



# **The Higher Education Experiences of Native American Students: A Qualitative Study of Historical Trauma, Identity, and Institutional Support**

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Gevirtz Graduate School of Education | UC Santa Barbara, on Chumash land

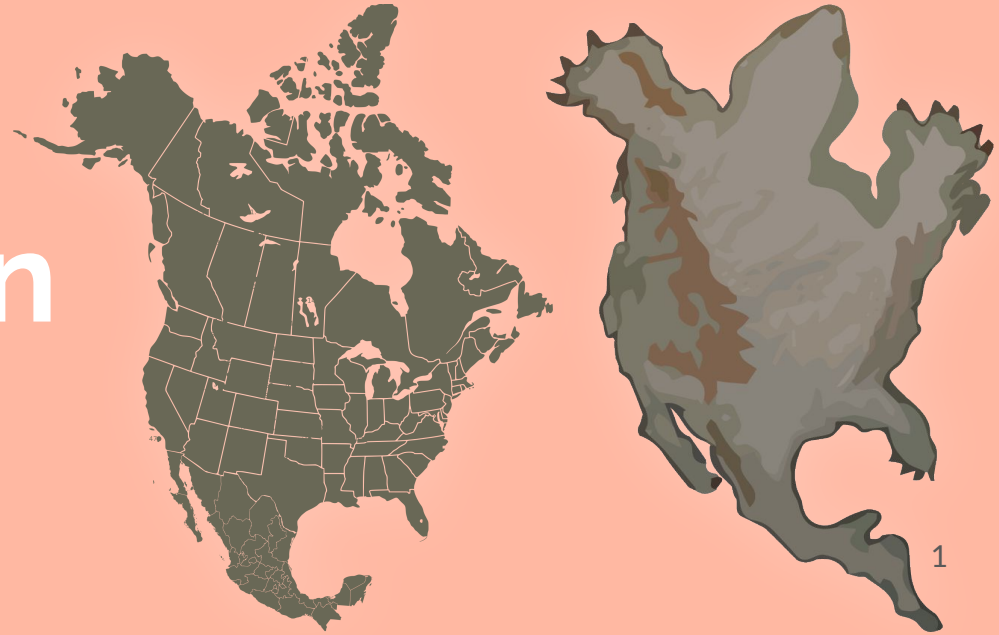
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# Chapters

1. Introduction
2. Literature
3. Methodology
4. Findings
5. Discussion

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# Chapter 1: Introduction



**“Kill the Indian,  
save the man”**

**— U.S. Army Capt. Richard Pratt,  
founder of Carlisle Indian Industrial School<sup>1</sup>**

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1. Adams, 1995; Churchill, 2004; Dixon & Trafzer, 2006; Ellis, 2006; Lomawaima, 1999; Pitcher Hayes, 2018.



Source: Wikipedia




# Study's Purpose, Professional Significance

- **0.8%:** In 2016, percentage distribution of AI/AN enrolled in college<sup>1</sup>
- **24%:** In 2019, percentage of AI/AN ages 18-24 enrolled in college<sup>2</sup>
- **16%:** In 2020, percentage of AI/AN earned Bachelor's or higher<sup>3</sup>
- Is there a **connection** between the Indian Boarding Schools and today's Native students' educational experiences? How do they **perceive their experiences** on campus? What can educators learn; how can we **better serve** Native students?

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# Chapter 2: Literature

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- **History of Indian Boarding Schools:** Getting caught speaking heritage languages, practicing traditional ceremonies often provoked **physical, sexual, or fatal abuse**<sup>1</sup>. **Historical trauma** took a hold of many survivors<sup>2</sup>.
  - **Indigenous Research Methodologies:** Native researchers' **responsibilities:** Privilege and protect Indigenous knowledgeways, co-create new knowledge in community, contribute findings to community to promote self-determination<sup>3</sup>.
  - **Belongingness with Today's Native Students:** They feel **belonging with other Native students** and Native community members, which supports learning in the classroom<sup>4</sup>. Numbers are so few, and worldview so different<sup>5</sup>.

