DECOLONIZING INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES: SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS

MARY PATRICIA BLANCHARD

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ABSTRACT

The Aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population. As a result, it is essential to increase Aboriginal participation in post-secondary studies and persistence to completion. To accomplish these goals, it is necessary to rethink how post-secondary institutions support Aboriginal students and to make them feel welcome and that they belong. This dissertation takes an in-depth look at the experiences of Aboriginal students at a northern Ontario college. It examines the challenges faced by students as they prepare for and complete their studies. It identifies the significance of cultural safety and support in overcoming feelings of loneliness and isolation, and explores the role of family and community encouragement in helping students persist to graduation. It also discusses the role of faculty relationships and the need for institutional commitment in creating an environment that acknowledges and includes Aboriginal worldviews, traditions and cultures.

This qualitative study explores the experiences of seventeen students. The outcomes of the study provides guidance to post-secondary institutions in three key areas: promising practices to improve Aboriginal student outcomes; successful approaches to conducting culturally intelligent research; and the significance of Indigenizing the college through generative discussion with individuals local to the institution. The dissertation suggests the use of generative discussion to Indigenize an institution has great potential as a transformative change tool.

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I would also like to thank the chair of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle of my new college and the staff of Suswaaning Endaajig for their commitment to creating a beautiful center to support Aboriginal students. This is important work that has the potential to touch many students.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, particularly my husband Al, for their support and patience during this long journey. It was largely because of their encouragement, and perhaps a little nagging, that this large task has finally been completed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation reflects my personal journey beginning with my experiences prior to beginning the fieldwork for the college study, around which this dissertation is centered. These experiences provide insight into why this area of study is important to me, and will provide direction for others interested in this important field of study. The experiences prior to beginning the college study are outlined in the first chapter, entitled Prologue. The prologue will provide context for the dissertation by drawing attention to the importance of improving Aboriginal college student success rates. The use of prologue and epilogue was inspired by the work of Margaret Kovach (2010).

The dissertation is divided into two streams: my personal decolonizing journey, and an exploratory study of decolonizing institutional practices. As a non-Aboriginal person conducting research with Aboriginal peoples, my goal was to apply decolonizing theory in a very practical way. I sought to involve Aboriginal peoples as co-constructors of knowledge; privilege Aboriginal perspectives, traditions, cultures, and ways of knowing; and honour the authority of participant voices through the use of direct quotes. I struggled as I worked to internalize decolonizing methods, as described by Aboriginal scholars, such as Linda Smith (2009), Margaret Kovach (2010), and Shawn Wilson (2008) and others, while recognizing that my interpretations may continue to be limited by my own culture and way of seeing the world.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings were used as a conceptual framework and also used to analyze the interview data. I used Social Justice Theory, specifically the work of John Rawls (1971, 2001), as the theoretical lens to develop recommendations from the

knowledge acquired through in-depth interviews with Aboriginal peoples at the college, along with the learning I acquired while working in the Aboriginal Learning Unit at the college over a ten month period. In *Justice as Fairness* (2001), Rawls states his belief that inequalities can be addressed by providing the greater benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (p. 42). It is clear to me that Aboriginal peoples have been disadvantaged in our society through historic racist agendas designed to destroy Aboriginal cultures and assimilate them into the broader, largely European-influenced, Canadian culture, along with persistent negative stereotypes and ongoing racism and discrimination. I believe that by improving practices, colleges can better support Aboriginal students in the completion of their studies, which, in a small way may redress the historic wrongs perpetrated by Canada and Canadians.

CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE: LOOKING BACKWARD

In the fall of 2007 I began a study that investigated the Aboriginal student experience at a community college in northeastern Ontario. Through the use of interviews with students and other key informants, the study sought the answers to the following question: What are the institutional structures, policies, procedures and practices that support Aboriginal students and what are the structures, policies, procedures and practices that create barriers to student success? Prior to beginning the discussion of the study, I would like to provide some insight into the decision to begin this work.

In the fall of 2005 I applied to York University for a doctoral program in the Faculty of Education. My intention was to continue the work begun during my Masters, the focus of which was technology-enhanced learning. I was accepted into the program, and having been approved for a sabbatical leave from my employer, a college located in northeastern Ontario, began my studies in the fall of 2006. During the early fall I spent most of my time reading various studies, as I searched for my "niche" in the area of technology enhanced learning. I met regularly with my pro-tem supervisor, who directed me toward recent studies he thought would be of interest. I struggled with a lack of clarity and felt as though I was wasting my valuable sabbatical time.

One of the key courses for those newly admitted to the doctoral program was known as the "doc seminar", or more formally "Research and Issues in Education". The "doc seminar" was designed in such a way that during the later portion of the fall semester various professors from the faculty were invited to speak about their work. In preparation for the guest lecture, we were given selected readings and were instructed to learn more

about the theoretical underpinnings of the work of each guest lecturer. One of these guest lecturers was Doctor Haig-Brown. In reading the selected articles for the next class I felt engaged and excited about the possibility of doing work in the area of Aboriginal education.

I began to think about my experiences as a dean at the northeastern Ontario college and how Aboriginal students and mature students seemed to have more challenges in navigating the post-secondary educational system than other students. In my experience, the lives of adult students are often complicated by family responsibilities and financial pressures. In some instances, these difficulties are further compounded by previous brushes with the law and addiction issues. These challenges frequently lead to detours in the road toward the ultimate goal, which was graduation and then finding a well-paying, stable job to support their families.

During the first year I was living on-campus, so after reading the preparatory articles for Haig-Brown's lecture, I immediately went to the Library and withdrew "Taking Control: Power and Contradiction in First Nations Adult Education" (1995). Haig-Brown's book resonated with me. One of my college responsibilities included access programs, namely the Academic Upgrading program and the General Arts and Science program. The Academic Upgrading program was designed to assist mature learners gain the skills and knowledge to be successful in further studies. The majority of students were adults and many had previously been unsuccessful in the educational system. The Academic Upgrading program had monthly intakes and was designed to meet the individual learning needs of each student. In addition, the post-secondary programs for

which I had responsibility included general arts and science, and community services programs, such as Early Childhood Education, Social Services Worker, Child and Youth Worker and Native Child and Family Studies. I also had responsibility for justice programs, which included Police Foundations, Correctional Services Worker, and Law and Security Administration. At the time of the study the college had approximately five hundred students who had identified as Aboriginal and more than half of the identified Aboriginal students were enrolled in programs for which I had responsibility. The stories conveyed in Haig-Brown's book mirrored many of the stories I had heard from students, such as the challenges they faced returning to school as an adult and balancing family responsibilities and financial pressures with learning at the post-secondary level. I wanted to learn more.

At a later meeting, I asked Doctor Haig-Brown to supervise my work, and she agreed. I now needed to identify a specific area of study. In doing so, I began to reflect on many of my past experiences. Going back to the late 1960's I recalled my fifteenth summer when I worked at a tourist lodge on Manitoulin Island. In looking at the demographic break down of Manitoulin Island at the time, there were several First Nations and a high percentage of Aboriginal peoples. The tourist lodge catered primarily to American tourists interested in fishing the beautiful, clear waters of Georgian Bay. The staff of the lodge included the owner, a supervisor/cook, six young women, counting myself, along with several local fishing guides. Three of the young women were from Sudbury and the other three were from a nearby First Nation. Our responsibilities included everything from cleaning the cabins and doing the laundry, to setting the tables in the

dining room, serving customers their meals, and washing the dishes afterwards. We worked seven days a week, and the work was physically exhausting. Our only real break was a weekly afternoon in the nearby community of Little Current. On Wednesday afternoons, the owner of the lodge would drive us into town, and our routine was always the same. We would head over to a little restaurant overlooking the harbour to have burgers, fries and a coke. Afterward we would go into the local department store to look around, sometimes making a small purchase. On one occasion the girls from Sudbury suggested going to a different place to eat. The girls from Birch Island were reluctant, and we asked why, was it because we were underage? They said, "No," but were still hesitant. The girls from Sudbury laughed and said, "Come on – it's time to try a different place," and we went into the new restaurant. This experience occurred a very long time ago, but I still remember it quite clearly. We took a seat and laughed and chatted, waiting for the waitress to come over with menus. We waited quite a long time and no one came over. I remember looking around and seeing the waitress standing by a counter looking toward us. She wasn't coming over, so I went over to her. I asked if we could see the menus. She replied, "No, the kitchen is closed". I scanned the restaurant and realized her statement that the kitchen was closed was clearly not true, and when I looked at her questioningly she said "You should go: I won't serve you".

I was so bewildered I could not even be angry. I looked around the restaurant and saw that there were no other Aboriginal people present and quickly came to understand she was not going to serve us because some of us were Aboriginal. In retrospect, I think the girls from the local First Nation anticipated we might be turned away, but were not

comfortable explaining it to the rest of us. In my sheltered experience, the possibility of such behaviour had not even occurred to me. After leaving the restaurant we walked over to our usual place and had a subdued lunch. We never talked about what happened. None of us expressed outrage. We didn't challenge the behaviour of the waitress. We accepted that we were powerless.

In the larger context of North America, it was a time of civil unrest. There were race riots in Detroit, acts of defiance in Mississippi, and on the home front there was open prejudice and discrimination. On a beautiful summer day in downtown Little Current, hate was alive and well. I remember being confused. I had read about these things happening in the United States, but Canadians are better than that, aren't we? Didn't we have a fair and just society? Weren't all people treated with respect and dignity? Clearly my previous beliefs were naive. The experience conveyed above was my first personal exposure to discrimination and racism. Since then a number of experiences have brought home the realization that the belief that racism does not exist in Canada was and is only a myth.

In determining the particular area of focus for my studies, I decided to meet with a number of people whom I considered to be knowledgeable. I first met with a former colleague, who I felt could provide some guidance. She knew me well and had been a long-time employee of the college until her recent retirement. In addition, she was a former Chief of her First Nation and was very active in Aboriginal affairs at the provincial and national level. She supported the idea of my doing work in the area of contemporary Aboriginal issues and suggested I consider a topic that would educate mainstream students in both the historic and contemporary issues impacting Aboriginal peoples. She believed

that in the short term, conducting research in contemporary Aboriginal issues would have the greatest impact. I also met with an Elder who worked at the college in an advising capacity and who taught part-time in the college's justice programs, an area for which I had responsibility. He also supported my proposed work and it was through our discussion I began to consider a study to examine Aboriginal student success. He told me a number of stories of the challenges faced by students he worked with on a daily basis. In describing these challenges, he often pointed to the problems faced by students in navigating the various processes required in applying to college, securing funding, and then enrolling and registering for their programs. What he told me reflected a number of situations in which I had intervened with various internal departments and external funding agents on behalf of students. Looking at institutional practices that created difficulty for Aboriginal students appeared to have definite potential as my specific area of research.

As mentioned, the Elder taught part-time in the college's justice programs. As stated earlier, these programs include: Police Foundations, Correctional Service Worker and Law and Security Administration. One of the courses included in the curriculum for all of these programs is a course called Native and Diversity Issues. He had been teaching the "Native Issues" portion of the course for several semesters and he often invited me to his class. In the role of dean my schedule was usually very full, but one day I had an opening and so I asked him if it would be convenient for me to attend his class that morning. He readily agreed and encouraged me to come. His topic was residential schools. He framed the lesson with the legislation, but told the story of his personal experience as a survivor of a residential school. What he shared was emotional and poignant. Midway

through the class he gave the students a break. I asked a young woman sitting beside me if he always taught using personal stories. Her reply was, "Yes. He has some very important things to say". When the class resumed I could see that a small group of young men appeared agitated. The class was comprised of approximately 55 students, the majority of whom were in their late teens or early twenties. Most were male. All of the students took their seats and the Elder asked if there were any questions about the first half of the lesson. One of the young men from the group who appeared agitated, immediately put up his hand and rose to his feet. I felt somewhat wary, as I did not know what to expect. The student expressed his outrage that residential schools were a part of Canadian history, and particularly in the recent past. He asked how residential schools could have existed in a country that prides itself on fairness and equality for all. The Elder smiled slightly and said, "Exactly," and then went on with the second half of the lesson, which built on the first. I was pleased the students had gotten the point. Given the disproportionately large number of Aboriginal peoples involved in the justice system, the reaction of these students to the facts presented in the class underlined the importance of educating youth, particularly those looking to secure employment in the justice field, about the history and experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It is critically important that students become knowledgeable about historic and ongoing marginalization, discrimination, and the direct assault perpetrated by government and society toward Aboriginal peoples, as what has happened and what continues to occur helps form the context for current events, such as land claims, the horrific living conditions on many northern reserves, and the lack of police action in the cases of hundreds of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. In a

later conversation, I asked the Elder how the Aboriginal students in the class felt during such an honest, personal and emotional lesson, and subsequent discussion. He indicated many have told him they are pleased that the truth is being told, not in a "white" washed or politically correct way, but the straight, unvarnished truth.

The experiences described above, along with a number of other personal experiences, helped me to identify Aboriginal student success as having definite potential as a topic for my research. A preliminary scan of the literature suggested Aboriginal student success was under researched at the time, particularly in the Canadian college context. Receiving encouragement from respected Aboriginal people in my life reassured me that it might be appropriate for me to pursue this area of study.

As mentioned earlier, I began my doctoral studies while on sabbatical. During the late fall the college announced an early retirement incentive, which I was immediately interested in pursuing. By 2006 I had spent over thirty years at the college and was eligible for a full pension. The incentive was enticing; however, the agreement for those who pursue a sabbatical leave is that they will return to the college for at least a year after the sabbatical. I approached my supervisor, the Vice-president Academic to see if the sabbatical time could be forgiven and built my case for her approval. When she got back to me, she indicated, after discussing my request with the President, that the answer was no, the sabbatical time could not be forgiven as they did not want to set a precedent. They would, however, support the idea of my completing a mutually agreed upon project in lieu of returning to my former position. I agreed that a project could be a viable option. She

then proposed a project not of interest to me, so I countered with the idea of a study examining Aboriginal student success.

In the interim I wanted to discuss my research idea with the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, Joyce. Throughout this document I will use the actual first names of individuals, if the person has given me permission to do so. Using actual names honours participant knowledge and contributions, and demonstrates my accountability to relationships. Using the actual names of study participants is an approach sometimes used in Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008, p. 63).

Joyce was new to the college and had just started work in the fall as I began my sabbatical. We had never met, but when I asked her if I could work with her and the department to do a study on Aboriginal student success she indicated she was willing to collaborate with me on such a project. I developed a brief overview of the intended study, reviewed it with Joyce and then submitted it to the college's Vice-President, Academic. Shortly afterward, the college's executive committee agreed that I could conduct a study examining Aboriginal student success. I formally retired from the college and began the preliminary planning for the college study with Joyce. We agreed that I would begin working with the Aboriginal Learning Unit team in late August of 2007.

INTRODUCTION: DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

As I begin this dissertation, I would like to recognize that the college in the study sits on the traditional lands of the Atikamekshang Anishnawbek Nation. By sharing the words of a former Chief of the Atikamekshang Anishnawbek Nation and former college employee, Art Petahtegoose, I hope to demonstrate the significance of this location: "For our people it's part of our sense of being and there's a sacredness of this place because it's where our ancestors lived. This land is the mother, grandmother, grandfather of our people" (Keaney, 2008).

In August of 2007 I began working in the Aboriginal Learning Unit of a college in northeastern Ontario. My purpose was to develop a research plan, in collaboration with the staff of the Unit, with the intention of identifying the structures and practices at the college which supported Aboriginal students in their learning and pinpoint those that created barriers to their success. It was important to gather information by speaking directly to Aboriginal students and staff, and to then develop recommendations that would emphasize what they had told me. My research question was: What are the institutional structures, policies, procedures and practices that support Aboriginal students and what are the structures, policies, procedures and practices that create barriers to student success? I chose a personal narrative style to frame this paper, as the dissertation is the story of my learning journey working in an Aboriginal Learning Unit of the college and then drawing on my experience to apply the learning in a new context. In the qualitative study I selected decolonizing methods as the methodological approach to exploring the experiences of Aboriginal students at a college in northern Ontario. Decolonizing methods are approaches

that demonstrate a respect for and valuing of Indigenous traditions, cultures and ways of knowing. Decolonizing methods priviledge Indigenous perspectives, traditions, ways of knowing and cultures, recognize Aboriginal peoples as co-constructors of knowledge, and incorporate the authority of participant voice (Kovach, 2009; Smith, L.T., 1999; Wilson, 2008).The study sought to privilege each Aboriginal student's experience through extensive use of their own words.

Social justice theory is the theoretical framework used to develop recommendations from the college study and the Ojibway Seven Grandfather Teachings provide the conceptual framework. They were used during the first level analysis of the data acquired through the interviews. Theoretical frameworks assist interpreting the results the results of a study and applying the new knowledge in a useful and practical way and conceptual frameworks make clear the researcher's values, beliefs, and ways of seeing the world and provide an understanding of how this perspective influences the interpretation of the results (Kovach, 2010). Kovach's work was particularly helpful to me as I struggled to use theory to inform the analysis of the knowledge acquired through the interviews and my experiences working in the Aboriginal Learning Unit. The objective of the college study was to identify concrete actions that the specific college could adopt to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students, which in turn would assist students at the college to successfully transition to college, engage more fully in the educational experience, and persist to graduation. Investigating Aboriginal student success is an important area of study, which responds directly to the issues of low Aboriginal participation rates in post-secondary education and graduation rates well below that of the

general population. According to Berger, Motte and Parker (2009), "Compared with other Canadians, Aboriginal peoples are twice as likely to have stopped their education before completing high school; they are three times less likely to have a university degree (p. 52)". The student experience needs to be improved to change this trend. Post-secondary institutions in general, and colleges in particular, can improve Aboriginal students' experiences by changing their practices. Improving participation and graduation rates is an issue of equity and social justice.

In order to provide context for the college study, it is necessary to provide a brief description of community colleges. Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology offer a variety of post-secondary programs designed to prepare graduates for work in specific fields. The programs are applied in nature, as programming provides the opportunity to apply theory to practice in real workplace and community settings. Theory is used as a framework and foundation for the application of specific skills and knowledge in an employment context. Paramedics, chemical technicians, paralegals, practical nurses, dental hygienists, biomedical technologists are just a few examples of individuals who require a college credential as an entry to practice. In all instances, the curriculum is kept current through industry feedback in the form of regular program advisory committee meetings, community consultation, and comprehensive program review processes. In many cases, the programs are accredited through provincial or national bodies, which ensures currency and quality. It is not uncommon for graduates to write provincial or national licensing examinations prior to working in their field of study. In many ways, college programs are similar to the programs offered by faculties of engineering, social

work, or nursing in universities, since those programs also prepare graduates to work in specific fields. To provide the level of learning for graduates to transition smoothly to the work place, professors are hired based upon their academic credentials and their practical, relevant experience in the work place. Curriculum is dynamic, as it evolves based on the changing needs of business and industry. Program Advisory Committees for each college post-secondary program are comprised of regional business and industry representatives, and they meet at least twice per year to discuss industry trends and make recommendations for changes to curriculum so that programs remain current. Informed by these meetings, program teams meet each spring to conduct curriculum review and renewal.

To further describe colleges and their students, I will share some high level information from a recent environmental scan by Colleges Ontario (2013), which provides a profile of college students and graduates. The Colleges Ontario study indicates that fifty-eight percent of the new fall 2012 entrants to Ontario post-secondary institutions were enrolled in a college. Fifty-five percent had an annual family income of less than $60,000 and thirteen percent indicated the use of special needs/disability services. In 2012, 78,600 students graduated from college, representing a nine percent increase over the previous year. Of the 78,600 graduates, eighty-four percent were working within six months of graduation, with forty-nine percent employed full-time.

Increasingly, college entrants do not come directly from high school. In the 2012-2013 academic year only thirty-three percent of entrants came directly from high school, and forty-two percent has some previous post-secondary education. In examining the age of students, thirty-nine percent were under the age of twenty-one and forty percent were

between twenty-one and twenty-five years of age. In that year, fifty-nine percent of the entrants were female. The study suggests that two percent of the entrants self identified as Aboriginal, which is proportional to the Ontario population, however, the study references an anonymous survey (Academica Applicant Survey, 2012) which suggests that Aboriginal students may represent as much as four percent of the incoming student population. Students may chose not to self-identify as Aboriginal due to historic and current discriminatory practices and racist attitudes. Consistent with the college study, eighty-three percent of the college entrants applied to college for career preparation.

Though I was unable to find a similar publication for Ontario universities, some of the same information on university applicants and students is available on the Council of Ontario Universities website (www.cou.on.ca). The information found on the COU website indicates that in 2012, fifty-three percent of the entrants were female, and seventy-nine percent were twenty-five years old or younger, with thirty-nine percent less than twenty-one years of age. These figures would suggest that Ontario university undergraduate students in Ontario are much younger than their college counterparts and fewer are female. Comparing the profiles of first year college and university students emphasizes the fact that research conducted in universities may not be applicable in a college context.

Providing my working definitions for terms used in the dissertation is also important to fully understanding the importance this work, so I will provide a number of key definitions. In using the term Aboriginal, I mean it as an inclusive term to encompass First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples (Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, 35.2). The term

16

Aboriginal does not imply Aboriginal peoples are a homogenous group who share identical cultures, traditions and beliefs, but rather it is a term used to describe all of the original peoples of what has come to be known as Canada. I mean no disrespect by using the word Aboriginal and recognize that various groups would prefer other words be used.

Another term to be used later is "border crossing" (McKenna, 2003). The straddling of two cultural worlds, which is the experience of many Aboriginal students when they enroll in a post-secondary educational institution, is often referred to as border crossing. It suggests an individual of one culture can work, live and learn successfully in a dominant culture, while remaining true to their culture. I will also use the term "minoritized", which has been used by a number of authors, including Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005). Minoritized will be used to "refer to a people who have been ascribed characteristics of a minority" (p. 157). It should be noted though minoritized people may not be a numerical minority, those of the dominant group consider their views and perspectives of lesser value.

I will also use the term "traditional" throughout my dissertation. When I use "traditional", I mean customary, respected and time-honoured. The traditional lands of First Nations refer to the land where a peoples' ancestors lived and which continues to have deep meaning and relevance to individuals today, even though they may never have lived on that land. Traditional teachers are individuals who have devoted their lives to learning the customs, teachings, and practices of their ancestors so they might pass their wisdom and knowledge to the next generation and guide them in understanding how the teachings can be applied in a contemporary context. Based on what I learned during my

year working in the Aboriginal Learning Unit, to me a traditional person is one who lives the teachings, customs and practices of their people as they are woven into every aspect of their life.

Student success can be interpreted in a number of ways. For the purpose of this dissertation, and the college study, I mean the completion of a chosen program of study to graduation. I chose this definition since the Aboriginal students in the college study, and in a number of other studies, made the decision to pursue post-secondary studies to secure stable, permanent employment. Stable and permanent employment is important to many because they want to provide a better life for their families, and in many instances give back to their community. They see achieving a post-secondary credential as the first step in accomplishing employment stability.

Another term I will use is Indigenizing the campus. I have come to understand Indigenization as a process used in creating an environment where Indigenous values, traditions and cultures are respected and integrated into structures across the institution. Indigenization includes, but is not limited to: curriculum, student services, policies, and procedures. Indigenization is a process and not an end-point and must include Aboriginal individuals from the area of the institution to ensure the approach is appropriate to local customs and traditions.

Later in this paper I will use the term generative discussion. The term generative discussion refers to "Asking the question before the question" (Chait, Ryan, Taylor, 2005). Generative discussions are used to build understanding between two groups, such as boards of directors and senior executives and are used to explore values, beliefs,

assumptions, and organizational cultures. These ever deepening conversations help build a shared vision of where an organization should go and provide a touch stone for identifying strategic priorities and making key business decisions.

Later in this paper I will suggest the use of generative discussion as an approach to developing an Indigenization strategy for the campus. I believe that an Indigenization strategy will provide a more welcoming environment to Aboriginal students, thereby supporting persistence to program completion. Indigenizing the campus through the use of generative discussion is not something I started my research project with, however, life does not stop during the doctoral journey. Since the college study was completed I have had the opportunity to think about the experience and extend my learning to a new context. I have also had many experiences that deepened my understandings and interpretations of the findings and provided me with greater insight about what I believe needs to be done to support Aboriginal student success in colleges.

As a woman of Irish Catholic heritage, it was important for me to work closely with the Aboriginal staff of the Learning Unit to ensure the project was conducted in a culturally intelligent manner. Having taken a course in decolonizing research methods, along with reading the work of a number of scholars (Kovach, 2009; Smith, L.T., 1999; Wilson, 2008) who have written on the topic of decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies, I wanted to proceed cautiously and respectfully. Therefore the college project was conducted collaboratively with the Aboriginal staff of the Unit. Together we developed the research plan, including participant recruitment strategy, focus group structure, and the interview questions. In order to ensure the project was conducted in a

culturally suitable manner, Joyce, the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, recommended the project be submitted to the Manitoulin Anishnaabek Research Review Committee (MARRC) for ethics approval. I readily agreed and with her guidance and support, submitted the proposal to MARRC in June 2007. My intention was to submit the proposal for ethics approval to York University and the college after receiving approval from MARRC.

In late August 2007 I began work in the Aboriginal Learning Unit as a member of the team. I attended meetings, assisted with the development of funding proposals, participated in activities and ceremonies, attended professional development workshops, and generally helped out. Spirituality was woven throughout all activities, and every meeting began and ended with a prayer. My intention was to integrate into the daily operations of the Unit, become more culturally aware, and to interact with students on a regular basis. The staff from the Unit came from a variety of backgrounds. Joyce, Loretta and others are Anishnaabe, but from several different Nations. Harriet is Cree from north of Attawapiskat, and Deborah is a Métis woman from western Canada. Their various traditions, ceremonies, and ways of knowing provided a rich learning experience as they willingly and openly shared their cultures with me and with the other members of the Unit. Developing relationships with staff of the Unit, founded on mutual trust and respect, was very important as they became my teachers and encouraged me to participate actively and fully in all aspects of the daily routine and special events. They patiently answered my questions and shared their experiences and personal concerns, all of which helped me better understand and interpret what students were to tell me as the study progressed. Early

in the fall, the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit decided to start using the Ojibwe

translation of their job titles. Incorporating Ojibwe language in our practice was done to

more explicitly demonstrate a commitment to traditional languages and cultures. Loretta,

the staff member who took on this task, also provided me with my title in Ojibwe. The title

given to me was "Kendaaswin Bebaamozhganung", which I was told means "One Who

Gathers Knowledge". I felt honoured that I was also included, but this recognition

emphasized again my responsibility to ensuring the study was conducted in a culturally

appropriate and respectful manner.

In December 2007 I received ethics approval from MARRC and in January 2008

submitted my proposal to the ethics review committees at York University and the college

in the study. I received approval from both of these bodies the same month. With the

support and assistance of members of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, in February I

conducted a student focus group with Aboriginal students who regularly participated in the

activities of the Unit. The purpose of the focus group was to test the survey questions

developed with the input of the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit. The focus group

sought to elicit student recommendations on recruiting participants, and to identify

additional interview questions, which should be included during the interviews. In-depth

interviews, which lasted approximately an hour and were semi-structured to allow the

students to lead the conversation, were held between February and April 2008. In April I

conducted interviews with the staff, including Elders, from the Aboriginal Learning Unit.

In May I interviewed two First Nations Education Managers whose communities sponsor a

large number of students attending the college. Finally, I interviewed staff from several

student services departments. All twenty-nine interviews were tape recorded for later transcription and analysis.

During the summer of 2008 the interviews were transcribed. In the fall the data was analyzed and a report for the college, including recommendations, was written. In December a draft report was provided to the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit for review and comment. Suggestions were incorporated into the report and in January 2009 the report was emailed to all participants in the study for review and further comment. In February the report was finalized, including all particpant feedback, and was submitted to the Vice-president Academic at the college. In April 2009 copies of the report were circulated to members of the Anishnaabe Affairs Committee, which is a sub-committee of the college's Board of Governors. The Anishnaabe Affairs Committee is comprised of Aboriginal peoples from a number of local First Nations. On April 23, 2009 I presented the report to the Anishnaabe Affairs Committee. The feedback was very positive and the Vice-president, Academic committed to developing action plans for each of the recommendations.

The college project was my "project of possibility". As Roger Simon articulates (1987) "education and daydreams share a common project….images of that which is not yet" (p. 371). Completing the college project and having it well received by the Aboriginal Learning Unit staff, the study participants, and the Anishnaabe Affairs Committee was very important to me on both a personal and professional level. When the Vice-president, Academic committed to developing action plans for each of the recommendations, I felt as though I had successfully completed what I set out to do…create the conditions that had

the potential to effect change in a very real, concrete way. I put my faith in the stated commitment, and since the recommendations were quite reasonable I could see no reason for delaying implementation. I then retired from the college, so do not know if the commitment was genuine and the recommendations fully implemented, as challenges continue to exist in integrating Indigenous ways into a Western educational environment.

In this chapter, I offered a context for my dissertation by providing an overview of the college study, explaining community college programming, presenting the profile of college students, clarifying my use of some of the terms utilized, explaining my subject position and experience, describing the multi-level ethics approval process for the college study, and illustrating how the relationships with the members of the Aboriginal Learning Unit were established. The next three chapters will provide an overview of the scholarly work that provided a context and foundation for this dissertation. A number of studies exist that examine Aboriginal student experiences, but these studies are primarily in an American or Australian university context. Few studies exist that examine the Aboriginal student experience in a Canadian college context. As discussed in the Introduction, university studies may not be relevant to the college experience, as student profiles are quite different. Promising practices in supporting Aboriginal students were identified from the interviews with Aboriginal students, along with recommendations for conducting culturally appropriate research. In addition, an approach to systematically developing college-wide strategies to support Aboriginal students by developing an Indigenization plan through the use of generative discussion will be proposed. Though localized, these

recommendations may be generalizable to other similar environments and will be useful as

a starting point for similar work.

CHAPTER 2: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO INFORM THE FUTURE

Overview of the Literature

The next three chapters provide a review of literature related to my investigation and will provide a framework for analyzing the opinions and experiences provided by the participants in the college study. The heart of the dissertation is the production of a report from the college study, however, this dissertation will extend the resulting knowledge to a new context. As described in the Introduction, life did not stop once the college study was completed. Personal reflection and then the opportunity to act on the report's recommendations in a new context, along with ongoing experiences and learning, provided me with the opportunity to build upon this knowledge. As noted previously, the college study, upon which my dissertation is based, investigated the experiences of Aboriginal students at a community college in northeastern Ontario. The central question driving the study asked: What are the institutional structures, policies, procedures and practices that support Aboriginal students and what are the structures, policies, procedures and practices that create barriers to student success? Though a number of studies in the United States or in large universities explore Aboriginal student success, such as *Miracle Survivors: Promoting Resilience in Indian Students* (Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003) and *Academic Persistence Among Native American College Students* (Jackson, Smith & Hill, 2003), a gap exists, as fewer studies (ACCC, 2005; Huffman, 2008; Kulig, Lamb, Solowoniuk, Weaselfat, Shade, Healy,White Hirsch-Crowshoe, 2007; Waterman, 2007; Watson, 2009) analyze the experience of Aboriginal students enrolled in Canadian colleges or small

universities. Student Development Theory is a body of knowledge that could be useful in examining Aboriginal student persistence.

