



The Voice of Success: An Exploration of the Lived Experience of Kumeyaay College Graduates

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study ethnography aims to examine the lived experience of Kumeyaay Nation college graduates in higher education. Specifically, the study investigated factors that twelve Kumeyaay graduates perceived as contributors to their persistence in academic attainment within six years of enrollment for a baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution. Four themes emerged from the data analysis and were labeled as follows: cultural and identity revitalization (learning about tribal history and language), discovering the leader within (student leadership participation), a support network paradox (family values in contrast to community values), and what is the alternative? (limited opportunities as motivation). The research findings unveiled implications for practice in higher education, such as empowering students with knowledge of cultural traditions and the Kumeyaay language, fostering opportunities for leadership development, establishing Native American community-center support networks, and fostering mentorship and opportunities to give back among college graduates from the Kumeyaay Nation.

Keywords: Kumeyaay Nation, Native American, persistence

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

From time immemorial, the territory of the Kumeyaay Land has bordered Mexico – California, representing a diverse southwestern heritage of Spanish and Native cultures. The Kumeyaay Nation represents a unique Native American population that occupies the largest and most diverse territory of any Native American population in what is now known as the state of California. Prior to the first European settlement in Kumeyaay territory in 1769, Kumeyaay familial and/or territorial groups, also known as Sh'mulqs (Miskwish, 2007), resided, and thrived in arid deserts, expansive coast lands, and alpine mountains from what is now known as San Diego California to northern Baja California, Mexico (Miskwish, 2007). While the Kumeyaay Nation resiliently overcame many challenges of colonization and continues to thrive within twelve reservations in California and seven communities in Mexico, higher education enrollment and degree attainment remains low. This situation is especially dire when only 4.6% (n=111) of the Kumeyaay Nation population who enrolled in higher education in 2013 graduated with a bachelor's degree within four years, compared to 20.1% (n=5.14 million) bachelor's degree attainment for all other ethnic groups in the state of California during the same four-year period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These ethnic studies require an ethnic formation within the Kumeyaay networks to support learners in transitioning from K-12 to higher education. Increasing the rates of Kumeyaay higher education degree attainment is critical for the continued development of steadfast leadership, research, and the political revitalization of the Nation.

Institutions of higher education continue to face challenges in meeting the unique needs of Native American students and to foster a culturally responsive learning environment that is suitable for successful degree attainment. Native American students face barriers with limited admission and financial aid information due to geographical isolation to resources and limited K-12 institutional support (Andrade, 2014). When Native American students are admitted to predominately white institutions, those with strong cultural identities reported perceiving and experiencing significant racial harassment and isolation (Andelman et al., 2013; Mosholder et al., 2013). Moreover, Native American students in higher education experience cultural incongruence when faced with a Eurocentric curriculum that is not culturally responsive and support services that do not account for socio-cultural factors like potential financial challenges, collectivist values, and other cultural norms that manifest in students not seeking help or speaking up (Mosholder et al., 2013).

In 2017, Native American students enrolled in postsecondary education at a rate of 20% compared to the 40% total average postsecondary enrollment rate; where White students represented 41%, African American students represented 36%, Hispanic/Latino students represented 36%, and Asian students represented 65% (McFarland et al., 2018). Moreover, while all other racial and ethnic groups experienced no significant change in postsecondary enrollment between 2000 and 2017, Native American postsecondary enrollment rates increased from 35% to 41% between 2000 and 2010 before decreasing by 21% between 2010 and 2017 (McFarland et al., 2018). Efforts to identify effective strategies to support Native American students for college success and improvement should continue beyond the enrollment period.