1. Adams, 1995; Child, 1998; Churchill, 2004; Pewewardy, 2005; Trafzer, Keller, & Sisquoc, 2006. 2. Urrieta, 2019. 3. Smith, 2012; Kovach, 2010; Swisher, 1998. 4. Wilson, 2008; Bradford, 2017; Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012. 5. Smith, 2012; Fixico, 2009; Little Soldier, 1997.



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# Chapter 3: Methodology



# Research Questions & Themes

1. What is the **university experience** like for today's Native American students along the following:
  - a. What do we need to understand about Native students' **intersectional identities**?
  - b. What do we need to understand about the **historical trauma of Indian Boarding Schools** felt by today's Native students? In what ways is that trauma felt?
  - c. What are the **present challenges and gaps in service** experienced by today's Native students?
2. In what ways do Native students perceive the university could **better support** Native students?

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# Chapter 4: Findings

Table 1

*Demographic Information About Relatives in the University Context*

	Margo	Theda	Phyliss	Jean	Marcos	Winona	Dennis
<b>Age</b>	20	23	20	22	20	27	25
<b>First-Gen?</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Transferred?</b>	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Major(s)</b>	Sociology, Comm.	Sociology	History	Global Stud., Fem. Studies	Political Science	Enviro. Studies	Sociology
<b>Minor(s)</b>	N/A	Educational Studies	Educational Studies	German	Amer. Indian Studies	Amer. Indian Studies	AiIS, Applied Psychology
<b>GPA</b>	4.0	3.2	3.6	3.87	3.4	Alum; 3.6	Alum; 3.3
<b>AISO Length</b>	3 yrs.	1.5 yrs.	2 yrs.	3.5 yrs.	1.5 yrs.	3 + 4 yrs.	2 + 3 yrs.
<b>Hard to Find?</b>	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Safe on Campus?</b>	No	No	“Tucks away” Indigeneity	Yes, but “stupid Qs”	Yes; “very proud”	No	No

Table 2

*Demographic Information About Relatives' Identities*

	Margo	Theda	Phyliss	Jean	Marcos	Winona	Dennis
<b>Tribal Affiliation(s)</b>	Lipan Apache, Lemhi Shoshone	Blackfoot, Apache	Choctaw	Arawak	Pascua Yaqui	Snohomish, Lummi, Haida	Chiricahua Apache, Wukchumni
<b>ID w/ Other Culture?</b>	"Mexican," "Caucasian"	"Mexican," "Spanish"	N/A	"European"	"White"	"White"	"Mexican"
<b>ID Feels Most Connected</b>	Native	Mexican	N/A	IDs are "Balanced"	"Native Mexican"	Native	Indigenous, "balanced"
<b>Area Raised</b>	Urban	Rural	Urban	Urban	Rural, near Reservation	Rural, near Reservation	Rural, near Reservation
<b>LGBTQ2S?</b>	Queer	No	No	Bisexual	No	No	Two-Spirit
<b>IBS Relative?</b>	Unsure	Yes	Yes	Avoided	Yes	Unsure	Elders
<b>Speak?</b>	Yes	Some	Some	No	Some	Some	Yes
<b>Practice?</b>	"Not able to"	"Trying to"	Yes	"w/ family"	Yes	Yes	Yes



# Understanding Intersectional Identities

- **Marcos:** "I've met several people that have told me, 'I've never met a Native American in my life.' And I was like, 'you've probably seen some in passing. You just never knew.'"
- **Margo:** "It's like our people are trying to stand after **we've been kicked to the ground**, and before we can fully get up, **the next generation is kicked down again.**"
- **Theda:** "They think we're some **myth of the past**. Some **Halloween costume** to wear. Some prop ... **pop culture**."
- **Margo:** "It's never really something you forget because **these universities weren't created for us**, and the way they continue to operate to this day makes it clear that **being Indigenous, being a woman, being queer** — all of these things are intersections that would have prevented me from being able to go to a university 100 years ago."



