Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi (Where They Live Contently): A Study on Native Student Belonging at the University of South Dakota

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Abstract

In this dissertation, the impact of Living Learning Communities (LLCs) on Native student sense of belonging is examined and the following research question addressed: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community shape Native students' sense of belonging at the University of South Dakota (USD)? There is limited research written on Native student experiences in university housing, and this study contributes to that limited body of literature by examining a high impact approach: living learning communities. Through a narrative inquiry approach, student experiences are integrated into the research via one-on-one interviews that are coded for terms. From this analysis, an emergent theory titled *Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi* (*a Reliance on Stars): A Theory of Belonging for Native Students* is developed centered on five tenets that impact sense of belonging*:* Wicoti wico un (Community), Ob tanyan un (Connection), Sloliciye (Sense of Identity / Being Native), Okiyapi (Support), Wounspe iciye (Learning Through Experience). This study encourages Native researchers to develop culturally relevant frameworks to better understand Native student concepts of belonging within their selected institutions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Where They Live Contently

Wakpa Wase (Red Clay Creek)

Vermillion, Wakpa Wase (Red Clay Creek), is a small college town located on the southeastern border of South Dakota where the University of South Dakota (USD) has been located since 1883 (*USD Mission & History*, 2025). There have been many Native people who have impacted this town on the river—culture keepers, storytellers, first language speakers, educators, artists—all influenced by its history and connection across generations. Native people often frame their lives as what has come before and what will come after. One becomes part of a long story of place, community, and feeling a connection to home. At the time of publication of this dissertation, Vermillion is my place-based connection to community, belonging, and being Lakota.

The first time I came to Wakpa Wase, I had been invited to speak at USD's Center for Diversity and Community (no longer on campus due to South Dakota's ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] programs) and ended the evening with a few Native students I had known from a previous program. We walked to the Native American Cultural Center (NACC) across campus, a place I did not know would eventually become so important to my life. A little over a year later, and at the height of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic, I would be hired as USD's Director of Native Student Services (NSS) with my office located at the front of that same special building.

The Director of Native Student Services at the University of South Dakota "coordinates services and support for the development and retention of Native American students as highlighted in the overall mission of the institution" (Student Services, 2022). USD holds some of the oldest higher education related relationships to tribal communities in the state of South Dakota. The first Native student organization, formerly called Wapaha Club, and now Tiospaye Student Council, was founded in 1957 and the NACC, the building with the red door at 409 East Clark Street, was in its same location on campus since 1988.

Since I began my new position during COVID-19, I was presented with many challenges around community building, student retention, and program planning. The South Dakota Board of Regents had maintained all campuses in-person (with only a break between spring break and the end of spring semester), so when the role began, I had to learn the ins and outs of the position while wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing, and learning how to handle both physical and mental health crises. This work was learned within a complex framework—operating inside a community on the run from an illness the world had minimal understanding of at the time—which made developing a sense of connection both limited and difficult.

Tikage (To Make a Home/Home Away From Home)

As I made it through my first year at USD, the Native Student Services team at USD—which included myself, Megan Red Shirt-Shaw; Dr. John Little (Director of Native Recruitment and Alumni Engagement); and Brooke Jackson, (Coordinator of Native Student Services)—began to observe that many students were relaying housing-

related and dormitory-related problems they were experiencing. The students had been faced with challenge and distrust when it came to where they went to rest, and they shared many stories involving miscommunications, microaggressions, and feelings of division regarding a stereotypical view of Native culture and identity. Dr. Little observed how much the roommate experience overall impacted students from feeling safe, understood, and connected. The team decided they would seek a solution to the housing struggles many Native students encountered and began to ask: What could be created at USD that would help to alleviate some of the stress around dormitories and roommate relations for Native students on campus? On a Wednesday afternoon midsemester, the Native Student Services team submitted a proposal for a Native-focused Living Learning Community (LLC) at USD to University Housing, a division that hosted other LLC communities in its dormitories. The proposal was quickly approved, and we were asked if they a formalized programmatic plan could be submitted by the end of the week for the following academic year.

After the new Native-focused LLC was approved, our team was given permission to begin recruiting students and seeking funding opportunities for the LLC's programming. That fall, the program was selected by a funding organization at USD called *Women in Philanthropy* as "one of four new initiatives supported with financial investment to promote leadership development; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); student success and more" and we were awarded a $5,000 grant to kickstart its beginning throughout the academic year. In the fall of 2021, Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community welcomed its first class of students. Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi, a

Lakota language phrase provided by Dr. Delphine Red Shirt, professor at Stanford University and first language Lakota speaker, is translated to “Where They Live Contently.” The University Housing description to post on their website and for the students to apply through the housing portal was as follows:

> Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi—which translates from Lakota to “they are living contently”—is a community dedicated to Native American or Indigenous students and/or Native American studies majors and minors. The community is designed to provide students with a supportive community that centers Native American/Indigenous perspectives, cultures and histories. In this Living Learning Community, you’ll have the opportunity to participate in cultural and traditional workshops focusing on important conversations about cultural preservation, tribal sovereignty, language revitalization and the betterment of Native nations. (USD Native Student Services, n.d.)

Thus, a home away from home, Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community at the University of South Dakota began—and the Native Student Services team set forth to start planning and implementation for formal programming and community building.

Hecel Lena Oyate Kin Ni Unpi (So That the People May Live)

When our retention team developed a formal implementation plan of the new LLC, part of the proposal was financially incentivized for participation. While many traditional Living Learning Programs (LLPs) have an academic component—which usually includes a credit bearing class—we decided Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi would instead center learning opportunities that did not bear credit, grades, or the opportunity to

earn a failing mark. Without the academic component, Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi provides an opportunity for students to transition into the university community while learning about themselves through connection, culture, and conversation. Many of the students who participate in the LLC are connected on a cultural level that is very different from an academic interest—older and stronger than Western concepts of seeing, knowing, and belonging. The opportunities for kinship extend beyond students, faculty, and staff meeting each other for the first time through a tradition of creating a *tiwahe* (the Lakota concept for the family one lives with) or *tiospaye* (the Lakota concept for extended family) through Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi and the NACC, rather than within an academic environment.

At a previous USD partnership program provided support to Native students where Dr. Little had been the Director, his team had been allotted half-housing scholars for student participation if they decided to matriculate to USD (the partnership campus). When that external partnership ended, Dr. Little proposed that Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi be reallocated the same 32 half-housing scholarships provided to the other programming, and this proposal was approved.

Since that first class, Dr. Little has worked in partnership with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and University Housing to provide half-housing scholarships to its participants. The half-housing scholarship is equivalent to half the cost of residential living for USD's North Complex, comprised of predominantly first-year dormitories. As of 2021, this was equal to roughly $2,250 in financial aid students received for becoming a participant. To earn and maintain this half-housing scholarship,

LLC participants make a commitment to attend 80% of weekly Wednesday programs, equating to 11 out of the 14 weekly programs for the fall semester. Since 2021, the Wednesday programming has included speaker series, workshops, fairs with different opportunities for students, and a dinner with select faculty and staff. Many events include meals, connecting to a cultural power of feeding relatives while also guarantees a meal to students who are varied in financial need.

