Ready to Return: Focused Goals and Unexpected Challenges of Native American Adults

Returning Home to the Reservation after College

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of nine Native American adult students at the University of the Great Plains (UGP), a predominantly White university situated in the Northern Great Plains of the United States. Using a theoretical framework sensitive to the Native concepts of tribal sovereignty and self-determination, data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed according to qualitative procedures of analysis, methods of reflection, and writing. The findings of this study suggest how Native adult learners construct the educational goals they bring to the university and the various challenges they faced upon returning to the reservation. This research brings awareness to the challenges faced by Native American adult students with hopes of prompting educational and political strategies, interventions, and pedagogies that promote tribal sovereignty and self-determination. The findings could compel a greater understanding of Native issues in rural communities by examining how students construct educational goals and paying attention to barriers and challenges that they face upon their return home.

Native American[1] adult students who leave their home rural reservations to go to the university often have goals, needs, and aspirations that are distinctly different from non-Native, mainstream students at the university. Choosing to attend a university or college off the reservation, more than likely, requires that Native students go to a place that is very different from the everyday cultures of their family, friends, community, and tribe. Because Native Americans are the least likely minority group to enroll in public four-year institutions and the least likely to persist to graduation in those institutions (Pavel, 1999), the experiences of this group of students often go unnoticed. Thus, the implications of earning a university degree for Native American students may not be fully understood, and further analysis is needed to assist Native students working toward their self-determined goals of contributing to their home communities. In short, Native students raised on a reservation must contemplate the difficulties of leaving their home, typically a place with deep spiritual and cultural significance, and the consequences of returning after their time at the university is done (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

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[1] The term Native American is often used to describe Indigenous peoples of the United States in an effort to provide recognition, viewed by many as long overdue, of the unique history and status of these people as the first inhabitants (Garret & Pichette, 2000). The terms American Indian, Native American, or Native(s), and Indian are used interchangeably in this study to refer generally to those who self-identify as Native American and maintain cultural identification through membership of a federally or non-federally recognized tribe.

Faircloth (2009) described the difficult decisions she faced after earning her degree, as she wrestled with the idea of "going home and giving back." This is a complex, personal decision for Native adults, which entails the consideration of many variables and creates a kind of tension that many in the mainstream do not experience. The hope embedded in the tension of temporarily leaving home is that there is an opportunity to maintain ties to one's home culture while simultaneously preparing to assist their tribal communities in their quests for social justice (Brayboy, 2005).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of nine Native American adult students at the University of the Great Plains (UGP), a predominantly White university situated in the Northern Great Plains of the United States. This paper will describe some of the origins and depths of the personal commitment to return home by using a theoretical lens that connects returning home to the ideas of sovereignty and self-determination. The adult students' responses are, in many ways, shaped by their anticipated return home (after earning their degree) including understanding the challenges they will face once they return. The following research questions guided this inquiry into the lived experiences of Native adult learners at the university: How do cultural-historic elements of home inform the students' educational goals? How are the Native concepts of tribal sovereignty and self-determination discussed as they relate to the educational experiences of these adult students? What are the barriers that students identify in the process?

Theoretical Framework

The dual identity of being a Native American *and* an adult learner in a mainstream educational institution can entail multiple challenges. Pavel (1999) identifies

Native Americans as the least likely to enroll in public four-year institutions and the least likely to graduate from those institutions. Guillory & Wolverton (2008) and Jackson, Smith & Hill (2003) document the barriers that are often present for these learners which include differing levels of family, social, and faculty/staff support in addition to institutional racism, inadequate financial resources, lack of academic preparation, and others. It is also well documented that being an adult learner, regardless of race, ethnicity, and/or gender presents an altogether different set of challenges. Adult students are likely the most time-limited group of the college population; nearly all adults commute, most work, and many enroll part-time, leaving them with less time than traditional aged students (Lundberg, 2003).