## Effects from Historical Trauma

"You know, they say **evil doesn't go away ... it just shifts forms. ...** I'm just seeing the similarities between the Indian Boarding School practices and the university's practices. Even though it's "mild," it still is triggering in a way where it's like **my mind automatically goes into survival mode.** Like, "okay, what do I need to do in order to survive this classroom?" You know? **It may not be life-and-death-situation for me, but my mind automatically went to life-and-death.** Like, "all right, what do I need to do? I'll do what I gotta do in order to make sure I pass this class. 'Cause I cannot fail, since I don't have all the time in the world." So **I kind of went into survival mode and made sure I played the game,** you know – the way of the colonizers – in order to make sure I pass that class. ... **I didn't want to get my instructors mad** if I disagreed with how they were representing Indigenous people ... Because **if I made them mad, that might affect my grade. So I didn't really feel safe** in that way.'" – Dennis



## Effects from Historical Trauma, continued

"It just feels as though the Western education system was not designed for us. Our first entry into it was these boarding schools, which were designed to strip us of our identity, break us down, assimilate us into mainstream culture — and disband our ties to our community, to our heritage, to our traditions, to our language, to our lifeways — so that it would essentially eradicate our communities. And I guess the education system hasn't changed." — Winona





# Present-Day Challenges/Gaps in Service

- **Marcos:** "I have felt **super defeated** sometimes. I'll just be like, "it's not worth fighting over." ... I shouldn't feel like my voice is not valid, in terms of my experiences in my heritage, where my people come from, in a space that's **supposed to be inclusive of everybody.**"
- **Winona:** "Sometimes going to **the classroom cannot even feel safe.** ... Oftentimes, **you're called to instead be the teacher** ... which is even more frustrating and **can be traumatizing or triggering.**" And, "There's **no cultural advisor or spiritual advisor** on staff for Native students to go to if they need a **smudge**, need someone to sing them a **song**, offer a **prayer**, or help provide some **community counseling**, you know?"
- **Phyliss:** "They have one-hundred percent **taken bones of ancestors** and sacred objects and put them in display cases and said, "**look how cool these things are**."

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# Chapter 5: Discussion



# Implications for Higher Education

1. Create a Native student **support center/department**.
2. Create a full **academic program**.
3. Initiate a **formal partnership** with the local Tribe.
4. Create a **path of services** from pre-college to career.

# Tips for Preparing Native Youth for College



Indian Educators and Tribal Education Partners can play a special role in helping Native youth develop a sense of belongingness in school

A study in 2020 asked Native & Indigenous college students what kind of support they needed to safely and confidently be themselves on campus.\* Educators can help Native students "find their fit" in school by exploring the following questions (hint: school staff can help you find the answers).

## SUPPORTING PRE-COLLEGE YOUTH STARTING TO EXPLORE COLLEGE

- ▶ Does the college/university offer any culturally-centered college exploration programs? The university explored in this study offers a pre-college program for Native youth called STANDS (Students Taking Action for Native Dreams of Success), and a recent attendee said the program helped her decide to apply to the school because it was "where I could see myself having Indigenous family that's going to accept me for who I am and help me learn about my culture."
- ▶ Does the school have an Admissions counselor dedicated to recruiting Native students? If not, does the school's website mention other staff who work with Native students and who can explain supportive resources (e.g., scholarships, cultural programming)?
- ▶ Does the school offer a Native-centered academic program? For example, is there an American Indian & Indigenous Studies major or minor? If not, do students have the flexibility to create their own major or emphasis?
- ▶ Does the school offer a Native-centered living and learning community (i.e., dormitory or residence hall)? This might be important to an incoming Native student and according to research, in-community relationships become the foundation upon which new knowledge can be built (Wilson, 2009).
- ▶ Does the school have a Native cultural resources center or Native student support services department? Students who participated in this study reported the need for a safe space on campus where they could connect with each other and participate in cultural and ceremonial practices, and research confirms this (Deloria, Jr., 1994).
- ▶ How well are Native people represented on campus? How many of the school's students identify as American Indian or Alaska Native? How about the school's faculty and staff? Are there any Native-centered staff or faculty professional organizations on campus? Students who participated in this study said it was important to them to take courses taught by Native faculty and to receive support services, such as counseling, from Native staff.
- ▶ Does the school actively engage area Tribes? Does the school have a formal practice of acknowledging or working with the Tribe(s) in its area? All of the students who participated in this study expressed a need for the university to acknowledge and work with the local Tribe. One student said, "The elders have all this knowledge and tips and tricks on how to navigate life as a Native, and when you move into new spaces and onto new land and need to get connected ... ah, I needed that."