Between 2021 and 2025, since the LLC has been on campus, USD has had more than 34 tribal nations represented on campus, which includes all nine of the federally recognized tribes in the state of South Dakota. This has become an important consideration when building programming for students registered in the LLC, because LLC students represent different tribal nations. The community seeks to honor the traditional homelands of all who are place-based and related within the state of South Dakota, while also representing that the student body is tribally diverse in connection, community, identity, and thought.

In the fall of 2021, during the first year of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi, I was sitting in my office at the NACC, and a student came to ask if the LLC programming would be continuing again in the spring. Because it was a pilot program, there was always a hesitation throughout the first semester that it was not the right fit for creating a sense of belonging. Assuming she was unhappy, I quickly shared with the student that she did not have to continue with it if she did not want to do so. She firmly said, “No … I look forward to it every week.” As Strayhorn (2018) observed, to create a system by which students can excel, educators must foster conditions that engage belonging among

students. In fall of 2024, Native Student Services and Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi welcomed its fourth class of students to a home away from home at USD.

The Need for Native Research

Over the last 25 years, less than 1% of the published higher education scholarship has been committed to the study of Native American student experiences in colleges and universities, despite trends that demand research attention to this population (Native Governance Center, 2019). The 2016 total college rate for American Indian/Alaska Native young adults, at 19%, was not measurably different from the 2000 rate (Aud et al., 2010; Brayboy et al., 2012; DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Native-student enrollment, as well as retention, continues to be the lowest compared to other racial and ethnic populations (Shotton et al., 2013). Reflecting on these statistics, scholars—many of whom are themselves Indigenous—have observed that Native people have been "excluded from institutional data and reporting, omitted from the curriculum, absent from the research and literature, and virtually written out of the higher education story" in the United States (Shotton et al., 2013, p. 2).

In the last 15 years, Native scholars have dedicated an increased focus on studies and research related to Native higher education (Minthorn & Shotton, 2018). Scholarship written by Indigenous educators has risen to challenge previous patterns, often written by non-Native researchers, that projected Native student experiences in higher education through deficit models (Shotton et al., 2013). Deficit models and perspectives are persistent in literature about Native people (Lopez & Marley, 2018) however, Indigenous scholars have long understood Western views of education perceive Western ways of

knowing to be more legitimate than Indigenous ways of knowing (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Smith, 2012). These voices, who have a better understanding of Native epistemologies, methodologies, histories, and cultures, have begun demanding they be considered experts in Native education. The lens upon which higher education scholars are challenged to take is one focused on nation building, self-determination, tribal sovereignty, and Indigenous persistence in Western educational systems (Shotton et al., 2013).

Land-Based Reparations

This dissertation, and Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC, hope to serve as a retention model for other land grant and non-land grant institutions to be rooted in a true acknowledgement of land theft and dispossession for Native people through a housing focused sense of belonging and scholarship. The idea rests in an opportunity for students to find home in college on their homelands. In March of 2020, Tristan Ahtone and Robert Lee (2021)[1] published a report titled *Land Grab Universities*, where formal documentation of land acquisition proved that Indigenous-expropriated land was the foundation of the land grant university system in higher education. Ahtone and Lee (2021) forced many campuses to face their own histories and ask the question of how land-based reparations are essential for institutions that benefitted from the removal of Native people and the possession of land that was once sacred to their communities.

In response to this report, in August of 2020, I published a policy brief titled *Beyond the Land Acknowledgement: LAND BACK or Free Tuition for Native Students*,

[1] The report was released in 2020, but the official publication year is 2021.

where the argument was made that land acknowledgements are empty without recognition of the histories higher education has long ignored. All institutions, not just land grant universities, should either (1) return the land to Native nations or (2) provide Native students access to higher education on their traditional homelands for free (Red Shirt-Shaw, 2020).

While there were already institutions that follow a tuition-free model (e.g., University of Minnesota–Morris and Fort Lewis College), through the advocacy of many scholars and educators, even more public universities have created tuition-free policies for Native students. This includes where I am completing my doctoral work—the University of Minnesota. This report, and the extensions of its impact, serves as an important reminder that the concept of "land back" can be served in higher education through traditional ideas around creating a home by living with other students. It provides an opportunity to create a Tiwahe or Tiospaye central to success as Oceti Sakowin or Native people. It provides a framework for students to receive free or reduced housing on Native homelands. This report, as well as much of the research that has extended from it, challenges higher education institutions to consider what place based knowing, belonging, and home means for Native students on campus.

Position Statement

In my experiences working in higher education, I have often been asked to assess my own experience alongside other Native students without an understanding of respecting the societal, cultural, and social differences among tribal nations, communities, and individuals. As an Oglala and Sicangu Lakota researcher intending to

conduct this work in a responsible way that honors culture and community, I approached this study with both a critical and hesitant lens. I honor the responsibility of conducting research as an enrolled member of a federally recognized nation, and center my own positionality as nonrepresentative of all Native people, only my own lens. “Le miye, this is who I am” (Red Shirt, 1998, Introduction).

In January of 2021, only a few weeks after I started my new role as Director of Native Student Services, Dr. Little (not only my colleague but also more importantly—my husband) and I walked past a window in downtown Vermillion where a painting was highlighted on a stand. The man in the painting looked very much like my great, great, great grandfather, Ogle Luta, Chief Red Shirt, a powerful advocate for culture and education for Lakota people. Every day for a few weeks, I drove past the painting on my way to work, looking at him in the window, holding my breath if for only a moment I thought someone else might have bought it. Finally, I spoke to the store owner who connected with the artist, Daniel Long Soldier, who had been trained by my relative, Andrew Standing Soldier, and he confirmed it was in fact a painting of Ogle Luta. He is standing on the Plains with a horse, the Black Hills behind him. As Dr. Delphine Red Shirt (my mother) wrote about our family:

> When I think about where I come from, I am reminded of the vast area of land my grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and great-great grandfathers roamed, and the place where they considered their home to be: their sacred land, the “He Sapa,” the Black Hills. I think about how free they were, about the places where they

> held their ceremonies and their Sun Dances, their summer and their winter campus in the Black Hills. (Red Shirt, 1998, p. 62)

I purchased the painting, and it now hangs on the wall in my office in the Native American Cultural Center. I look up often in my day to remind myself of the legacy for which Ogle Luta hoped. I remind myself that our relations are always with us—helping us search for home. I too in many ways searched for a place throughout my Kindergarten through graduate school experience, where I could be myself, be celebrated for my own lived experiences, and give affirmation to others looking for that place, too. As the only Native student in many of my classrooms growing up, my physical home was truly the only space where I felt like I was understood in who I was as a Lakota person. I dreamed of and prayed for this experience for myself and all Native students throughout my life and remind myself every time I walk through the doors of the NACC, experiences another Wednesday of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community, and spend quality time with another fantastice Native student.

This dissertation was written in conjunction with my being the full time Director of Native Student Services. The day-to-day responsibilities of student-centered care, community building, and advocacy were not paused while this writing was completed. Working full time and writing this dissertation has been a difficult balance of participation versus research. Much like Strayhorn (2018) acknowledged in his own work around sense of belonging, it is very difficult to write about support of students and their success on one hand and simultaneously ignore a student who might need help on the

other hand. I ground myself as Lakota first, and a practitioner-scholar second. “Waci ma napa, my thoughts are split in two” (Red Shirt, 1998, p. 74).