Rigney (1999) says that researchers must continue to be active in doing work that privileges Indigenous knowledge, voices, experiences, reflections, and analysis of their social, material, and spiritual conditions. Grande (2004) and Brayboy (2006) contributed to a framework that seeks to understand the complex and sometimes controversial intersection of traditional Indigenous knowledge systems with mainstream Western knowledge systems (Begaye, 2004). These Native thinkers provide analysis helping others to imagine the educational process in a way that seeks greater political, intellectual, and spiritual sovereignty for Native peoples (Grande, 2004).

Grande's (2004) framework, Red pedagogy, is grounded historically in local and tribal narratives, informed intellectually by ancestral ways of knowing (history, culture, tradition, teachings, spiritual practice, etc.), and centered in issues of political sovereignty as it relates to the educational process. This framework challenges educators of Native Americans to reflect and recognize the controversial intersection of traditional knowledge

systems with mainstream Western knowledge systems (Begaye, 2004). Red pedagogy

seeks to extend education and pedagogy beyond the institution and allows Indigenous

communities to theorize their own lives by connecting their past histories with their

future lives (Marker as cited in Smith, 2005).

As dual-status citizens the experiences of Native Americans in western

educational institutions are distinctly different from other minority groups in the U.S. and

thus need a distinctly different theoretical orientation with which to critically analyze the

phenomenon. While acknowledging the usefulness of critical pedagogy, Sandy Grande

(2004) noted that while critical pedagogy compels students and educators to question

how knowledge is related historically, culturally, and institutionally to the processes of

production and consumption, a Red pedagogy compels students to question how

(whitestream) knowledge is related to the processes of colonization in modern education.

Brayboys's (2006) TribalCrit is rooted in a belief in and desire to obtain and forge

tribal autonomy, self-determination…and ultimately tribal sovereignty. This idea rejects

the idea of systematic assimilation in educational institutions for American Indian

students. Although some assimilation seems to be an inevitable outcome of the formal

structures of western schooling, education of Native students should not be rooted in the

goal of assimilation. Education, according to TribalCrit, should allow American Indian

students to combine Indigenous notions of culture, knowledge, and power with

western/European conceptions in order to actively engage in self-determination and tribal

sovereignty (Brayboy, 2006). Ultimately, Brayboy said, "this analysis may lead to a re-

conception of the parameters of engaging Indigenous students within institutions." (2006,

p. 434).

It should be noted that although many of the core traditional values permeate the lives of Native Americans across Tribal groups, Native Americans are not completely homogeneous. Instead, they differ greatly in their level of acceptance of and commitment to specific tribal values, beliefs, and practices through a variance of customs, language, and family structure (Garret & Pichette, 2000). Thus, it is dangerous to stereotype or make broad generalizations regarding Native peoples.

Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to investigate how nine Native American adult learners made sense of their education at a non-Native university. In the one-on-one interviews, the researcher asked short, descriptive questions with the hope of soliciting detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being studied (Kvale, 1996). This method of in-depth interviewing provided rich descriptions of how individuals constructed their goals and detailed pertinent challenges they faced as adult learners at the university.

Participants

This study described the perceptions of nine Native adult students at the University of the Great Plains (UGP). Students were selected using purposeful sampling (criterion sampling) from the target population of self-identified Native American adult students enrolled at the University of the Great Plains (UGP), a predominantly white university in the Northern Great Plains. The students in this study all indicated a desire to return to their home reservation after graduation. Several key people at UGP helped identify a list of potential candidates for this project including the director of the Native American cultural center on campus, several professors, and other referrals. This study

included both full-time and part-time students, and both undergraduate and graduate students. There were five women and four men in the study who represented eight different Tribal nations. Pseudonyms are used for the names of individuals, institutions, and places. Academic fields and tribal affiliations are also altered to protect the identities of the participants.

Data Collection

The primary means for collecting data was through in-depth interviewing. After assuring the participants of confidentiality and receiving their permission, all interviews were digitally recorded. I met with each participant two or three times over the course of three months. Interviews lasted from 45 – 75 minutes each. The semi-structured interview questions focused on the participants' experiences.