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHILE ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

- ▶ Are there cultural clubs or organizations that Native students can join? If not, does the school offer students the opportunity to create their own? The students enrolled at the university explored in this study belong to a 51-year-old Native American student organization, and they enjoy a "family-like closeness. One student said, "I don't even know how to explain it, but it was like an instant comfort. It was like, 'Oh, I belong here. I can be me.'" It might also be helpful if Tribal education staff reached out to the Tribes living near schools to introduce their Native students as new guests to the land.
- ▶ Are courses offered in which Native identities, histories, languages, and experiences are current and accurately reflected? Sometimes students need help examining course catalogs and syllabi when registering for classes. For example, review syllabi to see if courses' required readings are authored by Native or Indigenous writers or if faculty ever invite Native guest speakers to lecture in their classes, especially if they are from area Tribes. Tribal education staff might also encourage Native students to consult each other or online student reviews of courses in which Native issues are taught, as others' opinions are sometimes helpful.
- ▶ Do schools' LGBTQ+ centers recognize Two-Spirit (2S) relatives? According to research, sometimes LGBTQ+ and Queer People of Color (QPOC) communities leave out 2S people, further erasing their identities (Diskin, 2010). Tribal education staff might help Native LGBTQ2S+ students find resources on or near campus that affirm their full identities.
- ▶ Do social justice, racial justice, and/or diversity and inclusion trainings offered on campus include modern and accurate information about Native identities and experiences? All of the students in this study expressed frustration that people on campus talked about Native people in the past-tense or in connection to harmful stereotypes, and research confirms this (Little Soldier, 1997). Tribal education staff might help Native students identify or participate in developing trainings for the campus community that accurately reflect Native people today.
- ▶ Are there Native-identified clinicians and psychologists on staff? Many of the students in this study wished to receive culturally informed and/or traditional methods of care, particularly from trauma-informed professionals. If no information is available, Tribal education staff might help Native students figure out if they are living within the service areas of any Indian clinics, Tribal TANFs, or other Native-serving agencies.

\*TIPS based on interviews with Native college students who participated in a study done at a California university in 2020. For more information, contact Kerri Roadman (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) at [kroadman@ucdavis.edu](mailto:kroadman@ucdavis.edu), Sources cited: Deloria, Jr., V. (1994). *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Driskill, Q. (2010). *Disacknowledging Two-Spirit Citizens: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Students*. Little Soldier, J. I. (1997). *Is There an Indian in Your Classroom? Working successfully with Urban Native American Students*. Wilson, S. (2009). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*.



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**Yakoke chito!**

**(Thank you so much!)**





# 95%

Percentage of Turtle Island population wiped out from point of contact (1492) to end of Indian Wars (1890)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Churchill, 2004.

**“Kill the Indian,  
save the man”**

**— Capt. Richard Henry Pratt,  
founder of Carlisle Indian Industrial School<sup>1</sup>**

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1. Adams, 1995; Dixon & Trafzer, 2006; Ellis, 2006; Lomawaima, 1999; Pitcher Hayes, 2018; Churchill, 2004.



Source: Wikipedia



# Research Site & Participants

**Research Site:** Large public research university located in California's Central Coast

- Land-grant institution that sits atop tribal land
- Enrolls more self-identified American Indian/Alaska Native students than any school within its larger system

## Research Participants

- 5 interviews with members of AISO
- 2 interviews with AISO alums



# Data Gathering & Analysis Procedures

## Data Gathering

- Created three interview protocols (students, alumni, tribal relatives)
- Received IRB approval
- Conducted a pilot test
- Compensated volunteers with a \$15 gift card and medicine bundle

## Analysis Procedures

- Took extensive notes; recorded all interviews; transcribed by Rev.com
- Coded with In Vivo and Descriptive approach<sup>1</sup>; applied *self-in-relation interpretation* and *inward knowledge* where appropriate<sup>2</sup>