Student Development Theory is a body of work that looks at ways of engaging post-secondary students with the institution to encourage persistence. Beginning in the 1970's Student Development Theory originally looked at students in four-year colleges in the United States and focused on engaging students outside the classroom, since at that time most students lived on campus during the academic year. The work of Astin and Tinto is considered seminal in the area of student development. Their work began over thirty years ago and continues to evolve to reflect the changing needs of students due to increasing diversity and also the changes in institutions as they recognize the necessity of changing practices because of evolving demographics. The more recent work of Astin (1999) suggests that student involvement in academically meaningful activities, both inside and outside of the classroom, is the key to persistence. Tinto (2007) agrees with Astin, and suggests that remaining connected to their community, family, church or tribe is also essential to the persistence of some students (p. 3). Tinto reinforces the importance of classroom involvement to persistence, particularly for students who commute to the campus. He suggests it is particularly important for faculty to actively engage students in learning through the creation of educational or learning communities. In some ways the approaches proposed by Tinto and Astin correlate positively to successful practices identified in the work of scholars examining the factors that support Aboriginal student success, however, both Astin and Tinto promote the notion that to be successful, the student is responsible to change in order to adapt to the institution. Though there are

similarities, it should also be recognized that there are significant differences in the perspectives of Aboriginal post-secondary students compared to non-Aboriginal students. In fact, assimilation and belonging to a mainstream institution may not appeal to Aboriginal students, and they may actually fear the involvement, integration and commitment viewed as necessary for persistence by Astin and Tinto. Many Aboriginal students reject any level of assimilation, since they believe it may lead to a loss of their Indigenous identity (Davidson & Wilson, 2013; DeGage, 2002; Maldonado, Rhoads & Buenavista, 2005; Pidgeon, 2009).

Students in a number of studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Timmons, Doyle-Bedwell, Lewey, Marshall, Power, Sable, &Wien, 2009; Waterman, 2007) said they decided to pursue post-secondary studies to provide a more stable and economically sound life for themselves and their families, or to give back to their communities. They believed a post-secondary credential would help them achieve this goal; therefore I use "student success" in the context of completion of their studies to graduation, recognizing that other authors may use a different definition of student success. A number of conditions are recognized as supporting persistence to graduation and they will be explored further.

The literature review is structured to provide context and will parallel the themes identified through interviews with the college study's participants. Initially the development of the themes and the exploration of the literature was an iterative process. Other studies helped in the identification of the themes and then the themes provided direction for further investigation of the literature. The key themes identified are: challenges to successful completion of programming; cultural safety and support; family

and community encouragement; institutional commitment; and faculty relationships. As a background to these themes, the legacy of colonialism, and the usefulness of post-colonial theory for analysis were investigated. The literature supports the college study, as the various research studies examine strategies successful in improving Aboriginal student completion rates in other contexts, and share insight into worldviews and ways of knowing that differ significantly from that of the dominant Eurocentric perspective. I use the term Eurocentric to mean the dominance of European and Christian values and the resulting belief that there is one correct way to think and view the world. This domination is embedded in social conventions and reflects the beliefs of white, European Christians. Amin (1988) describes Eurocentrism as a social construct with the distinct purpose of creating binaries. It is thus anti-universalist, since it seeks to divide rather than bring together (p. vii). He believes Eurocentric thinking encourages and perpetuates discrimination and prejudice (p. 90).

The first theme explores the challenges experienced by students wishing to pursue post-secondary studies, including access to post-secondary studies, and successful methods used elsewhere to improve completion rates. The second theme, cultural safety and support, explores decolonizing methodologies, which informed the research methodology employed in the college study. It includes a discussion of Indigenous thought, the importance of cultural grounding, and the factors significant in supporting Aboriginal student success. The third theme, family and community encouragement, illustrates the importance of post-secondary education to Aboriginal peoples and their communities. The impact of institutional practices in supporting Aboriginal student success will be

investigated under the heading of institutional commitment. The fifth theme, faculty

relationships, will examine the significant role played by faculty in supporting Aboriginal

student persistence. Finally I will explore social justice theory as the theoretical framework

used to interpret what I learned from the study participants and to use the knowledge

acquired to inform recommendations for change. I will also describe my use of the Seven

Grandfather Teachings as the conceptual framework for the study to make clear how my

way of seeing the world influenced my interpretation of the data and why I selected

decolonizing methodologies as the research methodology.

Introduction

The literature reviewed clearly demonstrates that Aboriginal communities, peoples,

scholars, and leaders recognize the importance of formal education to the well being of

their peoples and their Nations. Aboriginal peoples want their children to be successful in

the western paradigm of education, but not at the expense of losing their cultural

grounding (Alfred, 2005; Bobiwash, 1999; Cherubini, 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008;

Monture-Okanee, 1995, Timmons, et. al, 2009). Colonialism has had a devastating impact

on Aboriginal peoples, and the resulting intergenerational trauma continues to have a

negative effect as many individuals endure ongoing racism and discrimination (ACCC,

2008; Cherubini, 2012; Malatest & Stonechild, 2008; Mihesuah, J.; 2004; Mihesuah &

Wilson, 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Pidgeon, 2008; Timmons, et. al; 2009). Access

to post-secondary studies continues to be an issue, as many Aboriginal students do not

complete high school and therefore do not have the entrance requirements for higher

education (Battiste, 2005; Mendelson, 2006). Students who have the admission requirements are often still faced with challenges to accessing post-secondary programming, not the least of which is an inadequate level of federal funding (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Malatest and Associates, 2010; Mayes, 2007; McCabe, 2010). The struggle continues for those who begin post-secondary studies, as frequently funding is not adequate to pay for all expenses, particularly since many have children and additional family responsibilities (ACCC, 2008; Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009 Timmons, et. al, 2009). Learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and under-preparation may create additional barriers to successful completion of their studies (ACCC, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Watson, 2009). These challenges exist in addition to the fact that Aboriginal history and contributions are either invisible in the curriculum or presented in a manner that devalues the importance of these contributions (Pidgeon, 2009). Examples from other countries of ways to improve Aboriginal student completion rates are available, yet Canadian educational institutions do not appear to embrace these strategies in a meaningful way.

As noted in the preceding chapter, the foundation of this dissertation is a college study focused on students' perception of barriers to and supports for their success. The following review of the literature reveals a number of related foundational issues and common areas. As indicated earlier, they will be explored further through the themes identified in the analysis of the interviews.

The Legacy of Colonialism

Colonialism, and its residual impact, continues to create barriers for Aboriginal peoples because it established a binary relationship between the colonizer and the colonized that persists today. Many scholars (Amin, 1988; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Césaire, 1994; Freire, 2006; Macqueen, 2007; Memmi, 1991) describe this binary as the belief that the colonizer's knowledge, religious beliefs, worldview and ways of knowing are superior and fundamentally "right". Cultural imperialism, as described by Battiste and Henderson (2000) placed the colonized in an inferior position, with those in the dominant position considering the original inhabitants to be savages and heathens, who are culturally bankrupt. As such, the colonizer accepted the responsibility to educate the "savages" to a better way, which in the past meant forced conversion to Christianity and European values. As converting the savages was a moral imperative, the colonizer felt justified in using whatever means were necessary. In Canada, the primary method of converting the "savages" was to take away their land, outlaw traditional practices, and force Aboriginal peoples onto small, isolated pockets of land, which prevented the traditional economy from flourishing. In turn vulnerability and a dependence upon the government for basic survival were created. The civilizing mission of exploration to new lands helped gain public support as it was viewed as being a noble purpose, which heighted the self-esteem and perceived value of the colonizer, while at the same time, devaluing the importance of the colonized. Memmi (1991) and Césaire (1994) believe that colonization debases and corrupts all involved while degrading the colonized, warping relationships, destroying them spiritually. Césaire states "the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry,

31

which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilization, paganism=savagery*",

resulting in practices of intimidation, degradation, and contempt for the colonized. He

went on to state his perspective in the equation "colonization = 'thingification'" (p. 177),

which justified treating the original peoples as objects and less than human.

Though the colonization of North America may have purported to have a noble

purpose, the sharing of the supposedly "superior" knowledge possessed by Europeans

clearly had a devastating impact on the original peoples, which persists to this day. One

significant effect, with direct relevance to this dissertation, is low high school completion

rates leading to low overall participation levels in post-secondary education, which in turn

results in a poor economic outlook for too many Aboriginal peoples (Canada Millennium

Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Mendelson,

2006; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2006). Improving high school

completion rates and increasing the number of students who then successfully complete a

post-secondary credential is not only essential to the individuals and their families, but also

to the social and economic well-being of Aboriginal communities. In turn, higher

completion rates have a positive impact on the Canadian economy since higher education

is becoming a baseline requirement for many new jobs and the Aboriginal population is

the fasting growing sector of the Canadian population (Mendelson, 2006; Pidgeon, 2008;

and Statistics Canada, 2006).

This section described the continuing impact of colonialism and they way in which

it continues to impact Aboriginal postsecondary education participation rates. In the next

section I will explore post-colonial theory, which will assist in further demonstrating the residual impact of colonialism in marginalizing Aboriginal peoples.

Post-colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory assumes the perspective that colonization has ended and we now must deal with the repercussions. A number of scholars (Bhabba, 2005; Giroux, 2005; Henderson, 2000; Jefferess, 2008; Littlebear, 2000; Macqueen, 2007) vividly describe, from their perspective, the impact of colonialism and the pervasive influence of deeply entrenched Eurocentric beliefs. Eurocentric thought has been normalized in Europe and North America and for uncritical thinkers, has come to be considered superior to other ways of thinking. Little Bear (2000) describes the "jagged worldview" created by colonization. A jagged worldview is the result of attempts to destroy the original worldviews, without providing an acceptable alternative, leaving fragmented and disjointed perspectives (p. 85).

Canadian colleges and universities perpetuate Eurocentric thought and in so doing marginalize or make invisible and inferior those with alternative worldviews. Post-secondary institutions maintain Eurocentrism through the invisibility of Aboriginal culture and contributions in the curriculum and through hiring practices that do not reflect the students we serve. Henderson (2000) describes the negative viewpoint of "diffusionism", which is a reflection of Eurocentrism. Diffusionism, a racist and discriminatory perspective, postulates some societies, for example Europe, were given a high level of gifts in the form of creativity, intelligence, strength of purpose and strong moral fiber and

believe it is these attributes that have allowed Europeans to evolve as a society. This misguided notion (Alfred, 1999; Freire, 2006; Stonechild, 2006; Turner, 2008) is used to justify colonial activities and perpetuate the belief Europeans are superior and therefore responsible for helping others by sharing or diffusing what they had learned. This sense of superiority allowed the colonizer to rationalize their right to claim anything that was materially valuable, such as land and natural resources, in pursuit of their higher purpose. In diffusionism, the claiming of valuable resources was viewed as a normal and natural way to help the lesser beings progress, as it provided European colonizers with the necessary resources to build superior societal structures (Henderson, 2000, p. 60-61). Universality is another aspect of diffusionism, which reinforces the notion of one group as superior to others by validating the dominant group's knowledge, experience, culture, and language and issuing the moral imperative to make the dominant groups' superiority the universal norm (p. 64). Implicit in such a perspective is that the knowledges, experiences, cultures, and languages of other groups are inherently inferior. Henderson suggested the first step in eliminating the colonial legacy and moving toward post-colonialism is to recognize how deeply concepts such as diffusionism and universality are implanted in social constructs and expose them for what they are in order to affect change.

Post-colonial thought is the first step in recognizing the ongoing implications of a colonial past and the degree to which colonial practices continue to be ubiquitous in society (Giroux, 2005; Jefferess, 2008). The need to deconstruct what is considered normal and accepted practice is imperative for the creation of a just and fair society where all members, in particular those who have been historically marginalized, are provided with

the opportunity to fully realize their potential. Post-colonial thought provides the opportunity to challenge the binaries advanced by colonial actions. These binaries construct a politics of difference and are reinforced through all elements of society. It is critical to challenge the status quo and discourse of difference within schools and curriculum because "Pedagogy is, in part, a technology of power, language, and practice that produces and legitimates forms of moral and political regulation that constructs and offers human beings particular views of themselves and the world. Such views are never innocent and are always implicated in the discourse and relations of ethics and power" (Giroux, 2005, p. 77). As such, it is the responsibility of every educator to critically analyze current practice with a view to recognize and eliminate systematic biases and marginalizing practices.

In this chapter we have explored the impact of colonialism in the ongoing marginalization of Aboriginal peoples and the effort to identify and confront colonial practices and thinking through post-colonial thought. In the next chapter we will closely examine the many challenges faced by Aboriginal peoples as they consider, prepare for, and access post-secondary education and then persist to the completion of their studies.

CHAPTER 3: ACCESS, RESPECT, CULTURE

Introduction

In the post-colonial context that we call Canada, Aboriginal peoples face many challenges in completing a post-secondary credential, not the least of which is securing admission in the first place and then adapting to a new cultural paradigm. This chapter will discuss these challenges, and will identify issues related to accessing post-secondary studies along with successful and promising practices used in other contexts to improve completion rates.

In 2005, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) hosted a national dialogue on Aboriginal learning as part of its commitment to improving learning outcomes for all Canadians. The conference was part of the consultation with Aboriginal communities and educators, the outcomes of which would be used to inform the creation of the fifth pan-Canadian knowledge center, the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. Participants included representation from such groups as: Aboriginal leaders in education, both on-reserve and off-reserve; First Nations, Inuit and Metis community groups; Industry Sector Councils; universities and colleges; and researchers. Dr. Marie Battiste was asked to prepare a background report for the Dialogue, which she entitled *State of Aboriginal Learning*. In this report, she indicated that easy access to post-secondary studies is only the first step to improving completion rates. She identified a number of foundational principles necessary in supporting Aboriginal learning and education. These principles include the following beliefs:

- Aboriginal peoples recognize the importance of holistic and life-long learning as being vital to their economic well-being;

- language, culture and the significance of land is integral for learning;

- the development of learning materials and curriculum must be controlled by the community and this control is a legitimate right;

- inequalities in funding must be corrected; and

- any research activities must be developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and leadership and follow the ethical principles developed by the communities.

She described the current state of learning from First Nations, Inuit and Métis learning contexts. Based on the legacy of colonialism, she declared, "It is understandable but tragic that First Nations youth have the highest school departures before graduation, the highest suicide rates, highest incarceration rates, and perform far below the achievement and employment rates of average Canadians". She went on to state: "Canada and its provincial curricula, has continued to marginalize or be indifferent to First Nations peoples, since their political legacies has divided their interests and the created hegemonic power relations evident in colonization, racism and domination which continue to effect First Nations present and future" (p. 5).

The summary of the current state of learning for Aboriginal peoples provided by Battiste paints a dismal picture, however, it also describes how changes in practice could turn this around. In the next section, the context for the low participation rates will be explored.

Context for Low Participation Rates

In a number of studies, the participants indicated they chose post-secondary studies to create a better life for themselves and their families, to be a role model for their own children, siblings, or members of their community, and to find stable employment (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Malatest & Stonechild, 2008; Timmons, et. al, 2009; Waterman, 2007). The desire to contribute positively to their communities was also frequently mentioned as a reason for pursing post-secondary studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Waterman, 2007).

Historic barriers to post-secondary participation include policies, such as changes in the Indian Act ,which removed status for those who chose post-secondary education, and laws, such as the those that outlawed traditional practices such as Potlaches, with the professed goal of assimilation. Residential schools are featured prominently, since residential schools were the government's primary tool for eliminating Aboriginal languages and cultural practices (Malatest, 2004; McCabe, 2010). The result of the residential school experience is a legacy of mistrust of education, and intergenerational trauma, which persists today. In addition, students sometimes have difficulty leaving their communities, which are often seen as places of cultural and spiritual significance (Jackson, et. al, 2003; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013).

Aboriginal peoples have a lower participation rate in post-secondary education than non-Aboriginal peoples. Based on the 2006 Canadian census data, the Canadian Council on Learning (2009) found that 67.6% of the Canadian population aged twenty-five to thirty-four had completed a post-secondary credential, while only 41.9% of the Aboriginal

population in the same age range had completed a credential. Mendelson (2006) analyzed

the 2001 Canadian census data and stated Ontario had the highest number of Aboriginal

peoples with 188,315 out of the total Canadian Aboriginal population of 976,305, or

19.3%, individuals identifying as Aboriginal. In reviewing the 2006 Statistics Canada data,

I found this figure has grown to 242,490 out of 1,172,785, or 20.7%. Both Mendelson

(2006) and Statistics Canada (2006) confirm that the Aboriginal population is growing,

and both on and off reserve the Aboriginal population is much younger than the overall

population. Based on continued growth, it is anticipated Aboriginal peoples should form a

higher percentage of the workforce in the future.

The gap in high school completion rates needs to be addressed to increase

Aboriginal success in post-secondary studies (Battiste, 2005; Mendelson, 2006).

Mendelson states: "While there are many Aboriginal people who are doing quite well, on

average the Aboriginal population suffers from higher unemployment, lower levels of

education, below average incomes and many other indictors of limited socioeconomic

circumstances. The way to effect change is through success in education" (p. 35).

Providing further context for the challenges potential Aboriginal students face in

accessing post-secondary education, the study entitled *Access, Persistence and Financing:*

First Results from the Postsecondary Education Participation Survey (Barr-Telford,

Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons, 2003) focused on youth between the ages of 18 and 24. In

their report, the authors found students in this age group, from families with an annual

income of $80,000 or more, were the most likely to pursue further education beyond high

school (p. 7). When the sources of funding for post-secondary schooling were compiled,

almost 80% of the students reported the money used to fund their studies was savings from employment prior to starting school, over 60% stated the money they were using was from employment during the academic year, and slightly less than 60% indicated the money was from non-repayable funding received from family (p. 14). Clearly Aboriginal students are at a disadvantage based on economic indicators alone, as generally low levels of education and residing in communities where poverty is rampant lead to reduced opportunities for gainful employment. These challenges are discussed in greater detail below.

The gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students continues to grow, even though the number of Aboriginal individuals pursuing post-secondary education has also grown (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009, p. 52). Berger, et. al, examine the financing of post-secondary education for under-represented groups and assert that not all Aboriginal students receive funding for their education, and for those who receive funding, it does not cover all of their costs. The study quoted information from the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* by the Environics Institute (2010), which reported only forty percent of Aboriginal post-secondary students in their study received funding, with the majority applying for student loans (p. 118). As contracted in treaties, and stated in the Indian Act, the federal government funds the Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) which provides financial assistance to Status Indian and Inuit students who are enrolled in eligible post-secondary programs. PSSSP funding comes from the federal government and is provided to eligible participants to cover the costs of post-secondary studies, including tuition, books and supplies, accommodation, and transportation. As identified in a number of studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009), funding is

often an issue for students wishing to return to school. Funding levels have not risen sufficiently to keep pace with demand, therefore waiting lists are the norm for many prospective students. Berger et. al, identify the importance of increasing access and completion rates for Aboriginal peoples, they state "Ensuring full participation in post-secondary studies by Aboriginal peoples is a challenge incumbent upon all of Canadian society. The gains, both economic and social, are too important for us to stand by and do nothing" (p. 140).

This section provided a context for low participation rates by describing some of the historic practices that served to marginalize Aboriginal peoples. The following sections will discuss the challenges faced by Aboriginal students. These barriers will be divided into the following categories: situational barriers; cultural barriers; institutional barriers; and academic barriers.

Challenges to Accessing and Completing Post-secondary Studies

Many Aboriginal students face barriers to accessing and postsecondary studies and then persisting to completion. Challenges include such things as personal circumstances, financial limitations, underpreparation and an unfamiliar environment at the college. These challenges are explored below under the headings of: situational barriers; cultural barriers; institutional barriers; and academic barriers.

Situational Barriers

A number of situational barriers exist that create challenges for Aboriginal students as they plan for and then begin post-secondary studies. As described in detail below, these situational barriers include: access to and inadequate levels of funding; child and family responsibilities; socioeconomic challenges that result in a lack of financial resources; the fact that Aboriginal students are older than the general student body; and difficulty finding and paying for appropriate housing.

Several scholars (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2009; Canada Millenium Scholarship Fund, 2005; Timmons, et. al, 2009) have identified funding levels as a significant barrier for Aboriginal students accessing post-secondary studies. Frequently First Nations students believe it is a treaty obligation to fund post-secondary education (Malatest and Stonechild, 2008), but only older students seemed to recognize band funding might not be sufficient to cover all costs. Students in the study by Malatest and Stonechild (2008) indicate the available funding did not allow for variations in the cost of accommodation and childcare in different cities, was not sufficient to cover first and last month's rent, and often did not provide adequate funds to purchase required learning materials and resources. In addition, in many communities the demand for funding often exceeds the available funds, so students are frequently placed on a waiting list and therefore must wait for several years to begin their studies (Malatest & Stonechild, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009).

Another situation impacting Aboriginal student persistence is that many Aboriginal students are older than the general student population and are more likely than non-Aboriginal students to have family responsibilities including dependent children (ACCC,

2005; Canada Millenium Scholarship Fund, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Malatest & Associates, 2010). Securing appropriate housing can be compounded by the fact that many Aboriginal students have family responsibilities. While many universities have accommodations for married students and their families, most college campus residences are designed for single students. Malatest and Stonechild (2008) identified housing as an important issue, as the struggle to find and pay for appropriate housing for their families created additional stress and pressure as they transition to their studies.

Lower socio-economic status can also be a barrier for Aboriginal students. A number of studies (ACCC, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009; Timmons, et. al, 2009) confirm that Aboriginal students frequently have lower family income levels. The lower income levels can be attributed to "The legacy of an educational system which was hostile to Aboriginal people and their culture" (ACCC, 2008, p. 17).

Cultural/Environmental Barriers

A number of cultural or environmental barriers also create challenges for Aboriginal students as they relocate to new communities to attend post-secondary studies. These challenges include: many are moving to a large metropolitan area from small or rural/remote communities; some may come from an environment where post-secondary education is viewed as unnecessary; others may have an aversion to debt; and many may experience high levels of stress as they attempt to adapt to an unfamiliar cultural

environment. In addition, the lack of role models may increase the difficulty for some students.

Aboriginal students face difficulties as they move from living in rural or remote communities to larger metropolitan communities. In many instances the post-secondary institution is much larger than the entire community from which they have come. Studies (Malatest & Associates, 2004; Malatest & Stonechild 2008; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013) found that students also face stress related to feelings of loneliness, isolation and culture shock. These can be linked to the normalization of a Eurocentric perspective within post-secondary institutions, which does not acknowledge or respect Aboriginal worldviews, traditions or cultures, thus creating an environment that marginalizes Aboriginal students. High levels of loneliness and isolation can lead to physical illness as a result of the extreme stress and pressure students feel. In an effort to cope with feelings of isolation and powerlessness, students sometimes turn to substance abuse. In addition some experience personal and family issues, which add additional stress and may cause them to withdraw from school (Helin, 2006; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008)

Other studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Malatest & Associates, 2010) found that some Aboriginal people and communities might not believe that post-secondary education is necessary. The belief by some that post-secondary education is unnecessary may compound the concern that a post-secondary education is not worth the risk of acquiring debt to fund studies. The study by Malatest (2010) found that while some students were willing to borrow to fund their studies, a number of students indicated an aversion to acquiring debt. Some indicated a concern with their ability to pay back their

loans, and some had childcare responsibilities, and so were cautious about incurring debt. Others spoke of the limited employment opportunities in First Nations communities, while others expressed concern they might not complete their studies and therefore did not wish to take the risk. Still others spoke of the struggle family members encountered when they incurred debt to pay for their studies (p. 24).

Cultural and environmental barriers can create significant obstacles for Aboriginal students as they plan for, begin post-secondary studies, and then persist to completion. Other barriers can be specifically linked to the institutional culture at their college or university.

Institutional Barriers

Discrimination and racism, a lack of role models, poor faculty relationships and feelings of not being welcome at the institution can create barriers for Aboriginal students. A number of studies (ACCC, 2008; Cherubini, 2012; Deloria, 2004; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Timmons, et. al, 2009) state the presence of racism towards Aboriginal people in Canadian society has a negative impact on the desire of Aboriginal peoples to access post-secondary programming and then makes it difficult for students to successfully complete their studies. These reports go on to state that experience with racism and discrimination is hurtful and creates additional stress for Aboriginal students as they attempt to cope with the challenges and obstacles inherent in the completion of credential requirements.

Institutions that do not clearly value Aboriginal cultures, traditions and contributions create an environment where Aboriginal students do not feel comfortable and welcome. The feeling that they are not wanted and do not belong in postsecondary studies further marginalizes students. A number of scholars (Cherubini, 2012; Davidson & Wilson, 2013) suggest that employees at educational institutions need to develop a better understanding of Aboriginal peoples, and the historic and social barriers they face. Faculty in particular can have a significant, positive impact on Aboriginal student persistence by demonstrating a genuine interest in their success. The importance of strong faculty relationships will be explored further in Chapter 3.

In addition, several studies (ACCC, 2008; Malatest & Associates, 2004, 2010; Malatest & Stonechild, 2008) identify the lack of role models at the college or university as compounding the stress Aboriginal students experience. The lack of role models at the institution is particularly challenging since many are in the first generation in their family to attend a post-secondary institution, therefore they may not have Aboriginal role models with whom to identify.

Academic Barriers

Inadequate academic preparation and disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, can understandably create significant obstacles to student success. These issues are compounded when a student is older and has been out of school for a significant period of time. Several studies suggest that inadequate academic preparation is a significant barrier to post-secondary completion rates (Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation, 2005;

Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Watson, 2009). It can be extremely difficult and stressful for students to maintain their studies and keep up with course demands when they lack adequate preparation. Though many post-secondary institutions provide specific academic support services for Aboriginal students (ACCC, 2005), these services may not always be adequate depending on the needs of the individual student. The Association of Canadian Community College's report (2008) *Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students: The Characteristics and Experience of Aboriginal, Disabled, Immigrant and Visible Minority Students* found that a higher percentage of Aboriginal students, 12 percent of Aboriginal students compared to 9 percent of non-Aboriginal students, report a disability, with the majority indicating they had a learning disability (p. 20).

In conclusion, without intervention many Aboriginal students face a number of academic barriers to credential completion. Malatest & Associates (2010) note that college participation rates are much higher than for university and therefore, "There is a great impetus for colleges to provide educational opportunities for Aboriginal peoples" (p. 17-18).

Improving Completion Rates

As an educator, I recognize that First Peoples highly value education, and that we all have a responsibility to increase participation and completion rates. To increase participation rates, it is necessary to understand the practices and structures supportive of Aboriginal student success, especially from the perspectives of students.

Much of the literature on the success of Indigenous peoples in education focuses on the fact that Eurocentric curriculum and methods serve to marginalize those not of the dominant culture (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Bazylak, 2002; Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006; Henderson, 2000; Swartz & Ball, 2001;Waterman, 2007). These scholars suggest the need to improve the educational outcomes for Indigenous students through culturally meaningful curriculum, methods of delivery and assessment approaches. A number of researchers (Bazylak, 2002; Bell, 2004; Jackson, Smith & Hill, 2003; Lundberg, 2007; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Swartz & Ball, 2001; Timmons, et. al, 2009; White Shield, 2004) state it is necessary to initiate a campus-wide effort in developing structured social supports and creating learning environments that are culturally friendly toward Aboriginal students and welcome community people into the institution. White Shield asserts the, "Freedom to express our Indigenous identity fully in our educational experience is paramount" (p. 123). Further, she maintains mainstream institutions have a responsibility to ensure success for Aboriginal students in higher education. Lundberg (2007) goes even further, and states student involvement and institutional commitment to diversity are predictors of successful Aboriginal student learning. She believes institutions have a responsibility for student success, and those institutions that clearly value diversity, in ways evident to students, will have higher rates of program completion.

Though not stated in these terms, I believe these scholars are suggesting that post-secondary institutions committed to Aboriginal student success must begin the process of Indigenizing their campus. I have come to understand Indigenization as creating an

environment where: Indigenous values are respected; Indigenous stories, perspectives and presence are privileged; Indigenous principles, modes of organization and behavior are respected and integrated into the larger structures of the institution; and curriculum, student services, policies, and procedures are developed and delivered with Aboriginal student learning needs in mind (Alfred, 2004; Justice, 2004; Mihesauah & Wilson, 2004; Newhouse, 2008; Simcoe, 2009). To ensure Indigenous values are respected, it is essential to recognize the expertise of local Elders, the importance of community involvement, and ensure the integration of Indigenous and western academic knowledge, while honouring and valuing the cultural traditions, values, languages and practices of Indigenous peoples (Gehl, 2010, Pidgeon, 2009). DeGagne (Goar(b), 2013), the president of Nipissing University and an Aboriginal scholar suggests the goal of his Indigenization project is broad social change and that he wants his university to be a living model of reconciliation. Pidgeon (2008) postulates the transformation required to Indigenize the institution cannot exist in policy alone and "must occur through sustainable actions that move policy from paper into the lived realities, cultures, and fabrics of our institutions" (p. 11). In other words, Pidgeon is suggesting that mission and value statements and policies and procedures mean nothing if practices do not embrace cultural diversity and the values and ways of knowing of all.

As stated previously, high attrition rates for Aboriginal students are a grave concern; however, when students do not succeed or complete their program, the situation may actually be temporary. In many instances Aboriginal students begin post-secondary studies, but leave for a variety of personal and educational reasons, such as financial

concerns, family responsibilities, or issues related to academic preparation. A nonlinear

path, or tendency to "stop out" to deal with life issues, has been identified by a number of

scholars (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore & McClelland,

2005; Lundberg, 2007; Mihesuah, J., 2004) as common among Aboriginal students. On the

other hand, for some, the world of college becomes impossible, because as Huffman

(2001) suggests, students are often overwhelmed by the lack of familiar cultural

connections and initial feelings of alienation within the institutional setting. A number of

studies identify feelings of extreme isolation and loneliness (Larimore & McClelland,

2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; White Shield, 2004) felt by students as they begin

college.

Understanding the student experience from the time students arrive in the city

provides insight into the many challenges faced by those relocating to a large urban

community. The support students receive during the transition period to college can

positively influence student acclimation and success in their post-secondary studies.

Increasing the understanding by educators and broader society on the negative legacy of

colonial practices is the first step in making changes that have the potential to create a

positive, welcoming, and culturally safe environment for Aboriginal students. Before an

increased understanding can happen, though, it must also be recognized how colonial

attitudes of superiority are still embedded in current practices. In order to identify those

colonial attitudes and practices it is critical to understand and describe the complexity of a

culturally safe environment. The next section will provide a detailed description of cultural

safety and provide a number of examples of proposed approaches, successful in other

jurisdictions, to support Aboriginal students in the completion of post-secondary programming.

Cultural Safety and Support

Creating an environment that is welcoming, culturally recognizable and supportive is important in making Aboriginal students feel wanted and welcome. A recent report from the Health Council of Canada (2012) describes cultural safety as an outcome, and states an environment can only be assessed as safe by the individual, since they are the only one who knows if they feel a particular setting is safe. Cultural safety is based on respectful engagement and an understanding that power differentials are inherent in many situations, particularly health care and education. Creating a culturally safe atmosphere is likely to produce better outcomes, in the case of education this means persistence to completion, as the individual will know that people in the institution care about their success, and treat them with dignity and respect. Further, the Health Council of Canada report states that cultural competency and cultural safety are needed because "Negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people are deeply rooted in Canadian society, and much of what Aboriginal people experience in the health care system [and I would suggest education] is an extension of this systemic racism" (p. 8). Because of historic marginalization and persistent and systemic racism it is necessary to make every effort to help students overcome their feelings of loneliness and isolation as they transition to a new environment. Support is needed to help students resist the temptation to leave the college to return to the comfort and familiarity of their families and communities. One means of combating

loneliness is by educating all members of the college community about the long history of

discrimination and racism, the ongoing effects of residential schools, and ways of

confronting stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008;

Mosholder & Goslin, 2013).

A number of studies (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Guillory

& Wolverton, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009; Waterman, 2007) identify strategies to effectively

support students. These include using a variety of assessment approaches, developing

culturally appropriate programming, and the use of Elders to create a more welcoming

environment. As the traditional knowledge keepers, Elders help learners feel competent,

that they belong at the institution, and help reinforce a strong sense of cultural identity.

The Elders' role is recognized as foundational to the success of Aboriginal students

(Cherubini, 2012; Mixon, 2010).

The challenge for higher secondary school completion rates and increasing post-

secondary participation rates remains - to actually use the information learned in these

studies to combat the known barriers facing Aboriginal students in the educational system.

The next section provides a discussion of decolonization through the work of specific

scholars. It will demonstrate the importance of decolonizing post-secondary education by

providing insight an Aboriginal person's experience in post-secondary and the

marginalizing impact of racism and discrimination on the student experience.

