

# A Complex Path to Haudenosaunee Degree Completion

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This qualitative study describes how 12 Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) college graduates constructed pathways to degree completion. The participants related their experiences on this path through open-ended interviews. The pathways were found to be complex owing to their unique cultural grounding and dedication to family. The participants managed a college education while maintaining their cultural integrity even though it meant more work and effort. Their greatest support during college was their family. Participants embarked on a double curriculum: that of their academic program and another constituted by participating in structured native language classes or involvement in their traditions. Participants were academically engaged but resembled adult returning students even when they were traditionally aged and living on campus. The male students reported richer, more intense experiences than the women due to the mentoring they received.

## Introduction

**T**he Haudenosaunee are more commonly known as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. Located primarily in New York State, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations presently reside on six reservations, one settlement, and two territories.<sup>1</sup> New York is a state with 64 state university campuses, and over 100 private postsecondary institutions.

I engaged in this study because statistics indicate that American Indians/Alaska Natives are the least likely of all ethnic groups to attain a college education (Benjamin, Chambers, & Reiterman, 1993; Pavel, Skinner, Cahalan, Tippeconnic, & Stein, 1998; Rhoads, 1998b). In observing college-going behavior in my community, I noticed that some of our more traditional families, where the language was spoken and whose members regularly participated in ceremonies in our Longhouse, had several college graduates.

Because the small number of American Indian/Alaska Native college students complicates statistical analysis (Pavel, 1991; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993), I decided to embark on a qualitative study of Haudenosaunee college graduates. Statistics were not telling the whole story. Based on interview data, this study

describes how 12 Haudenosaunee college graduates, from their point of view, negotiated a successful college experience.

As I am a Haudenosaunee college graduate myself, I will use the terms “we” and “our” when referring to Haudenosaunee or American Indian students in general. In the present study, the participants referred to themselves as Haudenosaunee, their individual nation, or as Native American. There were some references where the participant used the term “Indian.” The participants in this study reflected “the tendency of many Native Americans in the company of fellow in-group members to refer to each other as ‘Indian,’ whereas in the company of ‘outsiders’ there is a tendency to refer to themselves as ‘Native American’ and to expect non-Indians to do the same out of respect” (Garrett & Pichette, 2000, p. 4).

### **Question**

As noted above, available statistical data indicated that our rate of degree attainment was very poor (NCES, 1999; Pavel, et al., 1998), yet members of my traditional community at Onondaga were earning college degrees. I wanted to know *how* degrees were being attained by Haudenosaunee in spite of the reported odds against it.

### **Literature Review**

American Indian/Alaska Native education, in general, and college student retention theories were the two areas of literature that provide a context for this study. This section begins with a brief historical overview.

The failure of the early efforts by the Colonists to educate Native people was viewed by many of that era that we were ineducable. The nature of our culture and spirituality has often been blamed for our academic failure since the beginning of the boarding school era (Lindsey, 1995; Perry, 2002; Sanchez & Stuckey, 1993). The boarding school era began in the 1880s and operated until the 1950s (school closures slowly started in the 1920s).<sup>2</sup> The very purpose of the boarding school was to replace our culture. Formal western education was an assimilation effort, integral to the process of also physically removing us from our lands (Adams, 1988). Education was, literally, an enemy for many of our elders (Jorgensen, 1993), and boarding schools were often inhumane environments for Native children and youth. In addition to being denied the use of our own languages and cultural traditions, many boarding school survivors reported physical and sexual abuse. Native people today are aware that assimilation was the purpose of education in the past, especially in Indian boarding schools (Smith-Mohamed, 1998).

Studies of American Indian/Alaska Native college students seem to focus on Native nations in the southern and western part of the United States with few published studies of Native college students in New York. The literature acknowledges a widespread failure of American Indians/Alaska Natives to attain the degree of formal education enjoyed by other US populations (for instance,

Belgarde & Martinez, 1998; Dodd, Garcia, Meccage, & Nelson, 1995; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Jackson & Smith, 2001; Wright, 1985).

From the beginning of our exposure to western education, our cultures were largely deemed to be deficient. According to Deyhle and Swisher (1997), the “deficit model” dictated educational policy well into the 1960s. “This deficit ideology, used by non-Native teachers and administrators, suggested that Indian homes and the minds of Indian children were empty, or meager, thus rationalizing the need for ‘enriching’ Eurocentric experiences.” This deficit ideology encouraged the separation of Native children from their parents, discouraged the use of the Native language, and treated any cultural practices as “remainders of their past culture,” something that was no longer deemed necessary (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997, p. 123).