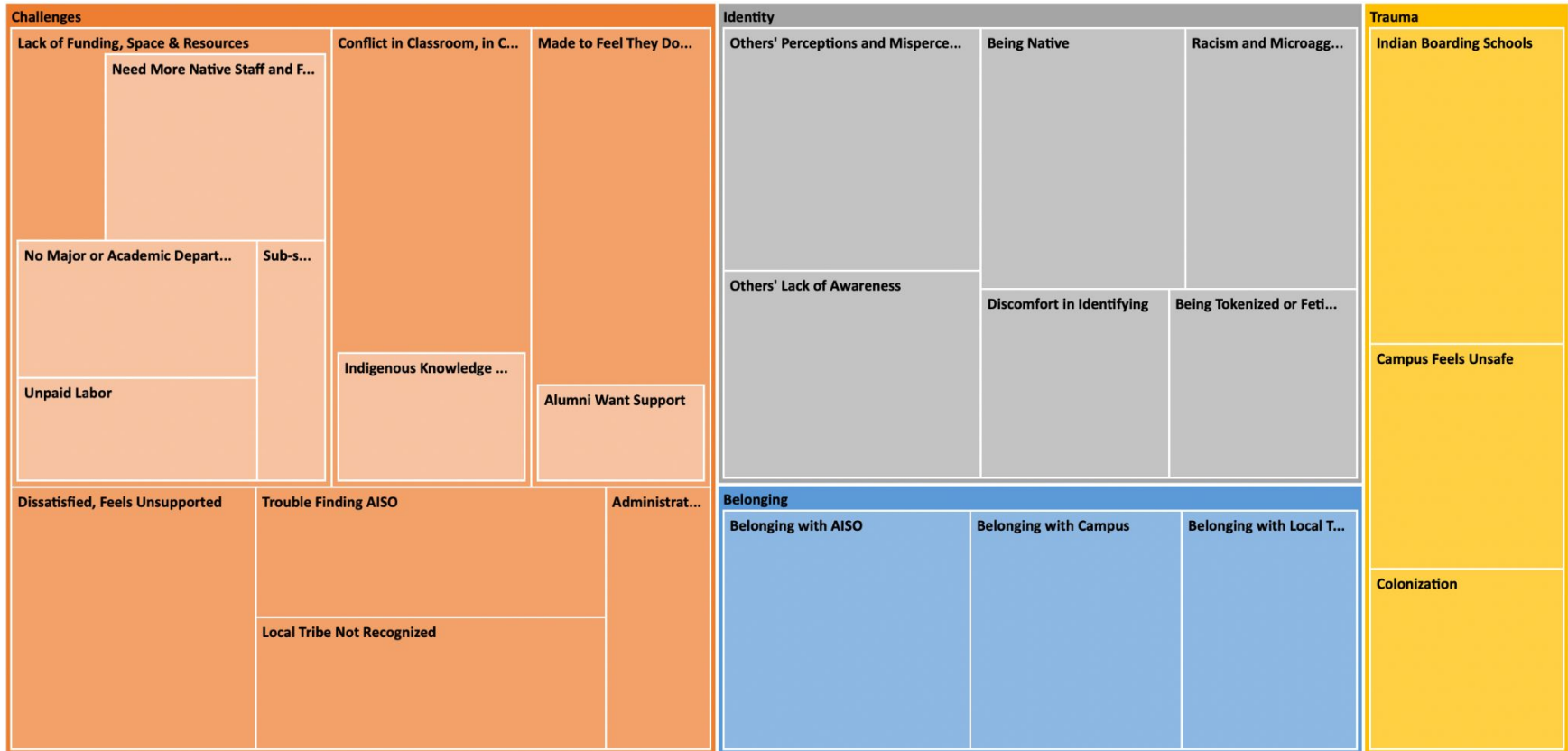


Figure 1. Tree map shows, in hierarchical order, the themes that emerged in this study's findings.



# History of Indian Education

- Four “naturalized tenets”<sup>1</sup> were culturally constructed to justify bringing colonial education to Indians — “**education for extinction**”<sup>2</sup>.
- **1879**: First federally-run, off-reservation Indian boarding school opens.
- Getting caught speaking heritage languages, practicing traditional ceremonies often provoked **physical, sexual, or fatal abuse**<sup>3</sup>. **Historical trauma** took a hold of many survivors<sup>4</sup>.
- Practices slowly changed; **some found value** in learning White ways<sup>5</sup>.