Decolonization

In this section decolonization will be examined through the lens of racism, cultural capital, cognitive imperialism, and decolonizing methodologies. The work of specific scholars will be used to explicate each of these topics.

Racism, Discrimination and Marginalization:

In *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks*, Monture-Okanee (1995) thought deeply about racism and her personal experience. She describes the pain she endured living with racism and her constant battle to not feel like an object. She states her pain was heightened by the denial that racism and discrimination existed (p. 36-38). She expresses how she managed to survive post-secondary education without compromising who she was as a Mohawk woman. While she was able to function successfully in the white world, it was at a high personal cost. She explains her decision to act as a bridge between her own people and non-Indian people, and states a friend calls acting as a bridge "The home of the boundary warriors" (p. 78-79). She then describes the importance of a holistic education, which includes the mind, body, spirit, and emotional well being of the student, and asserts that in her experience, higher forms of education deal only with the mind (p. 84). Other studies (Cherubini, 2012; Mixon, 2010; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Timmons, et. al, 2009) also identified racism as a significant barrier to Aboriginal student success.

Monture-Okanee (1995) also speaks of the importance of education in order to combat marginalization, stating it is necessary for gainful employment and a reasonable standard of living. She describes education as a significant gatekeeper to opportunity;

however, the experience of education for Aboriginal peoples has historically been more about assimilation than opportunity (p. 91). She says:

> Education of Aboriginal children has been one of the central tools of forced assimilation and the destruction of family relations and social relations, as well as the traditional forms of education. This point is clear, Aboriginal Peoples now understand education for what it has been - a tool of our oppression. Education is merely a reflection of Canadian society - its version of history and its values. If our society is racist, and this is a fact Canadians are now coming to understand, then our education systems can only reflect and further entrench racism. Aboriginal peoples do not need to be "helped" to attain some higher status or a greater degree of civilization. We need to be respected for who and what we are, as well as for how we have helped to shape this nation. We are not founding people. We are original people. And this is not found in our textbooks, or in Canadian history, or in our classrooms, or in our laws. Only through accepting the truth about Canadian history can education, for Aboriginal peoples, become a path to our freedom rather than a tool of our oppression (p. 96).

This powerful quote speaks to the experience of many Aboriginal people in formal education. It also emphasizes the residual pain felt even by those who have successfully

completed a post-secondary education. One might infer that those who were not able to persist may have endured an even higher level of anguish. Though many institutions are seeking to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students, clearly extensive work remains.

Becoming re-acquainted with history and belief systems before colonization can be liberating. hooks (1992) stated that red and black people need to look beyond the written word, which has been constructed by the colonizer, and instead look to the stories handed down through the generations. She stated her belief in the power of collective wisdom, "Within changing worlds, black and red people look once again to the spirit of our ancestors, recovering worldviews and life-sustaining values that renew our spirit and restore in us the will to resist domination" (p. 193).

Looking to one's own culture and history can provide powerful tools for minoritized peoples as they gain the courage to name and confront racism, discrimination and marginalization. hooks suggests that by drawing on their cultural identity, students are able to move forward from a position of strength.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), hooks described learning about the substance of social class and the impact social class had on her teaching. When she arrived at Stanford University, she thought of social class only in relation to material things, but soon realized it also shaped values, attitudes and beliefs, as well as how social relationships were developed, and the ways in which biases informed how knowledge is given and received. She saw how those who challenged the views of the privileged, dominant class were silenced and deemed troublemakers. As a professor, she

often taught students from African American, and poor and working-class backgrounds who expressed "Frustration, anger, and sadness" as they tried to reconcile the internal conflict of functioning in a white middle class environment at the university while maintaining their ability to deal with a very different environment at home. To assist these students, she shared her own coping strategies and encouraged them to reject the concept of choosing between the experiences, believing they must creatively invent ways to border cross (p. 178-182).

hooks illustrates the conflict minoritized students may face in attending a post-secondary institution. They may feel marginalized and that they do not belong because their life at school clashes with their home life. It also illustrates the impact of socioeconomics on the ability of poor students to integrate and cope in a post-secondary institution, particularly in the upper middle class environment of an elite university. hooks makes the point that success in this type of environment requires more than just intellect and work ethic, it requires cultural capital. The next section will explore cultural capital in greater detail.

Cultural Capital

The literature suggests that providing access to post-secondary education is not enough to further the goals of decolonization. As stated earlier, the number of Aboriginal peoples continues to increase and the population is younger than the Canadian average (ACCC, 2005), plus Aboriginal peoples see education as the key to a more prosperous future. However, barriers due to historic federal government policy, current inadequate funding levels, on-going negative stereotyping and the lack of culturally appropriate

support systems continue to negatively impact completion rates for Aboriginal students. As stated by Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2003), schools often reproduce social relations that perpetuate existing structures of domination and exploitation by valuing certain types of cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) described cultural capital as educational level, linguistic competence, and other forms of capital marking social class. They suggested much of society's inequality is embedded in a colonialist social system and cultural practices, with those not from the dominant culture often viewed as lacking in cultural capital. Without the cultural capital and official knowledge, which facilitates access to services within schools, those from outside the dominant culture are often marginalized. Educational institutions in general and post-secondary educational institutions in particular, support the myth of meritocratic ideologies and play a significant role in the reproduction of social structures through the official and hidden curricula. Though clearly many individuals from minoritized backgrounds have found success from both an educational and economic perspective, it is often at great personal cost. It is for this reason that the official and hidden curricula must be exposed for what it is to reach a decolonized future.

Corson (1998) described Aboriginal peoples as "involuntary minorities" who have been denied equal opportunity. He stated Aboriginal peoples' cultural capital has not been valued and goes on to describe his view of decolonized education:

Above all, as in all forms of education for diversity, Aboriginal

students want the best of both worlds from their education. They

want to see their own cultures celebrated and valued in schools, but

they also want the other options that good forms of modern

education can offer. This means that just replacing the Aboriginal

culture with the dominant culture is not good enough. Nor is it good

enough simply to add the dominant culture to the students' culture.

Instead students need to start out with a strong sense that their own

culture is valued in schools. Furthermore, getting the best of both

worlds means students using their own culture as their vehicle for

interacting with the majority culture. It means students using their

own familiar discourses to make sense of the less familiar discourses

of the dominant culture, and to integrate the best of both worlds, in

their own way and to their own satisfaction (p. 81).

Corson is emphasizing the importance of infusing Aboriginal traditions and

culture throughout all aspects of the student's learning experience. He reiterates the

importance of including Aboriginal contributions, ways of knowing and traditions

in curriculum, in addition to providing culturally appropriate services to students.

Cognitive Imperialism

Battiste and Henderson (2000) discuss the importance of education, and assert

Aboriginal parents want their children to fully participate in Canadian society but also

want them to develop their linguistic and cultural identity from their own Aboriginal

context. They stated the education system has not supported these important elements and

described the assimilation agenda as cognitive imperialism, also known as cultural racism,

which "is the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview". They state, "No force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations cultures than the educational system" (p. 192-193).

Education conceptualized and delivered predominantly by academics and professionals of European descent can shatter Indigenous students' sense of cultural pride and can seriously challenge their confidence in the validity of their cultural knowledge (Ball, 2004, p. 457). These colonizing practices frequently marginalize Indigenous students. In order to decolonize the experience of Aboriginal students, they must be put at the center of the educational experience. They must see themselves and their worldviews reflected in the curriculum and in the built environment. They must be respected, valued, wanted, and know they belong in higher education. Decolonized curriculum can be restorative to Aboriginal students (Justice, 2004; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004). McLaren (2003) suggests the attitudes of the larger society can negatively affect students and states, "Culture is intimately connected to the structure of social relations within class, gender and age formations which produce forms of oppression and dependency" (p. 74). He states oppression by the dominant group must be examined to identify how inequalities are maintained within schools and the wider society.

Decolonizing Methodologies

Treating students with respect and valuing their knowledge and experience is important to making them feel welcome. Indigenous scholars (Justice, 2004; Kovach,

2010; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Smith, L.T., 1999; Wilson, 2008) promote the use of decolonizing methodologies to privilege an Indigenous perspective and demonstrate respect for and valuing of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Linda Smith (1999) states, "In a decolonizing framework, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent. Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things which are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current condition" (p. 3). Coupling decolonizing methods and social justice principles can assist in actually improving current social conditions. She and other scholars (Kovach, 2010; Turner, 2006; Wilson, 2008) emphasize the importance of involving Aboriginal people in the construction and implementation of research projects, and respecting their participation as co-constructors of knowledge as opposed to subjects. They also emphasize the importance of following decolonizing methodologies and incorporating Indigenous research protocols to ensure the research is conducted in a culturally respectful manner and the knowledge which results is shared fully with the participants and their communities. The importance of following appropriate protocols is essential, given the history of Aboriginal peoples being used for research purposes with no reciprocity and little if any respect for sharing what was learned. Smith goes on to state, "Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (p. 20). She explains, "Decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and

world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (p. 39). It is therefore impossible to use decolonizing methodologies if conducting research "on" Aboriginal peoples. Rather, research must be done "with" Aboriginal peoples and the results and recommendations used to further the goals and objectives of Aboriginal peoples. Further, she indicates decolonization is a multi-layered, long-term project requiring the removal of colonial power with the final goal of universal social justice (p. 98). While the goal of universal social justice lies somewhere in the future, the struggle to get there has begun.

Kovach (2009) asserts the significance of critical reflection as central to decolonizing methodologies, and notes the importance of identifying the researcher's location and acknowledging the subjectivity and bias, which an individual's subject position creates (p. 33). Inherent in a commitment to critical reflection is the ethical responsibility to not just 'do no harm', but to actually make improvements to the situation under study in such a way that it benefits Aboriginal people or peoples. She states a decolonizing approach in research is useful in analyzing power relationships and has the potential to transform at the structural and personal level through the authority of participant voice (p. 80-81).

For the education of Aboriginal students to be successful, information must be conveyed in a meaningful way for the learner. It must help develop a transformative vision and acknowledge and build upon the participant's lived experiences, and must incorporate traditional values, beliefs, and knowledges and be based on equality, respect and reciprocity (Cajete, 1995, p. 219). Many scholars describe the importance of Aboriginal

Elders (Cherubini, 2012; Cote-Meek, 2010; Gehl, 2010; Mixon 2010) as they are the recognized carriers of Aboriginal traditional knowledges and often have the responsibility to provide guidance to members of the community. Cote-Meek (2010) recognized the inherent limitations of describing Aboriginal knowledges in a written format, as the context of knowledges is individualized and based on individual family, community and natural relationships, as well as, an individual's unique life experiences, physical location, and personal world view. She acknowledged that different Nations also have different and unique ways of coming to knowledge, and Aboriginal ways of knowing are all encompassing, as they "are reflective of a way of life, a way of being in the world, and a way of relating to both the seen and unseen" (p. 30).

In *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (2000), Cajete explained "'Mitakuye oyasin', which in Lakota means "we are all related," a metaphor which personifies what many Indigenous peoples perceive as community. He suggested community is also the context in which each community member assimilates culture and its underlying philosophy. "In its most basic sense, culture is the way in which a group of people have come to relate to a place and its natural processes" (p. 86). This connection with land and place is integral to many Aboriginal peoples ways of knowing.

Recognizing that formal education has been used as an officially sanctioned tool of assimilation is critical in deconstructing current and past practices and creating learning environments that acknowledge Aboriginal peoples as the original inhabitants of the land known as Canada. Coupled with the acknowledgement of the negative impact of education on Aboriginal peoples is the need to officially recognize the significant contributions of

Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society. Recognition must be done through textbooks, educational resources and the official curriculum so these contributions can be made visible and clearly valued for the important role they have played in the creation of the nation.

This section described decolonizing research methodologies and emphasized the importance of using this approach when conducting research involving Aboriginal peoples. The next section will present critical theory, its purpose and a number of approaches, in addition discussing the positive impact of decolonized education in supporting Aboriginal student success .

Critical Approaches to Research

In addition to decolonizing methods, there are a number of "criticalist" (Carspecken, 1996) approaches in qualitative research, including, but not limited to: critical ethnography, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, critical social research and institutional ethnography. As noted above, to my knowledge Carspecken was the first scholar to use the term "criticalist" and I will use it to describe the work of critical theorists in this section. Criticalists share the common belief that society and social structures are inherently inequitable and unjust because they subordinate some groups while privileging others. Kinchloe and McLaren (1994) state that those involved in critical work, "use (their) work as a form of social or cultural criticism . . . that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted. . . that certain groups in any society are privileged over others". Giroux claims critical

theory reveals "the gap between society as it presently exists and society as it might be" (p. 51). McIntosh (1989) addresses one dimension of needed social change when she describes white privilege as, "an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visa, clothes, tools and blank checks". She asserts "Whites are taught to think of their lives as a morally neutral, normative, and average" and those in the dominant group often work toward helping 'them' to be more like 'us'. Criticalists recognize the knowledge produced through their work must be directed toward uncovering inequities by deconstructing unearned privilege in order to initiate social change (Giroux, 2003; McIntosh, 1989; Simon & Dippo,1986).

Decolonizing education is an important step in creating a welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students. To decolonize education, it is necessary to identify the ways in which education privileges some while marginalizing others, and then take action to expose and eliminate these practices. In the following section, Indigenous ways of knowing and worldviews will be discussed at length through the work of a number of Indigenous scholars.

Indigenous Thought

As a non-Aboriginal person, it is important that I treat this section with conscious sensitivity and caution to avoid any misunderstanding of cultural appropriation or any sense that I am positioning myself as an expert in the area of Indigenous thought. As such I will present this section under three headings: Nature of Indigenous Knowledge, Sources of Indigenous Knowledge, and Recognition of the Value of Indigenous Knowledge. Rather

than synthesize the thinking of various Aboriginal scholars, I will describe my understanding of each of their works.

Nature of Indigenous Knowledge

In *Ways of Knowing*, Belanger (2010) describes Indigenous ways of knowing as being similar to Western ways of knowing in that they are both founded upon the collective experience of the individual, their community, and their ancestors' understanding of the natural environment (p. 2-3). He identified ways in which Western and Indigenous ways of knowing are distinct, and stated many Indigenous peoples believe that all of creation is animate and has spirit, including humans, animals, birds, fish, insects, plants, rocks, trees, water, the earth, sun and moon. Inherent in this belief system is that we are all connected, and all related. Thus the reference to "all my relations" means more than just other humans. Accepting such connectedness recognizes all relationships as important and the responsibility of every part of creation to protect and care for their relations (p. 13-15).

Stewart-Harawira (2005) described the central principle of traditional Indigenous ontology as the "interconnectedness of all existence" and interconnectedness extends seamlessly to the seen and unseen world, including the world of spirits. Indigenous knowledge is believed to come from the Creator and provides explicit directions on how to live one's life (p. 155). She reinforced the responsibility, "of guardianship which delineates our relationships with the natural world and our deep obligation to sustain and nurture the earth and all life" (p. 156).

Alfred (2005) asked the question "What is being Onkewehnwe"? Onkewehnwe is a Haudenosauone word meaning "the original people". He then responded to his own question by stating "Being Onkwehonwe is living heritage, being part of a tradition – shared stories, beliefs, ways of thinking, ways of moving about in the world, lived experiences – that generates identities which, while ever changing and diverse, are deeply rooted in the common ground of our heritages as original peoples" (p. 139). In interviews with Onkewehnwe youth, the students provided Alfred with their personal priorities, which included: the importance of being successful at school while preserving traditional beliefs, values, and cultures; knowing who they are and being proud of their cultures; looking for strong role models who can provide direction; and looking for opportunities to speak their traditional languages and preserve their cultures, supported in all of this by the guidance of Elders (p. 259-261). Others also speak to the important role Elders play in supporting Aboriginal students (Cherubini, 2012; Cote-Meek, 2010; Gehl, 2010; Mixon, 2010).

Alfred (2005) believes the younger generations of Onkewehonwe leaders are impatient with unsuccessful attempts to right the injustices created through colonialism. He asserted that peace is not possible without universal acceptance that everything in creation is interdependent, and stated this to be the first principle and original instruction central to Indigenous spirituality and beliefs, and crucial to the survival of the earth. He asserted that recognizing everything in creation as connected requires a shift toward respectful co-existence between autonomous nations. Prior to peaceful coexistence

happening, however, he recognized it is critical for Onkwehnwe and all Indigenous

peoples to reconnect with who they are, stating:

> We must work together toward accomplishing these things –
>
> liberation from domination, freedom from fear, a decolonized diet, a
>
> warrior ethic, and reconnect to indigenous cultures – then we will be
>
> freed from the cage of colonialism and know once again what it is to
>
> be Onkewehonwe on this land. We will be independent, self-reliant,
>
> respectful, sharing, spiritual, and adaptable. And we will be powerful
>
> in peaceful coexistence with those who live among and next to us as
>
> neighbours and friends" (p. 265-282).

This powerful quote suggests that Alfred believes that a positive relationship

between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples can be restored. In order for a

balanced relationship to occur, Aboriginal peoples must draw upon their traditions and

culture and not compromise who they are as strong Indigenous peoples.

Cardinal (2001) discussed the importance of land to Aboriginal peoples and the

ways traditions, customs, and spirituality have developed out of a connection to the land.

He described the relationship to the land, which includes a responsibility for stewardship,

and persists even though many have never actually lived on their traditional lands. He

presented the idea of molecular or cellular memory proposed by Lionel Kununwa, and

how the search for connections to culture and traditions appears to be innate (p. 180-182).

Each of these Indigenous scholars speaks to the importance of the
interconnectedness of all creation and the responsibility of each individual to care for the
land and everything in existence. This responsibility is fundamental to their belief systems.

Sources of Indigenous Knowledge

In *Ayukpachi: Empowering Aboriginal Thought* (2000) Henderson asserted the
importance of Aboriginal scholars understanding the discourse of their oppressors in order
to develop an Aboriginal discourse based on their own heritages and languages (p. 250). In
speaking of Aboriginal thought he stated Aboriginal worldviews, languages, and beliefs
arose from their observation of nature and the world around them (p. 252). He said each
individual has unique gifts and in Aboriginal thought there is no expectation these gifts
will be given equally. He acknowledged it is the responsibility of each individual to
develop their potential by using their unique gifts to understand their relationship to the
earth. "Any person who sets out on the journey to find his or her gifts will be aided by
guardian spirits, guides, teachers, and protectors along the way" (p. 265).

In *Coming Full Circle*, McGregor (2004) discussed the specific sources of
knowledge, which are traditional knowledge, empirical knowledge and revealed
knowledge. She described her belief that traditional knowledge comes directly from the
Creator and has been shared orally through stories from generation to generation since the
beginning of time. She shared the Creation Story of her people, which provides original
instructions for each member of creation and these instructions state it is the responsibility
of humans to care for the earth. She described these original instructions as Indigenous

Knowledge (pp. 387-389). She quoted Battiste and Henderson who acknowledge Indigenous Knowledge is dynamic and varies from territory to territory as people interact with, "their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands" (p. 390).

McGregor and Stewart-Harawira (2005) also discussed the nature of Indigenous Knowledge and how it provides direction on life, how to live, and on the interconnections between all things, both animate and inanimate (p. 35). She stated "A central principle of indigenous peoples' relational ontologies and cosmologies is the inseparable nature of the relations between the world of matter and the world of spirit" (p37). In the next section the significance of cultural grounding as a support to student success will be explored and a number of successful practices will be described.

Recognizing the Value of Indigenous Knowledge

In *Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge*, Graham Smith (2000) emphasized the importance of Indigenous peoples taking action which is in their best interest without concerning themselves with explaining or justifying their actions to the dominant group. He stated that providing explanations for decisions or actions puts the colonizer at the center, thus reinforcing subjugation (p. 210). He promoted the idea of developing theories created out of and consistent with Indigenous Knowledge and supportive of transformative action. He also encouraged the use of any theory and practice, regardless of the source, as long as it works to the benefit of Indigenous peoples (p. 214).

Barnardt (2005) postulated there is increasing recognition of the value and relevance of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of knowing. He suggested that for

education to be relevant to Indigenous learners, it is essential it relate to, "a sense of place and its attendant cultural practices and manifestations and recognize knowledge as constantly changing in order to adapt" (p. 10). He shared a definition of traditional knowledge provided in the American Association for the Advancement of Science handbook:

> Information that people in a given community, based on experience and adaptations to a local culture and environment, have developed over time, and continue to develop. This knowledge is used to sustain the community and its culture and to maintain the genetic resources necessary for the continued survival of the community [2003:3] (p. 9-11).

The above quote suggests that Indigenous Knowledge is not static and has evolved over time. It emphasizes the importance of the land and recognizes that since knowledge comes from the experience of people in a particular place, there is no one Aboriginal culture or set of traditions.

This section is an attempt to provide a high level insight into Indigenous Knowledge from the perspective of Indigenous scholars, recognizing it has already been interpreted through my selection of texts. Each scholar emphasized the belief in the interconnectedness of all creation both animate and inanimate, and also described the responsibilities all humans have to each other and to the protection of the land. In addition the authors described how their spiritual beliefs were infused through all aspects of their

life. The next section will build on this understanding by discussing the importance of traditional culture as a support to Aboriginal student success.

Importance of Cultural Grounding

Understanding who they are as an Aboriginal person and developing a strong sense of cultural identity can help students succeed in post-secondary studies. Many scholars (Alfred, 1999; Antone, 2001; Grande, 2004; Huffman, 2001, 2008; Jackson, Smith & Hill, 2003; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Larimore & McClellan, 2005; McKenna, 2003; Shields, 2005) identify commonalities in Aboriginal students who have succeeded in post-secondary studies. Successful students demonstrate resilience in the face of very difficult circumstances. Other scholars (Alfred, 2004; Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Grande, 2004; McCabe, 2010; Waterman, 2007; Watson, 2009) suggest that those who are able to retain a strong traditional cultural identity while navigating a foreign Western education model are the most likely to succeed. The straddling of two cultural worlds is often referred to as border crossing. McKenna (2003) suggested the only way to survive the borderland is to acknowledge the multiplicity of difference and to acquire a tolerance for ambiguity (pp. 434-435). Minoritized students are challenged in their attempts to maintain their own cultural identity while attempting to border cross. Often the initial transition to the post-secondary environment for culturally traditional individuals can be very difficult, but it can eventually act to facilitate higher educational persistence (Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Huffman, 2008; Mixon, 2010; Watson, 2009). Succeeding in both worlds is important for the Aboriginal leaders of tomorrow, and Alfred (1999) suggests that Aboriginal leaders

will need to, "interact with the changing mainstream society from a position of strength rooted in cultural confidence" (p. 133).

A student's ability to adapt to a different culture without being bound to it often reflects resilience, which helps students resist assimilation while functioning successfully in the majority culture of higher education (Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore and McClellan, 2005; Ungar, 2008). The ability to draw on their cultural identity as a source of strength and knowing who you are spiritually provides a sense of direction which supports academic persistence and assists Aboriginal students in carving out a middle ground within the post-secondary institution (Antone, 2001; Bobiwash, 1999; Heavyrunner and Marshall, 2003). Huffman (2001) describes the ability to interact on two cultural levels at the same time as transculturation, while others (McCabe, 2010; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013) use the term biculturalism. They, in addition to Unger (2008), speak of resistance theory, suggesting when minority students actively resist assimilation, they become more confident in their ethnic identity.

Culture is an essential element of student success and speaks to the importance of supporting students in staying connected to their traditional cultures and practices (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005; Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2004). Many other scholars (Hampton & Roy, 2002; Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003; Huffman, 2001; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Lee, 2007) believe that including cultural programs and culturally appropriate supports help Aboriginal students create balance, maintain a sense of safety and can be drawn upon as a source of strength when students are faced with adversity. The 2005 ACCC *Report on Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal Learners* supports the assertions of

these scholars and emphasizes the importance of, "develop(ing) a high profile, stand-alone Aboriginal services area that is knowledgeable of and responsive to the academic, emotional, spiritual and physical needs of Aboriginal students" (p. 68).

The literature suggests that recognizing, and then valuing, and supporting alternative worldviews can provide an environment that encourages the expression and celebration of various cultural values and beliefs, thus helping minoritized students feel connected with other students, with professors, and those in supporting roles at the college or university. All of these efforts can make students feel as though they are wanted and belong at the institution, which is likely to lead to persistence and higher completion rates. Knowing that others believe in your ability, care about your success, and accept you as a fully functioning and important member of the institution can make a difference when confronted with the challenges and obstacles inherent in the completion of post-secondary programming. Clearly support from the college community is important to academic success. However, the encouragement of family and community can also provide the additional support needed to persist through challenges and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Family and Community Encouragement

Family and community support and encouragement have been identified as very important in supporting Aboriginal students as they move to post-secondary studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003; Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Richardson & Blanchet-

Cohen, 2000; Waterman, 2007). Family and community support and encouragement often provides the additional encouragement needed when students encounter difficulties and consider leaving school.

This chapter provided the context for low post-secondary participation rates for Aboriginal students by describing the challenges and barriers faced by many students. It also spoke to the importance of decolonizing our institutions by acknowledging the significance of Indigenous thought and knowledge and the role culture plays in supporting Aboriginal student persistence. The next chapter in the review of the literature will address the importance of post-secondary education to Aboriginal peoples. It will also explore the significance of faculty relationships and institutional commitment to Aboriginal student success, and will introduce the theoretical and conceptual frameworks selected for the college study.

CHAPTER 4: VALUES, COMMITMENT, THEORY

Importance of Post-secondary Education

Stonechild (2006) refers to post-secondary education as the "new buffalo" for Aboriginal peoples. Historically the buffalo met most of the needs of First Nations peoples, and he trusts the new buffalo, education, to ensure prosperity for future First Nations. He references the Assembly of First Nations' report, *Tradition and Education: Toward a Vision of Our Future*, which, "espouses a new vision of the empowerment potential of First Nations education" (1988, p. 97). Stonechild concludes his analysis with the following:

> Being allowed to pursue this "new buffalo" will mean that future
>
> generations of Aboriginal peoples will not only have a special and
>
> unique ability to participate in post-secondary education, but will be
>
> able to acquire the tools that can one day enable them to contribute
>
> at the highest levels to the country they know as their homeland (p.
>
> 138).

Clearly Stonechild recognizes education as a key to the ability of Aboriginal peoples and communities to survive and thrive. He also acknowledges that education will enable Aboriginal peoples to contribute actively and fully in Canadian society.

The 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) affirmed the importance of education and began with the following:

> In Aboriginal Societies, as in many societies, children are regarded
>
> as a precious gift. Control over the education of their children has

been a pressing priority of Aboriginal peoples for decades. This is

not surprising. The destiny of a people is intricately bound to the

way its children are educated. Education is the transmission of

cultural DNA from one generation to the next. It shapes the language

and pathways of thinking, the contours of character and values, the

social skills and creative potential of the individual. It determines the

productive skills of a people (vol. 3, chapter 5, p. 1).

This important quote describes why Aboriginal people continue their struggle to

control the education of their children. In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood, which

was later renamed the Assembly of First Nations, presented "Indian Control of Indian

Education" to the federal government. This paper demanded full responsibility for and

control over the education of Aboriginal children and described education as a key to

cultural survival.

Alfred (1999) states the only real power is knowledge. He believes "Education is

the way to knowledge, the weapon our warriors need for the twenty-first century" (p. 133).

Others (Cherubini, 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hampton & Roy, 2002; Timmons,

et. al, 2009) agree, stating their belief that education is the key to a better future for

Aboriginal peoples.

Ten years after the completion of the RCAP report, the Assembly of First Nations

(2006) prepared a report card analyzing the progress made in implementing the

Commission's recommendations. The Report Card states: "Based on our assessment,

Canada [and by default, Canadians] has failed in terms of its action to date" (p. 2). It is

now 2014, and a number of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions exist;

however, they often struggle for survival due to chronic under funding. Despite the

difficulties encountered by inadequate funding, the graduation rate of Aboriginal students

from Aboriginal-controlled institutions far exceeds the success rate of Aboriginal students

from mainstream institutions (Stonechild, 2006, p. 103). Higher levels of completion from

Aboriginal-controlled institutions suggest that including Aboriginal traditions and cultures

in a systematic way, across the institution may result in higher completion rates.

According to the report *Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal Learners: An Overview of*

Current Programs and Services, Challenges, Opportunities and Lessons Learned

completed by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC, 2005), only two

Aboriginal institutions in Canada are supported by provincial policy. Being supported by

provincial policy means these institutions have provincial authority to grant credentials

and have access to secured annual funding (p. i). Other Aboriginal-controlled institutions

struggle to achieve autonomy, as funding is not secure and they are forced to partner with

mainstream institutions to issue credentials to their graduates (Stonechild, 2006).

Compounding the issue of underfunding is the fact that many eligible Aboriginal

individuals are refused support through the Post-secondary Student Support Program

(PSSSP), the funding program for education provided in the Indian Act. Such chronic

under funding at the student level is the result of rapid population growth, a 2% cap in

funding, and significant increases in tuition and living expenses (Assembly of First

Nations, 2005).

Based on the previous discussion it is clear Aboriginal peoples recognize the importance of education, and in particular post-secondary education, to improving their health, prosperity and wellbeing. Despite their commitment to education, the legacy of colonialism continues to impede participation in post-secondary education for many Aboriginal peoples. A key element in the success of Aboriginal students is the explicit commitment of the educational institution to Aboriginal peoples and their cultures and worldviews.

Institutional Commitment

Institutional commitment to Aboriginal students can be expressed in a multitude of ways. Providing culturally appropriate support services, recognizing the contribution of Aboriginal peoples in the curriculum, and explicitly providing evidence of Aboriginal culture in the built environment are all meaningful and recognizable ways of illustrating the institution is respectful of Aboriginal peoples and their culture and committed to Aboriginal student success.

Examining Institutional Practices

It is not enough to simply initiate student support services; it is essential that these services are effective. Institutional commitment to Aboriginal students can be demonstrated in different ways. Many experts (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cherubini, 2012; James, 2004; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Shields et. al, 2005; Stonechild, 2006) emphasize the importance of community

consultation and involvement in the development of courses, programs, and delivery methods. Others (Antone, 2001; Hampton & Roy, 2002; Lundberg, 2007; May & Aikman, 2003) express their belief that an institutional emphasis on diversity, cultural safety, and inclusiveness creates an environment where Aboriginal students can be successful. Others (Bobiwash, 1999; Justice, 2004; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Wilson, 2004) suggest integrating Aboriginal culture and history into the curriculum and delivering curriculum in a culturally relevant manner, leads to positive outcomes. As stated in the section on Cultural Safety and Support, creating a place where students feel they belong and which is viewed as culturally safe by students is recognized as significant to student success. The 2005 ACCC Report supports all of these approaches as appropriate to supporting Aboriginal learners.

Actions speak louder than words and a number of individuals (ACCC, 2005; Antone, 2001; Pidgeon, 2008; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Stonechild, 2006; Waterman, 2007) suggest the dearth of full-time Aboriginal faculty and staff and the reluctance to provide core funding for Native support services signals a lack of institutional commitment to Aboriginal students. For many institutions, funding for specific Aboriginal student services comes directly from the provincial government in a specific funding envelope. The concern remains that should funding cease, individual institutions may choose to discontinue specific Aboriginal support services since the cost of providing specialized services is not embedded in the core operating budget.

Institutions can do additional things to increase success. Many research projects (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Mixon, 2010; Mosholder &

Goslin, 2013; Watson, 2009; Waterman, 2007) emphasize the importance of mentorship programs in the smooth integration of Aboriginal students to post-secondary studies. Others (ACCC Report, 2005; Huffman, 2001; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008) describe the importance of providing a visual presence for First Nations people on campus, suggesting cultural symbols and art reinforce identity and lead to increased comfort levels.

As stated earlier, the number of Aboriginal students accessing post-secondary studies continues to rise. Bordieu and Passeron (2000) suggest post-secondary educational institutions often purport to be open access, but question whether admitting students is enough. Low success rates and high levels of attrition for Aboriginal students attending post-secondary institutions signals the ongoing need for support services. A successful learning experience is not limited to activities in the classroom, but includes every interaction with every person in each department across the college (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Timmons, et. al, 2009).