The presence of our culture was also determined to be the basis for cultural conflict in school (Gilbert 2000; Oppelt, 1989; Sanders, 1987; Swisher, 1990). Cultural differences have been alternately termed “cultural discontinuity” or “value discrepancy” and various researchers have suggested ways to mitigate cultural conflict (Garrett, 1995; Huffman, 2001; Ledlow, 1992; Pottinger, 1989). A point to be made from many of these studies is that when the culture of the community is discontinuous with that of the school, Native students drop out, Reyhner (1992) wrote that our students are not dropping out of formal education—we are being “pushed out” (Ledlow, 1992). In spite of the evidence of widespread discontinuity where Native students are concerned, educational institutions remain Eurocentric in design, curriculum, culture, and climate (Auletta & Jones, 1990; Benjamin et al., 1993; Champagne & Stauss, 2002; Rendón, 1994; Rhoads, 1998a).

Interestingly, Deyhle (1995) found that Navajo students who were more “secure” in their “traditional culture” achieved academic success despite a vocationally and assimilationist oriented educational structure. The Navajo students in her study maintained cultural integrity despite the surrounding Anglo community’s attempts to deny Navajo culture. Jorgensen (1993) discussed resistance strategies employed by Native college students as they “block[ed] acculturation” at a community college. To maintain their Native identity—something these students actively strived to maintain—they chose to not participate or become involved in campus life (p. 89). Other researchers have found that culture and spirituality do not negatively affect academic achievement (Brayboy, 1999; Castillo, 1982; Deyhle, 1995) and that those Native students who are firmly grounded in their culture are those who experience the most success (Garcia, 1999; Garrett & Walkingstick, 1994; Garrett, 1996; Huffman, 2001; Jorgensen, 1993; Willetto, 1999). It is apparent that despite efforts to integrate Native people into schools and the dominant society, native culture and traditions are emerging as a positive factor in college retention and completion (Tierney, 1992, 1993).

The importance of family as an embedded American Indian/Alaska Native value has been reported by many researchers (Belgarde & Martinez, 1998; Garcia, 1999; Heavyrunner & DeCelles, 2002; Rindone, 1988). The importance our

students place on participation in ceremonies has also been noted (Jorgensen, 1993), which often created negative consequences when students missed class to attend ceremonies and family obligations (Benjamin, Chambers & Reiterman, 1993; Cibik & Chambers, 1991). Students place greater value on attending ceremonies and often return home as a “need and obligation” but have still “managed their studies despite frequent visits home” (Benjamin, et al, 1993, p. 33).

College student integration theories (specifically Tinto, 1987, 1993) imply that the many successful college students must forsake friends and community in order to integrate into college social life. Any situation that pulls the student away from the college culture, such as a job or family, is considered an external demand to college. The student is expected to replace his/her old community with a new one centered within the college community. Tinto’s theory is based on individual factors and on the “traditional” Anglo, 18-22 year-old, middle-class, and full-time college student living on campus. However, Davis (1996, 2000), Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, (2004) Tierney (1992, 1999) and Weidman (1989), question the efficacy of transition and social integration for non-traditional students.

### **Method**

Twelve Haudenosaunee college graduates were interviewed. Participants were asked to relate their experiences with formal education beginning with their K-12 years and proceeding through to college graduation (see Appendix for an interview guide). Two participants were interviewed in the fall of 2002 and ten more followed in the spring of 2003. Two participants graduated in 1987, but the remainder graduated in the mid-to late 1990s and early 2000s (see Appendix for table of participants). Eight participants were women, and four were men, which is slightly higher than the proportion of Native women college students to Native men nationally (65 percent versus 59 percent).

The sample was purposive in the sense that each participant was Haudenosaunee and had attained a college degree (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Participants were located in this manner: 1) the participant’s relative told me the participant had a degree; 2) the participant was in graduate school; and 3) the participant held a professional position, and I correctly assumed that she had a college degree in order to attain such a position. A pilot study of seven participants from the Onondaga Nation was conducted in 1999-2000. Pilot study data were included in the present study wherever applicable. In order to protect privacy, pseudonyms are used with all of the participants and the institutions they attended.

As will be expanded further in the Context section, the Haudenosaunee is a confederacy of six nations. Our land base is limited. There is not enough room for all of us to live within our nations’ territories forcing some to live off-territory.<sup>3</sup> Since Haudenosaunee territories are close to cities, we often move from urban to reservation and back several times in a lifetime.

Three of the participants, Cindi, Tammy, and Rusty, spent a majority of their youth in an urban environment. They did, however, visit relatives or spend time on reservations. Cindi spent many weekends on the reserve with her grandmother. One of Tammy's foster homes was on a reserve, and Rusty lived his early years in Mohawk territory. It is interesting to note that these three did not finish high school in the traditional manner. The remaining participants were raised on reservations.

My position as researcher provided many lenses of interpretation. I am a Haudenosaunee college graduate. I live on the Onondaga Nation, the political seat of the Haudenosaunee and wish to remain here. I am a wife and mother of two daughters who, I expect, will go to college in addition to maintaining their culture and traditions. I have also worked in the university environment for over 20 years.