Researchers agree that higher education administrators and student success staff need to understand the issues that obstruct the pursuit and attainment of postsecondary education for Native American students (Akee & Yazzie-Mintz, 2011; Demmert et al., 2006; Guillory, 2009; Lopez, 2018; Proudfit & Myers-Lim, 2017; Tierney, 1992). While a great amount is known about the disproportionate lack of K-12 academic preparation for higher education, higher rates of health disparities, high rates of criminal victimization, and cultural misrepresentation (Proudfit & Myers-Lim, 2017), little is known about the factors that supported the success of Native American college students who obtained a baccalaureate degree within six years of enrollment. Scholars suggest that a focus on programs that embrace and respect cultural traditions and establishing mutually supportive relationships with institutions and Native American communities may promote a greater understanding and support of student's needs (Lopez, 2018; Mosholder et al., 2013; Proudfit & Myers-Lim, 2017).

This study was crucial to understanding the lived experience of Native American students because it went beyond mere enrollment rates and delved into the factors that contributed to positive educational experiences, areas of support, and influences that led to degree attainment. By isolating the factors that participants unveiled as supportive and essential to their persistence and graduation, educators and administrators can tailor their efforts to address the specific needs of Native American students and enhance the degree attaining potential for this historically underrepresented community in higher education (Akee & Yazzie-Mintz, 2011; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Persistence Theories

Over the years, researchers developed various theoretical explanations for student persistence in higher education (Astin, 1999; Guillory, 2009; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Tinto, 1975,1993). However, prevailing persistence paradigms that emphasize student integration further perpetuate the role of student assimilation and cultural dissonance that is detrimental to the college experience of Native American students (Goforth et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2015; McMahan et al., 2019; Minthorn, 2014). Theories focusing on integration necessitate an understanding of multigenerational relationships to ancestors, nature, and the land. Native scholars recommend for higher education environments to value family and cultural inclusion that were disrupted during various periods of relocation, assimilation, and continued systems of oppression (Henderon et al., 2015; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014; Minthorn, 2014).

In contrast to traditional persistence theories that value integration and assimilation, the Family Education Model focuses on maintaining family and tribal community connections by proposing higher education institutions act as advocates for social services to students and to engage with family members to sustain support networks for their students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Guillory's (2009) American Indian/Alaskan Native college student retention strategies model recommends culturally sensitive career counseling, peer mentoring, and community connections. In addition to the support networks, Windchief and Joseph (2015) theorized that policies and curriculum must be claimed as Native American spaces that incorporate Native culture, values, and history to predict persistence among Native American students.

Family Dynamics

Guillory and Wolverton (2008) compared the perceptions of persistence factors among Native American students at three large state universities and those held by policymakers at the respective institutions. While financial factors and academic preparation were among the perceived hindrances to persistence for policymakers, Native American students revealed that family was the most influential persistence factor along their educational journey. Native American students explained how their role of caretaker of their parents and grandparents often presented challenges to academic success and campus engagement (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Nonetheless, the connection to their family was a significant factor to their willingness to overcome the lack of preparation, financial deficiencies, and

unwelcoming environments in education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Similarly, Minthorn (2014) suggested that family support was significant for educational success and development. For example, the idea of bringing honor to the family and the career prospects of education motivated students, while the pressure to meet family expectations and the fear of failure were sometimes a barrier to persistence (Minthorn, 2014). This is consistent with the Family Education Model which postulates that retention programs are most effective when they affirm and strengthen the student's family identity and empower students by extending the family structure to the institutional environment (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). As such, policies similar to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 that requires outreach to all parents and family members to foster involvement in programs and activities in primary and secondary education has the potential to establish norms of family support into retention programing as students transition into higher education.

Cultural and Community Engagement

Studies revealed that making contributions to the community and the desire to serve as a role model for family and community members are significant persistence protective factors among Native American students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Henderson et al., 2015; Minthorn, 2014; Thompson et al., 2013).

Home Going

Contrary to traditional first-year programing and practices in higher education that seek to integrate students into the campus culture and community, Native American students benefit significantly from consistent home visitation and community engagement which validates a student's sense of belonging and identity (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Waterman, 2012; Schmidtke, 2016). As demonstrated by increased grade point averages, the support from families and Native communities by way of advice, cultural responsibility to set a good example for future generations, and identity reinforcement were positive protective factors derived from frequent home going (Bass and Harrington, 2014; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014; Schmidtke, 2016; Waterman, 2012). Even when institutions of higher education fail to provide the necessary inclusion and support, researchers found that family support and involvement was the most frequently identified source of encouragement, motivation, and empowerment that contributed to positive academic outcomes (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014).