Post-secondary institutions promise of support and access is frequently included in mission statements and proclamations of values. For example, the York University mission statement asserts it is "Committed to….social justice, accessible education". Similarly, the mission statement of the college included in this dissertation states, "We provide opportunity for people of all abilities and backgrounds to discover their potential and fulfill their aspirations". Implicit in such promises of access is a responsibility to ensure applicants admitted to the institution have an equitable opportunity to be successful, and recognize that in fact, all groups may not have the same chance of success. These promises place specific responsibility on these institutions to level the playing field through the

provision of specialized support services. In using the term equitable, I mean more than just impartial, fair and unbiased, but rather the expanded definition of being partial to particular groups in order to offset oppression or privilege. The provision of support services helps build resilience and creates a level playing field, which is integral to student persistence to graduation; however, it is necessary to examine institutional structures on a regular basis to confirm promises of access and equity are in fact supported by practice. It is important that institutions challenge the prevailing notions of normal practice, disrupt the existing marginalizing practices acting as gatekeepers, and ensure all practices are culturally sensitive to verify educational institutions' promise of access and equity are fully realized. If institutions are truly committed to social justice and accessible education, then it becomes the responsibility of the institution to put systems in place to ensure they are demonstrating a commitment to their mission and values.

To create a positive environment for learning, which truly welcomes all students, there must be an understanding that many worldviews exist and they all need to be respected and embraced equally. In recognizing and embracing the multiplicity of difference, it is necessary to acknowledge that traditional European values and beliefs are not the only way to see the world.

Several scholars (Freire, 2006; Gergen, 1978; Chait, et. al, 2005; Klimek, Ritzenheim & Sullivan, 2008; Wittrock, 1992) use the term "generative" in a number of ways. All speak to the importance of dialogue in uncovering and challenging assumptions that have the potential to lead to transformative action. Freire discusses generative themes, such as race, class and gender and proposes the use of dialogue and problem posing as a

means to overcome limit-situations and generate the priority themes to be confronted by a particular group. Gergen speaks of generative theory, which he believes has the power to transform society by, "unseating comfortable truths of wide acceptance" (p. 1357). Wittrock, who is recognized as the founder of generative learning theory, built his theory on neural research. He believes new learning is acquired by examining existing knowledge and preconceptions, and then generating a new relationship between existing knowledge and new knowledge or concepts. As mentioned in the introduction, generative discussion (Chait, et. al, 2005) builds on generative theory and is described as "getting to the question before the question". It is about uncovering values, beliefs, assumptions and organizational culture. It requires that groups identify and agree upon the underlying values that will drive strategy, which in turn affects what problems or issues an organization pays attention to and what priorities and tactics are chosen to address these issues. Chait, Ryan and Taylor developed the use of generative discussion as an approach to strengthening governance and decision-making in non-profit boards for institutions such as hospitals, universities and colleges. These deep conversations take boards beyond their usual fiduciary and strategic planning responsibilities and moves them from problem solving to problem framing. Generative discussions are useful because they assist boards to move outside the usual framework of overall operations and help boards to, "better understand the paradigm shifts that can impact an organization's success over the long haul. Generative thinking is critical to looking at fixed data and situations in a more subjective, retrospective way" (Ryan, 2008). By having these deep conversations, Boards are more easily able to make decisions that are consistent with institutional values.

In the next section I will present the significant role that relationships with faculty play in the success of Aboriginal students. These relationships are important in encouraging persistence, but also in creating a climate for learning that is welcoming and free of racism.

Faculty Relationships

Strong relationships between faculty and Aboriginal students are also influential in encouraging students to remain in school. Many reports (Bishop, 2005; Cherubini, 2012; Hampton & Roy, 2002; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Lee, 2007; Lundberg, 2007; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Shields, 2005) suggest when students are treated in a respectful manner, by professors who demonstrate personal warmth, a caring attitude, a genuine interest, and some knowledge of Aboriginal culture, students are encouraged and are more likely to persist to completion.

Racist, discriminatory, and essentializing actions by faculty, staff and other students can be devastating for students (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Mixon, 2010; Timmons, et. al, 2009). In *Red Pedagogy* (2004), Grande describes the "simplistic constructions that limit racial identity to its most essential and/or stereotypical features" and "essentialist theories are driven by the white stream desire to define 'otherness' (p. 100). In interviews with Native American students, (Jackson, et. al, 2003), a student expressed the same concern, "I'm expected to speak up for all the brown people in the world, and I just don't like that". Another student stated: "I was offended. I was hurt" (p. 557).

Eisner (2001) speaks of both the implicit or hidden curriculum and the null curriculum. The hidden curriculum emphasizes and furthers societal values through teacher behaviour that rewards some behaviour, such as compliance and competition (p. 88, p. 92). He also discusses the null curriculum, or what schools do not teach (p. 97). By not teaching about Aboriginal values, contributions, ways of knowing, educational institutions may signal that this knowledge is not important or valued. A number of scholars (Helin, 2006; McLaren, 2004; Shields, et. al, 2005) also speak of the hidden curriculum. In their context, Helin, McLaren and Shields view the hidden curriculum as marginalizing particular groups and seeing them as deficient, and therefore less academically able than others. If there is an assumption that Aboriginal students will be less successful, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when high attrition rates occur (Stonechild, 2006, p. 87). In some situations, Aboriginal students believe that teachers have a lower expectation of their academic ability and commitment. The belief that all members of a particular minority group share common weaknesses is often referred to as deficit thinking or deficit theorizing. Deficit thinking suggests something is inherently missing in minoritized students, which predisposes them to academic failure (Maldonado, Rhoads & Buenavista, 2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Pidgeon, 2009; Shields, et. al, 2005). Such negative thinking leads to a discourse of low expectations, inappropriate streaming, and systematic marginalization in the educational setting. In speaking of the success of Grandview/Uuquinaküuh Elementary School in Vancouver, Helin (2006) states: "Kids, whether Aboriginal or otherwise, respond to high academic expectations placed on them with results" (p. 213). Mazawi (2005) agrees "Deficit theorizing is the major

impediment to minoritized students" (p. 120). He states that in the classroom, meaning

making, or learning, is developed through "language: statements, images, conventions, and

metaphors". He describes how difficult it is for minoritized students to translate what they

hear in the classroom or read in a textbook in order to 'make meaning'. Mazwai challenges

the ubiquitous use of the dominant discourse as a hegemonic practice which continues to

marginalize those not from the dominant group (p. 123).

It is possible to structure the institution in such a way as to make Aboriginal

students feel comfortable from the beginning. If institutions create a respectful

environment that welcomes Aboriginal students, includes Aboriginal contributions in the

curriculum, and demonstrates a valuing of Aboriginal culture, the number of the students

who 'stop out' could be reduced.

In the following section I will describe the theoretical and conceptual frameworks

selected to analyze the data collected in the college study. I will also explain the reasons

for selecting these frameworks and why they were meaningful to me. From the perspective

of Aboriginal students, the college study explores the strategies that support Aboriginal

student success at a particular northern Ontario college and identifies the barriers to

Aboriginal student success.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks help structure research projects and

interpret the results by explicating the values of the researcher and providing a particular

lens with which to view the data. As stated by Kovach (2010), decolonizing methodologies

and incorporating an Indigenous research framework "means gathering knowledge that allows for voice and representational involvement in interpreting findings… that allow the participants to share their experiences on their own terms" (p. 82). As a non-Aboriginal researcher working to address the experiences of Aboriginal students, I have drawn on the work of Aboriginal scholars to guide me in a positive direction.

Social Justice as a Theoretical Framework

Kovach (2010) suggests theoretical frameworks are essential when interpreting knowledge and valuable when converting knowledge into purposeful, relevant and useful approaches to address a situation or issue (p. 44). I intend to take the approach suggested by Kovach, and allow the theory to do the work of converting what I have learned through the college study, and subsequent experiences, to address the specific goal of Indigenizing the campus.

Theoretical frameworks consistent with Indigenous ideologies are holistic, value-based and are committed to maintaining relationships. They are not solely an intellectual construct (p. 63). A social justice lens provides an appropriate tool to examine Aboriginal students' experiences in post-secondary education. By social justice, I mean equitable access to things that meet basic needs, such as clean water, safe housing, adequate amounts of nutritious food, and also access to education which will help each individual feel respected and valued and help them fully realize their potential. In addition, Rawls (1971) describes the fundamental belief of social justice is "Inequalities of wealth and authority are just only if they result in compensation benefits for everyone, and in

particular for the least advantaged members of society" (p. 14). In *Justice as Fairness* (2001), Rawls states that inequalities can be addressed by providing the greater benefit to the least-advantaged in society (p. 42). This specific statement was used as a secondary analytic lens to view college study interviews in order to inform the development of recommendations.

As stated previously, the Government of Canada overtly, deliberately, and systematically attempted to eliminate Aboriginal cultures, traditions, and languages through legislation and the residential school system. The intention was to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into the dominant Christian society. Despite the horrendous assault on Aboriginal peoples and their ontologies and cosmologies, their belief systems have persisted and are in fact beginning once more to thrive.

A number of scholars (Davis, 2011; Hanks, 2011; Miller, 1999; Swander, 2011) speak of the complexity of the term social justice and reject the notion of a single definition. Often subject position influences the perception of whether or not social injustice has occurred. Challenges arise when responsibility for social injustices cannot be attributed to specific individuals or clearly delineated actions. Swander (2011) also links the pervasiveness of social injustice to capitalism and the "profit motive" and questions whether addressing injustices as they arise is adequate. She suggests a need to develop structures to ensure justice is available to everyone (p. 1-3). Hanks (2011) identified the challenges and impediments to achieving universal social justice and states such a lofty goal is often impeded by "Emotions, subjectivity, and our own self-interest" (p. 8). Davis (2011) asserts that small gains in eradicating specific instances of injustice might be more

valuable than the search for a universal definition, since perspectives on justice vary in different regions of the world. It is therefore difficult to achieve agreement about what constitutes in actual situations. Davis (2011) proposes that people's concern with social justice is largely related to the broad recognition of the importance of relationships and feelings of self-worth and feeling valued (p. 44-45).

Rawls (2001) attempts to simplify the concept of social justice by identifying key principles. He speaks to the issue of justice as fairness, which he describes as equal access to basic rights and liberties, and equal access to opportunities. There are limitations to his theory, as it is based on an assumption that society is a "Fair system of social cooperation over time from one generation to the next" (p. 41-42). He goes on to state reasonable people will understand and honour these principles, even in a situation where it is not in their best interest. He suggests the role of principles of justice is to specifically identify the fair terms of social cooperation (p. 6-7). He acknowledges that social and economic inequalities exist, but he believes these inequities need to be addressed by providing the greater benefit, in any situation, to the least-advantaged member of society (p. 42).

Other scholars (Alfred, 2004; Cherubini, 2012; Pidgeon, 2009; Ungar, 2007) suggest Aboriginal peoples in Canada have not been treated in a just manner. They suggest that once issues of social justice and equity have been recognized and addressed, then programs, services, policies and practices will change to address systemic inequities.

In describing the "Stolen Generation" in Australia, Zubrzycki (2011) states: "Amongst this history of profound loss and disadvantage is also a story of extraordinary

survival of one of the oldest living cultures on the planet" and quotes from Briskman's

(2007) work *Social Work with Indigenous Communities*:

> Aboriginal and Torres Islander communities have demonstrated great
>
> strength and resilience surviving decades of government policy and
>
> injustices…Their survival can be attributed to their traditional customs
>
> and the importance of family and community ties that they have
>
> continued despite the destabilization that colonization posed (p. 130).

As with any living culture, it is important to recognize that Aboriginal culture is

not frozen in time and continues to evolve and transform. Zubrzycki concludes that

perhaps now is the time to put into practice the strategies which are known to be effective

and to work collaboratively with Aboriginal peoples to achieve social justice through the

implementation of an educational framework which respects Aboriginal world views (p.

140). There are some common experiences to be learned from Indigenous cultures in other

parts of the world that help to strengthen and inform the lived experiences of Indigenous

people collectively.

In summary, the previous section provides a description of social justice theory and

relates it to an Aboriginal context. As discussed previously, social justice, or as Rawls

(2001) suggests addressing inequalities by providing the greater benefit to the least-

advantaged (p. 42), in a post-secondary educational context can be achieved by providing

specific support services, demonstrating institutional commitment to Aboriginal culture

and traditions, educating faculty, staff and other students about the legacy of colonialism

and the impact on Aboriginal peoples today, reflecting Aboriginal culture, traditions and

knowledge in the curriculum, and by welcoming the community into the institution. In

short, there is a need for each post-secondary institution that serves Aboriginal students to

"Indigenize" their campus. These activities all assist in redressing historic wrongs and help

create a level playing field where Aboriginal students feel welcomed, encouraged and

supported. The next section will explore the use of the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a

conceptual framework.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings as a Conceptual Framework

      The Seven Grandfather Teachings guided my practice, and my interpretation of the

Seven Grandfather Teachings are used as the conceptual framework for this dissertation.

According to Kovach (2010) a conceptual framework makes clear the researcher's way of

seeing the world and provides an understanding of how such a perspective influences the

interpretation of the data and the selection of research methodology. I found that the

Grandfather teachings correspond directly to many of my beliefs about the world, although

I am ever conscious of my limited experience with them. Corbiere (2007) retold the

traditional lesson and states the Seven Grandfather Teachings came from the Creator to

help guide the people and they form the foundation upon which all peoples should conduct

themselves. The Teachings emphasize the importance of respect, truth, love, humility,

honesty, bravery, and wisdom. When used as intended, they become a code of ethics for

culturally appropriate research practices. According to a number of Indigenous scholars

(Borrows, 2008; Maar, McGregor Sutherland & McGregor, 2005) the Seven Grandfather

Teachings cannot be practiced in isolation, but rather must be used together in an interconnected manner. In practice, the Seven Grandfather Teachings suggest looking for connections, honouring the traditions, and avoiding generalizations. It also means a commitment to conducting research in a manner that reinforces and respects the cultural values of the First Nations individuals involved in any study, and in the spirit of reciprocity, it was also important that research provide a direct benefit to those who participated in the study, as well as future generations.

I was told by my teacher, Deborah, the great gift of the Seven Grandfathers was given by the Creator to provide direction and balance to all peoples and following the teachings would help people live in harmony with all elements of creation, provide direction on how to care for Mother Earth; and care for each other. "They are often the first teachings received and are the foundation for how one sees, processes, reacts to, and interacts with the world and all that is in it" (personal conversation, Robertson, 2009). I will provide a more robust discussion of how this conceptual framework actually guided the research methodology in the next Chapter.

Summary

The review of the literature in the previous three chapters demonstrates that the legacy of colonialism continues to have a negative impact on Aboriginal peoples. Dominant discourses have normalized the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples' contributions, worldviews and ways of knowing. Though Aboriginal peoples believe strongly that education is key to their survival, marginalization continues to impact access

to post-secondary studies as education has historically been used as a forceful tool of assimilation. Post-colonial theory assumes that colonialism is in the past. The goal of post-colonial theory is to confront what happened and redress historic wrongs. The scholars identified in the review of the literature advocate for the critical examination of the Eurocentric worldview and its normalization as it is entrenched in social thinking and practice, which continues to marginalize those who are not from the dominant culture.

Decolonizing methodologies insist that those who have been colonized assume a position at the center and not apologize for decisions and actions taken that are in their own best interests. A number of authors reject the notion of deficit theorizing and challenge educators to deconstruct their assumptions about minority students. Other scholars suggest the ability of Aboriginal students to border cross between their own culture and the dominant culture is an important means of surviving post-secondary education, while staying true to their belief systems and at the same time resisting assimilation.

Institutional practices can make a significant difference in creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment for Aboriginal students. Organizations that clearly value diversity will provide a culturally respectful environment, including opening space for the students to create their place in the college. They will integrate Aboriginal cultures and histories in the curriculum and provide a positive learning environment, which will support student persistence by increasing students' sense of belonging. In short, by taking a holistic approach to infusing traditional Aboriginal traditions, culture and contributions into all aspects of the institution they will Indigenize their campus.

Indigenous peoples have many distinct worldviews and ways of knowing and those who exercise traditional practices infuse spirituality throughout all aspects of their life. Historically the traditional beliefs and values were transmitted verbally; therefore, lessons in the form of storytelling are an integral part of various cultures. Implicit in such belief systems is the interconnection of all things, both animate, such as people, birds, and animals, and inanimate, such as rocks, trees, and lakes. Many Aboriginal cultures teach that specific instructions have been given to humans by the Creator and it is their responsibility to care for the earth. Reciprocity is an integral part of Aboriginal relationships (Chacaby, et. al, 2008; Justice, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Waterman, 2007) and this relationship speaks to the importance of the co-construction of knowledge in an educational setting and giving back in the form of sharing research results with participants and their community. Many Aboriginal peoples have strong beliefs that every individual is given gifts (Henderson, 2000), and it is their duty to use these gifts for the good of their community. Central to these beliefs is reciprocity, that is, the obligation to give something back for gifts received. The importance of land and the belief that traditions, customs, and spirituality have developed out of the connection to land is also central to Aboriginal worldviews. As suggested earlier, Aboriginal student services that teach and celebrate Aboriginal traditions, cultures, and provide access to ceremonies can help students feel connected to their ways of knowing and worldviews and assist them in overcoming difficulties. In addition, when Aboriginal students see their ways of knowing and worldviews included in the formal curriculum, they feel valued.

In the next chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the methodology used in the college study. I will also describe how the developing relationship with my Aboriginal colleagues and teachers in the Aboriginal Learning Unit guided and supported the implementation of a culturally responsible research project.

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNICATING, COLLABORATING, CO-CONSTRUCTING

Background

This dissertation is developed in two distinct parts. The first part is focused on the college study conducted during the 2007 – 2008 academic year. As discussed earlier, I worked in the Aboriginal Learning Unit of a northeastern Ontario college from August 2007 to July 2008. During this time I worked collaboratively with members of the Aboriginal Learning Unit to design and implement a qualitative study, from an Aboriginal student perspective, examining institutional practices that supported Aboriginal student success and the institutional practices that created barriers to Aboriginal student success. The second part of the dissertation focuses on how the knowledge acquired during the college study later informed the creation of an Aboriginal Learning Unit in a college in southern Ontario. The second portion of the dissertation discusses how the initial acquired knowledge was extended to include the significance of Indigenizing a college through generative discussion with the goal of creating a decolonized institution. The next section will provide a background to the college study.

As a non-Aboriginal person preparing to conduct research examining institutional practices and the ways these practices impact Aboriginal students, I employed decolonizing methodologies to approach the research in a culturally intelligent manner. A main component of cultural intelligence includes self-study and critical personal reflection. In using decolonizing methodologies, it was important for me to examine my own biases and be open to learning about worldviews and ways of knowing very different from my own. I selected decolonizing methodology in an effort to ensure I proceeded in a respectful

and culturally appropriate manner. Agar (1996, p. 91) asks the question "Who are you to do this?" He went on to discuss researcher bias and asserted one's own culture is the platform from which all other cultures are framed (p. 93). Bhabha (Rutherford, 1990) supports this notion stating the dominant culture "locates" other cultures within their own grid (p. 208). As a non-Aboriginal woman commencing a research project with Aboriginal college students, I asked myself the same question, who am I to do a study with Aboriginal peoples? I understood my subject position and biases might cause me to misinterpret what I saw or heard. As well, unconscious filtering could mean I missed important cues, leading to lost opportunities. These lost opportunities had the potential to prevent me from uncovering the most significant institutional barriers. As a long-time employee of the college, I saw my experience as both an asset and a liability. I was very familiar with the institutional structures at the college and had developed strong relationships with key people in many departments. On the negative side, based on my experience, I also had preconceived notions about the practices that created the most difficulty for students. As a result I attempted to de-center what I thought I "knew" and worked to interrupt my own ideas of what I should attend to and what I should choose to ignore. I was aware my own background had the potential to prevent me from even hearing what students were saying, thus allowing my own biases to interfere which could result in "Mental doors slam(ing) shut on the alternatives" (Agar, 1996, p. 98). As suggested by Matua and Swadener (2004) I attempted to consciously decolonize my research by emphasizing the voices and worldviews of participants. I also critically interrogated how my methods might be "reproducing oppressive patterns and relationships" (p. 6). To conduct research in a

decolonized manner, collaboration is essential. I recognized the importance of involving every participant as a co-creator of knowledge. My role in the study was to be a helper in the process, thus allowing me to gather authentic information and overcome inherent biases. Despite my potential shortcomings, I hoped through the guidance of knowledgeable colleagues, thoughtful and reflective practice, and by critically examining my learning that I would be able to overcome these limitations, acknowledging I may not always be successful, despite my best efforts.

The College Study

The primary goal of the college project was to uncover the subtleties of current practices at a northeastern Ontario community college, which tend to marginalize Aboriginal students, and based on the suggestions of the Aboriginal peoples in the study, make recommendations for positive change. It was my hope that the recommendations would be practical and could actually be implemented. Through the analysis of the participant interviews in the college study, recommendations to better support Aboriginal students are proposed in the conclusion of this dissertation. Consistent with decolonizing methodologies, these recommendations were vetted through the participants themselves and then endorsed by the Anishnaabe Affairs Committee, which is a sub-committee of the college's Board of Governors. It was hoped the recommendations would be fully implemented and result in a more welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students, and thus increase student success. The promising practices, arising as they do from the students themselves, constitute one of this dissertation's contribution to

knowledge. Recognizing that such work must be local and specific to be relevant to those involved, I also conclude that these recommendations will have resonances and serve as a starting point for similar work in new and different educational contexts within other colleges and beyond.

Joining the Aboriginal Learning Unit Team

Commencing August 2007, meetings began with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit. Through discussion and collaboration with the staff of the Unit, a research plan was developed that demonstrated cultural awareness and focused on the goals of identifying institutional practices which support students in their learning and uncovering those practices that serve to create obstacles to academic success. Inherent in these goals is the importance of identifying, from the student perspective, the supports which helped them persist in their studies, the barriers which created difficulties for them, and changes they would recommend the college implement to make it easier for future Aboriginal students to be successful. The collaborative approach used for the study involved ongoing involvement of the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, which is essential in using a decolonizing methodology. Collaboration occurred in designing the research, developing ethics proposals, recruiting participants, and developing the final report. Planning for the college study with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit occurred as I was waiting for ethics approval. In addition to the staff of the Unit, the study included in-depth interviews with Aboriginal college students, First Nations Education Managers and staff from various college student services departments.

Prior to interviewing participants, I sought multi-level ethics approval. As stated in the Introduction, at the suggestion of Joyce, the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, I first submitted the project plan to the Manitoulin Anishnaabek Research Review Committee (MARRC) prior to seeking ethics approval from York University or the college. The MARRC ethics review process was very specific and detailed and the proposal was returned to me twice for further information, clarification, and elaboration. The proposal was originally submitted in June, but the request for additional information was not received until September. At that time, the Committee asked for additional detail on the purpose and scope of the research and they asked me to elaborate further on what would happen should a participant wish to withdraw from the study. I prepared the response, met with Joyce to discuss the submission further and then resubmitted the requested information within a week. In late October I received a request to elaborate further on how the Seven Grandfather Teachings would inform and guide the study. Once again I prepared the response, discussed it with Joyce and resubmitted. I received ethics approval from MARRC in December. In early January I submitted the required ethics approval forms to both York University and the College's ethics committees with the MARRC proposal appended. I received ethics approval from both educational institutions within two weeks. Once approval had been received from all groups, I, along with staff from the Aboriginal Learning Unit, conducted a focus group with students. We recruited student participants for the focus group through a call for volunteers during an event hosted by the Aboriginal Learning Unit. The purpose of the focus group was to test the interview questions to gain a sense of the types of responses the questions would elicit and

to seek feedback from students on the questions themselves, their wording, and any identified gaps the students felt were important. Based on student feedback, the interview questions and recruitment strategy were refined. Then I began the interviews.

Chapter nine of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research involving Humans (2010) speaks specifically to a researcher's responsibilities when conducting studies involving Aboriginal peoples. It states that any such research is premised on respectful relationships and describes in detail the importance of collaboration and engagement between researchers and participants and working with the community to plan research and to share results. It also speaks to the need for reciprocity and explains the obligation to give something back in return for gifts received (p. 105). In the context of the college study, I had an obligation to work collaboratively with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit in the design and execution of the college study, and furthermore, had a responsibility to the study's participants to 'give back' by recommending changes in practice at the college which I hoped would result in a more supportive environment for future Aboriginal students. The approach to research provided in the Tri-Council Policy Statement is consistent with decolonizing methodologies.

As in any critical approach, the purpose of constructing new knowledge is to examine existing practices with the intention of transforming these practices to be of benefit to the study's participants. In the next section, I will provide a detailed description of my use of the Seven Grandfather Teachings as the conceptual framework for the dissertation.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings

Earlier the Seven Grandfather Teachings were introduced as the conceptual framework for this dissertation and through the process of receiving ethics approval from MARRC, I committed to these Teachings. Kovach (2010) states the purpose of a conceptual framework is to make visible the way the researcher sees the world and provides insight into a researcher's belief about knowledge production. MARRC ethics proposal template is available on the Noojmowin Teg website, at www.noojmowin-teg.ca. As the study proceeded, the Teachings were my touch stone for ensuring I was working in a way consistent with the values they espoused. The Seven Grandfather Teachings are: wisdom, respect, love, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. I gained a stronger understanding of the Teachings through the MARRC ethics approval process, through discussions with one of my colleagues and teachers, Deborah, a staff member in the Aboriginal Learning Unit (personal conversation, 1999), and through readings (Benton-Banai, 1988; Borrows, 2008; Corbiere, 2007). The MARRC proposal template spoke specifically to how the Research Review Committee believed researchers must demonstrate their research plan was respectful of the Teachings.

In addition to identifying the ways the Seven Grandfather Teachings would guide the research, I was expected to answer the following:

- Are the participants and the community approached in a respectful way?

- Are the research instruments appropriate?

- Do participants have time and opportunity to get to know the research process?

- Does the researcher demonstrate an understanding of local cultures and customs?

- Will the research benefit participants or the community directly?

- Will the sharing of the results benefit future generations?

- Is the researcher willing to learn and be guided by local customs?

- Is the researcher willing to develop a trust-based relationship?

- Is the community a true partner in the research process?

- Is the community's contribution acknowledged?

- Will the research likely lead to community action rather than harm?

- Is the researcher willing to support change based on the research results?

- Is the project designed to empower participating communities?

The MARRC ethics form privileged Aboriginal perspectives, traditions, ways of knowing and cultures and is consistent with decolonizing methods. The ethics approval process required the researcher to explicitly describe how Aboriginal peoples would be involved in the creation of knowledge, how the research would further local priorities and demonstrate an understanding of local cultures and customs, and describe how the research was consistent with the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Working collaboratively with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit to guide each step of the research project was based on a growing relationship and friendship. I will now describe how each individual teaching was applied in the college study.

Wisdom

In this context wisdom means a valuing of the knowledge gained by students through their individual lived experiences. The participants were asked to share their experiences while

at the college. In conducting the interviews, it was my intention to recognize and acknowledge their expertise and the importance of each student's experience. The interviews were unstructured, allowing students to direct the conversation and opening the space for them to tell their stories. I emphasized the importance of the student perspective and experience by encouraging the participants to lead the dialogue. I told the participants I hoped to publish and present the findings upon completion of the study. Sharing the findings would assist in disseminating the new knowledge and hopefully assist others in examining their institutional policies, procedures and practices.

Respect

I recognized the participants were sharing their personal experiences and these experiences could not be generalized. Students were assured their experiences were meaningful and valuable and formed the foundation for the study. Through the dialogue about informed consent, I attempted to ensure each person understood the purpose of the questions and the study, and also understand how the information provided would be used. It was my intention to create a comfortable, non-threatening environment and to use open-ended questions so the individual participants had a role in leading and directing the discussion.

Love

I discussed how I hoped the research would benefit current and future students. The participants were approached kindly and with genuine warmth and appreciation, as they were giving me the gift of their time and demonstrated a willingness to teach me by sharing their experiences. The focus was entirely on the individual during the interview.

Bravery

I acknowledged it might be difficult for participants to discuss their experiences. I told the participants that if they wished, meetings with Elders could be arranged. Based on the results of the study, the final report openly disclosed the findings with the intention of creating change at the college.

Honesty

I included the participants as valued collaborators by acknowledging their contribution. I was open about the purpose of the study and what I hoped to accomplish. Though the Executive Committee of the college had approved the study in principle, I informed the participants I could not guarantee the recommendations would be fully implemented.

Humility

I sought the guidance of Elders and other knowledgeable people in structuring and implementing the study. I tried not to be intrusive and did not push the participants to disclose information they were not comfortable sharing. The participants were not judged based on their current or past circumstances. I ensured it was a good time to conduct the interview and recognized the participants had agreed to help me with the project.

Truth

It is understood by many Aboriginal peoples that words are part of the person, so it was my responsibility to treat those words with care. I shared my hopes that the research would lead to the creation of a more supportive and welcoming institution, thereby leading to higher levels of student success. My plan for change began from the students' perspective

and reflected the student experience, and placed their needs front and center. I ensured the information provided to me was kept confidential and retained in a safe, secure location.

As a non-Aboriginal person, I was hesitant to use the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a conceptual framework, even though they were embedded in the project from the beginning. My reluctance stemmed from my concern that using them as a conceptual framework might be considered by some as cultural appropriation. In order to determine whether or not it was appropriate for me to use them as the conceptual framework, I sought the guidance of knowledgeable Aboriginal people. At my current college, I spoke to the staff of the Aboriginal Student Unit, the chair of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle and to an Elder in Residence who is also a scholar in the Western tradition. When I asked about the appropriateness of my using the Teachings as a conceptual framework, the people I approached initially expressed surprise and then, after thoughtful consideration, stated the Teachings did not belong to any one race, but rather, were to be used by all people to live in balance and harmony on earth. Exploring this further, I re-examined the work of both Corbiere (2007) and Benton-Banai (1988). Both authors suggest the Seven Grandfather Teachings were given by the Creator to all the earth`s people. In the story of the Seven Grandfather Teachings, the man who was given the Teachings by the Creator was instructed to go to all the four directions to tell the people about the teachings (Corbiere, p. 19). It is based on this understanding and the recognition the Seven Grandfather Teachings are considered sacred, particularly by Anishnaabe peoples, that I respectfully frame the college study with the Teachings.

Ethics approval took much longer than I anticipated. When I first met with Joyce, the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit in June, I expected to have approval from MARRC by September and from the college and York University shortly after. I expected to begin the interviews by late September or early October, and I fully expected to have the data-gathering portion of the study complete by the end of the Fall semester. Rather than waiting at home for the proposal's approval, I spent three to five days each week working in the Unit. My work involved participating in the planning activities, meetings, attending ceremonies and events, along with the day-to-day activities of the Unit. I learned about Aboriginal traditions and cultures. In particular, I learned about the spiritual customs and practices of the staff, as they were infused in all activities. Seasonal feasting and celebrations helped with my preparation for the interviews, as I acquired a deeper understanding of cultures and the importance of building trusting relationships. Staff shared openly and invited me to be a fully engaged member of the team. I also started to build relationships with students. Kovach (2010) and others (Smith, L.T., 1999; and Wilson, 2008) suggest a relational approach to research is consistent with Indigenous or decolonizing methodologies. As stated earlier, ethics approval from MARRC was finally received in December and ethics approval from York University and the college was received in January, within two weeks of submission. In retrospect, I see the delay in ethics approval positively, as it provided me with the opportunity to learn, as well as build relationships, trust, and lasting friendships.