Zitkala (The Bird)

I examined the work through what I singularly have learned as a Lakota person, because I descend from a long line of humble and important Lakota people. My grandmother, Winyan Isnala (Lone Woman), described her own experiences entering Western education systems to my mother on a tape recording that would eventually become a book about her life, *Turtle Lung Woman's Granddaughter*. In this excerpt, she talks about being required to speak English instead of Lakota:

> Now I could not speak the language I knew best, to say what I wanted to, whenever I wanted. I could not express how I felt about this new place, called “owayawa,” school. I know how “zitkala,” the bird, or “khagi,” the crow, felt when they split its tongue and made it speak. (Red Shirt, 1998, p. 136)

She, the woman who aligned with me in my early years, remembered the old fable that splitting a crow’s tongue could make it speak. There is a responsibility in recruiting Native students to college that they will be met with a community and a family to center their care, and that they will never again be forced to speak without others there who understand their lived experiences. I approached this work through a phrase my mother taught me in Lakota, “weksuye, ciksuye, miksuye,” which translates as closely as it can in English to, “I remember, I remember you, remember me.” This research should be about honoring one another in our experiences as Native people, about a reciprocal relationship that takes on larger collective memory and meaning. It should be about the

me honoring myself as a Lakota person, instilling Lakota values, and using my lived experience as a Lakota person to write about Native student experiences. It should be about serving communities, about searching for home, wiyuskinyan unpi tipi, where they (our students) live contently.

Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi

As Schussler and Fierros (2008) confirmed in their research study, an outcome of LLC participation can be experiencing a sense of belonging on a college campus. This doctoral research study sought to understand if Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC at USD creates a sense of belonging for Native students through providing them an opportunity to live with other students who understand their lived experiences, community building, and strategic programming. This community is anchored by centering and prioritizing Native perspectives weekly for the students who participate, allowing them to be removed from their experiences in being one of only a few at a predominantly White institution (PWI), USD.

To inform the work of creating an LLC for Native students, this literature review will cover a historical analysis of Native higher education, contemporary research on Native American students in higher education, and the impact of university housing and living environments for Native college students. Literature focused specifically on Native student experiences in housing has been very limited in the larger body of research across higher education (Singson et al., 2016). Unfortunately, because Native students are often represented by an asterisk in higher education data without a solid framework (Shotton et al., 2013), they represent what could be classified as a close to “invisible” population,

which impacts their senses of self, aspirations for the future, and perspectives on the earning of college degrees (Fryberg & Stephens, 2010, p. 115). The creation of an LLC for Native students provides an opportunity for students to see themselves reflected in the spaces in which they live, counteracting these feelings of invisibility on campus, as Erb et al. (2015) described:

> Not unlike the outcomes of competition, purpose-driven programming and living-learning communities afford students the opportunity to see themselves as crucial members of a group or community that mutually benefits from their contributions and centers their efforts on a particular interest or initiative. Such initiatives, whether focused within or outside the campus community, strive to establish a core group of peers with which the student can find solidarity. (p. 13)

In examining literature that supports the creation of Living Learning Programs (LLPs) for Native students, the importance of finding a connection to college—and a home where students feel a sense of belonging—is central to creating high impact practices for student success (Paige et al. 2017). This literature is essential to better understanding Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi at USD.

Our team held the hope of creating a program that can live beyond our time at the institution in both format and the impact it has had a student who participated, a program that redefines concepts of what it truly means to find a home away from home on campus. This qualitative narrative inquiry study addressed the following research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD? May this dissertation serve as an affirmation of the importance of

communities like Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC, the Native American Cultural Center, and the Division of Native Student Services in higher education. It is a love letter dedicated to the importance of creating community, belonging, and connection for Native students through kinship and connection to home.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD?

Significance of Study

As Schussler and Fierros (2008) confirmed in their research study regarding housing experiences, an outcome of LLC participation can be through experiencing a sense of belonging on college campuses. Due to the lack of studies focused on Native student experiences in university housing, this study was an opportunity for further contribution to a very small body of literature. Through student interviews, I offer an examination of belonging as essential to the value and longevity of the program. This study is an important contribution to the literature because of its focus on an underrepresented student population experience in an LLC and how active participation affects student sense of belonging. Community is created through centering and prioritizing Native perspectives on a regular weekly basis and has provided an opportunity for students to be removed from their experience of being one of only a few Native students at a predominantly White institution. These feelings of belonging are centered on the creation of a student familial unit that is care-centered, community focused, and open to a spectrum of lived experiences.

Terminology

The following terms are important to identify for the purpose of this study:

- **Native student:** For this research study, a Native student is defined as a self-identifying Indigenous student from federally recognized, state recognized, or un-recognized Nations. In building a community of understanding at USD, the opportunity for students to disclose and self-identify is important to their own sense of community and belonging. This does not always align with National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) definition of Native student because any student who marks multiple racial categories, is not categorized within Native student data on a national level.
- **Living Learning Community (LLC):** A living learning community is a cocurricular environment for students to engage in learning (Buell et. al, 2017).
- **Financially incentivized:** The LLC program focused on within this research study does not have an academic partnership. Instead, it has a financial partnership with the Office of Undergraduate Admission through a half-housing scholarship. Students have an opportunity to become a participant in the LLC and receive a half-housing scholarship (in the 2024-2025 academic year this was equivalent to $2,250), but these spots are limited in quantity year-to-year. Rather than an academic evaluation, students who decide to become members of the community understand their receipt of the half-housing scholarship is dependent on their participation and attendance in LLC programming. This differentiation is important to distinguish because most traditional LLCs partner with academic

departments instead of distributing scholarships or financial awards for participation.

- **Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi:** This phrase was given to the community by Dr. Delphine Red Shirt. The LLC team approached her and asked her to gift the community a name. She is a first language Lakota speaker and professor at Stanford University. She gave the term Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi, which roughly translates to “Where They Live Contently.”

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction to Literature Review

Terminology

The canon of literature focused on Native students in higher education utilizes different terminology to reference Native American students generally, including Native American, American Indian, Indian, Native, and Indigenous, among others, as there is no consensus across the literature for terms, changing year-to-year and survey-to-survey (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Lopez & Marley, 2018; Shotton et al., 2013). These terms are used interchangeably. In articles where a specific tribal affiliation is noted that specific tribal lens is noted instead. When examining specific tribal nations, three important terms in the study of Indigenous peoples are tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and decolonization. First, tribal sovereignty is defined as: "the right to govern one's community, the ability to preserve one's culture, and the right to control one's own economy" (Federal BAR Association, 2017). Second, self-determination (protected by Article 3 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*) states, "Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development" (United Nations, 2007, p. 8). Third, decolonization, as defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), "is recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power" (p. 101).

Importance of Place-Based Knowing

In the study of Native higher education, the historical, as well as day-to-day experiences of Native people, are distinct and vary across tribal identities (Brayboy et al., 2012). Singson et al. (2016) wrote, "college campuses are places of historical tension because Native American students live on land that was colonized by the very institutions from which they seek an education … no other population comes to college with these characteristics" (p. 112). Harmonizing Native epistemology (i.e., ways of knowing) and ontology (i.e., ways of being) with the dominant culture and customs of Non-Native Colleges and Universities (NNCUs) can be the most intense, invisible task that Native students endure within these contexts. This struggle can go undetected, as NNCUs are often unaware of place-based knowing (Singson et al., 2016). Native students who are navigating systems of Western higher education must understand certain themes and place them into the context of their own tribal understandings (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

Native scholars in higher education privilege the idea that Indigenous ways of knowing are centered on land, living beings, the cosmos, and the responsibility to these relationalities that is central to making meaning of our surroundings (Shotton et al., 2013). An Indigenous perspective on land and place, as a relationship, is an example of what Native students bring with them when they leave home to attend college. An understanding of how those tensions manifested is centered in understanding the tribal nations locally impacted when writing the literature about a particular institution. Being tribally specific in writing, where appropriate, is more accurate to the research than identifying with a larger pan-Indian identity (Fox et al., 2005).