I strived to maintain a transparent, respectful relationship with these students. Since my agenda was focused on working toward goals that benefited the participants, their community, and future Native students, it was important to build relationships and trust by listening and visiting with each of them. I spent a considerable amount of time at several campus events designed by or for Native students and was also welcomed into the campus Native American student center by the director and was even offered a workspace. This allowed for many informal conversations with both study participants and students who were not a part of the study. The knowledge shared from the participants was respected, the relationships were genuine, the process had integrity, and my hope is the results have value to these and other Native adult learners.

Trustworthiness

To confirm the credibility of the study's findings, I had to determine whether the

participants recognized the findings as true to their experiences. Member checking

allows the participants to argue, extend, confirm, or re-examine certain data or findings

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the second round of interviews, I reviewed what was

talked about in the first interview in an attempt to seek clarity or confirmation of my

thoughts and ideas. After transcribing the interviews, I e-mailed a copy of the

transcription to each participant, giving them an opportunity to review, revise, delete, or

add anything from the transcriptions.

I also consulted with a close friend who is Native and has previously earned a

degree from UGP, and an esteemed university Native American scholar about some of

the findings of the study. They both confirmed that although many of the experiences

highlighted in the study may be common for Native American higher education students,

these experiences seem to be unrecognized or unappreciated by many non-Natives at the

university.

Analysis

The goal of the analysis was to identify common themes among the interview

responses as well as specific language that captured these themes. The analysis involved

a constant moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data

that were being analyzed, and the analysis I was seeking to produce (Braun & Clark,

2006). Triangulation of sources (Patton, 2002) is a method that uses multiple sources of

data to paint the picture that is under investigation. In addition to the in-depth interviews,

my analysis examined relevant documents, my field notes, and my researcher's journal.

First, I used the process of horizonalization, which included working through the

data systematically, giving full attention to each data item and identifying interesting

aspects that formed repeated patterns (Patton, 2002). During this phase, the researcher generated a list of what was interesting about the data, paid attention to instances and stories that seemed to both correspond with and deviate from the literature review and theoretic framework, and used codes to signify these meaning units. Next, data were organized into thematic categories (Polkinghorne, 1989; van Manen, 2003). These new themes may be understood as structures of experience (van Manen, 2003), and capture patterns of meaning within the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Finally, I employed textural-structural synthesis, which integrated the textural and structural descriptions into an account of the ranges of experiences representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, the analysis sought to grasp and elucidate the perceptions of the participants (Patton, 2002).

Thematic Findings

Goals and Motivations

"I'm the product of countless strong and beautiful men and women," Mato, a student in his mid-30s, proclaimed. Mato, like so many Native adult students, has an unmistakable sense of pride in his home. That pride is part of the motivation that is calling him home after he graduates, to the reservation where he grew up and learned the many values that his family instilled in him. However, as a result of some reckless behavior, Mato had questions about if he had burned all his bridges and relationships from home and had to deal with the possibility of not being able to return.

"I used to live a crazy life," Mato explained. Alcohol and drug abuse, running with gangs and dealing with the accompanying violence, drug sales, and manipulating and scheming all were prevalent in his daily activities. Now, five years since a legal

intervention, Mato is on the brink of finishing a double major in alcohol/drug studies and American Indian Studies. He is poised to return home clean and sober, focused and committed, accomplished, and armed with the tools he needs to help others to overcome their addictions. "I've come a long ways and now I have a nation waiting for me back home," he affirmed.

By indicating that he has a "nation waiting for me," Mato implied a sense of responsibility he feels to return home and give back. He knew that his struggles were due to the fact that he lost some of the connections with his culture, home, and family due to past reckless behavior. Now that he is back on a healthy path and will soon have university credentials, Mato feels he is poised to return to his home rural community, a place that lacks the resources to keep up with the constant battles of drug and alcohol abuse, and work in the field of drug/alcohol abuse counseling.

Also when Mato mentions "nation" he is referring to his tribal affiliation, which has the status of a sovereign nation. Although Native peoples never have needed clarification as to what sovereignty means, the "Marshall Trilogy" came to define this unique status in federal court (Leisy, 2010, p. 6). Supreme Court Chief Justice Marshall ruled, among other things, that Indian nations shall be considered a distinct, independent political community, retaining their original natural rights (Deloria & Lytle, 1984). Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) say that sovereignty is the inherent right of a people to self-government, self-determination, and self-education and includes the right to linguistic and cultural expression according to local languages and norms.