# Indigenous Research Methodologies

- Native researchers' **responsibilities**: Privilege and protect Indigenous knowledgeways, co-create new knowledge in community, contribute findings back to community to promote self-determination<sup>1</sup>.
- **Kovach**<sup>2</sup>: Research-sharing circle, inward knowledge, cultural protocol, self-in-relation interpretation, interpretive meaning-making
- **Additional responsibilities**: State positionality<sup>3</sup>, Indigenize the academy<sup>4</sup>, publish/cite Native researchers<sup>5</sup>, share knowledge<sup>6</sup>, invite allies to help<sup>7</sup>



# Belongingness with Today's Native Students

- Native students feel **belonging with other Native students** and Native community members, which supports learning in the classroom<sup>1</sup>.
- Numbers so few, worldview so different means Native students shoulder added responsibilities<sup>2</sup>. **Resilience sourced from each other**<sup>3</sup>.
- Little discussed about Native students' **intersectional identities**: Urban, rural, and reservation Indians<sup>4</sup>; multiracial, multitribal, and “looking Indian”<sup>5</sup>; religion and spirituality<sup>6</sup>; gender and sexual diversity<sup>7</sup>.



# Data Analysis: In Vivo Coding Samples

Sample **direct quotes** pulled from Relative's interviews:

- “We come to campus already carrying a lot.”
- “If you don't know that we exist, then you just don't get me.”
- “It is such a White institution. It is just inherently obvious, day in and day out, that it wasn't meant for me.”
- “I know I don't look the way that people expect me to look, and I don't want them to think that I'm a box-checker.”
- “I also wish there were more Native faculty that we could rely on to just, you know, teach courses about actual Native people and not some Eurocentric, White-washed history.”
- “I see similarities between the Indian Boarding School practices and the university's practices.”



# Data Analysis: Descriptive Coding Themes

Major Themes	Related Minor Themes and Subthemes
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="473 532 1818 674">● Lack of funding, space, and resources: Need more Native staff and faculty; no major or academic department; unpaid labor; sub-standard student support services</li><li data-bbox="473 690 1676 729">● Conflict in classroom and curricula: Indigenous knowledge not valued</li><li data-bbox="473 744 1406 784">● Made to feel they don't belong: Alumni want support</li><li data-bbox="473 799 1051 838">● Dissatisfied, feels unsupported</li><li data-bbox="473 853 890 893">● Trouble finding AISO</li><li data-bbox="473 908 977 947">● Local Tribe not recognized</li><li data-bbox="473 963 1112 989">● Administration talks, but no action</li></ul>



# Data Analysis: Descriptive Coding Themes

Major Themes	Related Minor Themes and Subthemes
<b>Identity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Others' perceptions and misperceptions</li><li>● Others' lack of awareness</li><li>● Being Native</li><li>● Racism and microaggressions</li><li>● Discomfort in identifying</li><li>● Being tokenized or fetishized</li></ul>
<b>Belonging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Belonging with AISO</li><li>● Belonging with campus</li><li>● Belonging with local Tribe</li></ul>



# Data Analysis: Descriptive Coding Themes

Major Themes	Related Minor Themes and Subthemes
Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="479 539 942 572">● Indian Boarding Schools</li><li data-bbox="479 589 884 622">● Campus feels unsafe</li><li data-bbox="479 639 759 672">● Colonization</li></ul>





# Data Analysis

Example of applied *Inward Knowledge*:

**Winona:**

“Our people are scientists. We know how to make up our medicines, how to doctor people, take care of our lands, take care of her animals. We know how to live in a different way, think in a different way, pray in a different way.”

“There’s no place for Native students to go if they need a smudge, someone to sing them a song, offer a prayer ... have access to medicine.”

**My applied Inward Knowledge:**

Elders have taught me which plants can be used as medicine (for health and ceremony), how and when to gather them, how to honor them (spirit of reciprocity), and how to protect them, and that enables me to co-create knowledge construction with Relative F. Similarly, I have been gifted songs (learned the words and how and when to sing them) and been smudged in ceremony. I have received a corn pollen blessing.



# Data Analysis

Example of applied *Self-in-Relation Interpretation*:

**Winona: Today's students vs. ancestors who survived Indian Boarding Schools:**

“They’re making it ... that’s because they’ve learned how to cope. They’ve learned about this New World. They’ve had time to acclimate, adjust, and learn from previous generations’ traumas. ... We all know we’re okay, so when we go into this space that’s White-dominated, we’re going to act *this way* and then we’re going to leave.”