The lens through which I interpreted the data was a Haudenosaunee lens. This lens could render me blind in some areas. Just as European-American culture is often invisible to European-American people, the possibility exists that I did not pay attention to everything I could have. This is why I found it invaluable to share my work with people who are outsiders to my culture for an "outsider's check." The Haudenosaunee lens or worldview also differs from the larger society's in some major ways. For example, the Haudenosaunee are here to care for Mother Earth and to give thanks to all of creation as opposed to being a "ruler over the earth and animals" (Tierney, 1992, p. 7).

As will be discussed later, the participants in this study followed dual paths—an academic and a cultural path. My status as insider to this research was something with which I struggled. Not only did my participants embark on two paths, the academic and the cultural, but I did as well. I am Haudenosaunee as well as a researcher. I may have taken some things for granted, but attempted to avoid assumptions by coding the data according to themes, by clarifying with participants anything I later realized I may have assumed in the interview, and by talking through my codes with non-Native colleagues.

### **Perspective**

This article is about the college experiences of the Haudenosaunee I interviewed. This study was my idea, a Haudenosaunee, and concerns a topic that had not been addressed previously. This study centers on the Haudenosaunee perspective and is analyzed from that perspective. Nevertheless, as a Haudenosaunee woman, I have added responsibilities, which I wholeheartedly embrace.<sup>4</sup>

Indigenous research approaches problematize the insider model in different ways because there are multiple ways of both being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts... the major difference is that insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities (Smith, 1999, p. 137).

Not only am I an insider but in order to do the research, I had to act like an outsider. Qualitative research means I will ask many questions. I must ask for details (probe). I must be, in essence, "nosey" (Brayboy, 1999, p. 69). While

conducting research for his dissertation, Brayboy wondered, “How do I remain a good researcher yet a 'good Indian?’” (p. 98). He wrote:

I was acting in a manner in which a “real Indian” would never act. That is, I was asking to do things which I was not invited to do... I was not being “polite” and respecting individual space (p. 66).

I, too, had to cross cultural boundaries. Still, I asked questions, and sometimes probed for more information. I found participants were so eager to talk about their college experience that they provided details without probing. When I probed, I did so respectfully.

Because I am Haudenosaunee I may hear my participants differently than an outsider, and not just because some of the participants used Native words. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) on Black Feminist Thought provided a framework to understand and analyze the words of the participants in this study. Collins places the locus of knowledge, not with the researcher/scholar, but with the participant. Respect is highly valued among indigenous people, as are community, relationships and responsibility—all of which Collins addresses in Black Feminist Thought.

I found the five concepts of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1995) to fit nicely with Haudenosaunee thought. Our common experience as Haudenosaunee provided a context within which to interpret the words of the participants of this study, just as Black Feminist Thought acknowledges a common experience among African American women. A brief discussion of the intersection of Black Feminist Thought and how I used the concepts follows.

#### Lived Experience or Concrete Experience as a Criterion of Meaning

“Living life as Black women requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women’s survival. African American women give such wisdom high credence in assessing knowledge” (Collins, 1995, p. 120). Similarly, Native people also value lived experience. In many traditional communities, community members are expected to witness. We learn by observing (Deloria, 1991; Garrett, 1995; Jorgensen, 1993). The unique experience of African American women is essential to an African American woman’s understanding and worldview. Haudenosaunee also have a unique, complex experience necessary for survival in a world of imposed borders, Eurocentric curriculums, racism, and conflicting values and interests of the modern world.

#### The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims

Not only is the oral tradition a part of African American culture, it still thrives in Native cultures. Collins describes how knowledge is constructed through dialogue in the community. This is also true in the Native community. Dialogue promotes connection and relationships within the community (Collins, 2000, p. 260).

Oral traditions are often discounted as myth or folklore (Alfred, 1999). This devaluation discounts those who construct oral traditions (knowledge). As in the African-American community, oral traditions facilitate the dissemination of knowledge. To relay knowledge orally is to relay knowledge communally. In doing so, one often forms relationships, and through these relationships people, including scholars, start to care for each other and empathy is fostered, which enhances a sense of connection, of community.

### The Ethic of Caring

The connection made in the community promotes caring (Collins, 2000, p. 264). Objectivity—meaning an impersonalized distance or detachment—is an arrogant attitude of the academy, in general, that a scholar can know something about a population or community by removing his emotions. Even today, Native people have been denied the opportunity to research their own people because it was felt that we are not able to be objective (Deloria, 2002). Yet, Anglo scholars research their own culture and people all the time, and their objectivity (and credibility) is seldom questioned.