Cultural Identity

Jackson et al. (2003) unveiled that a greater understanding of ethnic identity led to increased academic performance. Similarly, Henderson et al., (2015) qualitative study examined the impact of cultural identity and found that tribal affiliation strongly impacts the identity of native language abilities. These protective factors support anti-discriminatory practices for positive navigation amid a Eurocentric educational environment.

Tribal Sovereignty

Central to Native American cultural preservation and identity is the concept of tribal sovereignty or self-governance (Brayboy, 2006; Goforth et. al., 2016; Kalt & Singer, 2004). Evidence from Brayboy (2006) indicated that community-based expressions of sovereignty were helpful for exploring the uniqueness of Native American experiences. Self-determination, self-governance, self-identification, and self-education are four articulations of sovereignty that explicitly reject models of assimilation in educational environments and acknowledge the tribal history and contemporary issues experienced by Native American communities (Bates, 2016; Brayboy, 2006; Kalt & Singer, 2004).

Institutional Support

Faculty relationships are the foundation of academic resources for facilitating the intricacy of course interchanges for the complexities of degree attainment (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Jackson et al., 2003; Schmidtke, 2016). Effective faculty-student relationships that provide consistent availability and informal interactions fostered motivation and self-confidence among students (Hoffman, 2014). These relationships also provide mentoring opportunities and increase access to opportunities (Bass & Harrington, 2014). Researchers examining ethnic organizations and multicultural centers for underrepresented students provide cultural responsiveness to the support network, increasing identity awareness as an inclusionary sense of belonging (Bowman et al., 2015; McShay, 2017; Park, 2014; Simmons, 2013). Perhaps the greatest benefit to ethnic organizations on campus involves the peer navigation for students to identify staff and faculty of similar backgrounds who can serve as mentors, advocates, and resources for navigating the higher education environment (McShay, 2017; Simmons, 2013). However, academic support services for undergraduate and first-year students indicate that persistence factors for success are most significant when methods of support include financial contributions for an increased rate of student matriculation (Nguyen et al., 2019; Olbrecht et al., 2016; Pratt et al., 2019). Findings from

a study of the relationship between family finances, merit-based aid, and retention suggest that when students are offered merit-based financial aid, retention increased significantly even with small amounts of aid awarded (Olbrecht et al., 2016). In the case of supporting Native American student persistence, there is an opportunity for institutions of higher education to improve their support of this community through holistic services that leverage the cultural strengths and relational opportunities.

Present Study

The study of the Kumeyaay Nation and college graduates aims to examine the lived experiences of students participating in academic studies. Specifically, the research study investigates factors of support that graduates perceived contributed to their educational attainments of a baccalaureate degree within six years of enrollment at a four-year institution of higher education.

RESEARCH METHOD

Merriam (2016) defined a qualitative researcher as one who is concerned with “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p.6). In qualitative research, the researcher engages as the primary instrument to inductively analyze and understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants in the study (Merriam, 2016). As such, when designing the approach to study the lived experiences of Kumeyaay Nation graduates, a qualitative methodology was used to better understand the intricacies and perceptions of study participants.

Creswell & Creswell (2018) posited that a phenomenological approach is best suited when a research problem demands a deeper understanding of the human experience shared by a homogeneous group of people. As such, the researcher learned the Kumeyaay language from a trusted leader in the Kumeyaay Nation and engaged in observations of cultural events and activities during the study. The researcher attended a summer cultural nights event where youth were celebrated for their educational pursuits, traditional games were played by men from various reservations of the Kumeyaay Nation, and a meal was shared. Lastly, the researcher was invited by a member of the Kumeyaay community to attend the burial service for a loved one. This provided first-hand experience of the depth of family connections and support networks. In alignment with the focus of exploring the factors which influenced persistence and degree attainment, a phenomenological study with elements of ethnography allowed the researcher

to thoroughly explore the lived experiences among this historically underrepresented community in higher education that persisted and attained their degree (Manen, 2016; Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Research Questions