South Dakota, where this doctoral research and location specificities within the literature review was grounded, occupies the territory of the Oceti Sakowin, often known as the Great Sioux Nation (Glover, 2005). The Oceti Sakowin, or Sioux Nation, is a confederacy of tribal nations that occupy three different language dialects: the Dakota, the Nakota, and the Lakota. The Lakota is the largest of the three dialects, or bands, and occupy reservations that are in South Dakota and North Dakota. The Dakota, or Santee Sioux, live in South Dakota, Minnesota, and Nebraska while the Nakota reside predominantly in South Dakota and Montana. The state of South Dakota occupies nine federally recognized tribes overall: the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, the Oglala Sioux Tribe, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the Yankton Sioux Tribe, the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (Glover, 2005; Native Governance Center, 2019).

Although this concept of place-based knowing is critical to ground in this research, there are tribally specific gaps of documented experience in the current literature; therefore, the texts selected for this review span a wide range of Native and non-Native perspectives. Due to this factor, the range of language used to describe tribal nations and Native people is diverse across the research, but it should be noted that this was written from a Lakota researcher's lens, epistemology, and framework. This dissertation focused on one LLC at USD in Vermillion, South Dakota, is anchored to its physical location as an experience of on-campus University Housing, while also being a

structure and conceptual framework rooted in place-based knowing that higher education literature seeks to recognize.

To understand the importance of place-based learning, sense of belonging for Native students, and the importance of an LLP designed from an Indigenous perspective, it is critical to understand the many historical factors that contribute to Native student challenges in higher education (Brayboy et al., 2012). This includes the history of Native education, the model of a financially incentivized living learning community, and a larger understanding of how Native students experience higher education because of this timeline and these factors. This chapter examines the frameworks that have defined the importance of the creation of LLCs for Native student sense of belonging.

History of Native Higher Education

Introduction

The history of education in the United States has always intersected with Native student success (Brayboy, 2014). Throughout the literature, scholars have identified three critical eras of Native higher education that inform the infrastructures that exist today: the colonial era, the federal era, and the self-determination era (Cunningham & Redd, 2000; Fox et al., 2005). As Reyhner and Eder (2017) stated:

> [After] hundreds of years of contact with European immigrants, Indians have good reason to be suspicious of anything European, and schools, even Indian-controlled ones with Indian administrators and Indian teachers … are alien institutions as far as Indian cultures are concerned. (p. 167)

As Smith (2012) articulated, and many Native scholars agree, though enrolling in postsecondary education provides a new opportunity for Native students, understanding the history of the systems within which they are expected to be successful will help in overcoming the wrongdoings of the past. Institutions of higher education were critical to the colonization process because the ability to attend meant that a Native student had "assimilated" and was ready to move into the next phase of Western colonial thought (Smith, 2012, p. 68). As Smith (2012) identified, "although colonial universities saw themselves as being part of an international community and inheritors of a legacy of Western knowledge, they were also part of the historical processes of imperialism" (p. 68).

Colonial Era

The first era, the colonial era of Native higher education, began with contact with Europeans in 1492 and extended until the end of the Revolutionary War (Cunningham & Redd, 2000). Europeans who encountered Native people viewed them as lacking a formal system of education, despite methods reflected how many systems existed around the world, by learning from familial relations or elders (Carney, 1999). Three of the original nine colonial colleges—Harvard College, William and Mary College, and Dartmouth College—included the education of Native students in their charter (Lomawaima, 1999). Harvard's charter stated it was committed to "the education of the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and godliness" (Brooks, 2018, p. 82). However, there were reports written about tribal leaders who declined the opportunity to send their Native students into the first colonial colleges, due to a concern that these spaces

contributed to the erasure of Indigenous ways of knowing. One such example of a negative response to the opportunity for students to attend came from Conassatego, who was an Onondaga-Mengwe chief. He stated:

> We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those Colleges and that the Maintenance of our young Men, while with you, would be very expensive to you … But you, who are wise must know that different Nations have different Conceptions of things and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same as yours. We have had some experience of it. Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces, where they were instructed in all your Sciences, but, when they came back they were bad Runners. Ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy; spoke our language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. (Carney, 1999, p. 30)

Although there were Native students who resisted Western education altogether, there were also those who believed attendance would solidify Native and White relationships or provide better success in their own futures and survival (Carney, 1999). However, it became evident that these colonial institutions of higher education were likely more interested in the fundraising opportunities that educating Native students brought, typically collecting donations from those interested in their missions as a concept, as opposed to a true commitment (Carney, 1999; Fox et al., 2005). Between 1660 and 1800,

these colonial colleges enrolled only 47 Native students, with a total of four graduates. The combination of financial interest from the colleges, as well as resistance from Native people, may have been a shared reason behind these numbers. Due to the failure of the colonial colleges in graduating Native students, the next era of Native higher education, the federal era, would focus further on assimilationist policies that brought vocational training for Native students to the forefront (Carney, 1999).

Federal Era

The second era, the federal era of Native higher education, began at the end of the American Revolution in 1783 and extended into the beginning of the 20th century (Carney, 1999; Cunningham & Redd, 2000). At the end of the American Revolution, due to the signing of treaties and ongoing negotiations, the relationship with the now United States and Native tribes was on a government-to-government basis (Carney, 1999). Between 1778 and 1871, there were 97 distinctive treaties signed that addressed the topic of Native education (Belgarde, 1996). The first treaty with a higher education provision was signed between the United States government and the Choctaw Nation in 1830 and granted scholarship funds. However, these funds were not accessed until 1841 when Choctaw students attended White higher education institutions (Turner et al., 1996). During this treaty period, the government's focus on Indian education was strictly through federal funding as well as policy (Carney, 1999).