It was apparent that the depth of Mato's commitment is tied to a cultural-historic grounding he has toward his home. He continued, "I could say that I *have* to go home,

but I *want* to go home. That's where my teachings were inbred in me. I'm going home,

I'm going home to give back. I received a lot from there." Mato's statements are

consistent with Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) finding that the idea of "giving back" to

the home community is a significant theme for Native Americans at the university. Mato

said that he was grateful for the teachings of his elders, "I was really blessed in gaining

those teachings from my great-grandfathers, my grandmothers and grandfathers, my

aunties and uncles." Those teachings were significant in shaping the educational goals

Mato had for himself and how he wanted to make a difference in his community back

home.

Lucy, an aspiring medical professional, had just finished a clinical rotation at an

I.H.S. (Indian Health Services) clinic near her hometown. She has strong ties to this

clinic. This was the very clinic where she went as a child, and later where both of her

parents worked. Lucy had been to other parts of the country and has served in the Army,

including a tour of duty in Saudi Arabia, but she is excited at the possibility of coming

back to work in her home community someday. She said, "I know there are Native

people all over the country, and health care is needed everywhere, but these are my

people so I'd like to stay there. That's what I want to do…is be at home." This quote

suggested the strong commitment Lucy feels to serving her community, a community

with important family and friend relationships. She continued, "And if I can help them in

any way, that's exciting to me. And just the ideas I have for community issues with the

obesity, especially women…I really get excited."

Lucy mentioned that she had "ideas" for helping her community in the area of

health care. The knowledge-making process for these ideas are most likely a result of the

combination of what she learned at the university and from her own, unique, personal, contextual knowledge of her home reservation community. Lucy's goal of helping the people in her rural community, in addition to her enthusiasm ("I get really excited"), her local knowledge and university credentials provided the basis for pursuing self-determination. She understood that the resources in her home community are scarce, and her "ideas" based on her personal knowledge of her home may be critical to the healthcare needs of her people.

Most Indian reservations in this state are vast and remote. Often the nearest "big town" is 45 miles away or more. "Indian Country," rurality and poverty are often inseparable. In fact, four counties with Reservations in this region are in the top seven poorest counties in the US (County income and poverty patterns, 2009). Carr and Kefalas (2009) note that conventional wisdom and some documented scholarship indicate that rural areas suffer from the "brain drain" of some the their most educated and talented individuals. While Carr and Kefalas (2009) are not directly speaking to conditions on tribal lands, it seems rural Indian reservations also are susceptible to this phenomenon. Further, Huffman (2001) argued that in rural tribal lands, a number of significant cultural and economic factors intersect to create a complexity that is not typically found in most American rural areas. Regardless, the schooling of both rural and Indigenous people, as part of a larger project of assimilation, has not served these communities well as it has had the aim of intentionally breaking down ties between students and their home communities (Greenwood, 2009).

Both Mato and Lucy seem to have educational goals that are tied to a commitment to use what they learned at the university and apply that knowledge to the context of their

home rural Native communities. The rural areas from which Mato and Lucy come are often plagued by a shortage of resources and services. Grande (2008) affirmed that for this reason Native students are best served by an educational experience that cultivates a sense of collective agency as well as a praxis that targets the revitalization of indigenous communities.

But beyond feeling obligated in a negative way, both Mato and Lucy's goals reflect intersections of self-determination and sovereignty. These adults clearly understood that they have talents, skills, and very soon, the credentials to return to their community ready to serve and increase the capacity of places with limited resources.

For Lucy, who is a single mother and grandmother, being away from home while at college and working on her degree is bittersweet. Although her family and friends seem to be proud of her, earning her degree has meant some difficult personal sacrifices for Lucy. She said:

> I'm kind of guessing that they are thinking that it's good for me to be off the reservation, because life there is hard. And it's getting worse as the years go on. So they say that I'm doing a good thing…but I really don't feel that lucky, because my family is back there, my relatives. I'm away from the ceremonies, and the cultural part, the language. There are not very many people (at UGP) that speak the language.