Emotion is part of the human experience whether we want to acknowledge it or not. By removing emotion from data such as the tone of voice, the speed with which words are spoken, facial expressions, and body language, the researcher loses a large part of the message (Collins, 2000, p. 263). How a participant responds to an answer is as important as the words used to answer the question.

### The Ethic of Personal Accountability

Accountability to one's community is a key concept in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, p. 265). When the person is removed from the research, the accountability of the researcher is removed (Deloria, 2002). The lack of accountability has been very harmful to Native communities. Non-Native scholars have misinterpreted or minimized our communities. Gossip has not always been recognized as such by outside researchers, generalizations were made from one community to another, and the central role of our women has been virtually ignored (Alameida, 1997; Deloria, 1991).

### Black Women as Agents of Knowledge

Coupled with their unique experience and increased number of African American women scholars, "African-American women aimed to speak for ourselves" (Collins, 2000, p. 266). Not only does Collins provide a process for validating knowledge not otherwise accepted, she provides a way for people of color to speak for ourselves; to define ourselves. We can speak for ourselves because we have the unique experiences that provide us with a unique knowledge to do so (Collins, 2000, p. 269). Otherwise, misunderstandings are made. If higher education wants to increase the graduation rate of American Indian/Alaska Native college students, why not ask Native college graduates how they attained their degrees? They are the experts, after all, of their own college experience.

## Context

As stated in the introduction the Haudenosaunee are made up of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations. The Tuscarora joined the Confederacy around 1720 when they were driven out of the Carolinas.

We are a matriarchy. Nation, clan, and property are passed down through the mother. Clanmothers possess great power (Barreiro, 1992). A Clanmother chooses the Chief of her clan, and she is the only one who can remove him. A Clanmother also names the children of her clan. A Clanmother and Chief hold their titles for life.

We still have traditional Chiefs, Clanmothers, and Faithkeepers. There is no separation between church and state; our spiritual beliefs and leadership are interconnected. Our ceremonies continue their cycle in our longhouses and in our language. We do not worship animals or the dead; we give thanks. That is the very purpose of our ceremonies—to give thanks and to take care of the earth so it will continue. Some of our ceremonies are long and involved; some are only a matter of a few hours.

All of our languages are at risk. The Mohawk language is the strongest; there are many more Mohawks than there are Onondagas. At Onondaga, we have language classes for all levels and a summer immersion program. Onondaga Nation School, a K-8 school located on the nation, includes Onondaga language and culture classes, as well as release time to attend ceremonies.

Our families tend to be large. A person comes to define his/her identity within the context of family and community. I have a responsibility to my family and my community, but there is also a reciprocal responsibility to me. Adult children are not necessarily expected to leave the home, but to take on family responsibilities such as helping with chores, children, and paying bills.

Haudenosaunee life is not perfect and this is a very general overview. We experienced the boarding school era and are still recovering from that horrible period. It was also a perilous time for our culture—I give thanks to those who did not go away to school and remained to learn the ceremonies.

## Summary of Findings

The time needed to complete a four-year degree averaged nearly eight years. This is two years less than in the pilot study. One participant, Cindi, completed her four-year degree in only two years at the age of 48. Another participant, Rusty, completed his four-year degree in 20 years after a 16-year stopout. With one exception, participants attended more than one institution with a majority attending a community college.<sup>5</sup> Three participants attended three institutions. Three participants had no high school diploma. In terms of home and parental backgrounds, two participants grew up in foster homes. Three mothers of the participants had LPN degrees and one mother had an associate's degree. One father had a vocational certificate for iron work.

Only two participants applied to more than one college. Guidance counselors provided little help in steering these students toward college. In fact,

the high school guidance counselor of Loretta, a Mohawk, told her “Indians didn’t go to college.” In addition, Melanie, another Mohawk, told me that her guidance counselor never suggested she apply to college even though she was an excellent high school student.

Stephanie: Now, did your guidance counselor talk to you about going to college?

Melanie: No.

Stephanie: Did your guidance counselor at school help you at all?

Melanie: I don’t think so! I don’t remember! (laughs) It was mostly my mother, you know. We’d get the forms and sit down and try to figure out what we had to do.

Since high school guidance personnel did not encourage these participants to attend college, like Melanie’s mother, parents waded through the application process and financial aid applications with little or no assistance.

Parents expected their children to finish high school and at least *try* college. While only one parent actually checked homework (Sophie’s mother), other parents did ask if homework was completed.

Participants applied to college with a vague notion that the education would allow them to help their people. When asked why Sharon decided to go to college, she said:

Because nobody else did. I was the first one in my family to graduate from a four-year college, not just—that’s even in my mom’s and my dad’s, like my dad, my aunts and uncles and myself—I was the first one. Not just grandchildren but children, like all my aunts and uncles on my mother’s or father’s side, nobody did...cuz nobody did, and I think cuz guidance automatically assumes when you’re a teenage mom that you’re not going anywhere and you’re not doing nothing. It was that whole tell me, no, I can’t, I’m gonna do it. That’s pretty much what it was.