Despite the rise of college development during the late 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, the colonial institutions that had initially committed to focusing on Native students through their charters or other provisions abandoned or minimized those efforts

(Fox et al., 2005). During this time, higher education for Native students shifted to vocational training, engaging through farming, labor, and other means that would assimilate them into Western society. Overall, the policy that drove higher education during the federal period was assimilationist. During this era, the federal government had also begun the process of the Indian Removal Act; so, while the federal government was displacing and controlling Native people with connections to land, they were also working to assimilate Native students into fitting in within White society (Carney, 1999). As Carney (1999) observed:

> [in] virtually every known society, the central purpose of education is the stewardship and passing on of culture, White education as offered to the Indian dwelled on the dissolution of their culture. In the rush to replace it with White culture, Indian culture was ignored or viewed as not worth knowing. (p. 50)

This belief system thrived in the creation of Indian boarding schools during the 19th century (Carney, 1999). The first federal Indian boarding school was the Carlisle Indian School, authorized by Congress and founded by army officer Richard H. Pratt in 1879 (Lomawaima, 1993). Pratt quickly became an authoritarian figure and believed Native culture was inferior to Western culture and White ways of knowing (Adams, 1995). Rather than believe in the well-known adage "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," Pratt believed in assimilation and instead became famous for his own mantra, "kill the Indian in him and save the man" (Adams, 1995, p. 52). Within five years of the authorization of Carlisle, the government had been so impressed by Pratt's militaristic efforts, other boarding schools began to open across the United States. The goal of these

schools was to Christianize, civilize, and assimilate Native children, through curricula and practices that focused on piety, obedience, and manual labor (Lomawaima, 1993). By 1899, 3,800 Native students had matriculated to Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and only 209 had graduated. This can now be assessed for many factors including abuse, death, lack of support systems, and the process of forced assimilation for Native students (Adams, 1995). Luther Standing Bear (Sicangu and Oglala Lakota) described his return home from Carlisle saying, "I (began) the battle of my life … to retain my individuality and my life as a Lakota" (Reyhner & Eder, 2017, p. 213). These boarding school systems became a mechanism by which the federal government continued the process of colonization; however, many Native people benefitted from higher education schooling and helped better their communities (Smith, 2012).

After the creation of boarding school systems, the Dawes Act of 1887 was passed, separating Native people from their community-focused societies, and prioritizing the individual by subdividing Native tribal lands into individual plots. The Curtis Act of 1898 followed, which destroyed tribal governments, and put the federal government in charge of Indian affairs (Carney, 1999). The opportunities for education continued to be propelled by the same factors upon which colonial institutions had been founded, including assimilation and Christianizing of non-Western thoughts and communities (Belgarde, 1996). Ultimately, these Western systems of education were created, "to transform Indian people and societies and eradicate Indian self-government, self-determination, and self-education" (Lomawaima, 1999, p. 5). Christianization, forced acculturation, and assimilation were the forces that continued to drive throughout the

federal era of higher education (Belgarde, 1996; Fox et al., 2005). Overall, the lack of attention to Native students during this time likely extended from three factors: overall racism within the country, the small size of the Native population, and the retention of federal control over Indian affairs. The third and final era, the self-determination era, would move back towards seeking autonomy for Native people in their concerns, with focused attention towards education (Carney, 1999).

Self-Determination Era

The third era, the self-determination era, was guided and informed by a few different historical events at the start of the twentieth century. After the destruction of tribal governments, a decrease in Native population, and the federal government continuing an assimilationist path, the self-determination era would present some of the most dramatic policy changes, contradictory to other decisions historically. The desire for Manifest Destiny had ended, and Native people were no longer considered to be a problem that needed to be assimilated or destroyed to acquire land by the federal government. The Snyder Act of 1921 granted control of higher education to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which created a centralized system and the opportunity for higher education grants for Native students (Carney, 1999). Then, in 1928, a study titled *The Meriam Report*, commissioned by Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, was conducted at the Institute for Government Research at Johns Hopkins University (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). It was written by Dr. W. Carson Ryan, Jr., a respected educator in the Progressive movement, as well as Henry Roe Cloud, an enrolled member of the Winnebago Nation who had attended and graduated from Yale University (Reyhner &

Eder, 2017). Although the report was generally critical of the treatment and livelihoods of Native people under the BIA, it also encouraged the restructuring of federal schools to include college preparation, as well as a request for additional funding and financial aid (Carney, 1999). One of the major challenges in Native students' pursuit of higher education presented was many of the boarding schools that had been created did not extend beyond the 10th grade, hence making college matriculation difficult without adequate preparation (Reyhner & Eder, 2017).

Although the self-determination era has been debated in timeline from different scholars in the literature, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, also known as the Indian New Deal, is often used as a starting point (Fox et al., 2005). The Indian New Deal reaffirmed Native tribes had both sovereignty and self-determination in the pursuit of their higher education and simultaneously created a loan fund for Native college students. Although this funding was a significant turning point for Native higher education, it was not until after World War II that an increase in Native students enrolling in higher education occurred (Carney, 1999). During the 1940s and 1950s, the United States federal government worked to end its trust relationship during the Termination Era with Native tribes and moved the responsibility for Native services away from the federal government and onto the states (Fox et al., 2005).

A renewed drive to reestablish self-determination in Indian education occurred during the 1960s, with the selection of the first Native person to head the BIA in a century named Robert Bennett, as well as Congressional Acts that would focus directly on educational support for Native people (Carney, 1999). The development of the Indian

Community Action Programs within the Office of Economic Opportunity allowed tribes a chance to administer their own affairs, without the influence of assimilation policies (Carney, 1999; Wright & Tierney, 1991). In 1966, the Rough Rock Demonstration School was founded on the Navajo Nation, which led to the creation of the first Native-controlled and -directed college in 1968 called Navajo Community College (Carney, 1999). Navajo Community College, today known as Diné College, served as a model and a case for the expansion of Indian community colleges, with a combination of vocational and Indigenous higher education models. It was followed by Sinte Gleska College on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in 1970, as well as Oglala Lakota College and Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl University in 1971. The same year, Congress passed the Navajo Community College Act, which appropriated funding to construct a $5.5 million campus. The passing of this act was the beginning of a more genuine self-determination era in Native higher education (Carney, 1999). Over the next 25 years, 30 tribally enrolled colleges were founded (Carney, 1999). These tribal colleges are governed under the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), which was founded in 1973 to provide support, to lobby, and to work towards accreditation (Carney, 1999; Cunningham & Redd, 2000).

In 1969, *The Kennedy Report* was issued, which focused predominantly on Indian education and called on many injustices for Native people in similarity to *The Meriam Report* (Carney, 1999). The Higher Education Act of 1978 provided an increase of financial aid funding for Native students, and in the same year, the Tribally Controlled Community College Act of 1978 allocated funds for these colleges (Carney, 1999). With

the creation of tribal colleges and a new era of self-determination for Native higher education, moving into the modern era, the numbers of Native students attending higher education would more than double over 30 years between 1976 and 2006 (Brayboy et al., 2012; DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; Shotton et al., 2013). In this literature review and research, USD is centered on land where tribal nations are continuously living, thriving, and in community; and the history of higher education creation intersects with those histories.

The History of Higher Education in South Dakota

Prior to the creation of higher education in South Dakota, the Great Sioux Reservation encompassed roughly 60 million acres, including the entirety of Western South Dakota and parts of surrounding states. The reservation was promised to the Lakota people in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. But two decades later, the federal government broke up tribal lands into smaller reservations and claimed much of the land in West River under the Dawes Act of 1887—2 years before South Dakota became a state in 1889 (Schell, 1961).

In 1862, the first territorial legislature passed a measure to create a university in Dakota Territory, and in 1882, USD was opened, predating the creation of the South Dakota Board of Regents (SDBOR; Goodchild et al., 2014; Schell, 1961). Since the creation of the state of South Dakota, the postsecondary system has developed few changes or initiatives, despite numerous studies by different agencies. Every study of the state of higher education in South Dakota since 1918 has made suggestions regarding the decision to consolidate or to close programs as well as university or college institutions.

One of the original universities, the State Normal School in Springfield, was the only school that closed because of low enrollments and at the behest of the governor at the time (Goodchild et al., 2014). The belief has been that six institutions are too many for a state with a smaller population, currently 814,180, written in reports such as the Academy of Educational Development visit in 1974 (Millett, 1984; United States Census Bureau, 2010). Despite these conversations, ultimately the board and the legislature never felt comfortable confronting the suggestion because of the politics it would cause across the institutions (Goodchild et al., 2014).