The following questions were used to frame the study:

1. What were the lived experiences of Kumeyaay Nation students during enrollment in a four-year institution of higher education?
2. What are the perceived factors, if any, that influenced persistence at a four-year institution of higher education for Kumeyaay Nation college graduates?
3. What are the perceived factors, if any, that influenced attainment of a baccalaureate degree within six years from enrollment at a four-year institution of higher education for Kumeyaay Nation college graduates?

Participants

Since the number of college graduates in the Kumeyaay Nation was small and consisted of an interconnected community or tribal and non-tribal demographics, the sampling included criteria for small populations that protected the confidentiality of participants. The sampling methodology is appropriate when studying sensitive issues where accessing data for protected populations is difficult (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Waters, 2015). The purposeful sampling represented various reservations of the Kumeyaay Nation. The twelve total participants in the study included:

- One member who graduated within one year of the start of the study,
- One member who lived on the reservation but worked off the reservation, and
- One member who served in a leadership capacity within the Kumeyaay Nation.

Participants ranged from recent graduates with one-year post-graduation to over twenty years post-graduation from a four-year institution of higher education.

Data Collection

The researchers used multiple semi-structured methods to gather data for this study, including interviewing, facilitating focus groups, taking field notes, and observing participants. The collected data included twelve interviews and one focus group over seven months, from November 2020 to

May 2021. To ensure the accuracy of these findings, data triangulation, supported comparisons, and multiple sources for internal validity and reliability among the participants. Before participating in the study, participants were given written informed consent and privacy consent forms for data collation and assigned pseudonyms associated with the information. The participant's collected data remains confidential and protected for individual and community privacy and will not be distributed to other participants, community members, or researchers external to this study.

Data Analysis

All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using MAXQDA software to develop codes and themes that emerged from the data collected. Following the interview and the focus group, the researchers confirmed accuracy by providing each participant with a copy of the transcript and the opportunity to submit any corrections or additions. Henceforth, data coding was completed independently by the first and third researchers to confirm the codes' reliability through consensus. After a second and third rounds of coding, the researchers selected four emerging themes for significant findings within the study. These four themes were labeled as follows: cultural and identity revitalization, discovering the leader within, a support network paradox, and what is the alternative? These themes, supported by statements and observations in the data, revealed the unique lived experience of Kumeyaay college graduates who participated in the study. The final steps of data analysis involved synthesizing themes to conclude factors for participants' perceptions of support in baccalaureate attainment in higher education.

RESULTS

A total of thirty-seven different codes emerged from the data analysis. The following four themes emerged from the codes as perceived factors that contributed to the persistence and degree attainment of a baccalaureate degree within six years of enrollment at a four-year institution of higher education: (1) Cultural & Identity Revitalization, (2) Discovering the Leader Within, (3) A Support Network Paradox, and (4) What is the Alternative?

Persistence of Kumeyaay Students

Theme 1: Cultural & Identity Revitalization

The theme of cultural and identity revitalization appeared in all twelve participant interviews when participants were asked about the factors that they believed supported their ability to continue their college journey year

after year. When participants discussed the challenges they experienced in college, and the factors that provided the support to return and continue their education, they often started with their Native American identity and how they navigated the new environment. The focus group revealed that participants often learned about their own culture and language for the first time in college because there was very limited, if any, academic resources about Kumeyaay culture or language growing up. Field observations and the process of the researcher learning the Kumeyaay language revealed that there was very limited scholarly work published about this community and that the language was spoken fluently by less than fifty people at the time of the study. Participant 3 stated,

College for me, I finally was able to engage with academics who taught about where I came from. In one of my classes in Grossmont College, you know, he was teaching, and he included the local tribes and it was just really weird to hear somebody talking like that. I'd never heard anybody talk about us in that respect.