Collaborative Research

Involving Aboriginal peoples as co-constructors of knowledge is integral to decolonizing methodologies (Kovach, 2010; Smith, L., 2009; Wilson, 2008). During the initial meetings with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, I described the project, outlined the purpose of the study, and reviewed the proposed methodology. At the second meeting, I realized I had a lot to learn. My original approach to sharing my research plan with staff was to present the plan in a linear, sequential method. As I walked through the plan, a number of the staff looked puzzled, and one asked if I could rework the plan and present it as a cycle or circle. I was caught off guard, but promised to bring it back for consideration at our next meeting. Though redesigning the presentation in the form of a circle may seem simple, I needed to rethink everything I planned to do, and it took me several hours to prepare the revised plan. It was through this early experience that my learning began. Circular thought is integral to many Aboriginal peoples, as natural cycles, such as the seasons, the movement of the sun and moon, the life cycle, and so on, provide a way of knowing the world. When I re-presented my plan the following week, the staff looked pleased, and based on their feedback, the plan was elaborated, and finalized. Joyce provided me with an office within the department, and in late August 2007 I began working out of my new office.

Based on the recommendation of staff, the first step was to hold a focus group and then conduct in-depth interviews with approximately twenty Aboriginal students. MARRC recommended the student interviews be conducted using a team approach. Recommending that interviews be conducted using a team approach, meant I would work with a member

of the Aboriginal Learning Unit to ensure the comfort level of the participants. Using a team approach for the interviews was presented to the participants during the focus group, but a student suggested it might prevent interviewees from openly commenting or making recommendations about the services currently provided by the Unit. I discussed the students' recommendation that I conduct the interviews on my own with Joyce, and it was agreed I would offer the participants the option of including an Elder or staff member in the interview. Though a number of students expressed appreciation that I offered to have an Elder or staff member present, none felt it was necessary. As the Elders, all members of the Unit, the participating students and the Education Managers are Aboriginal peoples, the opportunity to gain the personal perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal people was embedded in the study. That being said, it is not assumed the perspectives and experiences outlined in the college study represent those of all Aboriginal peoples, as there is great diversity across Nations in terms of language, cultural protocols, and practices.

My intention was to include a broad selection of students from various programs and each year of study. I chose this approach as I recognized the student experience might vary depending on the program of study. Based on a group decision at a Unit team meeting on September 10, 2007, it was agreed a question regarding my college research project would be included as part of an annual student survey, which was to be distributed at an upcoming social function. It was the practice of the Unit to survey students annually, at the beginning of the academic year, to identify student needs and then structure programming and services to meet the needs of the learners. The question we asked was: "Would you be interested in participating in a research project on student success?" Those who were

interested in participating completed a form with their contact information. A total of 49

students volunteered, and it was anticipated many of the study participants would be

recruited from these volunteers. We also wanted to include students who had withdrawn

from the college. Students who had withdrawn from the college were contacted by the

Registrar's Office via email and then follow-up letter, in an attempt to recruit participants.

Only two students responded, one of whom had re-enrolled in another program. The

purpose of sending the call for volunteers from the Registrar's Office was to ensure only

those interested in participating were identified to the research team. To implement the

communication, the Registrar's Office generated a database of all withdrawn students who

had indicated Aboriginal heritage. To guarantee confidentiality, an email was sent to these

individuals as "blind copies" thus ensuring neither students nor the research team could

identify to whom the message was sent.

In order to demonstrate my appreciation, all participating students were given a

small token at the beginning of the interview. The token of appreciation took the form of

Tim Horton's coupons, and the participants appeared to be pleased by this small gift. This

was discussed with the Aboriginal Learning Unit and was part of the MARRC ethics

application. Since the gift was a small token, it would not be construed as bribery and was

given at the beginning of the interview, so if a student chose not to continue with the

interview, they would still keep the thank you gift.

In the end, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-nine participants. In

addition to seventeen students, I also interviewed seven Aboriginal Learning Unit staff,

including three Elders in Residence, two First Nations Education Managers and three

college staff from various student services departments. The purpose of these interviews was to identify, from their perspectives and experiences, the structures that created the greatest challenges for students. Based on these interviews and to further inform the study, I also decided to interview staff from various college student services departments. One staff member coordinated and provided academic supports in the Learning Center, another provided support to students with learning disabilities and provided academic accommodation recommendations through the Center for Students with Disabilities, and the third person was a counselor in the Counseling Department. All work closely with Aboriginal students and regularly refer Aboriginal students to the Aboriginal Learning Unit for additional culturally specific services. During the ethics review phase of the study, MARRC recommended that First Nations Education Managers be included in the study to provide their experiences and perspectives. First Nations Education Managers work in their respective communities and provide academic guidance and advice to residents of the First Nation who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education. Academic guidance and advice includes assistance in the selection of programs and institutions, facilitating the admission process, dialoguing with the various educational institutions in their geographic area, and assisting students access available funding. Relationships continue post-admission as the Managers support and encourage students throughout their studies. Volunteers from the various communities were solicited via email, with two individuals expressing interest. I interviewed both of these volunteers in person in their community. All twenty-nine interviews were tape recorded for later transcription and analysis.

Recruiting Participants

The data for the college study was collected during the 2007 – 2008 academic year. As stated earlier, I worked closely with the team from the Aboriginal Learning Unit to plan and recruit participants. Though forty-nine students initially expressed a willingness to participate in the study, the lag time between the September survey and when the interviews began in the winter semester reduced the number of interested students significantly, and only eight students from the original group of volunteers responded to follow up messages. The low response rate could be due to a number of factors. Though difficult to assess the reasons definitively, one plausible explanation could be that some students were doing field placements during the winter semester, and were not on campus. Some students may have withdrawn from the college and perhaps others may no longer have seen the study as a priority. To recruit additional participants, I sought the advice of the Aboriginal Learning Unit team. They suggested that since I had been working in the Unit for a number of months and was already known to many students, that I begin approaching students personally. I was gratified the team demonstrated such confidence and trust in me. I had not considered my participation in the Unit's activities as having built such a strong relationship. Approaching students directly was quite successful. In retrospect I realize it was successful because throughout the academic year I had been participating in all of the Unit's activities and had developed a familiarity and relationship with students, too.

The Aboriginal Learning Unit was a popular place for students to study, socialize, and relax. It was physically located at the end of a hallway on the main floor of the

college. Adjacent to the Unit's offices was the Native Student Association, and in front of these offices was a large lounge with tables and chairs and comfortable sofas. There was natural light from a bank of floor to ceiling windows, and murals representing Aboriginal themes were painted on a number of the walls. It was not unusual to have more than twenty students in the area at any given time. Nearby was a computer laboratory dedicated to Aboriginal students. As time permitted, it was my practice to sit in the lounge area and read and chat with students. When it came time to recruit additional students I was able to build on these existing connections, so I approached students in the lounge and computer laboratory, described the project, and asked if they were interested in participating. Most agreed, and we then scheduled a convenient time to meet. At the end of each interview I would ask the student to refer someone else. As I conducted the interviews, I realized I did not have students from some key program areas, so I asked for the assistance of program coordinators in making referrals. I felt having broad program representation was important because, based on my experience, the student experience might vary depending on the program of study and wider involvement might contribute to a stronger understanding of the barriers to success and richer detail for the overall study, though the results were not separated programmatically. I continued to interview students until I believed I had reached a point of data saturation, that is, the later interviews were not providing any significantly new information or perspectives.
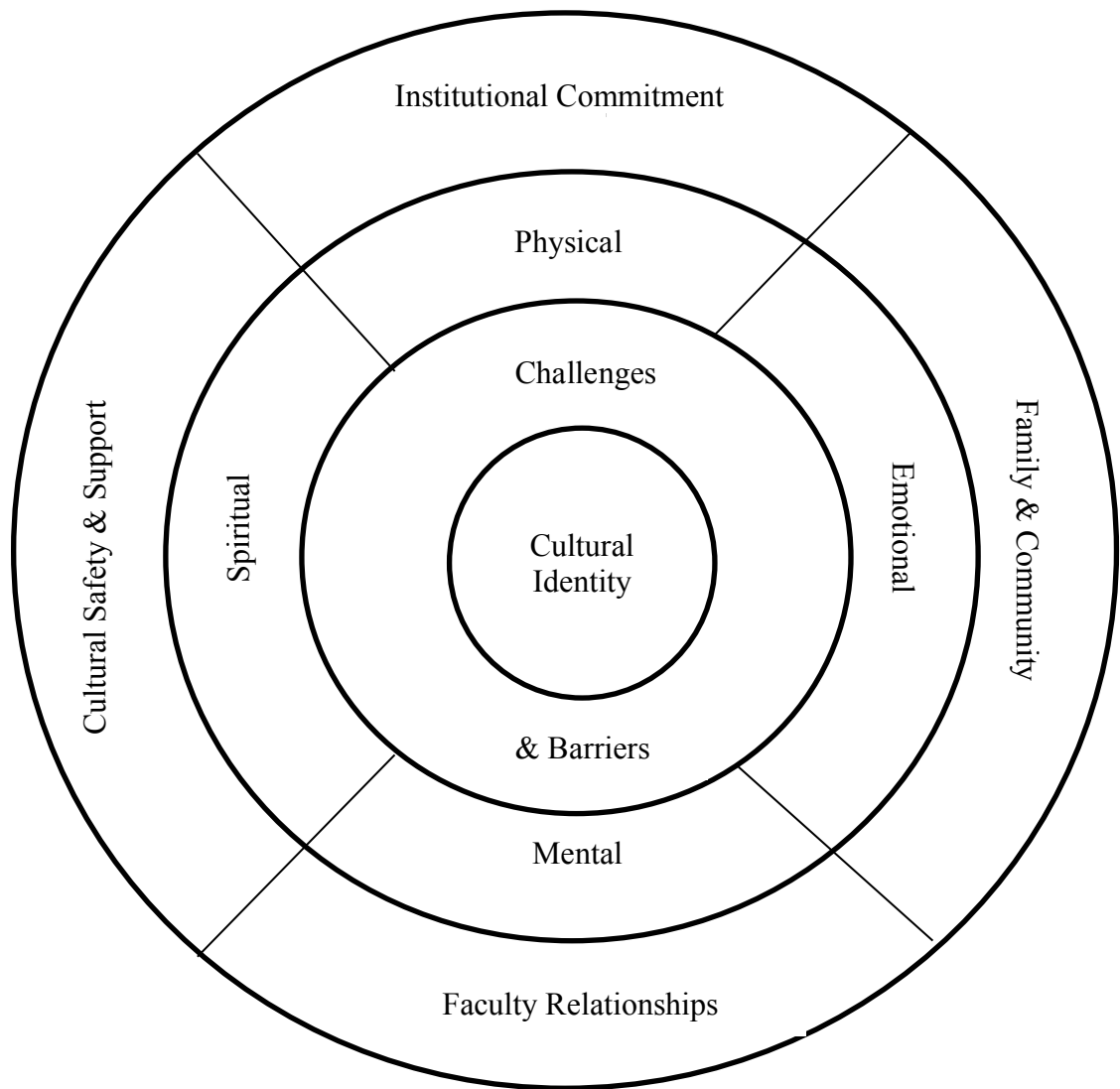
Analyzing the Data

To begin the analysis, I printed the interview transcripts and began with a manual process by sorting the responses based on the questions posed during the interviews. After sorting the responses, I was then able to cluster them further based on the identification of similar ideas within the interview responses and coded them numerically. The analysis and sorting of the interview transcripts was an iterative process and quotes were moved from one category to another as the clusters were explicated and then further refined. From there, topics from the literature were coded and tagged according to the ideas identified from the interviews. The initial coding and sorting occurred over a number of days. The sorting was a laborious process and I had the interview transcripts and reference books and articles spread all over my kitchen table and counter. As I worked with all of the pieces, I reviewed the highlighted areas of the literature. As I reread one article, the words of a staff member from the Aboriginal Learning Unit popped into my head. During a conversation, Loretta shared her concern that her daughters were losing their Aboriginal identity. She had been living in the city since their birth and they were now young women. She was a traditional person, and had raised them with traditions and culture of her people, but she felt it was important for them to reconnect, in a stronger way, with their traditions and cultures. As a way of strengthening her daughters' connection to their traditions, she spoke about an upcoming naming ceremony. A respected Elder was coming to her home community at the end of the month, and he would be conducting a naming ceremony, in which she wanted her daughters to participate. She believed that by receiving a traditional name, her daughters would connect more strongly with their heritage. This conversation

helped me identify "cultural identity" as the core from which the other themes would emerge. From there, the clustering of similar topics from the interviews and linking them to the literature assisted in the identification of four of the five themes. The original themes I chose are: Cultural Safety and Support, Institutional Commitment, Family and Community Encouragement, and Faculty Relationships. It was through conversations with staff from the Aboriginal Learning Unit that I decided to use "Challenges" as the fifth distinct theme. The themes were large buckets and as the data in each bucket was analyzed, sub-categories became clear. Subdividing the information further as I extended the analysis and explained my understanding of what I had been told helped unpack the interview data even further. Initially the grouping of similar thoughts was accomplished by sorting the physical transcripts into finer grouping, but as the report developed into a word-processed document, the report was elaborated, reorganized, and edited electronically. Diagram 1 provides a schematic used in organizing the data and was inspired by the work of Graveline (1998).

Diagram 1 – Organizing Themes for the College Study

Social Justice Theory was the lens used in further analyzing the themes and developing recommendations, which were included in the draft report. My goal was to address the identified challenges by identifying strategies to benefit Aboriginal students (Rawls, 2001, p. 42). A draft report was then created using the identified themes and subcategories to organize my interpretation of what the study participants told me. Upon completion of the draft report, it was circulated to the Aboriginal Learning Unit team for feedback. The feedback provided allowed me to further explicate the various themes. Once their feedback was incorporated into the document it was emailed to all participants. Participants were invited to review the draft document, and provide feedback to me, or to any member of the Aboriginal Learning Unit team. They could provide input via the email address provided, by telephone, or in person to the members of the Aboriginal Learning Unit. Timelines for feedback were clearly articulated. I believed that providing participants with the opportunity to review the document prior to completion was an important element easily accomplished via email. Many Indigenous scholars (Kovach, 2010; Justice, 2004; Smith, L.T., 1999; Wilson, 2008), and the MARRC guidelines for conducting respectful research in Aboriginal communities, emphasize the importance of involving research participants in all elements of the creation of knowledge. The participants had shared many personal stories, so I wanted to be sure my analysis accurately reflected what they had told me. Ensuring the researcher has captured the words and intent of study participants correctly is an essential step when using decolonizing methodologies.

In *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Wilson, 2008) a Maori study participant studying in Canada described the space between people as sacred and that the purpose of ceremony is to bridge that space and bring people together. Later the Maori student stated, "research is a ceremony" and that the culmination of the ceremony is when all the connections are made (p. 87). Wilson went on to state the importance of the spiritual in ceremony, including the research ceremony. The discussion of research as ceremony reminds me of a personal conversation with an Inuk Elder from Kalaallit Nunaat, Greenland. Angaangaq Angakkorsuaq, the Man Who Looks Like His Uncle, is from a family known to be healers and wisdom keepers. In a personal conversation he stated, "Ceremony without spirit is just ritual". His statement resonated at the time, but in the context of reading Wilson's work had even greater meaning for me (Fieldnotes, January 16, 2008). Throughout the interview process and then during the analysis of the interviews and connecting it with the literature, I could often hear the participants' voices in my head. Clear memories of our conversations resulted in a strong connection for me to the participants' words and to the participants themselves. Wilson described an Indigenous, or decolonized, research paradigm as one that employs personal connections to recruit participants, the importance of approaching participants in a culturally appropriate manner, incorporates the notion of relational accountability, and includes participants as co-creators of knowledge. My goal was to do all of these things.

Kovach (2010) also speaks of the importance of relational accountability and asserts that Indigenous research is more than just an intellectual construct. She states that working with the community to develop the research plan is important, as they alone can

identify what is relevant. Kovach and others (Justice, 2004; Pidgeon, 2009; Wilson, 2008) also speak about the importance of shifting the power from the researcher to the participants, "which means gathering knowledge that allows for voice and representational involvement in interpreting the findings" (Wilson, p. 82). I believe I followed all these decolonizing methodologies by involving the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit in the research design, including the voices of participants by using direct quotes, and requesting feedback on the draft report from everyone involved in the study.

In Decolonizing Methodologies, Linda Smith (1999) provides the opportunity for a number of scholars to give their description of Kaupapa Maori research. Kaupapa Maori research has the goal of taking back the space so that Maori people can determine the, "priorities, policies and practices of research for, by and with Maori" (p. 183). Kaupapa Maori research is culturally safe, conducted under the guidance of Elders, and is culturally relevant and appropriate. Bishop (2005) frames his description with the Treaty of Waitangi and recognizes that non-indigenous researchers may have a place in Maori research, while Graham Smith (2000) indicates Kaupapa Maori research must be connected to Maori philosophy and principles, takes for granted that Maori perspectives are legitimate, and recognizes "the struggle for autonomy over our own cultural well being" (p. 184-185).

In discussing Indigenous or decolonizing research methods, each of the above scholars speaks of the importance of involving participants in the research process and recognizing their contribution. They emphasize that researchers must commit to relational accountability, allowing participants to direct the research, and acknowledging spirituality as rooted in research design and practice. After ensuring the participants' words were

captured accurately, my next step was to use the chosen theoretical and conceptual frameworks to organize and make sense of the data.

As stated previously, the theoretical framework used in the analysis of the data collected in the college study is social justice theory and the conceptual framework is the Seven Grandfather Teachings. The social justice lens provided insight into the ways in which Aboriginal peoples are systematically oppressed in society and assisted in the development of recommendations from the data collected through the interviews in the college study. I understand the goal of a social justice approach is to reduce these inequalities. Specifically, Rawls (1971) postulates a societal responsibility to provide "Benefits for everyone, and in particular, for the least advantaged members of society" (p. 15). Kovach (2010) provides a description of both theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which I used to differentiate between them. As stated earlier, she states the purpose of a conceptual framework is to make visible the way the researcher sees the world and provides insight into a researcher's belief about knowledge production. She explains a theoretical framework is used to interpret knowledge in a purposeful, helpful and relevant manner (p. 41-42). I found these definitions very helpful in selecting the appropriate frameworks for the college study.

Summary

Ensuring the methods employed in data collection, analysis, and validation was consistent with decolonizing methodologies was very important to me. I wanted to ensure the work was conducted in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner, and that

participant voices were privileged. The experience of submitting my proposal to MARRC for approval and the resulting conversations with Joyce, the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, helped me better understand, in a very practical way, how the study should proceed. Although the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit was a member of MARRC, she was not involved in the review of my proposal because of a potential conflict of interest. Her in-depth knowledge from a cultural, practical, and scholarly perspective was invaluable. Having a steering committee comprised of Aboriginal peoples who infuse traditional practices in every aspect of their life added to the richness of my learning experience. The fact that the Aboriginal Learning Unit was comprised of people from a number of backgrounds, including Ojibwe, Cree and Métis, also enhanced the learning experience, as they openly shared their experiences, beliefs, and traditions with me and with each other. Spirituality was an integral part of the operations of the Unit, from opening and closing meetings, to celebrations and feasts. The staff willingly shared how they 'walk with the teachings', and we all learned together. Collectively, the staff and Elders in the Aboriginal Unit guided the study from conception to completion and provided very useful feedback, which informed the final report to the college.

In Chapter Five I will present the interviews from the college study. In keeping with the principles of decolonizing research methods, I will use the authority of participant voices by including many direct quotes from the study's participants. This approach is used to honour their contributions and the important role they played in the study, and in the creation of new knowledge.

CHAPTER 6: GETTING CONNECTED, STAYING CONNECTED, RECONNECTING

Introduction

Aboriginal students beginning their post-secondary education may feel torn between their values and beliefs and the demands placed on them to be academically successful in an unfamiliar environment. Often students feel overwhelmed, lonely, and depressed. Many do not feel as though they belong and have no idea what to do about it. Many give up the dreams that brought them to college in the first place and return to the safety of their family and home community. Though the number of Aboriginal students beginning post-secondary programming has increased, additional work needs to be done to improve completion rates.

In this chapter, I will incorporate direct quotes to illustrate the experiences, perceptions, and recommendations of the college study's participants. The purpose of using direct quotes is to put the student experience at the center and open the space for students to tell their story. By proceeding in this way, the participants and I are co-creators of knowledge.

Several years prior to beginning the college study, I attended a presentation by social work professors Kauppi and Nangia entitled *Report on Attitudes and Perceptions of Race Relations and Issues for Cultural Groups in Sudbury* (2004). The idea of conducting such a study came from the executive director of the social planning council. In addition to her role at the social planning council, she was also an elected municipal councillor. She told me that the need for the study was the result of a refusal by her fellow municipal councillors to believe that racism was an issue in the city. The specific purpose of the

study was to examine "Attitudes to various cultural groups and experiences of stereotyping and discrimination among key linguistic and cultural groups in (the City) including Aboriginal peoples, Francophones, and visible minorities" (p. i). A total of 270 residences were surveyed, and the results suggest that many residents (42%) felt that gains made by Aboriginal people in the areas of land, hunting, and fishing rights are excessive. Many respondents (54%) opposed affirmative action policies to improve employment opportunities for Aboriginals, and 44% denied that there is systemic discrimination within large corporations. Roughly a third of the participants believed that Aboriginal people's problems within the labour market stem from a lack of effort, lack of emphasis on education and training, and an unwillingness to take available low paid jobs and work their way up. Approximately a third of the respondents reported beliefs that are consistent with negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people: a lack of self-respect and respect for others among Aboriginal teenagers and adults, weakness and instability in Aboriginal families as the root cause of Aboriginal problems, poor school achievement for Aboriginal children stemming from parents' attitudes about learning (p. i-ii).

The audience for the presentation was small and included approximately fifty people. After the presentation was finished, the authors of the study asked the audience for their comments. A number of people requested clarification on parts of the report, and then an Aboriginal woman, who I guessed was in her late forties or early fifties, stood up and shared her experience in the city. She said she could not take the bus without someone making a derogatory comment about her race. She went on to state that hurtful comments, by complete strangers, were part of her daily life. She was well-dressed, well spoken, and

there was nothing to suggest she was unsuccessful. The only thing distinguishing her from me, was we were of different races. I present this information in this section, rather than in the review of the literature, to provide a context for the participant interviews in the college study. Given the results of the report and the experience shared by the woman at the presentation, I fully expected to hear many stories of racism and discrimination when I interviewed the college study participants.

Demographics

A total of twenty-nine individuals, from a range of backgrounds and of varying ages were interviewed, including seventeen students from a cross-section of programs and year of study. Nine of the students were male and eight were female. Their ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-one, with ten of the participants between the ages of thirty-one and fifty-one. Five of the participants were between the ages of twenty-six and thirty. The majority, (10), were high school graduates and five had successfully completed a post-secondary diploma or degree previously. Fifteen students indicated they had previously been enrolled in a post-secondary program. Of those interviewed, one was from the city in which the college was based and an equal number of the remaining participants indicated they were from either a rural or a remote community. Thirteen of the students had dependents, with six having three or more children. The interviews were conducted in a manner consistent with the beliefs and values espoused in the Seven Grandfather Teachings, that is, in a manner which was respectful and demonstrated love, recognized the participants were brave in sharing their experience, that I humbly appreciated their

participation and was honest and truthful about how their words would be used, and

recognized their wisdom and experience would be shared in a manner that would create a

positive environment for current and future Aboriginal students.

In the following sections I will use direct quotes from the college study's

participants. This approach is consistent with decolonizing methodologies and will provide

the participants with the opportunity to share their experiences directly and it will also

honour their contribution to this work.

Factors in Attending College

As found in the work of a number of scholars (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008;

Timmons, et. al, 2009; Waterman, 2007), the majority of participants indicated their

purpose in returning to college was to improve their lives and to help their people. Many

have dependents and had worked in seasonal, temporary, or low paying jobs. The resulting

lack of financial stability created difficulties for them and their families. They said:

It's the thing to do. If you want a life you need a job, a stable job. So you got to go

through school to get a stable job.

I wanted to get a better job, 'cause I used to work at the (employer). I worked there

for ten years. It wasn't a steady job, but I made good money. It was off and on, I'd

get laid off, work nine months, six months off. For ten years it went like that. So I

want a steady job. So I couldn't find a steady job with my education, so I decided to go here to (college).

Because I wanted to make something of (hesitation), like make a better life for me and my children.

As indicated earlier, most of the students in the study were from a rural or remote community. In addition to wanting to make a better life for their families through steady employment and a stable income, many indicated a commitment to returning to their First Nations community to use what they had learned through their studies to benefit the entire community. One student in particular believed that his personal battle with addictions, coupled with his social services worker diploma, could assist his community in battling rampant addiction issues. Another suggested that his business diploma could help him open a business in his community, which would fill a gap in services.

Students chose this specific college for a variety of reasons. Some indicated it was because of the proximity to their home community, but others stated that family members had attended previously. Reasons included:

It was very close to my community and I already came here, so I figured if I had transfer credits I would be able to use them while I was here. And if I didn't, then I already kind of know how the courses go here, and I knew if I went to a different

college that the courses could have been structured differently. And from (home) to here is only four hours.

I like it here. Way back when, my son was in a hockey tournament. It seems like a nice place and I told my son, I like it here. It's nice here. I wouldn't mind coming to school here. I started to say I like this school. I started to feel that thing, that thing around me was saying I'm coming back. That's when I…I came back and I said to myself, I'll be more, I'll be happy here.

And (the city), well, I knew (the city) from when I came to visit the college with an Aboriginal group from high school, the Friendship Center, I think. They brought a bunch of us to do college tours.

The participants emphasized the importance of feeling familiar with their surroundings, both from the perspective of the college and the community. Though the region is comparatively small, with a population of approximately 150,000, this would still seem very large for individuals coming from rural or remote communities. The comfort felt from a sense of familiarity due to previous visits was very important in their decision to study at that particular college.

The First Nations Education Managers interviewed for the college study stated most students choose to study in (the City), either at (the College) or (the University) because of proximity to home. Others decide to go elsewhere either because of programming, or

because they have family in another city. Close proximity to home seems to be a key factor in selecting this particular college for the students in the college study too; however, one student expressed a different reason for selecting this college:

> Because of the services (for students with learning disabilities). I never heard that there was more services provided for students that had disabilities. So I thought, maybe I'll try this, maybe I'll get through it.

Clearly this student was not aware that most, if not all, postsecondary institutions provide support for students with disabilities. Since she was unaware of services available to assist students with disabilities, it would suggest that those providing her with academic advice, such as her high school guidance counselor and/or the Education Manager from her community were either not aware that she had a learning disability, or were unaware of the support services available at the college. This lack of awareness is unfortunate, as the college offered a special orientation program for students with disabilities to facilitate a smooth transition to college.

Close proximity, as indicated by one of the students, could mean a four hour or more drive. Even though the students considered the college close to home, the students still needed to relocate to the city and had difficulty going home on a regular basis because of distance and finances. As suggested in the literature review (Malatest & Associates, 2004; Malatest & Stonechild, 2008; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013), without the familiarity of their

home community, many students in the study felt isolated and lonely, particularly at the beginning of the semester as they integrated into their new environment.

Only two students indicated they were the first person in their family to attend a post-secondary institution, however most were in the first generation. In a number of instances, the fact that siblings had attended the college previously encouraged them to attend, too. Four students indicated they were not funded through their First Nation. As found elsewhere, (Malatest & Stonechild, 2008) an additional two students said they had been on a sponsorship waiting list for a number of years, but were now funded through their community. Waiting for approval for funding can create a great deal of stress for individuals, particularly since most have dependents with their own goals and needs.

When asked what they planned to do after graduation, there was a variety of responses. Most wanted to return to their home community and many planned to seek employment in their field of study. One student was unsure what he would do after graduation and another wanted to continue studies at the university level. One student planned to pursue a professional designation while working in the current field of study, while another wanted to continue in a related college program and still another hoped to start a small business. Since all the students in the study were persisting successfully through their program of study, it would suggest that their original goal of providing a better life for themselves and their families through education was still considered valid.

All of the students indicated an awareness of the support services, such as the Aboriginal Learning Unit, the academic student support center, counselling services and the center for students with disabilities. Interestingly, though they knew support services

were available, several did not seek assistance, even when experiencing academic difficulty. They chose instead to struggle along on their own, or seek the assistance of peers. When asked why they did not seek assistance, they really did not have an answer, however, given the feedback from Aboriginal Learning Unit staff provided later, perhaps they were concerned they would not be welcome.

Challenges

In my experience, students, and particularly mature students, frequently have problems with application and registration processes. Registration, in particular, can be difficult, especially for those who stop out midway through their program and then decide to return. As described earlier, college programs prepare graduates to work in specific occupations, as a result programs of study are designed with specific courses required for graduation. For the most part the only opportunity to choose a course is for the breadth or general education electives, which represent only three courses out of the approximately 25 courses required in a two-year diploma program. As described earlier, included in the program quality review process is an annual review of curriculum and semi-annual consultation with business and industry. As a result of formal reviews and regular employer consultation, programs of study are dynamic and evolve over time. When students return after a number of years, the requirements to graduate from a particular program may have changed, in some instances substantially. Though my experience suggested that changing programs of study might be an issue, most of the students

interviewed indicated it was not a problem for them. They suggested all went smoothly and any minor issues were no more than could be expected.

The challenges experienced by students can be grouped into a number of categories. The barriers include situational, institutional, cultural, and academic. Though the categories sometimes overlap, these groupings will be used to organize the barriers faced by the students in the study.

Situational Barriers

A number of students began their program, but were unsuccessful the first time and left college. A nonlinear path, or tendency to "stop out" to deal with life issues has been identified by other scholars (Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore & McClelland 2005; Lundberg, 2007) as common among Aboriginal students. One student indicated:

> I wasn't really prepared for college. I didn't get anything ready. I just came here registration day and just signed up. I wasn't really…..first time going to college, I was like…there wasn't much focus on attendance in class, so I would miss a class here and there and I wasn't really motivated to go to school. But like I wanted to be in school, that's why my marks were failing. Once I started attending my classes more often, my marks went way up. It was really based on being there.

The above quote illustrates the emotional conflict many students experience as they begin post-secondary studies for the first time. They want to be successful, but many are unfamiliar with the academic expectations, are challenged by the lack of structure, and the

need to find their own way of coping with the many challenges they face. Often students are reluctant to reach out for assistance, become discouraged, and stop attending classes.

As discussed earlier, the federal government funds the Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) which provides financial assistance to Status Indian and Inuit students who are enrolled in eligible post-secondary programs, which includes: community college and CEGEP diploma or certificate programs; undergraduate programs; and advanced or professional degree programs. The PSSSP grants are intended to cover all costs, including tuition, books and supplies, accommodation, and transportation. As identified in a number of studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009) and corroborated by several college study participants, approval for funding is often an issue for students wishing to return to school. Funding levels have not risen sufficiently to keep pace with increasing demand, therefore waiting lists are the norm for prospective students in many communities. A student commented:

> I'd been on the waiting list for a number of years. Priority went to high school grads and anyone else was a lower priority. There were so many students who sent in funding requests…..

Prior to returning to school, this student had worked in her band administration office and was very familiar with the challenges in securing funding. She had previously graduated from university, and though the graduate certificate she wished to pursue was directly related to her work responsibilities within the Band office, she was forced to wait several years before receiving approval, as recent high school graduates were given

priority in her community. She shared that this uncertainty created a great deal of stress for her, as she was a single parent with several children.

Stressful Transitions

With the vacancy rate in (the City) at less than 1%, finding suitable housing was a challenge for many, particularly for those with children. In addition to finding suitable housing, there were also issues with settling children in new schools, finding appropriate child care for pre-school children, and before and after care for those who are in school, but too young to care for themselves. Finding appropriate housing and childcare has been identified as a barrier in other studies, too (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Mixon, 2010). When asked if they had trouble finding a place to live, students indicated:

This year we did. We did have a problem at first. I think that the biggest problem was because we had to stay about one month in a motel. And this happens every year. Some students stay in motels for a number of weeks before they find a place.

One of the biggest problems we have is finding a place to live here. I stayed in a motel for two and a half months. I was able to ask questions, but what about somebody young, nineteen, twenty years old with a young family? There was a bunch of them last fall. They just gave up and went home.

No, we got lucky. So the first week we stayed here we stayed in the hotel. So one day we decided to go to the store to have breakfast, like there's a little restaurant

there, too, and we saw an apartment right on our way down, so called the number

and got an apartment right there. We got pretty lucky.