Currently, SDBOR governs six postsecondary institutions, which include the University of South Dakota, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, Black Hills State University, Northern State University, Dakota State University, and South Dakota State University (Goodchild et al., 2014). In 2019, the enrollment in the South Dakota public university system totaled 34,520 students. The percentage of South Dakota high school graduates entering the state school system was 32.3% as of the 2017–2018 school year, down from 36% in the 2010–2011 school year (SDBOR, 2020). Despite the lower state enrollment, the state system conferred 1,208 more degrees in 2019 than in 2009 (SDBOR, 2020). There are four publicly owned two-year technical schools, five private institutions, and three tribal colleges. The tribal colleges are Oglala Lakota College (founded in 1970), Sinte Gleska University (1971), and Sisseton Wahpeton Community College (1973; Goodchild et al., 2014).

Contemporary Research on Native American Students in Higher Education

The needs of the Native student demographic are unique to their peers, and it is important to understand the factors that contribute to lower enrollment numbers, with particular attention to how community engagement translates to individual student success (Shotton et al., 2013; Tinto, 1987). Education, particularly when it comes to Native students, should be focused on a student's ability to be successful in the world in which they will exist (Brayboy, 2014). In over 20 years of scholarship and 2,683 published articles in leading higher education research journals, Wilmott et al. (2015) discovered that only 36 of those articles focused on Indigenous student experiences in higher education. Although many larger higher education studies are conducted on college-going populations, it is the belief of many scholars that Native students are often not included due to small population numbers, typically excluded from studies because of the possibility that these data would skew report statistics (Shotton et al., 2013). In data collection, Native students are labeled with an asterisk and marked as statistically insignificant (Wilmott et al., 2015). Moreover, there is historical mistrust in data collection for Indigenous people because the federal government often used racial measures for social status and achievement-outcome justification (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). The first consideration to changing this was a lack of research designs that specifically focus on small samples are conducted by researchers (Lopez & Marley, 2018). The second consideration is whether Native students are typically excluded from the data because of nonculturally relevant variables (Lopez & Marley, 2018). Although theories on overall student retention have been considered across the literature, most of

these studies have not been studied with direct connection to American Indian students (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Due to the strong connections Western higher education systems have to Native communities in the United States, many Native scholars believe Native people are better positioned to critique systems of Western education, as they were forced to engage directly within this process of colonization (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

National Research on Native American Students

In 1976, roughly 76,100 American Indian and Alaska Native students were enrolled in higher education institutions; and by 2006, 181,100 American Indian and Alaska Native students were enrolled in postsecondary education (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Despite this increase, Native students still have the second lowest graduation rates nationally, the lowest percentage of college enrollment between the ages of 18 and 24, and the lowest attainment within a four- to six-year graduation period (Tierney et al., 2007). In 2006, Native students between the ages of 18 and 24 also continued to be enrolled in school at a lower rate than their peers, at 26%, and in comparison, 41% of Asian students, 33% of Black students, 27% of Hispanic students, and 58% of White students were reported to have been enrolled in higher education (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Out of 100 American Indian students, 51 will graduate from high school, and only 37 of these students will enroll in higher education and graduate within six years (Tierney et al., 2007). One of the largest shifts these numbers demonstrated was a shift from two-year institutions into larger numbers

enrolling in four-year institutions, which began happening in the late 1990s (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008).

Overall, Native students comprised 1.1% of the total college and university enrollment in 2006, which increased from 0.7% in 1976 (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Tierney et al. (2007) observed three key hypotheses for matriculation and success for Native students in higher education:

1. If American Indian students do not graduate from high school at a traditional age, the likelihood that they will attend college is less likely than their counterparts.
2. If American Indian students graduate from high school but do not immediately go to a postsecondary institution, the likelihood that they will ultimately attain a degree is less certain than their peers.
3. If American Indian students attend a postsecondary institution, they need to find means of support to attain a degree. (p. 16)

Many Native scholars reference Tinto's (1975, 1987) "Theory of Student Departure," which found students matriculate into college influenced by their personal, familial, and academic skill sets (Fox et al., 2005; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Student interactions with the college they select to attend, which includes both individuals and structures, mold these intentions. If they have a positive reaction, they further assimilate to the culture, which contributes to their retention; if they experience negative interactions, they feel an increased sense of alienation, which can lead to dropping out of school. Therefore, student departure occurs when their intentions and the campus environment no longer

align (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Tinto, 1987). As scholar Sherene Razack (2015) observed about important retention factors in higher education:

> The pernicious idea that it has all been simply a cultural misunderstanding persists in education. We have yet to develop anti-colonial pedagogies that would invite students to examine their complicity in ongoing colonialism … while universities are happy to promote courses on Indigenous knowledge, and individual students enthusiastically participate in smudging ceremonies, there is less willingness to consider issues of Indigenous sovereignty and colonial violence. (p. 203)

Native scholars are moving towards frameworks of resiliency to address retention theories centered on Indigenous methodologies (Clarke, 2002; Fox et al., 2005). Reports and studies have shown that Native students have often felt unsupported by institutions of higher education through experiences that involve racism, feelings of seclusion, and low enrollment and graduation rates (Brayboy et al., 2012). As scholars Deloria and Wildcat (2001) observed:

> When Indian students take all of the knowledge received in colleges and universities … they are led to believe that Indians are prepared to exercise self-determination because educated Indians are now able to begin to compete with the non-Indian world for funds, resources, and rights. But we must ask ourselves, where is the self-determination? What is it that we Indians as selves are determining? (p. 128)

These conflicts over identity within higher education become especially complicated when systems of Western epistemologies are privileged over Indigenous

methodologies (Smith, 2012). Deloria and Wildcat (2001) often made comparisons between non-Native and Native epistemologies in education and were critical of Native people being studied by non-Native researchers. Overall, there has been a call across the literature for Indigenous scholars to reclaim studying Native education (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018). Native voices, Indigenous epistemologies, and culturally centered frameworks are critical to the literature, because these positionalities provide a richness to higher education understandings (Shotton et al., 2013). As Deloria and Wildcat (2001) further observed:

> We can visualize the effects of education on Indians as follows. Non-Indians live within a worldview that separates and isolates and mistakes labeling and identification for knowledge. Indians were presumed to be within this condition except they were slower on the uptake and not nearly as bright as non-Indians. In truth Indians were completely outside the system and within their own worldview. (p. 133)

Native scholars are challenging the "indigenization of our educational system," through new and increased scholarship in these areas (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001, p. vii). The literature is now pushing to "[Indigenize] the academy," which "is not meant to express a destination, but a process that encourages us to privilege what's within ourselves as a starting point" (Minthorn & Shotton, 2018, p. 7). To exercise and to protect sovereignty, as well as self-determination, scholars of this literature identify giving students identity through the development of Native education is a crucial aspect

of confronting and challenging Western ideas in education (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). As Smith (2012) observed about the balancing of Western experiences for Native students:

> Assimilation policies in education were intended to provide one-way roads out for indigenous people who "qualified." Many did take that road and have never returned. There are many others, however, who choose to remain, to wear their identities with pride and work with and for their own communities and nations. (p. 232)

Because of the historical legacy of assimilation policies, Native students have historically not been well served by NNCUs, and leaders within higher education must commit to better understanding Native student experiences to improve their matriculation and graduation rates (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013). The process of self-determination and sovereignty is a crucial component of recruiting and retaining Native students in institutions of higher education (Brayboy et al., 2012). Assistance in attaining a college degree is a responsibility that should be shared among federal, state, and tribal governments, as well as the student and their family (Tierney et al., 2007).