Three participants stopped-out due to academic dismissal. Marco was able to achieve a 3.7 GPA upon his return after he changed his major from a hard science to American Studies. Debbie and Victor were academically dismissed because of excessive partying. Sharon took a two-year break between her associate’s degree and attendance at a four-year state school to work. Randi had a five-year stop-out, with only six credits left, to take care of her terminally ill mother. All but two participants worked while attending college.

Community college was an important mediating experience. For the three participants who did not have a high school diploma (Rusty, Cindi, and Tammy), community college was the only way they could enter higher education. For the three participants who were academically dismissed (Marco, Debbie, and Victor) community college was where they repaired low grade point averages. For others (Sharon and Randi) the community college was where they began their educational careers. In Victor’s case, community college was where he found himself as a student. Victor had been taking difficult vocational courses, not doing well academically, and decided to stop taking classes. A friend suggested that Victor take a class on any topic that interested him, to “start all over.” Victor said:

So I remember taking um, an American Lit course. Man, that was fun! Early American literature...I ended up getting an A in the course. I liked the professor, you know, she was pretty cool. It kinda gave me some confidence. Oh, you're really not a D or C person. Here's my first A. I was really excited. I remember that book, it was like the *Norton Anthology of Literature*. It had those bible pages ... just tons of stuff. So one day I was flipping through it in class. I was like [hand motions like he has the book in his hand and is flipping pages] and I could have swore I saw Tuscarora. You know, are my eyes playing tricks on me? So I flipped back through it... Sure enough there's an excerpt from a guy named David Cusick. And it was David Cusick, and it says, comma, Tuscarora, and that's what I saw. I recognize the Cusick name, and there's a lot of Cusicks at home. So I'm like what is this all about? So I read his little bio, you know, he actually wrote a book and published a book on the creation story and early history of Six Nations and it was published in 1827. And his dad, I heard, Nicholas Cusick, was in the Revolutionary War, so everybody knows about him, one of ten kids, and I'm reading this whole thing, and it was just amazing. Now here I am Tuscarora...and I don't know any of this stuff about this guy, I never heard of him, and he's got an awesome history here. And so I'm thinking, jeez, here these books are being read probably by 100,000 kids across North America, they're probably learning this, and I'm not, and I know nobody else at home probably knows this. It made me think, "what the hell's the matter with this system?" And that was when I got my epiphany that I wanted to be an educator.

Affordability may be another reason community college was important.<sup>7</sup> Only two participants, Sophie and Skye, mentioned student loans. Melanie, the only participant to attend a single, private institution, also had no student loans. She said, "I'm thankful for any scholarship I could apply. It didn't matter for what." Skye also said even though applying for financial assistance consists of "a lot of red tape...there's a lot of financial assistance out there."

Because the participants remained strongly connected to their communities and their families, they resembled adult returning students even when they were college aged and living in a residence hall. When Marco was 18 and living on his campus he said he "was just going to school there." Debbie who was also 18 when she lived on campus said she was "at [Snowy University] but not really in an involved part," and during the week, Sophie drove across town to another four-year institution to be with Native students. Every weekend Sophie went home, an hour's drive. When Sophie transferred to a private institution near her home during her junior year, she said she "was just there for the schooling."

Eight out of the 12 participants entered college as traditionally aged 18-21-year-old students. Four of the eight completed their degrees as traditionally aged students. Four entered as adult students. As is consistent with the literature, as adult students they were not interested in becoming socially involved in their institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Harrington, 1993; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1985, 1989).

This study supports the findings of Rendón (1994), Rendón et al. (2000), Tierney (1992, 1999), and others who challenge Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of

attrition. I found that while participants did join clubs and had college friends, they experienced college more similarly to returning adult students. Few participants in this study and in the pilot study were able to name friends from college who were not Native.<sup>8</sup> They were not experiencing social isolation on campus, however. The participants had friends and support, but their support was not located on the campus. Their friends and support were Native friends and/or family, and their community.

When I asked Skye, with whom he associated while in college he said, “My family!” He said his family was very supportive. During his senior year, he was exhausted from his academics, taking an Oneida language class that required a 45-minute drive one-way, and working 15 hours a week. He told his brother he was going to quit college. He told me his brother said, “that if I didn’t finish my degree, I would definitely get it from him. He would give me hell.” Skye said that was the push he needed to finish. Cindi told me that her adult children typed her papers and gave her pep talks. Sophie’s parents bought her a laptop computer so she could keep up with her coursework when she went home every weekend. Tammy’s family caused stress, so an aunt opened her home to Tammy.