Lucy mentioned she felt that she may be sacrificing some cultural aspects as she raises her children away from home, but in the end, the motivation for this sacrifice is for a greater cause of helping people in a place that needs her. She explained:

> For me to be away from that (home) and now my son is away from home, my

daughter never really grew up around that, I feel that it's a part of the bigger sacrifice that I am doing when I'm here (at UGP). And learning what I'm learning in hopes of going back and contributing finally to the people who are a part of who I am.

Lucy's motivation is what Wilson (2004) talked about when she said that there seems to be a growing number of Natives who are less concerned about their status in the White world and more concerned with helping their respective nations with long-term survival. This was an educational goal that brought Lucy to the university. Lucy was motivated and decided to go to school on a full time basis because, as she explained, "The quicker I could get (back home) the better, because I really want work with Native people."

Lucy also knows that she has an opportunity to inspire young Native students who may or may not be contemplating a career in medicine. She said:

So my thinking is that if I go back home and the younger ones see me working like this and think that they are more apt to do this (be inspired to do the same). I get excited about the things I could do for high school students.

She continued, "If they can see me at the clinic and maybe someone would say to someone else 'maybe you could do that'…that's my hope. They may need help with an idea of which direction to go, and I could help."

Frank, a forty year-old law student, left his home a couple of times to go to school, but has always thought it was important to return. Frank, with his long dark hair braided and pulled back underneath his Nike golf hat, spoke carefully in a calm, deep voice. He was clear about how his educational goals were connected to a motivation to

return home:

> I've gone away to school off of the reservation, but I'll always come back to the
> reservation. Following high school, or whenever I would graduate, I always came
> back home because that's where I thought I could make the biggest difference in
> people's lives. And I think that's the general objective of getting educated and
> becoming more skilled in life is to help your own people. I've always done that
> and I owe that to my roots, my family roots, and roots I have on the reservation.

By emphasizing his "roots," Frank articulates an important cultural-historic understanding of his place and home. But beyond a superficial recognition of the importance of his home and the people there, he acknowledges his deep commitment to his culture, traditions, spirituality, extended family and relatives, and the deep connections to the earth that help shape his educational goals. Brayboy (2005) stated that Native students often attend university to gain skills and credentials to benefit their Native community and enhance sovereignty. In this way, education becomes a tool for self-determination and community liberation (Brayboy, 2005).

Brayboy's notion ultimately describes Frank's reasons for coming to the university. Frank, the oldest law student in his class, is passionate about his people, their values, and their sovereignty. Frank believes that in order for Native people to continue to function in the dominant society, both Native and non-Natives must learn how to communicate with each other better. As Frank said:

> One of the bonuses of getting an education is to also learn how to explain things
> to non-Indian people in a way that they understand, and you are still able to get
> your perspective across. This is important and necessary for social change to

happen. I think we stand to gain more by gaining a mutual respect and mutual understanding of one another, because you gain and I gain and together we can make this change happen.

Frank suggests that understanding both the Native and White world can be an important tool for social change, especially in various contexts where tribal members and non-Natives interact. The unique political status of tribes as sovereign nations does not necessarily indicate their interests in a completely separate status. Rather, tribal and non-tribal entities in this region must work with each other in a number of social, economic, political, cultural, and education areas. Frank knows that being able to negotiate an understanding of both cultures, on and off the reservation, will help him accomplish his social goals of helping his tribal community by fostering a better understanding of the two cultures.

Bev, a single mom in her early twenties, wants to use what she learned in UGP's American Indian Studies program and return to her home reservation with specific goals. Her motivations were clear, "I would love to work for the tribe to try to reform some things, to try to take back our identity, and reclaim some of our traditional styles of dealing with government." Bev seems to understand that ideally, the knowledge learned in predominantly white institutions should be critically assessed, and if appropriate and necessary, combined with Native skills and knowledge in order to find culturally unique solutions to contemporary and future challenges (Champagne, 2006).