A strong example and response to Indigenizing higher education was the formation of tribal colleges and universities, which were created to grant agency towards Native communities (Martin, 2005). As Belgarde (1996) observed about tribal colleges, they often "promote the culture of the tribe they serve … strengthen the economies … and strengthen the social fabric of the tribal community both internally and in conjunction with outside communities through empowering individual Indian people" (p. 9). There are currently 37 tribal colleges, with 35 accredited, that are all members of

AIHEC (Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018). To maintain federal funding, 51% of tribal college enrollment must be from federally recognized tribes (Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018). Today, 11% of all undergraduate American Indian/Alaska Native students attend a tribal college (Sanders & Makomenaw, 2018). These spaces have presented a culturally based curriculum that has contributed positively to the experiences of Native American students in higher education. Within these colleges, creating K–12 partnerships, summer bridge programs, and more opportunities for family-friendly spaces were critical to creating a culturally sensitive model (Martin, 2005). Culturally responsive schooling was found to be important across the analysis of Native education, because of the many different perspectives Native students bring into their classrooms and onto their campuses (Castegno & Brayboy, 2008). Being tribally specific in this work means that understanding the experience of Native students in the state of South Dakota is critical to the development of an LLC.

Contemporary Native Higher Education in South Dakota

High school experiences, as well as socialization within their identified home community, has been found to directly impact success in higher education for Native students (Ortiz & HeavyRunner, 2003). In 2019, the four-year high school graduation rate for Native students in South Dakota was lower than every other racial group at 54%, compared to 85% as an average for students of all backgrounds. As a result, they sometimes must attend school online, select a distant BIA school, or transfer to a predominantly White high school to stay on track, which can limit their postsecondary goals (Lowrey, 2019). As of 2012, of the 25,048 students enrolled across SDBOR

universities, there were 772 American Indian/Alaska Native students. In South Dakota, 11.6% of the American Indian population in the state hold a bachelor's degree, compared to 26.4% of the state's White population. As of 2022, 2.8% of students enrolled at SDBOR institutions identified as Native American (Huber, 2023). Importantly, for students, financial considerations impact the choice of location, as well as type of institution, when it comes to selecting students' final college choice (Tierney et al., 2007). This is an important factor to consider in students' choice of deciding to enroll in SDBOR institutions.

Financial Aid in South Dakota

In the fiscal year 2002–2003, with a $105,000 state financial aid budget, South Dakota became the only state not to provide any financial assistance to students attending postsecondary education (Arnone, 2004; Goodchild et al., 2014). The legislature had decided to eliminate its merit-based financial aid program, when it had already not been providing need-based financial aid to students (Goodchild et al., 2014). Other ways the state pursued funding higher education was through the creation of a college savings plan program, as well as by working with critical technology degree programs to cover costs for 200 students (Goodchild et al., 2014).

In the fall of 2004, the state introduced another merit-based program called the South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship. In 2013, Senate Bill 237 was passed by the legislature to create a need-based grant fund, which allowed roughly $200,000 from the state to be distributed to students at all six of the public universities, all four of the technical colleges, all five of the private colleges/universities, and the one tribal college

(SDBOR, 2020). In 2016, roughly 28% of college students in South Dakota were recipients of the federal Pell Grant (SDBOR, 2013) As of 2019, South Dakota continues to have virtually no need-based financial aid for students (Geheren, 2019). Much of the research conducted on financial aid often excludes or identifies Native students as statistically insignificant (SDBOR, 2013).

Financial Aid for Native Students

American Indian students, similar to African American and Latino students, are disproportionately represented within lower-income populations, and have less financial assistance available to attend postsecondary education (Tierney et al., 2007). For low-income students, financial aid can be a determining factor in the pursuit of higher education, particularly if students perceive funding is inaccessible or that there is no funding provided (Tierney et al., 2007). In 2012, 57% of men American Indian/Alaska Native students and 71% of American Indian/Alaska Native students with postsecondary aspirations reported the availability of financial aid was very important to their higher education aspirations (Ross et al., 2012). Although studies confirm financial aid is a barrier to college persistence for many populations of students, there is a gap in the literature that focuses on how and why financial aid—or lack thereof—impacts Native students in higher education persistence and decisions (Carney, 1999; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Mendez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2018). Financial aid research is critically needed to understand if it contributes as a factor of non-persistence for Native students (Youngbull, 2018).

Delineating the different options coupled with the costs of college, Tierney et al. (2007) discovered not only does deficient funding exist to pay for college but also American Indian students fear they will incur insurmountable debt by choosing to attend college. In exploring financial aid through a Native nation-building lens, which examined the intersection of tribal sovereignty and Native students' college experiences, financial aid for Native students is different than for any other cultural group (Nelson, 2018). In a study conducted by Dr. Matthew Van Alstine Makomenaw (2010), a student described their interaction with a staff member in a financial aid office:

> This is what she (financial aid staff member) said "this Indian tuition waiver right here is a gift from us (Hub University) for you to use." And I (Niizh) was like, I don't think so, you need to reword what you are saying. She (financial aid staff member) was like, "that is how we classify it," and I (Niizh) was like well you need to reword what you are saying. I said it is not a gift, you might, whatever you are thinking, you need to say this is what you are entitled to. (p. 860)

Students who transferred from tribal colleges to four-year universities in the Midwest cited the financial aid office as being one of the most frequently visited offices, though the experiences were not cited as positive, as demonstrated in the story above (Makonemaw, 2012). In 2003–2004, 82% of American Indian/Alaska Native students received financial aid in some capacity amounting to roughly $9,500 for that academic year, yet there is no national formal set of tracking for financial aid package trends for American Indian youth (Tierney et al., 2007). However, in the 2015–2016 school year, 87% of American Indian/Alaska Native students received grants, while 31% received

loans nationally and 46% of American Indian students attending part time received federal Pell Grants, which was higher than White students (30%), Hispanic students (38%), Asian students (27%), Pacific Islander students (27%), and students of two or more races (38%; Radwin et al., 2018). A unique funding opportunity for Native students seeking higher education is tribal financial aid, also referred to as tribal scholarships, which are offered to federally enrolled Native students and administered by tribal education departments (TEDs; Nelson, 2018).

Funding Sources from Tribal Nations

Created in the 1990s, self-determined tribal financial aid and scholarships changed the politicized perception of financial aid for Native students who wanted to attend higher education (Brayboy et al., 2012; Carney, 1999; Nelson, 2018). There is a complex history connected to financial aid, to assimilate through pursuing higher education or urban vocational programs, by separating students from their ways of knowing and communities (Carney, 1999; Nelson, 2018; Reyhner & Eder, 2017). There is a general misconception that tribal higher education funding will cover the gap of unmet aid American Indian students typically need to attend college (Tierney et al., 2007).