The participants were academically engaged. Three participants had exceptional study habits; two of these participants had families who read for entertainment, the other participant came from a family that did not regularly watch television. Other participants indicated that they joined study groups or participated in group work. The older participants were comfortable approaching faculty for help, in fact, Rusty, who was 36 when he went back to the community college found that faculty wanted advice from him.

All the participants in this study and the pilot study remain connected to their communities after college graduation. Those who are working (Sophie is home with a toddler) work with Native people or populations of color.

## Discussion

The participants in this study were in control of their college experiences—they were agents of their educational success (Collins, 1998). Deyhle’s (1995) discussion of cultural integrity and Jorgenson’s (1993) discussion of resistance involve agency. They write about assimilation resistive strategies employed by the students. They also discuss the culture of the students, its importance, and the continuance of that culture despite a Eurocentric formal education. They write about *agency* on the part of the students. Being culturally grounded provided the students in both Deyhle’s and Jorgenson’s studies with the tools to engage in education with agency.

Part of that agency is negotiating with the university structure. Rusty, a Mohawk, made this comment about higher education:

...that philosophy, the narrow-mindedness, [in the university setting] the whole thing about the separation between church and state. When you say separation of church and state I mean mind over spirit. Higher education deals with the mind. It doesn’t deal with the spirit...the way the Iroquois

Confederacy looks at things, you see, you can't separate things. You can't disembody things and say okay, this is what we'll do, but it'll have no effect on this over here.

The structural separateness of higher education forces our students to learn in an environment that can feel unnatural (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Rusty's first attempt at the community college lasted but one semester. He went into the armed forces, became a parent, worked several jobs, and eventually realized he should continue his education. He consulted one of the Haudenosaunee's most respected spiritual leaders and asked him for advice about returning to college and was encouraged to return "and get that education, to do it for your people." Not only was Rusty then ready to negotiate the college setting with agency, but also to do so with a spiritual leader's support.

I found that the participants in my study also remained centered in their culture, community, and family—they maintained their cultural integrity, a finding similar to Deyhle's (1995) study. This study specifically supports the importance of American Indian/Alaska Native culture and language for successful Native college students (Belgarde & Martinez, 1998; Falk & Aitken, 1984; Jackson & Smith, 2001) and the importance of ceremony in maintaining spiritual health and connection (Cibik & Chambers, 1991; Jorgensen, 1993). The participants in this study valued their culture to such a degree that most engaged themselves in a double curriculum: their academic program and another involving structured Haudenosaunee language classes and/or participation in traditional ceremonies.

In a sense, college became the external demand on their lives, which Belgarde & Martinez, (1998) phrased as: "life goes on" (p. 21). The participants followed two paths according to their own choice. Their main path was that of their culture and identity as Haudenosaunee. The participants stepped off this main path to obtain their college degrees, but always sought to remain connected and able to step back into their culture and community. Maintaining two paths did create stress, because family and culture create demands apart from academic responsibility. As Melanie put it:

I remember one of my aunties telling me, "You know, because we're Haudenosaunee, we have to work twice as hard as White people." Well, I kinda took it all in. I always remember, I always thought that she meant ... it was real racist, you know. It still is, but it was real bad then, so I thought that's what she meant, you know, like overcoming all that. Then suddenly I realized, it wasn't until I was in graduate school, "Oh, my god. We're not working twice as hard, we're working 10 times as hard."...It wasn't overcoming the hardships, it was about working hard ...It was the connection to the community that um, "Oh here I am."...you know, we're going, running back to ceremonies, and oh, I'm going to miss two weeks of classes because I have to go to Mid-winter, and on the side we're trying to learn language.

Even though learning and maintaining cultural connections increased the stress and workload, Melanie, like many of the others in this study, deliberately sought

participation in a “double curriculum.” Only Tammy, who entered college without a firm cultural grounding, said, “I had to let go of all my culture when I went to school. There was no space for it at all.” Later when Tammy attended a graduate school that had a large number of Native students, she embraced her Native culture.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, only the men received effective mentoring from faculty and staff. Three of the four men in the present study were approached by faculty and mentored into teaching or leadership positions. Two women said they had mentoring experiences but this was very late in their college careers (their final semesters), and they were not mentored into teaching or leadership positions. The one man interviewed in the pilot study was mentored regarding his career plans at his community college and at his private institution where he became a teaching assistant.

Neither age of the participants nor race of the mentors seemed to be a factor in this discrepancy in mentoring. Mentors were of varying ages and races. Most of the mentors were male, but two were female. As Smith-Mohamed (1998) found, cultural knowledge is not necessary to mentor an American Indian/Alaska Native student. Mentors need to possess the characteristics of a mentor and cultural knowledge can come later. Even when the men changed institutions, faculty or administrators approached them and mentored them. The man from the pilot study attended the same institution as Skye five years earlier. The constant was the gender of those mentored: they were all men. What is also noticeably different from some of the literature (Erkut & Mokros, 1984; Smith-Mohamed, 1998) is that the mentees did not actively seek a mentor; the mentor chose the student.