Relocating to a new city, finding accommodations and returning to formal studies

as an adult can be extremely stressful. It would be very difficult for individuals with

children to establish any type of routine while living in a hotel room. Until more

permanent accommodations are secured, it would also be problematic to enrol children in

school, complete homework assignments while caring for children in such close quarters,

and adjust to a new city. All of this is compounded by having a very limited amount of

money, and in most cases, no family support nearby.

Despite the difficulties articulated by a number of students, several indicated the

transition was not particularly challenging for them. One student described her experience

starting college:

I was kind of nervous at first….meeting new people. I'm not an outgoing person;

I'm kind of shy sometimes. I'm starting to feel comfortable at school. Everybody,

the teachers, like they're friendly. The students are friendly, too.

The fact that some students do not need support during the transition, while most do,

illustrates the need to provide a broad range of services, as the needs of students are not all

the same. Though the majority initially believed themselves to be academically prepared

for college, some felt they were not personally prepared for the demands they would experience in post-secondary studies.

Ya, I was prepared. I was excited to come back. But then I found out that I was pregnant…and I couldn't back out by the time I found out because I didn't want…again the funding…I didn't want to …..Plus I really looked forward to coming back and I really wanted to make it this time.

Yeah, I was a little bit older. The first time I came here I was nineteen, so I was more into partying all the time and just going out to clubs during the week and stuff. And when I came back next time, I was twenty-four…it was just easier to get into school and after I got the job (at the College) I was just always here. It was easier to study and go to class.

It was only stressful in the second or third month of school when they got into their essay writing. I found that very stressful. I was….it got to the point where I was losing weight, I couldn't eat. It got to me really bad.

These quotes describe the range of student experiences. The student who was pregnant had hoped to return to college for a number of years, and even though she was going to have a child during the academic year, she believed her best decision was to start classes anyway. Though very difficult, she was able to have her child during the school year and

missed very few classes. She was one of the fortunate ones, as she was determined to succeed and had family support nearby to assist her with the care of her newborn child.

The second student described how he had matured between the time he first started college and when he returned. He recognized what he needed to do to be successful and focused on his studies. He also described how working part-time at the college helped him feel part of the college community, and how this belonging helped him persist. He spoke very strongly about the significance of on-campus work and how he was able to make connections with individuals across the campus.

The third student talks about her difficulty with the level of writing required in her program. She initially tried to work through her problems on her own, but once she sought help from staff in the Aboriginal Learning Unit she was able to improve her skills to an acceptable level. Prior to getting assistance her self-esteem and confidence were becoming eroded and her health was in jeopardy.

Unique Stressors

Several students shared additional stressors and challenges that were unique to their experience. The first student encountered challenges because he didn't have all the specific academic prerequisites required for admission to his program of choice. The second student encountered a clerical error on his transcript, as all of the courses were not accurately recorded.

The only thing I was facing when I first came here to apply for college was . . . I needed to do that . . . they call it a CAAT [author's note – this student was referring to the Canadian Adult Achievement Test which is sometimes used for admission when a student lacks the formal academic entrance requirements] test. So I had to do that.

Yes I did, because I graduated in 1990, I had my high school diploma, my last three courses weren't on my permanent record, so luckily I still knew one of the teachers….she took on the challenge….

Ummm, challenges….pretty much the teaching methods are very good. The classes are smaller, so it's more intimate and you get one-on-one with the professors. The only challenges I face is group projects, where some students decide not to show up, or partying or staying at home, skipping is priority. And some of the material that's newer is a bit difficult. I'm very comfortable going to my professor about questions and the (academic student support center), for extra help.

Some students faced a number of personal challenges. One had children in their home community and chose to commute a long distance in order to maintain stability for the children. Another faced a stressful personal situation, and needed to work through a number of issues, including finding suitable housing, while caring for her children and meeting the academic demands of her program. These examples re-emphasize the range of support services needed by adult students returning to school, and the need for flexible, individual supports and ongoing outreach.

As recommended by the Manitoulin Anishnaabek Research Review Committee (MARCC), all of the First Nations Education Managers who had students currently enrolled at the college were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Two responded and they were interviewed in person in their community. Overall, they reported satisfaction with their relationship with the college and the support provided to students. Based on their experience, the Education Managers suggested that students who enter college directly from high school face more challenges than the mature student, and even if they were academically prepared, students also needed to fit in socially. The challenges faced by direct entrants from high school will be described in more detail later. Mature students represented two thirds of those attending college from one of the First Nations, and only half of those sponsored through PSSSP (Post-secondary Student Support Program) live on-reserve. The increasing urbanization of Aboriginal peoples is indicated in demographic information, but not reflected in the participants in this particular study.

As was suggested by Stonechild (2006, p. 81), mature students were seen to have a greater advantage, as they knew what they wanted, and were more likely to understand what was required to succeed. The First Nations Education Managers interviewed agreed, stating they believed that mature students seem to adapt more quickly because their social skills and other skills are more honed. Mature students may also find the transition easier because they have previous experience with post-secondary studies, as indicated by the students in the college study. One Education Manager cited English as a major problem, since students often have difficulty with their writing skills, particularly essay writing, as suggested earlier by one of the participants in the college study. Though initially excited

about the prospect of leaving home and attending college, the Education Managers suggest that many younger students face challenges once they arrive at college. Some are unprepared for the workload, others have been pushed to attend by parents who want them to be successful, and still others may have an idealized concept of the field they are entering. Many are homesick after the initial novelty wears off. Overall, the Education Managers believed those who are clear on the goals tend to be more successful.

The First Nations Education Managers support the assertion that current funding provided through the Post-secondary Student Support Program is inadequate to meet student financial needs, and indicated many First Nations struggle with deciding whether to fund fewer students at higher levels, which would mean turning away even more students, or continuing to fund more students at levels they recognize are inadequate. They suggested that to make ends meet, students require additional financial support either from parents or through part-time employment. They indicated that scholarships and bursaries can really help, and they encourage students to apply, recognizing the demand for scholarships and bursaries is highly competitive. Aboriginal students can also apply for provincial funding through the Ontario Student Assistance program, however, many are debt-averse. This aversion to acquire debt was discussed earlier.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers can mean a number of things, including racism, bias and discrimination. One student had tried university, but left to return to college:

I was at the university first, but I felt like I didn't belong there. My coordinator always told me that I wasn't ever going to do that program. It was too hard for you. I knew that I could do it. Well it was my decision whether to continue. But all that negative talk with me, I don't think they want me there, and so then I said forget this, I'll go back to college. They took me right away. So I felt good about it, so I came back here to finish off.

The lack of support and encouragement experienced by the student quoted above could have been the result of low expectations or deficit theorizing on the part of her program coordinator. As stated earlier, a number of scholars (Maldonado, et. al, 2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013, Shields, et. al, 2005) describe deficit thinking as the belief that there is something inherently missing in minoritized students, which predisposes them to academic failure. In the particular situation of the student starting in a university program, the coordinator may not have expected an Aboriginal person to be successful in that particular program and therefore discouraged her from even trying. Deficit theorizing is unacceptable, as the student clearly had the admission requirements and believed she could be successful when she began the program.

As found in other studies (Huffman, 2001; Larimore and McClelland, 2005; Watson, 2009; White Shield, 2004) cultural barriers can create a feeling of disconnect between an Aboriginal student's way of knowing and the way of knowing valued by the dominant society. For this reason, it is important to understand the student experience from the time they arrive in the city, as this insight will provide a stronger understanding of the

many challenges faced by those relocating. The support students receive during the transition period can significantly influence student acclimation and success in their post-secondary studies.

As noted earlier, and supported by other research (Antone, 2001; Mihesuah, J., 2004), the First Nations Education Managers agree that students in need are often too shy to ask for assistance, even though they are aware help is available. Some will go to a particular department, and simply hang around, and staff may need to probe to find out what the student needs. They support the idea of campus tours, with one First Nations Education Manager suggesting she plans to bring students to the college annually, beginning in grade 10. She hopes that by the time students' graduate from high school, they will be familiar and comfortable with the campus, thereby easing the transition. This Education Manager spoke very highly of her working relationship with both the recruitment office and Aboriginal Learning Unit, stating such a high level of cooperation does not always happen with other colleges.

Institutional Barriers

Some students felt alienated, isolated and overwhelmed when they first arrived at the college. These students shared the following:

I was lost for sure. I didn't know where to go and the first week I was lost and I didn't get to my classes on time because there is nobody to show me where to go, and I don't know anybody.

I felt alone. I didn't really know about this place, because I registered as a part-time

student and I just walked in and helped myself. But if I registered full-time it

probably would have been a different story.

I really…I kind of kept to myself and I didn't really participate in any of the….I

was too busy to participate in any extracurricular activities.

Post-secondary institutions are large, confusing places. In most cases, buildings are

constructed in phases, and the numbering system can be bewildering. Things that should

be straight-forward, such as way-finding, can be indecipherable for someone coming from

a small community. In addition, loneliness and isolation create a significant barrier for

students trying to be successful in an unfamiliar environment. It is understandable that

some students find it too difficult and decide to return home.

Racism and Discrimination

An Aboriginal Learning Unit staff member, Harriet, also indicated it is often

difficult for students to ask for help. She shared the following:

As a First Nations person having faced discrimination and racism, and then

coming to college you want to ask for help, but at the same time you don't

want to ask. You're afraid that you might be turned away, or not

acknowledged, because of who you are. I had a couple of students mention

that when they approached their instructor and the coordinator, they just

ignored them, no response. One actually mentioned, well two actually

mentioned that they went to ask for help, but they didn't get very far. When

one student came in she was crying, and said she didn't think this would

happen here. She said she wasn't expecting this.

Harriet said she listened to the student's experience and then explained the services

available through the Equity Office, stating, "She's non Native, but she does her job, go

see her. So the student sat there and thought about it, but not for too long, and finally said

yeah, I will. When I saw her later she said that it helped her." During the interview, I

expressed my surprise more students did not mention racism and discrimination as an

issue, particularly given the results from the Kauppi and Nangia (2004) study. I mentioned

that in several instances, I thought students were pointing in that direction, but when I

asked directly most said no. In response Harriet said, "That's a place that's hard to go back

to, and it hurts".

The Elder who I knew well and who taught in the Justice programs, reiterated the

perspective of others, underlining the need for outreach to students. He believed outreach

could begin through casual conversation, but it was often necessary to have a quiet, private

and safe place to talk. He also felt hosting monthly meals for students provided a nice way

of building community and reassuring students they have a place to go. He emphasized the

importance of strengthening the connection with the Aboriginal Learning Unit and

building relationships between students and staff. When asked if students faced racism at the college, he said: "You know, that's a good question. Students are standing up to that. We may have some incidents, but no, I don't think it's alarming". He did say ignorance on the part of staff is sometimes an issue. One student was referred to a department and, "she came back and she was really upset. She said, 'Don't ever send me back there again. I felt this small, and I just told the lady, you keep your damn (service), I don't need you people' and then she walked out and she's never been back there". The Elder described another situation where students were making racist comments in class and, "the instructor didn't know how to handle it, didn't know how to put an end to it, so it went on and on". The student told the Elder about the situation and was very upset, so he approached the instructor and they agreed to do a session for the class. Afterwards the students apologized for their behaviour.

Confronting racism can be very difficult, and frequently employees are uncertain how to manage it. In some instances they are afraid to make a bad situation worse, in other cases they are uncomfortable and decide to ignore it, in still other situations, the racist statements may align with their own beliefs. It takes a great deal of courage for a student to make a complaint about this behavior and then be comfortable with taking some form of action. The role of the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Centre is essential in advocating on behalf of students and in educating staff about racism and negative stereotypes.

Academic Barriers

Harriet, a member of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, spoke of the academic challenges students face with the western pedagogical approaches typically used in class. Students in the Kanu (2002) study expressed discomfort when called upon to make oral presentations and were particularly intimidated by the direct criticism in the form of "feedback" which often accompanies this teaching-learning method. Harriet agreed, stating: "Speaking in a crowd, it's difficult. It means having to stand in front of people you normally wouldn't be with. It's very scary". She mentioned role-playing as being particularly difficult for many Aboriginal students, commenting "Some of them just couldn't do it, and just went home". She went on to suggest that to build confidence, perhaps "Starting a little bit small, maybe it could be two people talking, and then adding a third, and then a group". Providing professors with practical teaching strategies that may make Aboriginal students feel more comfortable is a key role of the Aboriginal Learning Centre staff.

Academic Preparation

Thirteen of the students interviewed initially felt they were academically prepared for the demands of college. Once they began, however, some changed their minds.

I thought I was [prepared] until I came into the course, until it really seemed…the stuff I was lacking, my writing skills. I have trouble reading and if I can't read, I can't speak properly. The second semester I went into General Arts and Science, and it helped

because I did a lot of English, I did math, like mostly getting prepared for my next course.

Yes, that was one of my main decisions. And that's why I talked to [the coordinator] to find out first. I had been out for such a long time; I was concerned that I didn't have the skills to successfully complete the program.

Academically I could say that I was somewhat prepared, but not as prepared as I ought to be.

As stated earlier, a number of studies (Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; Mihesuah, J., 2004; Watson, 2009) identify inadequate academic preparation as a significant barrier for some Aboriginal students. The above students expressed concern about their preparation, and when they encountered difficulty their first point of contact was within the Aboriginal Learning Unit. In some instances referrals were made, and in other cases the staff of the Unit were able to provide the needed support. Referrals from the Aboriginal Learning Unit are significant as students who receive assistance and are pleased with the result are more likely to seek further assistance when faced with additional difficulties. They may even be willing to suggest other students with similar needs seek help, too.

Adult students, with multiple responsibilities, who are returning to post-secondary studies must find study approaches that will work for them, based on their own circumstances. Two students talked about the strategies they employed to be successful:

I like, I really enjoy school. The first semester I didn't do any homework at home, like I'd come to school at the same time every day, even though I didn't start till the afternoon, and whatever homework I had, I'd use that time to do my homework.

I have to do my homework here. For myself, as a student, I have to have total quietness. I like that. A lot of us, I believe the Native, when we have to do homework, we do have to have total quiet.

Both of these students had families at home, so there would be many distractions as they tried to work on assignments, study or complete readings for class. I expect it was through experience and trial and error that they found a system that would work for them.

When asked specifically about whether or not they faced challenges with their studies, the participants provided a number of different examples. The student shared:

Time management. That's my biggest, my biggest enemy right now. I wait until the last minute.

Independent English is one that I neglect. It's, I don't think that it's a particularly

tough program, I think that it's something….I'm a visual person and because I don't

attend that class every week, it's not there to me. So when the dates are posted up in

the Center, Student Learning Center…oh crap…I forgot about that. So then it's catch

up.

The biggest challenge is once when you have to get into a group and its all young

people that are there, or all non-Native.

These examples illustrate the expectation in post-secondary education that students

will be able to manage their time and the workload with only peripheral guidance from

their professors. The third quote also suggests the discomfort felt by many Aboriginal

students when faced with particular pedagogical approaches, such as group work.

Discomfort is accentuated when the Aboriginal student does not identify with other

members of the group because of age and/or ethnicity. Increasing awareness of

pedagogical approaches that would be more comfortable for Aboriginal students is

important information to share with professors.

Technology is often viewed as a resource that supports access, but seeing it as a

support assumes that technology is readily available to students and they have the ability to

use it effectively as a tool for learning. Using technology effectively can be particularly

difficult for adults who are returning to school after a significant absence. One student

stated:

Right now the biggest challenge that I've ever faced in this program was the online course. I had no idea how to do the online courses.

Online courses can be a challenge for many students, particularly adult students, and it is important to spend time teaching students how to use the online tools and to make the course expectations explicit. Without regular face-to-face guidance provided weekly by a professor, it is easy for a student to fall behind in their studies, as suggested by the student quoted above and the student taking an independent English course.

Cultural Safety and Support

The majority of participants indicated a connection to traditional spirituality, with eight indicating it was very important to them. Twelve of the seventeen participants said they spoke their traditional language; however, four of the twelve stated they were not fluent. As suggested by many authors (Hampton & Roy, 2002: Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003; Huffman, 2001; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Lee, 2007; Mixon, 2010; Waterman, 2007; Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2004), remaining connected to their traditional cultural practices is critical to the success of many Aboriginal students. The opportunity to access cultural programs and culturally appropriate supports help Aboriginal students create balance, maintain a sense of safety and are a source of strength, all of which contribute to academic persistence. A number of quotes are included to illustrate the range of perceptions and emphasize the importance of creating an environment of cultural safety and support. When asked about the connection to traditional spirituality, one student indicated:

I'm getting reacquainted with that. That's something that I've lost, or I have learned

that it lost me along the way. I'm taking certain steps in the past two months. In the

past two months I've been taking certain steps to get reacquainted with it. Talking with

the Elders on campus and outside of the school as well. It is important to me.

A student, whose partner is not Aboriginal stated:

So right now we're trying to expose him [young son] to as much of the Aboriginal

culture as we can, so I want him to see both sides. I think it's important, because I

really didn't have the opportunity to be fully exposed. I grew up in a mosaic of people

and I probably know more about other cultures than I do about my own.

One student described a melding of traditional and western spirituality.

I would say yes, I have my own ways of spiritual practice. A couple of times I go to

ceremony, sometimes I go to church. It is very important for us, because we need a

connection with a higher power and that's the way we walk through, you know, we

walk with him.

These quotes illustrate how important spirituality and culture is to the students in

the study. Their spiritual practice is a source of strength, even though they may just be

reconnecting with it. The Aboriginal Learning Unit plays a significant role in helping

students stay connected or in reconnecting with their traditional beliefs. Having Elders on

149

campus to provide personal counseling and teachings, along with holding ceremonies on a regular basis helps students build a strong cultural identity, which can be drawn upon as a source of strength when they are faced with adversity.

As suggested by the ACCC (2005) report and identified in other studies (Lowe, 2005; Mihesauah & Wilson, 2004; Simcoe, 2009; Timmons, et. al, 2009), a standalone Aboriginal student center is important in supporting Aboriginal student success. The majority of students in the college study indicated the Aboriginal Learning Unit played a significant role in their success.

Also having the Institute right here [Aboriginal Learning Unit]. At first it was kind of intimidating to come here because, I don't know, I found it intimidating to come here at first. To ask for help. I didn't know what I was asking for. I just knew that I wanted help in that certain way and that I was looking for something, that I didn't know what I was looking for. And then I met [Aboriginal Learning Unit staff member]. I just basically talked to her and I talked to the Elders here and then I basically just started getting connected here. And trying to find a place here, where I can get connected is really important.

Oh yeah. Well that's because I came to the Open House at [Aboriginal Learning Unit] here. Oh it was so, I couldn't believe the stuff they did for us. And all the stuff you learn to do. I was so excited; oh my God I've got a place to go!

I felt like one of many people like, just a student, until I came over to the [Aboriginal Learning Unit]. I felt comfortable here. So when I came over here, it was just easier to talk to people. And staff would always come talk to me and ask me how I'm doing and how classes are going.

I like the fact that this center is available [Aboriginal Learning Unit] and there's the computer lab. It just makes it seem more comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

The [Aboriginal Learning Unit] computer lab room. You can go in it, and you're surrounded by other Native students. Like I don't mind going upstairs, up to the Library, but it's here you feel closer to, more or less in your own environment.

The variety and range of responses again emphasizes the importance of providing a wide array of supports and services. Regular activities and ongoing outreach is essential in meeting the needs of students on an individual basis. When asked for examples of some of the non-academic things that helped make them feel comfortable, many students mentioned the Aboriginal Learning Unit and the various activities run by the Unit. The services and activities offered by the Unit are designed to help students overcome the feelings of isolation and loneliness mentioned earlier. Some students commented on the helpfulness of having Elders on campus, which has also been identified as a significant source of support in other studies (Cherubini, 2012; Mixon, 2010; Waterman, 2007).

Others mentioned they enjoyed participating in ceremonies, as their schedule permitted. A number joked about enjoying the "free food". Some comments included:

Non-academic…other students are in the same situation as me. So we can all relate and have that same understanding. The Center [Aboriginal Learning Unit] itself, just the atmosphere and knowing that there's somewhere to go, that there are resources available.

Oh yeah, it's been great. I got helped a lot from the [Aboriginal Learning Unit] and they gave me a job. Just like services to get hold of my Band for funding. (Staff member) would give me bus tickets so that I could get around town 'cause she knew I was having financial problems. I couldn't get to school sometimes. The Food Bank. The food bank, she would help me with food. She would just talk to me sometimes. Made sure that I knew about all the events. Yeah, got me involved.

There's a lot of social activities. There's enough. (Aboriginal Learning Unit) is very strong in providing cultural-oriented activity. It's a support.

(Aboriginal Learning Unit) is the best place, like I find they have so many activities for you to do. Like they have their little functions, little lunches sometimes, and get-togethers. We get to meet the others students, other than in your program. This is excellent here. I love it!

The Aboriginal Learning Unit has been successful in creating a community for students, a place where they can feel comfortable and where they feel they belong. The participants in the study emphasized the important role of these services and supports in their success. Orientation to the college is seen as very important for Aboriginal students (Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Watson, 2009) and reaffirms the need to create an environment where students feel they belong.

While generally pleased with their overall college experience, some students offered suggestions for improvement. Some of the thoughts include:

I think it would be really nice if there was something, a personal contact at the beginning. And let students know when they are registering, "We're available". "This is where we are". "This is what we have" [referring to the Aboriginal Learning Unit]. Because some of the students who are more timid might not know. And you see them around every now and then, but you can tell that they're too shy.

Maybe you can have a student or have a volunteer who just floats around here, or floats around the school talking to Aboriginal kids, people you see walking around. Just say "Hey here's a business card, or hey here's a brochure, here's what we do" [referring to the Aboriginal Learning Unit].

I think advertising more. I didn't know about this place [Aboriginal Learning Unit]. I

didn't know what this place offered. Letting the people know that there are cultural

programs here, cause a lot people don't come to this side of the school.

Increasing awareness of the services and supports available through the Aboriginal

Learning Unit and other available student services is an ongoing challenge. Using multiple

means of communicating, including typical educational approaches such as brochures and

posters need to be supplemented by the use of social media and personal outreach.

Improving staff awareness of the specific services available is also important so they can

make referrals to interested students.

A member of the Aboriginal Learning Unit team, Deborah, suggests there are patterns

of behaviour that serve to marginalize Aboriginal students within the dominant society.

She stated:

There's patterns, and they're loud and clear. [Students have] had to

learn to recognize those patterns, but for people who don't understand

them, that this hasn't been a form of survival for them, it's totally

understandable that they would not recognize this. Aboriginal people

have often internalized the day to day struggles, but for those who've

come to the office here [Aboriginal Learning Unit], usually it's gotten

to a point where they have not been able to keep it down.

As suggested by others, Deborah felt it was important to provide a safe, welcoming environment and to help staff within the Unit, as well as other departments across the College, understand that students themselves do not always know what they are seeking. She supported the need for outreach to students.

In commenting on the challenges faced by students, another Aboriginal Learning Unit staff member, Loretta, indicated students, "encounter racism, and they have personal and family issues, academic issues, teacher issues. They are struggling with many different things." When asked about racism in the classroom, she said, "I think it's not intentional, you know there may be some things said that may be perceived as racist, but maybe it's just a lack of understanding, you know in the way they're communicating. I don't get a whole lot of concerns about racism within the College; it's more in the community." Her comment surprised me, as I expected the overt racist attitudes in the broader community would be reflected in the College. Based on the participant interviews, it does not appear that racist attitudes and behaviours at the college are prevalent. I recognize that racism might be more common than the interviews suggested. As Harriet mentioned earlier, students find racist and discriminatory actions painful, and they may have chosen not to revisit these negative experiences in the interview. Loretta went on to mention that courses on Aboriginal issues, included in programs of study, appear to play an important role in educating the general population about the Aboriginal experience. She states, "That course is eye opening for many".

When asked if she thought there were situations at the College that created systemic discrimination through the assumption of a European world view set in

opposition to an Aboriginal world view, Loretta commented on the tendency towards

essentialism, as described earlier by others (Grande, 2004; Jackson et. al, 2003),

> I think one of them is, is that we're not all alike, all Aboriginal peoples. We
>
> are very unique and different. The classic example of this is in a class
>
> where they are talking about Aboriginal people, and then asking the
>
> Aboriginal students to confirm, or defend whatever issue is being discussed.
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> This is something that happens quite often. We don't all speak the same
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> language or have the same beliefs, particularly because of Roman
>
> Catholicism and its impact on my parents' generation and my grandparents'
>
> generation, and well, my generation. It's harder bridging belief systems,
>
> you know, incorporating that in their life in terms of healing and wellness.

All the staff members interviewed from student support areas believe the

Aboriginal Learning Unit was providing an excellent support for students and they

frequently made referrals. They spoke of the importance of orientation, and felt the

potential existed for them to play a bigger role. One individual often walked Aboriginal

students to the Aboriginal Learning Unit, if the student was interested. All felt there were

opportunities for their department to work more closely with the Aboriginal Learning Unit,

either for the purpose of better understanding culturally appropriate ways of providing

support, or for strengthening referral mechanisms.

Family and Community Encouragement

In their studies examining Indigenous student persistence, a number of authors (Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003; Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000) suggest support and encouragement from family, and connection to their homeland and culture is important to academic persistence. Participants were asked if they felt supported by their families and their communities, when deciding to return to school. All indicated they were encouraged to pursue a post-secondary education. Comments such as:

Hmmm, I don't know, friends and family, I guess. Keep pushing me, telling me I'm almost done.

Oh yes, we get a lot of moral support. A lot of encouragement from where we are. 100%. Actually 110%. They're pretty excited right now 'cause I wrote my final exam at 8 o'clock this morning!

Another student took particular pride in his accomplishments. He shared:

Yeah, yeah, they're really happy that I'm staying in school and sticking with it. I want to finish. So I have little brothers and stuff and little nieces and nephews. I don't care to be a role model but that is gold for them to be able to see that I went to college and finished, and that they can go to college and finish it, too.

157

Support came in a number of forms. Some received money from home, others received financial support from their home communities in the form of hockey sponsorship for children, and still others from more remote communities received the treasured gift of traditional food. These supports and encouragement from home can make a significant difference for students, especially if they are feeling lonely or discouraged.

The First Nations Education Managers also provided support to students while they attend college. Students were expected to contact their Manager on a monthly basis and provide an update on their studies. The Managers maintained regular contact with students through email and provided information on requirements, such as minimum grade point average for continued funding. As appropriate, parents were kept informed, so they could also support their children.

Institutional Commitment

Institutional commitment to Aboriginal students can be demonstrated in a number of ways. These can include community consultation in the development of programs and curriculum; an institutional emphasis on diversity, cultural safety and inclusiveness; integrating Aboriginal culture and history into the curriculum; and delivering curriculum in a culturally relevant manner. All can lead to positive outcomes. Creating a place which students feel is culturally safe, such as the Aboriginal Learning Unit, is recognized as significant for Aboriginal student persistence.

As recognized by many other scholars (ACCC, 2005; Clark, 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Stonechild, 2006), few post-secondary

institutions employ Aboriginal peoples. In addition, many post-secondary institutions'

specific Aboriginal support services are funded through discrete funding envelopes

provided by the provincial government. Since these services are not included in core

funding, it makes them vulnerable to the whims of government and some (Battiste, 2005;

Pidgeon, 2008) scholars view not including Aboriginal support services in core funding as

an indication of a lack of institutional commitment to Aboriginal students.

As stated earlier, feeling welcome and that you belong is an important element of

student success. Though several students felt alienated, the majority of students (thirteen

out of seventeen) felt welcomed when they first arrived on campus. Those who felt

welcomed shared these impressions:

Oh, ya, I did. Ya, just because last time, I….don't really remember, there weren't that

many Native people here.

I felt very welcome and staff and other students were willing to show you around, help

you out, find your classes, it was very nice.

I thought it was very welcoming. Like I came in the front, and you see the President

sometimes, like Thanksgiving and you get a little treat and a highlighter. I remember

that.

Students indicated overwhelmingly that their overall experience at the college was positive. Here are some of their thoughts:

It's a very friendly atmosphere, um…they always have displays up, always getting you interacted, watching sports, you know what I mean. It gets your mind off school for a little bit.

I'd say excellent right now because with all the help I'm getting at the (center for students with disabilities). I'm not…I don't get perfect A's but I'm doing my best. Like I can only do what I can do, so I'm passing and I'm going to graduate this year.

It's been great. I feel like the non-Natives, they understand. Like that they seem to understand us.

When asked what the college could do to make the environment more welcoming, many students suggested things were good as is. Though generally pleased with the existing services, several students suggested opportunities for improvement:

Just try to get people out to the Open Houses and come in here so they don't get too lost and feel frustrated the first week. You know, because I was lost my first month. I couldn't find my classes or nothing.

Maybe just an information session on things that people have done to get through college a little better. Maybe like a video instead of just reading about it. You retain a bit more when you see and hear something, instead of just reading about it.

Have more events with the family. Meeting new people here, especially with your whole family, with your kids, would be good.

I guess having an orientation for part-time students would help. I guess doing that would have really helped me to find places, rooms in the College. I had a real tough time, I was lost.

These students suggested some small things that could be easily implemented to support new students, such as the orientation for part-time students. In addition, the students interviewed provided comments on a broad range of topics. Some suggested it was important to find out why individual students drop out. As suggested by the First Nations Education Managers and in the literature, a student suggested the funding provided by their First Nation was too low and it was difficult to live on it. One student felt there was bias in the marking and that he was penalized more for errors or omissions than others. He went on to state recruiting Aboriginal teachers would help level the playing field. As mentioned in the literature, the lack of Aboriginal professors is a common concern, as many educational institutions have no Aboriginal employees. Another student expressed frustration that not all of those teaching in the program had

practical experience in the field, and therefore added little to the learning experience. A parent expressed concern she had been waiting for an opening in the day care center at the college for two years, and did not know if she would ever get a spot. Two students expressed concern with the number of Aboriginal students who are struggling, yet who do not seek help from the center for students with disabilities. One student praised the extended orientation in her program, commenting that the program coordinator even talked about the services provided by the center for students with disabilities. A mature student suggested he would understand expectations better if teachers used multiple methods to explain assignments, such as orally, in written format, and through demonstration or examples. Accommodating Aboriginal learning preferences in this way could possibly benefit other students, as well.

A number of research projects mentioned earlier (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003; Jackson, et. al, 2003; Larimore & McClelland, 2005; Watson, 2009) emphasize the importance of mentorship programs in the smooth integration of Aboriginal students to post-secondary institutions. Two students in the college study also suggested a form of mentoring would be very useful:

> I think when they first arrive, I think that's where they're nervous, where they could have somebody to relate to or tell them where they can go (Aboriginal Learning Unit). I know when I first came here I didn't know where to go. …a familiar face they know, that's gonna guide them and tell them, okay, I'm gonna

take you there; you get to speak your language for a while. I think that would be nice.

Taking a student who's in their second or third year and seeing if they'd volunteer to give them a tour, instead of counselors, maybe. Having counselors do it is not like a student-to-student thing. It should be someone in the same program and I think you'd be able to connect or understand better. [When asked which was more important, the program or having an Aboriginal student as a mentor, the student responded] The program connection is the most important part.

One of the First Nations Education Managers also believed peer mentoring, particularly in the first few weeks, would smooth the transition to college. He agreed that someone from the same program would be preferred, and if the student was also Aboriginal, it would be even better.

An Elder also suggested the need for a mentoring program. He felt a mentoring program would be particularly helpful in encouraging students to pursue further education in the skills/trades area. "Have real life pictures of people who have been to [the College], went through the course, and are now working. We need that, and involve the companies [who hire the graduates]". He believes advocacy is a very important role for [Aboriginal Learning Unit] staff, believing there are solutions to the situations faced by students. He cautions that the solutions are individual, because the needs are individual. Word of mouth then reassures students help is available.