**Self-in-Relation Interpretation by me, a Native researcher/scholar:**

My relatives attended Indian Boarding Schools in the 1930s and '40s – thankfully, after the darkest days were over. Hearing about one’s experiences, having visited one of their schools – especially seeing the campus cemetery, and remembering when I felt like I didn’t belong in school affords me a related understanding to what Winona was talking about.



# Types of Support ALSO Students Want

- Safe space on campus to do ceremony
- More visibility, Indigenous art
- More awareness and training — not to be talked about in the past-tense
- A full academic program — a major, Ph.D. emphasis, research center, department
- More Native staff and faculty
- More relevant courses; courses centered on Indigenous knowledgeways
- A way to “take the temperature for students’ needs”; needs-assessment
- Investments in Native communities, projects; divestment in opposing projects
- Recognition of and partnership with local Tribe



# Overcoming Barriers

- **Dennis, of AISO:** "We have this family that just keeps on growing, you know? We have a lot of good resources, and I feel like we create a very, very good sense of belonging — to the point where people want to stick around and stay connected. And they do still refer to AISO as their family-away-from-family. I know from talking to different AISO alumni that they actually feel *more connected* to our AISO family than to their own families sometimes, which is very powerful once you think about it."
- **Marcos, of AISO:** "In AISO, we embrace everyone's diverse richness, in our own cultures. It's just so beautiful how we're all diverse and we promote that diversity, but we all are a collective one and relate to each other as Indigenous people, as Native people."
- **Margo, of AISO:** "It's the only reason that I've been able to stay at this school and thrive."



## Overcoming Barriers, continued

- **Theda, of the Tribe:** "I remember them coming in, **doing blessings for us**, and it was just a really, really nice way to **feel connected to the land** and the land's people. Like, "Okay. I'm okay to be here. I got the blessing." It was **honestly just really important to me.**"
- **Phyliss, of the Tribe:** "They're **so welcoming and kind** to us, even though we're in their space. Like they're just good people. They have **such kind hearts**, considering all the horrible things that have happened and the way that they're still treated, the way that the university treats their land. They are **so, so amazing and resilient and beautiful** people, and I love them very much."
- **Margo, of "Deb":** "She's just kind of been **my local mom**. Just **super welcoming ...** like I was welcomed not only at this school, but on her land."



# Discussion of Findings

- Findings largely aligned with literature, most of which was Native-authored.
- Expanded in areas of students' commitment to:
  - Learning heritage languages
  - Practicing old religions and traditions
  - Promoting traditional Indigenous knowledgeways
  - Paying attention to *inward knowledge*<sup>1</sup>



# Limitations & Implications for Research

1. **Identity Generalizability:** Asked only to speak from Native perspectives, but how do other aspects influence educational experiences?
2. **Only AISO:** But what do we know about other Native students' (not in AISO) educational experiences?
3. **No Tribal participation:** What expectations does the Tribe have of the university that sits on its land?
4. **Only California:** How do findings compare at NNCUs in other states with high populations of Native residents (e.g., Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico)?



# Implications for Tribal Education Programs

To support pre-college Native youth starting to explore college:

1. Does the college/university offer any culturally-centered college exploration programs?
2. Does the school have an Admissions counselor dedicated to recruiting Native students?
3. Does the school offer a Native-centered living and learning community (i.e., dormitory or residence hall)?
4. Does the school have a Native cultural resources center or Native student support services department?
5. How well are Native people represented on campus?
6. Does the school actively engage area Tribes?





# Implications for Tribal Education Programs

To support Native students while enrolled in college:

1. Are there cultural clubs or organizations that Native students can join? If not, does the school offer students the opportunity to create their own?
2. Are courses offered in which Native identities, histories, languages, and experiences are current and accurately reflected?
3. Do schools' LGBTQ+ centers recognize Two-Spirit (2S) relatives?
4. Do social justice, racial justice, and/or diversity and inclusion trainings offered on campus include modern and accurate information about Native identities and experiences?
5. Are there Native-identified clinicians and psychologists on staff?