Brayboy (2005, p. 435) summarized the role of academic knowledge that is acquired from educational institutions:

In many of our communities this is often referred to as "book knowing," or "book

smarts." While Indigenous ways of knowing and book smarts are often seen as diametrically opposed, these different forms of knowledge do not necessarily need to be in conflict. Rather, they complement each other in powerful ways. This blending of academic and cultural knowledge creates understanding that is key to survival and tribal sovereignty. For example, knowledge learned in school can be used in conjunction with Tribal knowledge toward social justice for these communities. The strategic use of multiple forms of knowledge generates power that is situated, dynamic, and historically influenced.

Bev, like Lucy, indicated that her presence as a professional in her home community may have an impact on young Native people. She confidently said, "I want to go back home and hopefully inspire some of these kids going to the Indian schools to stick with it, because I think there is such a high dropout rate and there doesn't need to be." Ultimately, Bev knows that her home community is in need of her skills and this seems to be a strong motivation for her to return and help.

She, along with others in the study, has educational goals that are culturally and historically induced. The goals are connected both to the cultural-historic notions of a place and the politics, circumstances, and economies of a place. This means the motivation for their educational goals are directly related to the relationships they have back home, the responsibilities they feel as adult members of their tribal communities, and the powerful sense of respect for the land and people to which they will serve.

The Complications of Returning Home: Crabs in a Bucket, and Reverse Indian Psychology, and Apples

The Native communities in the Northern Great Plains are complex places. This

complexity seems to stem from an incompatible mix of white western and Indigenous influence and ways of life that have uneasily co-existed for a long time. The reservations of this region have their share of challenges, but the importance of family and maintaining strong ties to the culture is an enduring priority. Tribal members have a strong sense of family, and their commitment to extended family takes priority over all other matters.

That is why leaving the reservation and returning home can be complicated. Crossing the border from the reservation to the university, and the eventual return, is not unproblematic for adult students. The complexity of reservation life and various impending challenges that Native students face are potential barriers for self-determination and tribal sovereignty. As leaders of social change begin to understand these challenges, they may begin to create pathways and the university, program, and classroom level to support these learners and their educational goals.

While the family is a source of support for Native students, the family may also create some perceived barriers (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Some students in this study said they received mixed messages from friends and family when they decided to go to the university to get an education. Frank describes a mixed message that he termed "reverse Indian psychology." He said:

> I don't think my dad was ever against me leaving home but he basically was just trying to encourage me in other ways. The first thing he told me when I left was, "you won't ever make it, you'll be home." And of course I went out to prove him wrong, and as painful as it was to be away from home, I stuck with it.

> Lucy used the term "crabs in a bucket" to describe the mixed messages she

received from her family. She talked about the implications of her experience:

> I know it's mostly the elderly when they say "you need to go and get your education so you can come back." But then when you do come back…it's like the analogy of crabs in a bucket. Kind of like that. Whereas instead of celebrating with me they are trying to pull me down. I have a relative who never has anything nice to say, so when he comes by, I just try to avoid him because I'm like him, my life in Plainsview (off the reservation) is not that easy either, and I'm having hard time financially, stuff like that. And I'd like to say "encourage me, help me." But I think to myself while he's around, he's an elder and I just keep quiet, but I don't forget what he's said.

In a small rural communities, adult students often feel a sense of accountability to their family, especially if they leave the reservation and decide to return. This accountability is something that weighed heavily on the minds of several participants in the study.

Tricia was raised traditionally by her grandparents and her mother. Her grandparents still live traditionally, without telephone service, running water, or electricity, and to this day, do not speak English. Tricia, although far from her home reservation, is trying to raise her daughter, as she calls it, "in Indian ways," teaching her the language and culture of her home tribe. In her small community, Tricia drew some criticism for leaving home and going so far away and thus feels the pressure to succeed.

Tricia also mentioned the mixed message from her family. She said sometimes when she calls home after a rough day at the university:

> My family will make small comments and my mother would be like "what, you

can't hack it?" and she'll bring it up somehow, someway and when we're having

a difficult discussion and she's like "well, if you can't deal with it there (at UGP),

how can you deal with this or hack it here?"