When asked if there was something the college could do to be more welcoming, the First Nations Education Managers indicated they are pleased with their relationship with the college. One stated, "No, not really. [The College] is really up to speed with everything. You know, the [Aboriginal Learning Unit], the powwows, everything". Another Manager recommended regular communication after being accepted might help students feel more connected to the college. He suggested the college could send short, point-form emails on a monthly basis, with information on such things as introducing them to their dean, their coordinator, and so on. Sending these messages would convey clearly that the college knows the student is there, and it would make them feel welcome. Even sending a quick email reminding students they can come in to visit the college anytime they are in the city, and they can arrange for a personalized tour of the campus, would be helpful.

Aboriginal Learning Unit staff was interviewed to identify, from their perspectives, the structures that serve Aboriginal students well, and those that could be improved to better support student success. As indicated by a number of authors (Huffman, 2001; Pidgeon, 2008; Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Timmons, et. al, 2009), one member, Joyce, suggested visibility in promotional material and within the built environment would create a welcoming tone and sense of inclusion. She asked the questions:

Looking at the College calendar, what is in there that draws them? Can they even find their way visually to the Aboriginal Unit? It needs to be visible right from walking in the front doors. Working with marketing,

164

could we revamp the web page, not just fit into the assimilated

educational box, but be able to put our colours up? All of our materials

should be first and foremost visually identified Aboriginal, and then

supplemented or complimented by the corporate information. These are

subtle things, but for the Aboriginal learner they make a huge

difference in how they ultimately engage with the school. These things

need to be presented in such a way that it's natural, not an add-on, like

we're not the 'other', but we're part of. Once students get here, there

are things that we do by working with individual programs. Through

programs we're linking with Aboriginal students and we're developing

strategies to provide more support.

A fourth Aboriginal Learning Unit staff member, Loretta, commented, "I think that

one of the most needed elements of student success is that they are readily able to identify

that there are people that are going to help them. You know that the care is genuine.

Genuine caring about their success." Pidgeon (2009) reinforces this notion, "Institutional

response to Aboriginal peoples must go beyond token gestures of representation to

meaningful and respectful inclusion" (p. 354).

An Elder suggested another strategy to better support students was to have the

college work more closely with sponsoring First Nations to smooth the transition to

college. By working together, gaps and misunderstandings can be resolved, hopefully

leading to better retention. He also suggested the college should encourage the First

Nations Education Managers to explicitly tell the students when they are doing well. "Send a letter. Just say hey, we heard you're doing well, keep it up! This says a lot to students. I had some who did it and the students were really excited, saying 'I didn't know they cared'".

Every member of the Aboriginal Learning Unit sees their role in supporting students to be successful as an integral part of their responsibilities. Having said that, at times we had deep conversations about the approaches taken to support students. In cooperation with the Native Student Association, the Unit managed a food bank and it was common practice for staff to give needy students food, bus tickets or small gift certificates from stores such as WalMart. Our discussions explored fundamental beliefs and values about what "support" was appropriate. Though students in the college study expressed appreciation for these supports, there were concerns that over use of these practices might foster dependence rather than build resilience. These profound conversations about fundamental beliefs and values happened in an ad hoc manner and helped me understand the conflict individuals experience as they face complex situations with no easy solutions.

In order to gain the perspectives of student support areas within the college, I met with staff from the academic student support center, the counseling center and the center for students with disabilities. Each person interviewed believed the college is a very welcoming community, and hesitated to generalize about Aboriginal students. One individual felt strongly that it was important to build trust at an informal level before moving to a more formal level. She believes participation in social activities and building connections through social networking would assist in bridging to more formal services.

She shared some learning from a recent conference. At the conference one presenter spoke of an approach he used in serving Aboriginal clients, saying he never tells them what to do, he never tells them the solution, or makes recommendations. Instead he tells them a story. "I can see myself doing something like that and tell a story about a student, and how we were able to help them, and what we were able to do for them, and not link it directly to them and just leave it, so that they would know that we exist in a real informal way. I would love that opportunity." Kanu (2002) and Haig-Brown (1995) speak of the importance of storytelling in Aboriginal culture indicating that the stories are often used for teaching about cultural norms and appropriate behaviours without direct guidance or reprimand of the person addressed.

Faculty Relationships

As stated in the literature (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009), strong relationships between faculty and Aboriginal students are very important in supporting student persistence. Professors empower Aboriginal students when they show they care about each student's success.

When asked to look at their total college experience and identify the things that helped them the most, the students provided a number of similar responses. Three students shared the following:

The coordinator. Having someone who's open-minded and not judgmental. And he talked to me in a positive way and that helped motivate me. And having people like

that really helps unique individuals with a problem, like I do, to overcome that sort of

stuff.

Well, the profs were very helpful. When I need anything or had any questions they

were there. Not all of them, but most of them for the most part.

I really enjoyed it. Ya, I learned a lot and I had different teachers….some people will

say that I don't like that teacher, and instead…I said you know, we're going to come

across these people for some reason, and they're put in our paths for some reason. For

us to learn something from them. And you gotta search for that something, even if you

don't like the person, or you don't like the way he teaches. There is something there

that, uh, that the Creator wants us to learn from that person.

A few students expressed unhappiness with their college experience. These students stated:

If you'd asked me in the first semester, I would have said excellent. I thoroughly

enjoyed the program. It was really good, exactly what I was looking for. However in

second semester, a couple of the courses I'm learning on my own. I could have taken

through distance ed. I don't feel that in the classroom I am getting anything. And it's a

real disappointment. Especially with some of these courses that I thoroughly enjoy,

although I'm learning myself through the book. Even the facilities, a couple of our

classrooms are horrible. Really awful. Our very first class for the first semester was

really dirty. Dust everywhere and just an unpleasant environment to be in. And even

just yesterday, we had presentations, and they couldn't do it because the outlets weren't working. None of them in the classroom.

Maybe more of the teachers announcing to the first year students at the beginning of the year…you see all the stats and you know the direct correlation with attendance and marks. But not too many people really care about that in the first year.

Incidents of racism were mentioned less frequently than I anticipated when I started the study. One student did share his experience with racism and discrimination:

Well, there is racism. I know that, 'cause if I hand in a paper, mine and this guy copies it, a white guy, he gets better marks than I do. No, I never [approached the teacher about the unfairness]. On the next test I'm just going to be scored less.

Students who feel they have been marked unfairly are in a very vulnerable position. They may feel angry and frustrated that race made a difference in the grade they received, yet do not want to lodge a complaint in the event the professor would mark them harder the next time. The imbalance of power is difficult to address, though formal grade appeal processes exist to address this type of issue. Even lodging a complaint after graduation may not be viewed as viable, since recommendations from professors can be very important when seeking employment.

An Elder also mentioned some professors already work closely with Aboriginal Learning Unit staff, and have gone out of their way to learn a little bit more about specific Aboriginal students and Aboriginal traditions and cultures. Increasing knowledge and understanding can lead to better communication between the professor and students and makes a big difference, as the students know their professor really cares about them and their academic success.

Summary

One of the first things I learned as I began the college study is that many Aboriginal peoples consider their words as part of themselves, and therefore what they say must be treated with care. The words of the study's participants are powerful and suggest the factors that support Aboriginal student success are multi-faceted and complex. Students come to college to make a better life for themselves and their families. To realize success, Aboriginal students often must overcome many barriers. Using a social justice lens to examine the experiences of these students would suggest justice has not been well served. Many of the students describe living in a hotel or motel with their families, including children, for extended periods of time. Many of their basic needs have not been addressed as they attempt to reconcile inadequate funding levels with the need to purchase educational resources and feed, clothe and care for their families.

Many scholars (Alfred, 2004; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2008; McCabe, 2010; Mixon, 2010; Waterman, 2007; Watson, 2009) assert the confidence students feel in their identity as Aboriginal people is a source of strength that will help

them persist to graduation. Unfortunately, the colonial experience, the invisibility of Aboriginal contributions in history books, negative stereotyping in the media, deficit theorizing, and open discrimination and racism can make it difficult to have a positive self-image. All of these negative experiences, coupled with the legacy of the residential school system often create a disconnect between Aboriginal people and their culture and confidence in the educational system.

Taken together, the results and recommendations in the research studies identified in the literature review support many of the perspectives provided by the participants in the college study. As stated in the literature, it is not surprising the services, supports, and the environment provided by Aboriginal student centers, such as the one in the college study, play a pivotal role in student success in the minds of students, staff and First Nations education managers. Recognizing the significant difference these centers can make by providing cultural events, intervention and advocacy across departments, and in the community, along with an aesthetically pleasing and culturally recognizable environment is important. Students feeling they belong and are connected to the institution and to other students, that people within the institution care about their success, and they are respected and valued for who they are, can make a significant difference in Aboriginal students' desire to surmount the obstacles they are bound to encounter in their studies. In the next Chapter I will provide the key findings learned from the college study interviews.

CHAPTER 7: EXPLORING WHAT THEY SAID

In 2011, three years after my original report, the provincial Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities released the *Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework*. The framework identifies Aboriginal education as a significant government priority and focuses on two key challenges: improving Aboriginal learners' educational achievement and closing the educational attainment gap. Prior to the release of this document, the Ministry consulted with key stakeholders across the province. As part of the consultation, colleges, universities, and other key stakeholders were provided with the draft *Framework* and were invited to provide input to the final document. I attended one of these consultation sessions in the winter 2011. I invited the Chair of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle at my current college to attend the event with me, but he was unable to participate. Unfortunately the session I attended at the University of Toronto was poorly attended due to a severe winter storm.

Significantly, the *Framework* recognizes the importance and contributions of Indigenous Knowledge and acknowledges Aboriginal education and workforce outcomes to be priority issues deserving targeted activity and support (p. 17). The document provides six key strategies and identifies key performance measures in half of the strategies. The strategies include:

- Sustained engagement with Aboriginal communities
- Leadership and professional development
- Building the postsecondary education and training systems' capacity
- Access and pathways to achievement

- Retention and completion

- Facilitating transitions to the labour market

In addition, the Framework identifies Aboriginal Learners' challenges in the postsecondary education and training environment, which include:

- Later transitions to postsecondary education and training can be more challenging for learners with limited academic preparedness and/or with family and community commitments;

- Intensive transitional programs are often required to support transitions from northern, remote and/or reserve communities;

- Aboriginal students may not perceive student loans as an option because of poor credit ratings or previous load defaults;

- Pedagogy is often not readily compatible with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Clearly, the development of the provincial *Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework* is an important step forward in supporting Aboriginal student success and in demonstrating the provincial government's commitment to Aboriginal learners. However, despite the fact that key performance measures exist in the document, to my knowledge the only required college reporting on these measures to the Ministry is at a very high level in the annual Multi-year Accountability Agreement Report Back document. The lack of direct accountability means that postsecondary educational institutions in Ontario are free to implement the *Policy Framework* to the degree they wish, with little consequence to those who take no action. I see very little improvement in

the new three year Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) currently being negotiated between the Ministry and the colleges and universities for implementation beginning April 2014. Despite the lack of overt accountability to government for making improvements to support Aboriginal learners, many institutions are moving forward by developing strategies, policies and practices.

In the college study, overwhelmingly, the Aboriginal Learning Unit staff, program coordinators, and professors were most frequently cited as the people at the college who helped the participants succeed. The majority of students in the college study expressed satisfaction with their current experience at the college, although most had enrolled at the college previously and had left prior to graduating. Though many attribute their previous lack of success to personal failure, such as lack of academic readiness or personal issues, it is difficult to know if these perceptions reflect the entire reality of their situations, as these challenges resonate with the Ministry document. The *Policy Framework* speaks specifically to the need for further support and mentoring.

In *Red Pedagogy* (2004) Grande speaks of the impact of essentialist theories in shaping identity, stating they "have undoubtedly impacted education practice, shaping the way teachers view students and, perhaps more important, the way students view themselves" (p. 104). We do not know if students who leave college decide to do so in order to resist the contradictions they face, "with the dilemma of choosing between 'academic success' and 'cultural suicide' they become unwittingly active participants in their own academic 'failure'" (p. 105). They may feel inadequate in the college environment because their worldviews and ways of knowing are not valued or

acknowledged. McLaren (2003) suggests, "Culture is intimately connected with the structure of social relations within class, gender and age formations that produce forms of oppression and dependency" (p. 74). When considering how social structures perpetuate inequality, it is important to critically examine how the larger society replicates itself in the classroom. As noted earlier, a number of scholars, (Eisner, 2001; Helin, 2006; McLaren, 2004; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Shields, et. al, 2005), spoke to the issue of the hidden curriculum; whereby certain students are seen as deficient, and therefore less academically able than others. If there is an assumption Aboriginal students will be less successful, it could be a self-fulfilling prophecy when high attrition rates occur (Stonechild, 2006, p. 87). Mazawi (2005), suggests, "deficit theorizing is the major impediment to minoritized students" (p. 120). It could be that the need for continuous code switching, as articulated by one of the staff from Aboriginal Learning Unit, became too difficult for some students, so they decided to withdraw from the college. Mazwai states that in the classroom, meaning-making, or learning, is developed through "language: statements, images, conventions, and metaphors". It must be very difficult for many Aboriginal students to translate what they hear in the classroom or read in a textbook to "make meaning". As stated earlier, Mazwai challenges the ubiquitous use of the dominant discourse as a hegemonic practice which continues to marginalize those not from the dominant group (p. 123). Seeking ways of structuring the institution to make Aboriginal students feel welcome from the beginning could make a difference in the number of students who "stop out" -- many never to return -- if practices were changed.

The college in the study had an Aboriginal Learning Unit, and every student participant indicated the importance of the center to their success. Post-secondary educational institutions that do not have such a stand alone, clearly identifiable center dedicated specifically to the needs of Aboriginal students, should consider creating one. Based on what the students in the college study told me, the transition to college was difficult. Sixteen out of the seventeen participants relocated to the city to begin their studies, and most of them have children. It can be expected that students moving from a rural or remote community to a metropolitan area will need help settling. A number of the participants said they had difficulty finding suitable housing, and one mentioned that several students left the college at the beginning of the first semester and returned to their communities because they were unable to find an appropriate place to live. Even with a low vacancy rate in the city, finding suitable housing is something the college could improve upon. The challenges related to transition could be greatly reduced if the college provided detailed information on available housing, schools for children, daycare centers or home day care, and public transportation. Organizing this essential information in a systematic and clustered way would expedite the difficult task of finding suitable accommodations and settling into the community. It was also suggested that Aboriginal students might wish to live in close proximity to one another to build a support network. Providing the relevant information in a comprehensive and holistic way could be very useful to the students and demonstrate that the college understands their needs and is committed to offering help.

Many First Nations are very small therefore it is easy to appreciate that starting post-secondary education, even at a comparatively small academic institution with 4,000 students plus 1,000 employees, could be overwhelming. It should not be surprising that many students felt lost when they arrived on-campus. Some institutions offer a "welcome" to the campus during the Labour Day weekend, since the weekend before classes begin is when new students typically arrive. Having staff available to provide tours of the campus, the opportunity to purchase textbooks, and get their photo identification prior to classes beginning could ease the transition and reduce loneliness and isolation. A campus-wide initiative of this nature would also provide the opportunity for the Aboriginal Learning Unit to provide a specific orientation, which is probably better timed than an orientation held earlier in the summer, particularly for those with families and who are coming from a distance.

The college in the study had an active "Native Student Association". The student association frequently organized social activities, which were mentioned appreciatively by several students. The student association included family-oriented events, which were well received by the study participants. Continuing and also building on these events is strongly encouraged, as it recognizes, in a concrete manner, the particular needs of Aboriginal students. These events also help reduce feelings of isolation, and help to build community. Clearly the needs of mature Aboriginal students with dependent children are different than the needs of the average, young, childless student entering college directly from high school.

First Nations education managers, personnel from student services areas, the staff from the Aboriginal Learning Unit, several students in the college study, in addition to the literature, all identify academic under-preparation as an impediment to academic success. It is incumbent upon the Aboriginal Learning Unit to work with the academic support areas to deliver workshops within the Unit's space, so students who require these services will feel comfortable. In the case of the college in the study, the Aboriginal Learning Unit was part of the academic division, so this would mean reaching out to managers in the appropriate departments within the student services division to develop a strategy. By working collaboratively, and conducting the sessions in the Unit's space, the sessions could be delivered in a comfortable and familiar environment, using a culturally aware manner that would facilitate learning and build confidence and self esteem. Surveying students about their academic support needs early in the new academic year could help guide the development of workshops that will address the specific needs of each year's new students.

Clearly Aboriginal student funding is inadequate to meet basic financial needs. Though individual post-secondary institutions can do little to change this problem, they could work collaboratively with the associations representing colleges and/or universities to lobby the federal government to make improvements in funding levels. In the interim, there are things that institutions can do. They can reach out to Aboriginal students for on-campus employment. As suggested by one student in the college study, part-time work helped him financially, but the collateral benefit was that he got to know staff from various departments and other students who were also working part-time. In turn, getting to know

others increased his sense of belonging. Another opportunity to help students financially is to actively solicit donations for scholarships and bursaries specifically designated for Aboriginal students. Staff in the Aboriginal Learning Unit can make students aware of these opportunities, and assist them in applying.

Mentorship programs provide another opportunity to improve support to Aboriginal students. In the college study, students, First Nations education managers, and an Elder suggested the importance of developing mentorship programs. Models that have been effective in many institutions could be borrowed from the work done by First Generation coordinators and by the sharing of successful practices at other institutions. The provincial government provides a specific funding envelope to support applicants who are the first in their family to pursue post-secondary studies. Through First Generation funding, many institutions have developed programming to specifically reach out to identified students and offer additional supports. I am aware of the work done at one institution where they reach out to students "just in time" prior to classes beginning and then throughout the academic year based on an understanding of when students typically "hit a wall", for example, mid-term and end of semester as students prepare for examinations.

Strong faculty relationships are seen as pivotal to academic success and persistence for Aboriginal students. In the interviews for the college study and also in the literature, examples were provided when professors were uncomfortable or uncertain as to how to address racist and discriminatory comments in class. Developing skills and confidence in confronting unacceptable behavior can be done through training using case studies that

will resonate as authentic to the audience. The skills developed will benefit all students and when used in class will provide a model for students to also confront racism. Another opportunity is to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity by educating professors about Aboriginal culture and history and to also suggest instructional approaches that might be more sensitive to Aboriginal student learning preferences. In the college study I was told that students are uncomfortable in role playing situations and making presentations to large groups. Though these are skills graduates will need in the workplace, perhaps students could begin in a small group setting to build confidence and increase comfort-level and gradually build to presenting or role- playing in front of the whole class. Including the principles of universal instructional design when developing lesson plans would be of benefit to all students. Encouraging professors to attend these types of sessions could be a challenge. Though I believe that these workshops should be open to all professors, including such topics in required new professor orientation and training could be a means of building skills and awareness early in new teacher's careers.

As stated earlier, the Aboriginal population is the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population. In addition, many new immigrants are from non-European countries, and most post-secondary institutions actively recruit international students from around the world. Creating a culturally safe environment will benefit these groups, in addition to Aboriginal students. It is important that all areas of the college be sensitive to students needs, demonstrate cultural awareness, and provide services in a culturally meaningful manner.

180

The reason many Aboriginal students in the college study originally decided to pursue post-secondary studies was to secure stable employment and build a better life for their families. The Aboriginal Learning Unit could work with the staff in the college's career services department to provide workshops and one-to-one support for students as they prepare for, and then seek employment. Scheduling these opportunities in their final semester and after they graduate would be very helpful.

Many of the efforts to support Aboriginal student success in Ontario colleges is currently being done through the work of students services departments, and in particular through stand alone departments with the specific mandate to support Aboriginal students. From the academic perspective, providing support to Aboriginal students is done on an individual, ad hoc basis, and is dependent on each professor's sensitivity and personal commitment to student success. Though these are recognized by the participants in the college study and supported by the literature, is this enough? Does this truly demonstrate institutional commitment? I would suggest it does not, and that a more holistic and comprehensive campus-wide effort is required to create an environment that truly welcomes and supports Aboriginal students. Creating a welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students is often referred to as Indigenizing the campus.

This chapter further explored and discussed the key factors in supporting Aboriginal students identified through the college study interviews. The participants in the study acknowledged the staff and activities of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, program coordinators, and professors as the supports that encouraged persistence, which ultimately led to their academic success. The college study sought to privilege Indigenous

perspectives and demonstrated a respect for and valuing of Indigenous ways of knowing

(Smith, L.T., 1999). It became clear to me that the participants in the college study believe

that genuine interest and caring make a significant difference in encouraging them to

persist in their studies. It is important to recognize the learning and understanding I

acquired came about because of the time taken to build relationships within the specific

context of the college in the study. In chapter 8 I will conclude by summarizing my

contribution to the creation of new knowledge, identify opportunities for further research,

describe the limitations of my work, and make recommendations for improved services for

Aboriginal students, including the important role of developing a college-wide strategy to

support Aboriginal student success in a comprehensive and holistic way.

CHAPTER 8: MOVING FORWARD

Many of the students in the college study attended college previously, but left, prior to completion, to return to their communities and be with their families. These same students returned to college and are now realizing academic success. Some are in the graduating semester of two or three year programs. A number of students interviewed suggested that many activities and services offered through the Aboriginal Learning Unit helped them persist in their studies. Several also indicated they were not really ready to focus on their studies when they attended previously, but were more prepared when they returned. Still others mention there seemed to be more Aboriginal students enrolled in the college this time, and being around other Aboriginal students created a more comfortable and familiar environment. The following two sections will discuss the limitations of the study and identify opportunities for further research.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this study is that it was conducted at one comparatively small college, with a small group of students in one particular academic year. The identified promising practices and the approach used to conducting culturally intelligent research reflect the perspectives of the specific college study participants and the specific college context. It may not be appropriate to generalize them to another location without further validation. Additional similar studies at a variety of colleges would provide further insight and contribute to this body of knowledge. Developing strong and trusting relationships was key to the successful use of decolonizing methodologies, therefore, other scholars

conducting similar studies in new contexts will need to build relationships with the

Aboriginal peoples in the new environment to ensure the knowledge and understanding I

have acquired through this work is relevant and transferable to a different college. The

strength of the college study was that it was local and specific to the participants, the

college, and the city. Asking Aboriginal people in a new context to provide direction for

future studies is essential.

Opportunities for Future Research

The college study began in 2007 and at that time there were very few studies

examining the experience of Aboriginal students in Canadian colleges. Though additional

studies, particularly quantitative studies that explore available statistical data, have been

conducted since that time, there is more to be done particularly in terms of qualitative

studies that examine, through the experiences, words, and recommendations of Aboriginal

students, how they could be better supported. The work conducted by the Association of

Canadian Community Colleges referenced in this work is largely a compilation of current

practices submitted by colleges across the country. It is not known if any research occurred

to validate these as promising practices with Aboriginal students. More scholarly studies

need to be conducted to identify, from the perspective of Aboriginal students and other

knowledgeable Aboriginal peoples, the services that would be of greatest benefit

(Huffman, 2008; Larimore & McClellan, 2005; Waterman, 2007; Watson, 2009).

Based on the suggestions of the students in the college study and my experience,

the following topics are identified as areas for further study:

- Strategies successful Aboriginal students use to persist to graduation;

- Successful practices in delivering services to Aboriginal students;

- Effective professional development strategies used to build cultural sensitivity and awareness;

- Successful practices used to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge in curriculum;

- Approaches to conducting culturally appropriate research with Aboriginal students;

- Indigenizing the college through generative discussions with local Aboriginal peoples.

Further research intended to identify the strategies successful Aboriginal student use to persist to graduation would be of benefit to both current and future students. Complimenting the research findings with a video of students describing their strategies could be a very useful tool, as proposed by one of the participants in the college study.

Creating an institutional environment that is culturally safe and welcoming has been identified as very important in supporting Aboriginal student success, as well as the success of immigrants and international students. Further research will uncover professional development strategies that are most likely to be effective in developing employee and student cultural awareness and sensitivity.

The value of this research can be divided into three distinct areas, the contribution to knowledge when researching in a cross-cultural context, the contribution to improving supports leading to Aboriginal student success and identifying the challenges and barriers

that need to be addressed to create a level playing field for Aboriginal students as they strive to successfully complete post-secondary studies. The third contribution discusses the importance of developing a comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting Aboriginal students by Indigenizing the institution.

In summary, this research's contribution to the creation of new knowledge is in three key areas:

1. Successful approaches to conducting culturally intelligent research.

2. Promising practices to improve Aboriginal student outcomes.

3. Indigenizing the college through generative discussion.

Conducting Culturally Intelligent Research

The ten months spent working with the staff and students in the Aboriginal Learning Unit provided me with many opportunities to learn. The time investment was critical to building strong relationships and developing a deeper understanding of the cultures, traditions, and beliefs of the participants in the study. I needed to prove that I was trustworthy and could be depended upon to conduct this work in a "good way", a term frequently used by the Aboriginal people with whom I worked. From the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit I came to know the term "good way" to mean respectful of Aboriginal peoples, traditions and practices. I learned about Aboriginal culture through the beliefs and ways of being of individuals from a number of nations and a variety of backgrounds. It was interesting for me to realize that, as I was learning, the other members of the Unit were learning about each other's cultures and beliefs, too. When describing her

traditional practices, Deborah, a staff member from the Unit would often state: "this is how I walk with the teachings".

Recognizing there is variation in practices from one Nation to another is significant when doing work with Aboriginal participants. I learned about the PSE experience of Aboriginal students from each individual student's perspective. In addition, I came to know more about conducting research in a culturally intelligent way. I learned to listen carefully and check my understanding often. I learned to follow and not lead. This approach is imperative when following decolonizing methodologies and incorporating Indigenous research methods.

I started the study with very little knowledge of Aboriginal traditions and cultures. What I did bring was an interest and openness to learn, and a respect for the beliefs of others. For others who start with little knowledge, but are committed to social justice, I would recommend spending a significant amount of time learning about the participants and taking the time to build strong and trusting relationships. I would suggest using the Seven Grandfather Teachings to guide their way.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings

From the beginning of my research journey, the Seven Grandfather Teachings guided my practice and helped me think deeply about how I would proceed with the study. Though I was aware of the Seven Grandfather Teachings prior to beginning my work with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit in the college study, it was through the process of receiving ethics approval from the Manitoulin Anishnabek Research Review Committee

(MARRC) that I learned about using the Teachings to guide respectful research with Aboriginal peoples. It is appropriate that I conclude this dissertation by describing how this study contributes to new knowledge. I will do so by drawing on the Seven Grandfather Teachings, which are one approach to Indigenous thought and are consistent with decolonizing methodologies. They informed my learning journey and shaped my understanding of what the participants in my study have to teach us all about how to conduct research in a culturally intelligent manner.

Wisdom

The participants shared their thoughts and experiences at college in an open, warm and generous manner. At times there was thoughtful silence or hesitation and at other times there were humorous comments and we laughed together. Through this process I learned that each interview would evolve in its own way and that I should not push participants to respond quickly.

Respect

Working with the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit for five months before the interviews began helped me gain insight into the range and variability of Aboriginal experiences and beliefs. The conversations that took place during this time helped me understand the fundamental values they shared, that is, the belief in interconnections and relationships. Starting each meeting with a prayer that honored all of creation and our responsibilities to each other, such as listening with an open mind and heart during the meeting, helped me understand how traditional ways were integrated into a modern context. This learning happened because of the time I spent as a member of the Aboriginal

Learning Unit and did not happen quickly or by reading books alone. Though reading the works of other scholars in different contexts is important, it is incomplete without the specificity provided by local Aboriginal peoples within a particular environment. Deep learning must happen through personal experience over time. It must arise out of a profound respect for the people involved and a commitment to learning and understanding.

Love

The study sought to identify improvements that would benefit current and future students, recognizing that I had little real control of whether the recommendations were actually implemented. When asked what the participants would like to see changed to benefit future students, such as their younger siblings or cousins, each Aboriginal participant in the study paused and thought deeply. When they spoke, their words often came from a place of deep love for those future generations. I learned the responsibility to future generations is very important to Aboriginal peoples and the welfare of seven generations in the future must be considered when making decisions today. This responsibility was not taken lightly: it was expressed clearly when participants had space for contemplation and deep thinking prior to responding. The participant's thoughtful responses provided me with greater insight into the common thread of commitment and the sense of responsibility to others embedded in traditional belief systems.

Bravery

It takes courage to share personal experiences, particularly when those experiences were hurtful and represented attempts to erode self-confidence and self-esteem. At times these experiences can be so hurtful, it's difficult to revisit them. It is therefore important to

189

seek the input of knowledgeable others, such as Aboriginal Elders, counselors and

advisors, who are able to provide insight into the student experience from a safer vantage

point.

Honesty

Since the first contact with European settlers, Aboriginal communities have

experienced breaches of trust and broken promises. It was therefore essential to build a

trust-based relationship between the Aboriginal Learning Unit staff and myself and then

the student participants and myself. Building trust, particularly given the legacy of

systematic attempts at assimilation, does not happen quickly. I would therefore

recommend that anyone wishing to conduct research in a cross-cultural context plan to

spend a substantial amount of time prior to actually beginning the study to demonstrate

their commitment to learning about the culture and showing, through actions, that they are

trustworthy.

Humility

In beginning research in a cross-cultural context it is important to avoid any

preconceived expectations. In my case, I thought that I knew some of the barriers the

student participants would share with me. As a result, it was particularly important for me

to listen carefully and not lead participant responses or push students in a particular

direction. At times students shared some very private and personal information, so it was

important not to be judgmental or intrusive. Thanking the participants for their willingness

to help and share openly is key when building a high trust environment.

Truth

When a trusting environment is created, research participants will speak from the heart, so it is important to make a commitment to care for these words and assume the responsibility to take action that will benefit others. In the case of my research, my commitment was to "make things better" for future students by making recommendations for changes in practice. It was assumed that some of these recommendations might not be well received by the senior administration of the college, but I had a responsibility to make them anyway.

The goal of social justice in a post-secondary educational context is to create a fair and equitable learning environment for all students. In the case of Aboriginal students, creating a fair and equitable learning environment often means providing additional needed support services to demonstrate an awareness of historic wrongs and an institutional commitment to taking deliberate action to redress these wrongs. The following section will identify recommendations to begin leveling the playing field for Aboriginal students attending Canadian colleges.

Promising Practices to Improve Aboriginal Student Outcomes

Based on what I was told by the participants in the study, I make a number of recommendations, which arguably have implications for adaptation in other contexts. Having said that, it is recognized that each context will be different and these recommendations will need to be vetted through knowledgeable, local Aboriginal peoples to ensure they are respectful of local beliefs, practices, and protocols. The resulting

recommendations have the potential to provide a more welcoming and supportive environment for Aboriginal students, which, if fully implemented, have the power to support Aboriginal students in the completion of their studies. What was learned through this work could provide a relevant starting point to delivering culturally appropriate supports to Aboriginal students in other contexts, in particular, other Canadian colleges. The recommendations are:

1. Create a highly visible, stand-alone center dedicated to supporting Aboriginal students, if one does not already exist. If such a center exists, strengthen the visibility of the center throughout the college, so students can easily find their way there.

2. Establish a comprehensive housing registry designed to meet the needs of families. Include in the registry information about schools, available day care facilities, and public transportation and customize the information to the specific geographic location of the housing.

3. Improve all print materials and the website to explicitly reach out to potential Aboriginal students. Identifying appropriate improvements should be done through consultation with knowledgeable Aboriginal staff and students.

4. Develop specific outreach strategies to Aboriginal students for on-campus work. Encouraging on-campus work will help ease the financial pressure faced by many students, while strengthening their connection to the college.

5. Develop a mentoring program by recruiting more senior students to act as mentors. Mentors could ease the disorientation and isolation felt by many Aboriginal students as they transition to the college.

6. Work with student associations to ensure family activities are included in their programming.

7. Ensure individual program orientations include information on all student services departments, in particular, the Aboriginal Learning Unit, the student support center, and the center for students with disabilities. It is important the information be conveyed in a manner that can be heard by the audience. One suggested method is through the stories of students who accessed the services and experienced a positive outcome. Hearing about the experience directly from other students would be highly credible. This could be done in person, or via a short video.

8. At the beginning of each academic year survey new students to determine the academic support services they believe will be necessary and then structure workshops to address these needs. The Aboriginal Learning Unit could work with academic support services to design, deliver, and host various workshops that are designed in a culturally appropriate manner to meet the various learning needs of students.