Because so few Native faculty teach in New York, only two participants had experience in their undergraduate careers with Native faculty. The experiences of these two participants were richer than those of the other participants. Unlike some institutions in western states where Native faculty members can sometimes be counted in dozens, when this study was conducted, only two institutions in New York could boast more than three Native faculty members. Melanie learned her language and culture from Haudenosaunee faculty and staff at her institution. In a rigorous, pre-med program, Melanie had a supportive Haudenosaunee community at her institution that centered on these faculty members. In fact, as a group, these Haudenosaunee faculty and staff would take students home for ceremonies—a four hour drive one way. Marco, a Seneca participant, transferred to a large state institution where Haudenosaunee faculty and staff mentored him into a teaching position and a new major.

Nevertheless, Native staff members are also important. Angela Johnson was an Oneida woman working in an academic office at Snowy University (a medium sized, private institution). Angela’s door was always open to students, and in her caring, “you can do it” way, supported Native students on her campus. Skye called her his “crutch.” Here is an example of Angela’s important role as related by Skye:

When I was going to school at [Snowy], I felt that I was neglecting my culture, and my heritage, by going to school at [Snowy]. And that was a lot of pressure on myself... And if it hadn't been for [Angela], she said to me, "It doesn't matter because if you step inside the longhouse, or didn't step inside the longhouse, what matters is what's in your heart, and it's whatever you believe in. You'll never lose that. That'll always be with you. Your culture, your religion will always be with you. That's why when the European settlers came here, they thought we were savages because our religion is always with us. You don't have to go to a particular place to be, believe in it or practice it, it's always with you." So I thought about that, and she also said, "You shouldn't feel like you're depriving your culture or your religion, because it's with you, it's always with you. Whatever you believe in, it's going to stay there." So that helped me, it helped me out, saying okay, it's okay, if you don't go to the Longhouse, or you didn't practice the ceremonies.

Angela provided Skye with a rationale for remaining in college and support for being Native. It is important to note here that Angela's academic department supported her efforts by permitting her to talk to students.

While Native communities in many parts of the US have access to tribal colleges and larger universities that have Native faculty and staff, this was not a common experience for the participants in this study. Most of the Haudenosaunee experienced college in a sea of Anglo faces and culture. In the pilot study, two participants attended out of state tribal colleges and then transferred to four-year institutions to complete their degrees.

Haudenosaunee are also close to major cities. It is possible to attend college during the day, and live a traditional life at home. It is also possible to attain a professional degree, work as a professional, and return home to the reserve every day. Many nations in the western US are not close to cities where professional jobs are located. The participants in this study did not subscribe to the notion that to be successful one must leave the reservation. However, they did acknowledge that the proximity of cities exposes our youth to risks: drugs, gangs, and the popular culture that surrounds us.

### **Limitations**

This study is not meant to be generalized to all Haudenosaunee nor to all American Indian/Alaska Native college students. Twelve is not a sufficient number of participants. However, where there have been up to now no data, this study is a beginning, a description of how a dozen Haudenosaunee completed their college degrees. And because our small number often complicates statistical data, (Brayboy, 1999; Pavel, et al., 1998; Tierney, 1992), often rendering us invisible, I saw this as the strength of doing a qualitative study.

### **Implications for Future Research**

More qualitative research like this study can help higher education faculty and administration understand the needs of Native and adult returning students. Some of the campuses where the participants attended have since hired Native faculty,

added Native Studies Programs, or are pursuing work/community service in Native communities. It would be interesting to revisit these institutions to see if any change has occurred in the climate for Native students. One institution in particular has always had about 100 Native students and a reasonable graduation rate. A case study of this institution could provide valuable information. Learning communities are more commonplace on campuses. Do Native students participate in these communities? If so, what has that experience been like for them?

Adult returning students have family and other community responsibilities. They typically do not have the opportunity or desire for the social integration expected in most mainstream colleges and universities, or other student group activities. The adult students in this study had the support of family and community; they studied with other students, and were focused. In what ways can institutions help adult students develop a system of support or encourage the support systems adult students already have? Indigenous or Native-centered qualitative methodologies needs to be further employed in order to answer such critical questions.

### **Implications for Practice**

In addition to professional development for faculty and staff on American Indian/Alaskan Native culture and history, I suggest mentoring programs where faculty and staff receive training and pair with incoming Native students. Big sister/big brother programs would pair senior Native students with an incoming Native student. Big sisters/brothers would help facilitate relationships and connections already made at the institution. Native alumni community connections are very important. Participants wanted to remain connected to their communities, and the only way to actively practice their spirituality was to go home. Native alumni could help connect current college students to Native communities and activities. There were also few Native faculty available to the participants to serve as mentors and role models. The academic path and cultural paths of Melanie and Marco were enriched by their interaction with Native faculty. Angela provided cultural and emotional support for Skye. Higher education institutions need to make the effort to locate and hire more Native faculty and staff.