Seven of the twelve participants self-identified as first-generation college students for whom experiencing their Native American history and culture being taught in a formal educational setting was new. However, not all participants experienced positive education about Native American history or culture during their college experience, and some experienced negative or false teachings pertaining to Native American history and culture. Participant 9 shared the opposite experience from Participant 3 and stated,

There is no general understanding, it's complete ignorance because of how the public education system teaches or really doesn't teach about Tribal Nations sovereignty. Treaties like these things that actually when you look at you know United States law, if you look at the Constitution, which says that these treaties once ratified become the supreme law of the land like, you know, it's not taught about like people don't even realize you know, the importance of treaties.

Nonetheless, all participants shared a variation of the responsibility of developing an intersectional identity that could navigate both worlds for the purpose of benefiting their community as explained by participant 9 who stated, "a sense of like responsibility and wanting to learn so that I can come back home and contribute." Participant 9, like many of the participants in this study, used the word "responsibility" when describing the motive for learning or explaining the internal emotions keeping them from early departure when in college. Apart from identity development in a formal sense within the classroom, participants in the focus group also indicated that their identity developed in community, through the various groups and student centers on

campus. Participant 3 specifically referenced the help that was received from the Indian studies department and the Native clubs on campus was a supportive network to navigating the higher education systems and the development of Native American identity. Participant 9 explained the connection between Native identity development and persistence when he stated,

There was Native community and like a strong like Native, you know, there's just a strong Native unity at UCLA, and once I found that and tapped into that; that became like the, that, that's that's what kept me there. That's what kept me there. That's what helped me succeed.

Participant 9, like many others interviewed, emphasized the impact that Native community had on their educational success. Participant 11 added that Native community support on campus also served as “emotional support” to “help each other through.” Participants often used communal language when describing the impact of Native community. Participants 5 and 12 explained how the negativity and the challenges faced served as fuel to persevere in their college education. According to the interviews and the focus group conducted, all participants shared an ongoing development of identity during their college experience that centered on their Native identity, learning how to navigate the system of higher education, and using education to benefit their Native communities.

Theme 2: Discovering the Leader Within

Seven participants in this study were involved in Native American organizations or clubs on campus, five were employed or participated in an internship with a Native American organization, and four were involved in activism during their college experience. These seven participants found that their active participation in university life led to better outcomes in their personal leadership development and opportunities they were extended during their academic experience. Participant 10 chose to emphasize the accountability to be present and engaged in college. She also equated this commitment in leadership to a responsibility to people she cared about and who depended on the activities put on by the Native American organizations. She stated the following when sharing about her leadership involvement:

You can't wing it. You can't wing it and you know on a lot of people depended on that for income and they were planning on it, you know coming from states away and it mattered to the community and so yeah, it was important. You know, I couldn't just stay in bed five days straight because I was having a rough week, you know, and those are the kinds of things that I think really get students.

The experiences of support, commitment, and responsibility were common among participants and some, like Participant 5, were personally driven by the desire to bring about change through the leadership engagement both on and off campus. The urgency and commitment to continue and attain her degree was evident throughout the interview with Participant 5 as observed by the repetition of the importance of obtaining the degree to accomplish the needs in the community and for herself to be a leading member in the change she wanted to see. The focus group discussion of leadership development and opportunities seldom focused on the participant themselves, but rather on the Native American community that these leadership opportunities served. Nonetheless, these leadership opportunities were perceived as supportive factors contributing to persistence.

Degree Attainment of Kumeyaay Students

Theme 3: A Support Network Paradox

The lived experience of Kumeyaay college graduates represented in this study indicated that support networks in the form of parental support, tribal leadership support, mentors, cultural centers, and Native American representation on campus were apparent factors facilitating degree attainment despite the financial challenges, racial discrimination, and isolation from community engagement. However, a paradox emerged between the support networks that were part of the lived experience of participants in this study and the historically negative views of educational institutions within the Kumeyaay community. Participant 12 shared that their grandparent had a negative and abusive experience in a government sanctioned boarding school as a child, but that this same grandparent encouraged their parent to pursue higher education for the social mobility it could provide today. The focus group discussion also revealed that several participants grew up in a unique family culture that valued education and encouraged them to pursue a degree even when they themselves had not attended college.