9. Through cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity training delivered by knowledgeable Aboriginal facilitators, increase the awareness of staff in various departments across the college to the fact that Aboriginal students

may hesitate to approach them for specific services, and staff may need to gently probe to discover what is needed.

10. Develop and deliver workshops for professors designed to build skill and confidence in addressing racist and discriminatory comments in class. Case studies are recognized as an effective method of delivering this type of training. Provide faculty development sessions on the range and variability of learning styles, and suggest ways to structure learning activities to use a wide variety of learning methods, convey assignment expectations in multiple ways, and suggest successful approaches to referring students to departments, such as the academic support center and the center for students with disabilities. It is important to ensure these sessions avoid any essentialist notions of Aboriginal peoples.

11. Encourage newly accepted students and potential students to come on campus frequently by offering campus tours and regular contact with the college. Develop activities designed to orient Aboriginal students to the college from an academic, physical and service perspective.

12. Develop a video to highlight the strategies successful Aboriginal students use to survive and thrive in college.

13. Continue working closely with First Nations Education Managers by seeking opportunities to collaborate in the support of students during the transition to college and throughout their studies.

14. Provide leadership in collectively lobbying the federal government,

through national associations, such as the Association of Canadian

Community Colleges, for improvements to post-secondary educational

funding for Aboriginal students.

This section provided a number of promising practices to improve Aboriginal

student outcomes. The next section will discuss the importance of developing a

comprehensive and holistic, college-wide strategy to create a welcoming environment for

Aboriginal students, and demonstrate, in a concrete manner, that they belong.

Indigenizing the College through Generative Discussion

When I step back to think about the study I conducted at the northern Ontario

college, I ask myself, "What were the participants, particularly the students, telling me"?

Some provided me with an overview of their experience deciding to pursue postsecondary

studies for the first time, others told me about how they decided to return to college to

complete studies previously abandoned, and still others shared their decision to pursue a

graduate program to enhance their skills and knowledge. They also shared the challenges

they faced during their studies, while staff from the Aboriginal Learning Unit and

Education Managers from Aboriginal communities provided context and additional detail.

From the study, I was able to identify the above recommendations that have the potential

to improve the experience of current and Aboriginal students at that college and could

likely be generalized to other similar institutions. I believe that all of this is important,

however, I ask myself, is this the micro level? Is there more to be done at a macro level?

The road to completing doctoral studies can be a long one, and things can change significantly over time. I completed the required coursework in 2007, the fieldwork for the college study in 2008, and finished the preliminary analysis and report writing in 2009. It is now 2014 and life did not stand still in the intervening years; I have had additional personal and professional experiences, read new research studies, and have had time to consider this work differently. The time spent reflecting on the college study experience and the opportunity to apply that learning in a new context has deepened my learning and provided insight into the additional actions that could be taken to further support Aboriginal students.

In the fall 2013 I read an article in the Toronto Star (Goar, September 20, 2013) entitled *Aboriginal trailblazer cuts through the fog.* The article was about Michael DeGagne, Aboriginal scholar and president of Nipissing University, and he spoke about how he was working to Indigenize his institution. Reading this article led me search for other similar articles. I then read another article by Goar (October 8, 2013) entitled *Canada's most aboriginal-friendly campus.* In both articles DeGagne spoke of using *Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation and Residential School* (Rogers, DeGagne, Dewar, Lowry, 2012) as a tool to Indigenize the campus. I was intrigued and wanted to learn more.

I began reading about how post-secondary institutions were Indigenizing their campuses. Firstly, I needed to understand what was meant by "Indigenizing". Was it the "Aboriginal fusion" advanced by the Chair of my current college's Aboriginal Advisory Circle? Or was it something different? In reading the work of other scholars, I have come

to see Indigenization as creating an environment where: Indigenous values are respected; Indigenous stories, perspectives and presence are privileged; Indigenous principles, modes of organization and behavior are respected and integrated into the larger structures of the institution; and curriculum, student services, policies, and procedures are developed and delivered with Aboriginal student learning needs in mind (Alfred, 2004; Justice, 2004; Mihesauah & Wilson, 2004; Newhouse, 2008; Simcoe, 2009). To Indigenize an institution, it is essential to recognize the expertise of Elders, the importance of community involvement, and the integration of Indigenous and western academic knowledge, while honouring and valuing the cultural traditions, values, languages and practices of Indigenous peoples (Gehl, 2010, Pidgeon, 2009). DeGagne (Goar, 2013) suggests the goal of his Indigenization project is broad social change and for his university to be a living model of reconciliation. Pidgeon (2008) postulates the transformation required to Indigenize the institution cannot exist in policy alone and, "must occur through sustainable actions that move policy from paper into the lived realities, cultures, and fabrics of our institutions". She further suggests that each of us need to ask ourselves "What can I do to help support Aboriginal students, faculty, staff and/or communities in my role at my institution?" (p. 11).

In addition to Nipissing University, other Canadian post-secondary institutions are working on their own Indigenization projects. A number of institutions such as University of Regina, University of Winnipeg, University of Fraser Valley, University of Lethbridge, and Camosun College, among others, are taking concrete steps to Indigenize their campus. They are Indigenizing their campuses through the use of culturally appropriate practices,

such as: recognizing the traditional territories upon which the campus sits at official events such as convocation; providing culturally appropriate delivery of services, including Elders in Residence programs; developing strong links with local Aboriginal communities; as well as looking for ways to integrate Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing in the curriculum.

Based on my learning, all of these activities appear reasonable, but are they transferable to other institutions? How should similar work be started at my current institution? Are the identified practices at other institutions the priority for my college?

To learn what is important in a particular context, any Indigenization project must include input from the local Aboriginal communities. I would suggest that consultation should begin with a preliminary conversation with the Aboriginal Education Council at the specific institution. Some of the preliminary questions that need to be answered include: what does Indigenizing the campus mean to the members of the Council? Are they interested in pursuing an Indigenization project?

Before discussions proceed beyond the "agreement in principle" stage, I believe a deep conversation needs to occur between senior management of the college and the Aboriginal Education Council. As mentioned earlier, deep conversations about values and beliefs occurred between staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit at the college in the study. These were not planned and tended to involve discrete issues or problems. Generative discussions are being used in some organizations, particularly with the boards of directors of nonprofit organizations, such as hospitals and post-secondary institutions, and this model could be effective in the context of Indigenizing the college. As I have stated

earlier, generative thinking has been described (Ryan, Chait, Taylor, 2005) as getting to the question before the question. It is about deliberately and explicitly identifying the values, beliefs, assumptions and organizational culture that will influence the identification of priorities and what strategies and tactics will be chosen to address those priorities. The authors point out that the root of generative is genesis, which means origin or beginning. Having deep conversations about values, beliefs and assumptions at the beginning of the planning will help determine what really matters and help in framing the issue or problem. Problem framing will help make clear analytically what many understand intuitively (p. 83). It can be expected that some disagreement will occur, which is positive, since discussions will be enriched by including multiple perspectives. Once agreement has been reached on a common understanding, or frame, the group will have focus, which in turn will guide the identification of priorities, the development of an action plan, and the strategies for implementation.

If colleges sincerely want to enhance Aboriginal student success, and are willing to examine their practices and make changes where indicated, they can start by listening carefully to the wisdom of Aboriginal peoples. The knowledge required to Indigenize the college cannot be acquired in any other way.

I recognize that this contribution to the discourse on Aboriginal student success is from my own experience and that others may be able to add to this discussion by sharing their points of view and experiences. In the Epilogue I will reflect on what I learned in working with the participants of the college study and how I was able to transfer this

knowledge, with the support of Aboriginal peoples in my new environment, to a new college in another area of the province.

Each of the Aboriginal people surveyed was asked what they would like to see the college in the study do differently to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for their siblings, children or grandchildren. The following quote from Loretta, a staff member of the Aboriginal Learning Unit, particularly resonates for me. She spoke of a vision for the future and stated:

> What I'd like to see, if they decided to come to [the College], is that they be acknowledged for who they are, as Aboriginal people. Young Aboriginal [people] who have the ability and skills, just like anyone else. But recognizing the strength in who they are too, as Aboriginal people. I think when they apply or whoever they meet when they fill out the application, or when they register, that that person is looking after them and helping them and acknowledging, having some idea of where they come from. Hey, you're from [community], I know some people from that community. Being familiar with a little bit of who they are as Aboriginal people, but also recognizing their potential as students and members of the college community. [A family member] feels [the College] is a good place for her, so she's coming back. But I think when we look at student services, those people should not only know about Aboriginal people. They need to be familiar with other people, other ethnic groups. You don't have to be an

expert, but at least know enough to acknowledge that there's a difference,

that you know and value each person's gifts.

This eloquent quote is particularly meaningful to me because it speaks to the importance of non-Aboriginal people taking time to learn about Aboriginal students and their cultures. Genuine interest in the students as individuals and making the effort to demonstrate this interest can make a great deal of difference in students persisting to graduation. Though the needs of individual students will vary, sincere caring is an important place to start.

Conclusions

Increasing Aboriginal student participation rates in post-secondary studies, and then improving completions rates is a pressing social challenge. The work in this dissertation specifically addresses these challenges through intentional consultation with Aboriginal students, Aboriginal community representatives, and traditionally knowledgeable individuals. This approach is respectful of Aboriginal traditions and culture, and aligns with decolonizing methodologies. The college study elicited a comprehensive list of recommendations to creating a welcoming and supportive atmosphere, as identified by Aboriginal students themselves. When the results of studies referenced are compiled, they make similar recommendations. Disparate studies suggest the need for and importance of practices such as: having a visible Aboriginal cultural presence across the institution; consultation with Aboriginal communities; physical space

designated for Aboriginal students; overt inclusion of Aboriginal culture at key events, such as Convocation; and cultural sensitivity and awareness training for non-Aboriginal staff and faculty. The college study is unique, as the recommendations are comprehensive in nature, and were made by Aboriginal students in an Ontario college. The participant experiences, shared through the college study interviews, validates the applicability of the work of scholars in other contexts as valid at the college in the study. The study was founded on social justice principles and sought to identify ways of leveling the academic playing field for a group of individuals widely recognized as being disadvantaged by Eurocentric practices in broader society, and in particular, in post-secondary educational institutions.

In order to be fully implemented, the recommendations in the college study require action from various departments, such as: student services; faculty and staff development, and academic programs, however, it does not address the need for a systematic approach to supporting Aboriginal students across all aspects of the institution. Other institutions, in particular universities in western Canada, refer to a comprehensive and systematic approach as Indigenization. I believe that Indigenization will clearly demonstrate an institution's commitment to Aboriginal student success. Generative discussions with senior college leadership and informed members of the Aboriginal communities, for example, a college's Aboriginal education council, is a way to begin discussions about culturally appropriate approaches to Indigenize the campus. It is my belief that Indigenizing the campus will create an environment where Aboriginal students will feel welcome and comfortable. Encouraging and supporting students in practicing their culture and/or

learning more about their culture is widely acknowledged as an important source of

support in Aboriginal student persistence. In addition, embedding Aboriginal traditions

and culture in institutional practice will increase knowledge and understanding by non-

Aboriginal students, faculty and staff about Aboriginal history, contributions and the

impact of historic wrong-doings by settlers on Aboriginal people today.

CHAPTER 9: EPILOGUE

The college study included in my dissertation was conducted during the 2007-2008 academic year at a community college in northeastern Ontario. By the time the study began I had retired from the college as Dean of the School of Justice, Access and Community Services to complete my doctoral studies. My intention was to finish my dissertation and then seek employment. Life does not always go as planned, and during the spring of 2007 I applied for a position at a college in southern Ontario, was the successful candidate, and began employment on a six-week interim basis in May-June and began full-time employment in early August. Prior to relocating to southern Ontario, I had completed all of the interviews.

During the summer and fall of 2008 the interviews were transcribed and the analysis begun. In September of 2008, Joyce, the Chair of the Aboriginal Learning Unit of my former college invited me to an upcoming meeting of the Indigenous Peoples Education Circle (IPEC), even though my new college did not offer any specific services to Aboriginal students. IPEC is comprised of members from the colleges across Ontario who offer Aboriginal-specific programming and or services, and who receive funding for these services from the provincial government. I attended the meeting and found the members of the Circle to be open and welcoming. One member suggested my college needed to start offering services to Aboriginal students since a number of people from his community were students there. He said that specific supports were important to their success. Specific funding for Aboriginal programming and services at colleges and universities began in the early nineties, and my former college had started providing

services even before the funding began. Since the early nineties there had never been a general call for proposals or opportunity for other colleges or universities to receive similar funding. A government representative from the Aboriginal Education Office of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities attended the IPEC meeting and provided a general Ministry update and also informed us the government wanted to expand the number of colleges and universities who were offering Aboriginal programming and services. She indicated a general call for proposals could be expected by spring 2009.

I was very pleased to hear of the upcoming opportunity for funding and excited I might be able to create an Aboriginal learning unit at my new college. The opportunity to apply what I had learned during my fieldwork, only in a new context, was exhilarating. Sometime afterwards, I discussed the funding opportunity with my supervisor, the Vice-president, Academic and she suggested I meet with the Vice-president, Student Affairs to discuss the idea further. My meeting with the Vice-president, Student Affairs was significantly less positive than I expected. It was her perception there were few students to serve in our area and she indicated there had never been a request by students for these services. The only First Nations community within the college's geographic area was very small, with only 150 residents, so her perception there were few students to serve was quite reasonable. In stating she had never received a request from Aboriginal students, as she had from other groups, such as a request from Muslim students to form an association, I felt she exhibited a lack of understanding of the history of colonization in Canada, and the fact Aboriginal students were unlikely to come forward as a collective and submit a request to form a club or association. I left the meeting feeling discouraged, but realized I

had some work to do before bringing the concept forward again. Since that discussion I have come to realize few employees of the college have any knowledge or understanding of Canada's colonial past and the systematic, government lead assault on Aboriginal cultures, languages and heritages. Despite an initial lack of knowledge, I have found they are open and willing to learn. Each year, personnel from the student affairs departments at the college attend a national conference. The summer following my discussion with the Vice-president, Student Affairs she attended the conference, as usual. The conference includes seminars, workshops, and research presentations on a wide range of topics of interest to student services personnel. That year she selected several sessions related to supporting Aboriginal students. When she returned she mentioned she had chosen these sessions deliberately, saying she now had a better understanding of why it was so important to offer specific supports to Aboriginal students. I felt I had my first supporter.

In my new position, I was the Dean of a new school formed as a result of an academic restructuring. I had a number of pressing strategic priorities and though I had worked at another college for many years, I needed to learn the culture and 'how things worked' in my new environment. As a result, my personal project of creating an Aboriginal student center was put on the back burner. I thought I would be notified when the request for proposals was issued by the Ministry, and I intended to bring my proposal forward again at that time. In the fall of 2009 I discovered the request for proposals had been issued and my college had decided not to submit a proposal. I was very disappointed that I had missed an important opportunity.

At roughly the same time, I became aware that the Education Manager for the local

First Nation had approached the college with the idea of starting an Aboriginal education

council. He had met previously with the Vice-president, Academic and another meeting

was scheduled. Based on my interest in Aboriginal student success, the Vice-president

invited me to accompany her to the meeting. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was

agreed I would be the college lead in working with the First Nations Education Manager to

create an education council for the College. Together the Manager and I identified key

Aboriginal stakeholders we would like to see represented on the council and we began

approaching organizations and individuals to determine interest and to recruit members.

In the interim, the college's institutional research department provided me with

some information to bolster my case for an Aboriginal student center. Their information,

garnered from the 2006 Statistics Canada data, indicated 64,000 Aboriginal people lived

within a hundred kilometer radius of the College and 6,000 people who had identified as

Aboriginal, lived in the city. At that time the College did not collect self-identification

data, so there was no way of providing specific enrolment information for the college. I

had the opportunity to provide the statistics to the college's Leadership Team, comprised

of the President and Vice-presidents, during my annual budget presentation. The statistics

surprised the team and there was general agreement that pursing funding to support

Aboriginal students might be a good idea after all.

At approximately the same time a call for proposals, with a very short timeline,

came from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities offering colleges and

universities funding to support Aboriginal student space. I approached the President for

permission to submit a proposal, and he agreed, though expressed concern we did not have

funding for staffing. I suggested that I would pursue funding for salaries and operating

expenses separately, but wanted to take advantage of the current opportunity. Within the

acceptable parameters of the proposal I was able to purchase everything needed to equip

an Aboriginal student center, including books, videos, office furniture, lounge furniture,

computers for staff, a bank of computers for a computer pod for student use, printers, a

large screen television, a video player, storage cabinets, bookshelves, and a large number

of pieces of Aboriginal art. It was challenging to decide what to buy, as a physical space

had not been identified. The funding provided a large sum of money, so I sought the

advice of my former colleagues at the Aboriginal Learning Unit and also the ideas of

members of the newly forming Aboriginal education council. The new council was

comprised of Aboriginal peoples from a number of local First Nations and the regional

Métis Council and I wanted their advice regarding appropriate purchases. Consulting with

local people was very important and served a number of purposes. They suggested I

purchase resources that were not mentioned by the staff of my former college and it also

demonstrated my commitment to involving local people in decision-making. It was

important that I start to build relationships in my new environment if I was going to be

successful in creating an Aboriginal learning center that was relevant to local students.

I now had everything needed to create an Aboriginal student center, except space

and staff. In the summer of 2010 the Vice-president, Academic and I met with a senior

representative of the Aboriginal Education Office of the Ministry of Training, Colleges

and Universities. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possibility of the college

receiving funding, even though the window of opportunity had closed a year earlier. I had

spoken to the Ministry representative prior to our meeting, and had the sense that funding

might be possible. The meeting was very positive and the Ministry representative

instructed me to prepare a proposal using the template provided in the original call for

proposals. He indicated he would determine, after reviewing my proposal, how the

Ministry might support our initiative. I prepared the proposal requesting everything I

thought would be required to fully staff the center and to provide the types of support

services offered by my former college.

The proposal was prepared, and after receiving endorsement from the newly

forming Aboriginal education council and vetting it through the internal approval process,

the proposal was submitted to the Ministry in September 2010. In responding to the

proposal, the senior Ministry representative indicated they did not have sufficient funds to

approve what I had requested, and asked me to reduce my request. I knew my request was

reasonable, as I was aware of what some other institutions had received; however, I also

recognized we had missed the original window of opportunity. I pared back my request to

fit within the specified parameters, vetted it through the Aboriginal education council and

the internal departments and resubmitted my proposal in October. The proposal was

approved in late November.

At the same time, a program within my School was looking for office space off-

campus. By late November a suitable off-campus space was identified and the renovations

were to commence in December, with an anticipated move in date of early February.

Though smaller than I would have liked, based on my experience at my former college, the

space they were vacating could be a reasonable option for the Aboriginal student center

and would only require some relatively minor renovations. I received approval from the

college's Leadership Team to use the identified space and made arrangements with

facilities for the minor renovations and a fresh coat of paint. It should be noted that this

level of institutional commitment was significant, as securing appropriate space was often

very challenging, since our enrolment was growing at a higher than anticipated rate, and

space was at a premium.

Now I needed to hire the staff for the new Aboriginal student center. I again sought

the advice of the newly forming Aboriginal education council to continue building

respectful relationships and demonstrate my commitment to involving the community in

decision-making. They provided some very good advice about appropriate qualifications,

duties and responsibilities, and suggested a number of places to advertise for the positions.

They also recommended I place notices in various newsletters and promote the opportunity

through First Nations communities and provided me with contact information, so I was

able to contact the communities quickly and efficiently. In addition, the positions were

advertised on the college website, as was our usual practice. Applicants were short-listed,

and interviews were conducted. By then the Education Manager from the local First

Nation who had proposed the creation of an Aboriginal education council was the interim

chair of the Aboriginal education council and to further develop relationships, invited him

to be a member of the selection committee. We identified a suitable candidate for the full-

time position and also for the supporting part-time position. Because of the limited

funding, we did not have sufficient resources to hire two full-time people. A start date was

arranged for mid-March, as my assumption was the space would be ready for occupancy by February, and starting in mid-March would provide adequate time to move in the furniture, set-up and image the computers, and generally prepare to start offering support services. Things did not happen as smoothly as I had planned, as the renovations for the off site location were delayed and which in turn delayed the renovations in the new Aboriginal student center. Despite a short delay, the newly hired staff of the Aboriginal Student Center moved into their lovely new space in late March.

In March 2011 the staff began their new positions and we started planning for the fall. They finished decorating the new center and worked with the facilities department to mount the art, the large screen television and arrange the furniture in an aesthetically pleasing way. Virtually every visitor to the center comments on the comfortable, welcoming atmosphere and students started coming right away, though by the time the center was up and running, the winter semester was over and activity over the spring/summer semester was comparatively small. The quiet period provided the time to plan for the return of students in the fall and we developed our work plan and in June presented the first draft to the Aboriginal education council for feedback and suggestions. We incorporated their recommendations and included many of the activities used at my former college in the final plan. I was pleased that many of the things I had learned were relevant in my new environment, but had not assumed they would be applicable without validating it with the staff and the members of the education council. As indicated earlier, cultures, traditions, and practices vary across nations, therefore consultation with local peoples is essential. This can make the development of an action plan quite complex, as

multiple perspectives may need to be incorporated in order to meet the needs of diverse local students. Identifying priorities can only be accomplished by developing trusting and respectful relationships over time. All agreed it was important to conduct the activities of the Aboriginal student center in a way that incorporated traditional practices and to have activities, such as, celebrations, ceremonies and teachings to aid students in connecting, reconnecting or staying connected to their culture and heritage. An important part of the plan was to incorporate the wisdom of Elders whenever possible. Based on the advice of the Aboriginal education council and the experience of staff, we identified an Elder who was willing to work with us on a regular basis. The first major activity we planned was a naming ceremony for the new center. One of the staff approached the Elder in the traditional way, by offering the sacred medicine, tobacco, with the request that he name the center. The Elder accepted the tobacco, which signaled his willingness to accept our request, and we planned for the ceremony. To celebrate the special occasion, we invited the members of the Aboriginal education council, the college's Leadership Team, center staff and students. The name given by the Elder was "Suswaaning Endaajig" or "the nest away from home", which seemed especially appropriate. After the ceremony, we commemorated the event with a feast comprised of traditional foods, such as salmon, wild rice, corn soup, and fry bread.

Suswaaning Endaajig is now firmly entrenched in the college, and the employees of Suswaaning Endaajig work closely with all of the student services departments to support student success. The academic support center often delivers workshops in the Center on topics of interest to Aboriginal students. The staff also work closely with the

financial aid office to ensure students apply for scholarships and bursaries and work with funding agencies to stabilize the financial situation of students. Along with the Director of Student Life and Career Services, I co-chair a sub-committee of the college's strategic enrollment management committee charged with the mandate of identifying a new retention strategy. As part of the work of this committee we created a Student Success Survey. The survey is targeted at incoming students and includes self-identification questions. The staff in Suswaaing Endaajig immediately began using the data produced from the Student Success Survey to reach out to Aboriginal students who identified as First Nations, Inuit or Métis.

The employees of Suswaaning Endaajig work actively at raising awareness of their services by presenting at School meetings. They also respond to requests from professors to speak to their classes, and reach out to programs, particularly in justice, community services and health sciences where they offer to present and discuss contemporary Aboriginal issues. In addition to these activities, I wanted to increase the awareness of Aboriginal issues in the broader college community, so I hired a local Aboriginal scholar to develop a course which will be offered as a general education elective to students across the college.

In reality, I do not know if my study had a significant impact on my former college. Most of the results reaffirmed or validated what was already happening, though it did provide the opportunity for conversation, reflection and a comprehensive review. One of the most important benefits of the study was students had the opportunity to tell us what they believed was standing in their way and what was important to their success. It is also

significant the college committed to the Anishnaabe Affairs Committee that they would implement the recommendations. What I believe is significant, though, is the learning I acquired through the project and as a result was able to bring to my current college. The staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit at my former college spent a lot of time teaching me about their cultures, sharing their personal experiences, and showing me how each of them "walk with the teachings" of their ancestors in a contemporary context. They trusted I would use the knowledge I had acquired in a respectful way to benefit current and future students. Through the process of developing the ethics proposal for MARRC, I was able to think deeply about how I would use the Seven Grandfather Teachings to guide the research. Had I not had these experiences, I do not think Suswaaning Endaajig would exist today. The learning I acquired also helped me recognize that I would always need to include knowledgeable Aboriginal peoples in any decision-making that would impact Aboriginal students. It is important to underline the fact that each educational institution has its own culture and ideology. In addition, the cultures, traditions, and beliefs of Aboriginal peoples are developed out of interactions with their local ecosystems and therefore vary from location to location. This means that plans to support Aboriginal student success are very complex and must be specific to a given context and relevant to the peoples directly involved.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) speak of the challenges faced by Aboriginal students seeking a post-secondary education. They reference the four Rs, which are respect, reciprocity, relevance and responsibility. Keeping these thoughts in mind, I recognize my former colleagues exhibited great patience and took many hours teaching me

about their cultures, traditions and ways of seeing the world. They trusted I would use the gift of knowledge in a way that would honour the Seven Grandfather Teachings. As a result, I have a responsibility to reciprocate by working with Aboriginal peoples, which includes the staff of the Aboriginal Student Center and the Aboriginal education council, to create an environment which supports and welcomes Aboriginal students. When I told Deborah, one of my teachers from the Aboriginal Learning Unit, that my new college lacked specific supports to assist Aboriginal students, she suggested creating an Aboriginal student center was the work that I was meant to do when I took my new job. I believe she was correct and I am very proud of my accomplishment.

Suswaaning Endaajig is successful and we had almost seven hundred student visits in the first year. The College Aboriginal Advisory Circle, as the Aboriginal education council came to be known, is comprised of a wide representation of Aboriginal community stakeholders and includes current students and graduates. It has been formalized, has a terms of reference, regular meetings, and an annual reporting structure to the College's Leadership Team. The employees of the Center participate in student recruitment activities, attend community pow wows, partner with local groups, present at high schools and host high school student visits. In the first full year of operation, we participated actively in the Ontario colleges' self-identification project by hosting focus groups and pilot testing the new survey tool. We offered cultural safety workshops, ceremonies, celebrations, traditional teachings and social events for students. Staff, professors and students from across the college are invited to participate, and many non-Aboriginal people have participated in these learning opportunities and celebrations. The work

continues on many fronts, and professional development activities on diversity, which are targeted to a faculty audience, are being developed and delivered using a case study approach. The case study approach was selected to provide practical examples of situations the participants can relate to, and to provide culturally appropriate and practical strategies when confronted with difficult, and sensitive situations. It is hoped that through this learning, teachers will become more sensitive to diversity and better able to create a culturally safe environment for learning.

In the fall of 2012, the Chair of the Board of Governors discussed his interest in having a series of generative discussions regarding key issues at the college. The Chair of the Board is the vice-president of Human Resources at the local hospital and he indicated that his hospital was using generative discussions with their board. The notion of generative discussion was new to us, but when the President of my college asked me to lead the first discussion on the topic of supporting Aboriginal students, I was very pleased. I felt this was an important opportunity to educate the Board and discuss the importance of providing specialized services to Aboriginal students. I asked the full-time staff member from Suswaaning Endaajig to co-facilitate the discussion with me. Together we identified a number of resources we wanted the Board members to review for the meeting and sought the advice of the Advisory Circle Committee regarding the selected materials. The Advisory Circle Chair made some recommendations and we proceeded with the discussion. It was a positive experience, the Board members made some interesting observations and a number of positive suggestions.

In the spring of 2013, an organizational realignment moved the Aboriginal Student Centre from the academic division to the student services division. Though I was disappointed the reorganization occurred prior to my retirement, I see some positive aspects of the change, as it more easily facilitates collaboration and synergies with the Diversity Office, the First Generation coordinator, and other student support services. I continue to play an active role in the Centre, as staff continue to involve me in decisions and I am a member of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle.

In the fall late of 2013 the President asked each member of the College Leadership Team to identify their key priorities for the college, either from within our portfolio, or cross-college initiatives. We were told not to limit ourselves based on finances or current structures. I decided to divide my priorities into short, medium and longer-term initiatives. My medium term initiative involved the Indigenizing of the college and I proposed a number of activities that might be included in the process. Prior to presenting, I discussed the idea with the employees of Suswaaning Endaajig and the Chair of the Aboriginal Advisory Circle. All were supportive of the direction. Though I was uncertain how well the notion of Indigenizing the campus would be received by the President and Vice-presidents, it was supported, recognizing that further discussion needed to occur. At a follow-up meeting in January 2014 we discussed what Indigenizing the college might look like. Through that conversation we agreed that a meeting with the Aboriginal Advisory Circle and the College Leadership Team should be planned to guide the process. The meeting occurred in February 2014, and resulted in a better understanding of the issues and a preliminary idea of what was important to members of the Advisory Circle. The

outcome of the meeting resulted in commitment by the members of the Advisory Circle and the College Leadership Team to begin work on Indigenizing the college. Based on my research, I would suggest that the next step is to plan a generative discussion to reach agreement on the values and beliefs that will frame the Indigenization project. I believe using generative discussion to identify an Indigenization strategy will be effective in my current college, as it aligns well with our institutional values and commitment to student success. Though this process can be pointed to as the way to proceed for other organizations, the specifics must come through the process of building respectful relationships to ensure relevancy to the Aboriginal peoples directly involved.

After validating the relevance with local Aboriginal peoples, virtually everything I learned during my research has been implemented at my new college, and was done in a manner which I hope clearly demonstrates a commitment to decolonizing methodologies, the Seven Grandfather Teachings and my personal commitment to social justice. The opportunity to build on the learning acquired at my former college by establishing respectful relationship in a new context and then developing a strategy to support Aboriginal students at my new college reflects how I have internalized decolonizing methodologies and the lessons learned in my journey. I believe I have come full circle.

In keeping with the principles of decolonizing methodologies, it is important for me to acknowledge my many teachers. As indicated earlier, the staff of the Aboriginal Learning Unit at my former college played a significant role in my learning. In particular, Joyce, Debbie, Loretta and Harriet's patience and willingness to share openly gave me great insight into Aboriginal cultures, traditions and worldviews. My dissertation

supervisor, Dr. Haig-Brown taught me many things about working with Aboriginal peoples through her course in Decolonizing Methodologies, reading her work, her critical review of my work, as well as our many conversations. Though I reviewed the work of many scholars on decolonizing or Indigenous methodologies, the work of Linda Smith (1999) and Shawn Wilson (2008) resonated and provided me with insight into the importance of conducting research from an Indigenous perspective and ensuring the research is for purposes that will benefit Indigenous peoples. Wilson's storytelling style was particularly engaging. At the suggestion of my supervisor, I read Margaret Kovach's (2010) Indigenous Methodologies. Her use of a prologue and epilogue inspired me to similar work. In addition to her Indigenous research frameworks, I found her descriptions of theoretical and conceptual frameworks very helpful, as I struggled to identify a lens through which to examine the knowledge generated through the college study interviews. Other Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors also taught me many things. McLaren (2003) helped me better understand critical theory, and Shield, Bishop and Mazwai (2005) revealed the impact of deficit thinking on minoritized students. Though I read the work of many scholars on the topic of Social Justice, I struggled to find a practical way to use it until I read Rawls (1991, 2001), and the way he repeated his belief that inequalities can be addressed by providing the greater benefit to the least-advantaged in society (2001, p. 42). This was a lens that I could readily use to identify recommendations to improve Aboriginal students' experience. The work of multiple authors in *Indigenizing the Academy* (2004) and the work of Michelle Pidgeon (2008, 2009) gave me a strong understanding of the reasons to pursue an Indigenization project. This is not an exhaustive list. Many other

219

scholars were also my teachers, though their influence may not have been directly cited in this work. I have come to recognize that I have now spent so much time with these inspirational leaders, that I have internalized their teachings: they have become a part of my everyday existence and the work that springs from it. My hope is that my teachers will believe I have lived up to the title of "Kendaaswin Bebaamozhganung", or in English "One Who Gathers Knowledge".

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