### **Conclusion**

Twelve Haudenosaunee college graduates were interviewed about their educational experience. Participants were generally first-generation college students, and came from working class backgrounds. Reading was an important family activity for three participants. Few high school guidance counselors were helpful in steering these students toward college. Participants applied to college with a vague notion that the education would benefit their community. Six of the participants entered higher education through a community college or vocational institution. Two others attended a community college after being academically dismissed from a four-year private university. Eight years was the average number

of years to degree completion, but six did graduate within four years. Participants found their greatest support while in college from their families. Participants were academically but not socially engaged in institutional life. Despite the increased workload of remaining connected to family and community, participants juggled a double curriculum: their academic program and by taking a structured language class and/or participating in Haudenosaunee ceremonies and traditions. Unfortunately, in this study, only the men experienced meaningful mentoring. This study supports other studies regarding the importance of language, culture, and family of American Indian/Alaska Native college students, and those who question the necessity that students break away from their communities, transition to, and socially integrate into the college community. Despite a well-earned mistrust of the academy, the participants in this study found that we could be formally educated and still maintain traditional identity. They are proof that both can be accomplished.

I would like to close this article with a quote from Melanie who recognized the added responsibility and obligation of her culture and community that she experienced but non-Native students did not. Melanie said, “Yeah, jeez, that’s a lot to carry. But it’s what keeps you alive.”

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>While this study was being conducted, the Cayuga were landless. On December 27th, 2005, the Cayuga acquired a 70 acre farm in their homeland on the east shore of Cayuga Lake, New York.

<sup>2</sup>According to Carney (1999) two are still in operation.

<sup>3</sup>Some of us choose to live off-territory. The reasons are endless such as being closer to work, to buy a house, etc.

<sup>4</sup>A piece on my conceptualization of religious methodologies forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup>There are no tribal colleges in New York State.

<sup>6</sup>Melanie went on to become a medical doctor.

<sup>7</sup>Sharon did say when she graduated with a bachelor’s degree she had no loans, but only \$35 in her bank account.

<sup>8</sup>This is not to say they exclusively socialized with Native people.

<sup>9</sup>At Tammy’s undergraduate institutions, she could only identify one other Native student. At that time there were no Native faculty or staff either institution.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

Participants were given an introductory explanation that this study was an exploratory study of how Haudenosaunee “do” college, because in order to support our students in college, colleges need to know “how” we go to college. I asked each participant to tell me the story of their college experience. The questions were the same for each participant.

Participants were asked:

- To describe where they grew up, the educational level of parents and siblings, the involvement of parents in school or homework, if there were books in the home, what kind of K-12 student they were, if they attended Longhouse or church, if the language was spoken in the home, when they decided to go to college, where they applied and why;
- To describe a summer bridge program, if any, how they paid for college, their major and why, who they socialized with, how they made friends, living arrangements, involvement in student groups, any mentoring or special faculty and staff they remember, their academic experience, study group involvement, work experience, what they did during the summers, HEOP/EOP experience, Longhouse/church involvement, current employment, future plans.

Interviews were open-ended and varied according to the individual. Since I had not expected to interview anyone who grew up in a foster home, I did not plan questions specifically for that situation. Consequently, I had to adjust my questions accordingly adding, for example, “In any of your foster homes, did anyone check on your homework or become involved in your school?” and “Were any of your foster homes on a reservation?” etc.

*The Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>HS Grad/ GED</b>	<b>Institutions attended</b>	<b>age at entry/</b>	<b>completion</b>	<b>Years to Completion</b>
Rusty (Mohawk)	GED	Community College Community College Snowy University	19 35 38	39	20/ 4
Marco (Seneca)	HS	Community College Big City University	18 21	25	7
Loretta (Mohawk)	HS	Adult Education Center Upper State College	20's 34	37	3
Skye (Oneida)	HS	Vocational/Technical Snowy University	22 23	26	3
Sharon (Mohawk)	HS	Community College Upper State College	18 24	25	7
Randi (Onondaga)	HS	Community College Big City State	25 28	37	12
Melanie (Mohawk)	HS	Prestigious University	19	23	4
Debbie (Seneca)	HS	Snowy University Community College Lower State College	18 20's 29	31	13
Cindi (Onondaga)	GED	Community College Snowy University	46 47	48	2
Sophie (Oneida)	HS	Gorges University Snowy University	18 20	22	4
Tammy (Oneida)	GED	Technical Community College Hills State College	18 20	22	4
Victor (Tuscarora)	HS	Snowy University Community College Big City State	18 20's 31	32	14