College Going Culture of the Family. All twelve participants indicated that there was a college going culture in their family or within their specific reservation leadership. Participant 9 emphasized that he did not understand how a college culture was developed without his parents having attained a degree but mentioned that it was understood that going to college after high school was an expectation. Participant 11 described the essence of her family's college going culture as a cultural norm where there was no other option than going and graduating. Participant 10 was specific when talking about her college going culture experienced at home and the benefits of

obtaining a degree that were explained to her from her parents who did not earn a college degree:

It was kind of like about how it's an opportunity, how it can provide security and just they emphasized that it was important to do and I knew that, you know, both of my parents felt limited like in their options a little bit.

Participant 10 used words like “opportunity” and “options” to describe the benefits underlying the college going culture in her family. Participant 12 reflected on his relatives and his father who did not graduate from high school but who encouraged college pursuit.

Tribal Leadership. In addition to financial support provided by programs and initiatives supported by Tribal leadership in the Kumeyaay Nation, eleven of the twelve participants provided examples of Tribal leadership involvement as a support network. Participant 10 described the involvement of community members in leadership as follows:

I think having community members who were willing to help remove barriers. You know, having those key people in your life who will help you problem-solve and will help you address the barriers that come, its huge.

In the focus group discussion, leaders in the community were described as helping “remove barriers” and helping “problem-solve.” Participant 5 stated, “I am fortunate to come from a community” when speaking of her reservation where Tribal leadership promoted college at community events and developed a college going culture throughout the reservation. Participant 7 emphasized the messages that he received from his Tribal leaders when he stated:

What's really ironic is that a lot of the old-timers who went through boarding schools and things, will tell you, you need education. You know a lot of people who are gone now would be the first people to tell you we're not going to get anywhere without education.

Participant 7 used the word “ironic” to describe the perception by people who had experienced the effects of boarding schools when it came to pursuing education. When asked about the irony behind the negative experiences associated with education and the belief that education is important, this participant explained that families and Tribal leaders who promote education understand that a college degree is the pathway to reforming the systems that perpetuate historical trauma and marginalization. Participants in this study expressed that a higher education degree was perceived as a tool and a doorway to opportunities, and this perspective of the benefit provided by obtaining a degree became a driving force to overcome

the challenges experienced in higher education or to cope with the generational trauma associated with educational institutions.

Participant 8 described the relationship between the support granted by leadership on the reservation and in the community with the desire to avoid letting them down. He stated, “it was you know; you don't want to let people down, you know, there's a lot of people that that would believe in you know that we're really proud of me.” Throughout the different experiences among participants Tribal leadership was described as a potential source of financial and cultural support. Having support networks, whether in the form of supportive family and community or by way of mentorship and representation, was a significant perception of why participants in this study were able to persist and attain their degree. Along with the social and emotional benefits that support networks provided to participants, these networks were perceived to have served as protective factors to overcome the challenges and barriers experienced in higher education. Every participant in this study referred to support networks and specifically the mentors who provided guidance to navigate the higher education landscape. Lastly, while the institutions of higher education were not identified as providing support, participants suggested that cultural centers and student leadership opportunities offered the necessary support to persist.

Theme 4: What is the Alternative?

Eleven of the twelve participants discussed the importance of attaining a college degree and described that they did not want the alternative. For participants in this study, the alternative ranged from being limited in their opportunities for career advancement or death if they remained in the environment they were in before pursuing higher education.