Further, Tricia thought that if she was not successful at UGP, it would be tough

for her to return home. She said:

I don't want to go back (home) unless I'm somebody. I don't like to fail and I

don't want to go home with my tail between my legs. I don't like to fail. I don't

like to not finish things, because if I go home without finishing (the degree)

people will say, "well she did this, but she didn't really finish" because everyone

knows each other at home. I guess just going home and facing my family or

facing my mom or my grandparents would be tough.

Along those lines Mato reflected:

There are a lot of people to please back home. It's a tough path because my own

relatives and my own family are even going to be critical of me when I return

home and when they don't feel that I'm doing what they want me to do.

Mato indicated that the expectations of his friends and family weigh heavily on

his mind ("a lot of people to please"). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that for

many Native students the expectations of the Native student's family was both a

persistence factor and a barrier. The need to live up to various expectations of the family

and a fear of failure (not graduating) certainly seemed to impact participants in this study

also.

Mato continued, "they want to see if you return to the Rez as an 'apple.'" The

term apple is commonly used on the reservation to describe a Native American who has

left the reservation and has forgotten his Native culture, and essentially "turned white."

As the saying goes, "Red on the outside, but white on the inside. Like an apple." Leaving

the reservation may therefore be interpreted as "selling out" to a different culture and way

of life (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003).

The complex nature of family and community pressure could dissuade adults

from leaving the reservation to get the formal credentials needed for professional

positions in reservation communities. These barriers essentially could hinder human

capital development needed to support self-determination and sovereignty.

The participants in the study shared other examples of the challenges that await

them upon their return home. Mato thought it was important to go home for sweats

(sweat lodge ceremonies) and powwows while he was away at the university, but he said,

"It is tough back home. But if I could go home every weekend, I would." By saying it is

"tough" back home, Mato indicated it was very risky, with all the alcohol and drug abuse

amongst his friends, to return home as he committed to a life that was free of alcohol and

drugs. He said:

> It's been five years sober and clean, but I spent at least 11 or 12 years in that
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> lifestyle. And in order to be sober, they say you have to at least be 11 or 12 years
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> sober to really say it.

Mato didn't want to focus on it, but I knew from first hand accounts how

prevalent alcohol and drug abuse is on his reservation. To combat this social challenge,

local agencies, such as Indian Health Services and schools, provide support, coursework,

and counseling. Mato told me that many of his close friends and family members are still

struggling with addictions, so going home would present him with many temptations.

Mato understood the difficult task he will be soon be undertaking by going home after he graduates. He speculated, "And it's going to be a tough path and sometimes I wonder, why me? But I know everything I did in the past and the path that I led before is building up to this."

Mato seemed to know that it will take a lot of courage to return home and it will not be easy. But he also felt a sense of responsibility to help the community with the drug and alcohol counseling degree he will soon earn at the university. The notion of "giving back" is frequently encouraged not only inside the family, but also within the tribal community (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Students who seek an education that is in the best interest of their Tribe or home community will ultimately strive for the improvement of conditions in those places and ultimately make strides toward a self-determined sovereign nation (Wilson, 2004).

Lucy also worries about moving back to the reservation. Because her son is shy and reserved, she worried, "My son, the age that he is, the teenage years…a boy on the reservation…it's hard, really hard. If he got into the wrong crowd, he could easily fall into some negative things that happen there, like the gangs and drugs." Gang membership and violence on some of the reservations of the Great Plains has spiked recently. Living in a remote and rural area, often youth feel that their options are limited, and gang activity and substance abuse provides something to do. This is something that Lucy has to consider when planning her move back to the reservation.

A normally reserved and thoughtful Tricia quickly became tearful when she talked about the biggest issue making it difficult for her to go home to her reservation. It seems that there is a formidable bureaucracy that Tricia and her husband have to face in

order to build a house. She explained:

> You can't just build a house (on the reservation) because these people (tribal
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> officials) say you can't build a house, and it's just frustrating. That really
>
> frustrates me, because there's so much bureaucracy, and it's hard because you just
>
> want these things, a home, and you want to live your life but then you can't do it.
>
> Then you think that maybe I'll just live in this place or that (off the reservation)
>
> and I'll have my own house there, where you won't have to deal with grazing
>
> rights or grazing permits or different things that reservations have to deal with.
>
> It's just so frustrating to be at home.