Rez Life. Participants in this study who grew up on a reservation affirmed that the alternative to finishing their college degree was not a desired option. Participants discussed specific aspects of their reservation life experience and the alternatives that awaited if they did not complete their degree. Two participants shared stories of overcoming substance abuse during their college years that began when they lived on the reservation. One of these participants also expressed sorrow over a loved one who passed away because of substance abuse. Several participants shared that the reservations were geographically distant and lacked many of the resources that were necessary for supplies, healthy recreation, and health care. Participant 2 affirmed that earning a college degree provided career opportunities that otherwise would not have been available. Several participants mentioned alternative employment at the casino. However, it was always in reference as a backup

that was not desired but was available. Similarly, Participant 5 described her experience with reservation life and the motivation to persist and attain her degree.

We heard our parents go through. I didn't want to I don't want to be like everybody else. Which I almost ended up that way. I know I didn't just go from high school to college. There was a couple years and to be honest. Like I was in rehab when I was 18 as soon as I turned 18, like month later two months later. I was in rehab. So those, like that reality that, like I could I could have been somewhere different and I need to keep going because you know, I was getting sober at the beginning of my college career. I was probably like a year or two sober if that. Watching my little cousins grow up in the same way that I was growing up. I still see that now. Just those are motivators to keep going.

The participant used the word “motivators” to describe the impact of her reservation life experiences. In similar vein, participant 7 stated, “education is the way up and it’s the way out.” Participant 2 also discussed similar experiences with overdosing on drugs and vehicle accidents and he stated, “it’s a miracle I made it where I am at” and affirmed that he explains to his current students that “college saved [him], it saved [his] life.” Participants 9 and 10 equated going to college to opening doors of opportunity.

Giving Back to the Community. Kumeyaay college graduates value giving back to their Native community and being a role model for others on their reservation, as evidenced by their interviews and the active discussion during the focus group. Participant 1 described Kumeyaay culture as being “big on family. We take care of our family everyone all the older people on the reservation like their family loves them so much.” Similarly, Participant 4 explained how the experiences of reservation life and the alternatives to obtaining a college education helped her understand that she needed a degree to help her people navigate through the challenges and barriers experienced. Participant 4 also affirmed that in Kumeyaay culture, they are taught that if they go to school, they must return to “give back to your community” because “this is where you came from.” She shared that the value is reciprocal, and they serve the generations that served them during their education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Cultural and identity revitalization emerged as an essential concept in supporting the persistence of Kumeyaay college graduates in this research. The results of this study highlighted the vibrant and active lived experiences

that Kumeyaay college graduates has as they continued to develop their identity and engaged in internal and external leadership opportunities to leverage various support networks for contributions to their community. Participants in this study discussed the significance of learning their Kumeyaay history and the value of growing in both academic and cultural knowledge. While the literature on the impact of student peer support and cultural centers suggested that these resources increased sense of belonging and persistence (Bowman et al., 2015; McShay, 2017; Park, 2014; Simmons, 2013), Kumeyaay students in this study engaged in a more active role on campus through leadership of organizations and starting support systems when they were not available at their institution. Findings in this study suggest that participation in the leadership of Native American student organizations was perceived to support persistence of Kumeyaay students.

Consistent with relevant literature, even when institutions of higher education did not have support systems in place, participants indicated that their Kumeyaay community and their family networks were critical to their degree attainment (Guillory & Wolverton, 2018; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Jackson et al., 2003; Lopez, 2018; Marroquin & McCoach, 2014). A concept that emerged in this study revealed that despite being first-generation college students, participants had a strong college going culture that was fostered by parents and/or their tribal leadership. The college going culture was a distinct characteristic about the participants in this study as compared to other community members part of the Kumeyaay Nation. Participants in this study shared the unique experience of having family or tribal leadership in their respective reservations that fostered a college going culture. When this paradox examined experiences with the participant's perceptions, they perceived a lack of family support or the presence of a college going culture among Kumeyaay college students who dropped out or delayed degree attainment. Kumeyaay college graduates in this study perceived the challenges of growing up on reservations as motivating factors to persist and attain their degree as an alternative that could open the door of opportunity. Unlike research that focuses on the negative factors found in Native American communities, this study revealed a Native community that is resilient and driven by education to bring about transformation that is culturally centered and equipped for the future. Participant 12 suggested that earning a college degree can change the narrative and that he continues to witness the benefit of his education in himself, his family, and his community. The significance that serving as a role model and giving back to the community played on participants persistence and degree attainment aligns with other studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Henderson et

al., 2015; Minthorn, 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). Finally, the motivation to improve or to give back to their community that supported and sustained them during their college experience was likewise positively associated with increased persistence and degree attainment.