Tricia's conundrum is apparent. She wants to be home, but does not want to endure the struggles that are required to build a house. If she lived off the reservation, she could have a house of her own, but wouldn't be near her family.

Tricia's family back home has had experiences like this before. She explained, "We are trying to get running water and there are people that stand in the way of that. There is just so much bureaucracy and politics. I'm trying to balance the two of going home or living elsewhere."

Tricia talked about the politics of getting land and building a house. She said, "there is so much drama involved with going home." Tricia continued:

> I mean not my family, my family is pretty non-dramatic, but it's just the people
>
> around you who just have that sickness of trying to bring each other down. And
>
> you're just like "God, I don't want to be there," but you miss home.

Discussion

This research adds to a growing body of research that highlights the complexity of

the educational endeavors of Native American adult students at the university. This study

sought to identify the goals and motivations of Native American adult students as they

left their tribal community to attend the university and the challenges they faced upon the

return to their home reservations. The study's findings highlighted the idea that goals and

motivations were often connected to issues of tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Additionally, data indicated that returning home, after life at the university, is not

unproblematic.

Because of the somewhat isolated nature of these rural reservation communities,

they are frequently in need of health professionals, attorneys, counselors, governmental

leaders, and other professionals. When Native adult students leave the reservation to

attend the university, there is a hope that the goals stemming from their culture and home

will guide their education and prepare them to assist their tribal communities in their

quests for social justice (Brayboy, 2005). The Native American adult students in this

study brought very specific goals to the university shaped by the specific needs of local

rural home communities and cultural-historic experiences. For students, enhancing tribal

sovereignty became a process of helping their home communities to sustain their cultural

integrity, according to their self-determined needs (Wilson, 2004) and was a significant

motivation for earning a university degree. These goals and their educational experiences

are critical because these adult students will be the ones creating new responses to old

issues surrounding their tribal communities (Brayboy, 2006).

There are some very important studies (Brayboy, 2005; Jackson, Smith, Hill,

2003; Guillory and Wolverton, 2008; Huffman, 2011, Tierney, 1992) that chronicle the

cultural conflicts and contradictions that Native American student face while at the

university. This study, however, highlights a different type of barrier that Native adult learners face: the return home. Although none of the participants indicated an overwhelmingly negative feeling toward returning home, all described some significant challenges they faced as they returned home from their time at the university. These issues, ranging from family support (crabs in a bucket), to perceptions of identity (red as an apple), and housing issues are complex and weighed heavily on the minds of the study's participants. Thus, these issues should be identified as potential barriers for other Native students who may want to get an education off the reservation.

It becomes apparent that leaders of social justice in the rural Great Plains consider the challenges that adult Natives face. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) indicated that institutions cannot continue to serve Native American students using typical mainstream approaches, if they want to truly serve our country's Native population. Instead, leaders should understand the importance of providing support groups and culturally relevant education programs and through advising and dialogue (Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). Huffman (2011) also suggested that that leaders and allies find ways to celebrate American Indian ethnicity, provide culturally responsive counseling, and offer sustained outreach services and support to aspiring Native students.

Tribal sovereignty and the dual-status citizenship to which most Native Americans are entitled is a unique status not understood by most non-natives including lawmakers, government officials, and educators. Understanding the cultural-historic perceptions and goals of Native adult learners may help leaders of various local community agencies (education, health care, social welfare, law, politics) approach challenges in a way that recognizes the potential or capacity of a community to live well

as defined by the community itself (Hassel, 2005). This idea of living well, as defined by the Native community itself, is a cornerstone of self-determination and sovereignty.

In the remote, rural areas of the Great Plains, where both human and capital resources are scarce, the development of talents and professional expertise through education are desperately needed. As members of tribal communities, the Native adult students in this study, with the help of their newly minted college credentials, will play a role in a much-needed capacity building effort that will help with the challenges their local tribes are facing (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Thus, it is important to understand that the educational goals that these students bring to the university and the challenges that the return home presents are critical to the concepts of self-determination in a constant battle to maintain and to strengthen tribal sovereignty on their home reservations.

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