Limitations

The phenomenological nature of this study presents limitations to the subjectivity of the potential participant's reluctance to disclose the whole lived experience of the phenomenon under study. Familiar with qualitative research, findings are generalized and may be relatable to other Native American community experiences in higher education. Additionally, increased sampling presented research limitations with control study samples and dependent variables of participants in the initial data collection. However, the final sample represented members interviewed from various Kumeyaay Nation reservations and a broad graduation period.

Implications

In the United States economy, projections indicate that 65% of jobs require a college degree (Carnevale et al., 2014). Evidence of the socioecological challenges experienced by Indigenous communities (Martin & Danner, 2017; O'Keefe et al., 2018; Sitter & Hautala, 2016; Turanovic & Pratt, 2017), highlights that institutions of higher education and the Kumeyaay Nation have a vested interest in improving persistence and graduate rates among Kumeyaay college students. Findings in this study contribute to the understanding of the lived experience of Kumeyaay college graduates and the perceived supportive factors to persistence and graduation.

The research findings revealed the need for institutions of higher education to develop culturally responsive and sustainable collaborations with local Native American Nations support Native students better. Suppose higher education do not invest in collaborations that support college-going Native students. In that case, they may perpetuate the current low rates of degree attainment among this population, and this may result in greater rates of unemployment that can become a burden the larger socioeconomic landscape (Martin & Danner, 2017; O'Keefe et al., 2018; Sitter & Hautala, 2016; Turanovic & Pratt, 2017).

The findings in this study affirm previous research that suggests family and community support is critical to the success of Native American students in higher education (Bass & Harrington, 2014; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003; Lopez, 2018; Schmidtk, 2016). Leveraging existing mentors, increasing faculty representation, and

supporting student peer support networks, tribal leadership in collaboration with institutions of higher education can enhance Native American student's college experience, which may result in increased retention and graduation rates. The intentional collaboration between institutions of higher education and Native American communities may also help develop a greater college going culture across communities by including the voices of the community in the development of programing and support services.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study aligns with previous research in Native American student persistence. Future research could explore the impact of degree field selection on the persistence and graduation rates among Native American students and would provide insight into the potential need for education regarding career opportunities. Given that the present study revealed that reservation life was both a perceived motivator to degree attainment for those who grew up on a reservation and perceived barrier by those who did not grow up on a reservation, research on the difference between growing up on a reservation and growing up outside of a reservation would also be beneficial.

CONCLUSION

The process of cultural and identity revitalization, active engagement in leadership opportunities for a diverse network of support, and resilience dedicated to serving the Native community were all perceived factors that empowered participants to persist and attain their degrees. Given that the growing demand for earning a college education remains competitive in America's economic and workforce environment, it is critical to provide a safe and supportive learning environment where Kumeyaay and other Native American students have equitable opportunities to attain a baccalaureate degree.

The results of this study suggest that while the Kumeyaay lived experiences included social and financial support structures, challenges with attending college impacted the Kumeyaay student's cultural identity and the perceived supportive factors that helped participants overcome these academic barriers. However, the Kumeyaay culture and the college graduates' self-efficacy and resilience provide hope for continued improvement with higher education institutions and inspire others in the Kumeyaay Nation to pursue higher education. For graduates completing baccalaureate education, the post-degree achievement supports Kumeyaay leadership through family and community support that actively acknowledges the importance of

mentorship to give back through services that passionately benefit learners for current and future graduates in the community.

The research findings of this study may be instrumental to developing policies and programming that will leverage the resiliency and strengths of Kumeyaay students who are overcoming generational barriers and systemic challenges during their higher education journey.

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