Another misconception is that tribal communities offer an equal amount of tribal aid to their communities. Arizona, as an example, serves 27 different tribal nations with 27 different tribal aid need analysis procedures for students dependent on their enrollment (Tierney et al., 2007). In a set of tribal nations that offered information about their financial aid policies, Tierney et al. (2007) discovered many of these nations did not have

enough aid to meet the demand of students, while also serving many students who applied who did not make the grade point average requirement. As Nelson (2018) observed, tribes in different regions have different relationships with types of financial aid as well as universities.

Although scholars have indicated an overall shift in Native student enrollment from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, the initial reasons behind many Native students enrolling in two-year institutions were because of financial considerations (Brayboy et al., 2012; Mendez et al., 2011). American Indian students typically must seek information on alternative funding sources but often lack accessibility or information (Tierney et al., 2007). Understanding these funding opportunities dispels the myth throughout history that American Indian students have been guaranteed full funding to attend the college or university of their choosing (Youngbull, 2018). Mentorship is essential for Native American students' success in postsecondary education, and many schools where students attend may be more likely to have counselors who are ill equipped, who do not offer mentorship, and who generally have a lack of access to information about attending college including financial resources (Tierney et al., 2007).

Lack of information or access to resources impairs students' decisions when it comes to deciding on whether to pursue postsecondary education (Tierney et al., 2007). The timeframe of student engagement in higher education is critical "especially during the first 10 weeks when the transition to college is not yet complete and personal affiliations are not yet cemented" (Tinto, 1998, p. 169). His recommendation for

reevaluating success structures in higher education included creating spaces of learning, such as in the student dormitories, that were both active and integrated (Tinto, 1998). Where a student lives on campus is where a significant amount of their time is spent sleeping, eating, socializing, studying, and connecting with their peers (Foste, 2021).

Retention and Persistence in University Housing

In a competitive higher education marketplace, on-campus housing is often used as a recruitment tool to entice students (Foste, 2021). Moving into a dormitory, for many students, is truly the most important moment of the beginning of their undergraduate experiences (Strange & Banning, 2015). Students who decide to live on campus have higher persistence rates than students who choose to live off campus (Mayhew et al., 2016). Schudde (2011) found students who lived on campus were more likely to return as sophomores than those who decided to live off campus. Residence halls can create connection to community as well as achievement in academics and overall connection to a college environment (Schroeder & Mable, 1994).

According to Braxton et al. (2014), the potential to create community positively affects students' psychological energy in creating friendships as well as in engaging in extracurricular activities. This was termed by Braxton et al. as “psychosocial engagement” (pp. 91–92), which Erb et al. (2015) evaluated side-by-side to Astin’s (1987) concept of student involvement. Although Astin believed engagement depended on energy students invested (viz., psychological and physical), Braxton et al. (2014) defined involvement as investment in social dimensions of college specifically. This engagement has been shown to affect positively how a student perceives their own

integration socially into a university community and has a large influence on how individual students believe their own experiences and values align with communities at the university they have chosen to attend (Erb et al., 2015). Naturally, whether a student feels committed to that university specifically affects their persistence (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975).

Braxton et al. (2014) focused on issues institutions face with retention and on how student and institutional motivation interact with social integration on campus. The focus for staff in housing and residence life should be on building community for undergraduate residents (Erb et al., 2015). These professionals play a large role in the success strategies created to support persistence for undergraduate students, especially and critically in their first year (Berger, 1997; Braxton et al., 2014). The expectation of early higher education scholarship was that residence halls needed to focus on developing the wholeness of students (e.g., Astin, 1973; Brown, 1974; Riker & DeCoster, 1971).

As Braxton et al. (2014) position, connection to other students as well as finding a shared experience provides a stronger foundation for students to feel in community. Erb et al. (2015) centered their research on community building on Berger's (1997) three dimensions of community: interaction, identity, and solidarity. These factors can provide university staff in residential life a framework for positively impacting student persistence. *Interaction* is defined by in-person connection within a student's living community, *identity* centers students' perceptions of how connected they feel, and *solidarity* identifies whether the community to which a student feels connected encompasses other members who share the same values and goals (Berger, 1997). Two of

those three dimensions, specifically within the residence hall context—interaction and identity—impact psychosocial engagement of students (Braxton et al., 2014). Of the three factors, solidarity can be one of the hardest for residential communities to achieve, particularly because it extends beyond interaction to shared values and overall goals. This can be influenced especially if students do not have a choice in selecting the residential community within which they live (Erb et al., 2015).

As Riker and DeCoster (1971) discovered, "it is simply not possible to disembody the human personality and develop a student's intellectual capacities in isolation from his cultural, spiritual, and psychological growth" as students spend more time in their housing than in all their other university locations combined (p. 82). It is possible for institutions to be intentional about their community building and that with creative resource building and allocation, the overall benefits to retention will outweigh the costs to the institution. Institutions must center a lens that focuses on not only retention but also persistence by showing individualized attention to student experiences (Erb et al., 2015).

Creating Community in Housing

Staff who work within residential life must be particular in creating a space that appreciates and respects differences in student experiences with training focused on understanding these experiences as a critical need (Erb et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2007). The three types of involvement for college students founded by Astin (1996) include (a) being involved with academics (which included time studying), (b) being involved with faculty, and (c) having peer-to-peer involvement with other students. The practices of engagement, as well as Astin's (1996) three types of involvement, are central to the idea

of LLPs (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). These are all important concepts for support in academics, connection to faculty and staff, and event programming that can promote opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Erb et al. (2015) identified four challenges of creating community for students in their living environments, which included "available resources, confounding university policies, parameters of individual practices, and implications regarding students with nondominant identities" (p. 16). In the first division of "available resources," for any program on a university campus to be successful, human and financial resources are of great importance. Student services is the division that is often impacted by institutional financial issues (Ramses, 2000). Community can still be fostered without great financial means, but it is only to a community's benefit that allocated resources be invested. A strong staff residentially and within student services is necessary to create living environments with intention and being understaffed overall can lead to constraints in retention efforts (Erb et al., 2015). LLPs provide engagement in opportunities to learn beyond academic coursework; in events centered on student, staff, and faculty conversation; or in cocurricular activities (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Lenning & Ebers, 1999).

In the second category, defined as "confounding university policies," there are many in place at institutions that may contribute to lower retention rates. As an example in housing, if a university campus does not have a residential requirement for students, it would be difficult to initiate required community-building activities to follow, especially if most students live off campus. For traditional dormitory environments, if students are

assigned randomly, this may contribute negatively to feelings of community. Rather, giving students an opportunity to rank or to prefer their rooming options could provide more self-awareness or community building. In the third category, "parameters of individual dimensions," Erb et al. (2015) described a phenomenon in which one parameter of creating a community might be undermined by the two parameters of other areas. As an example, one floor becoming very tight knit or connected could impede or prevent the larger dorm from bonding or building solidarity (Erb et al., 2015).

Finally, the fourth category discusses considerations in working with "students with nondominant identities" and how community building should take on different considerations in relation to their experiences. Nondominant identities in this context are defined as students who identify with a racial minority; with a religious minority; with a disability; with a lower socioeconomic status; with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) community; or as international. To persist, students must develop an identity within their university housing community, with special attention in their first year (Berger, 1997; Braxton et al., 2014).

College Roommates

According to Kuh et al. (2008), earning a bachelor's degree for students is connected to social, cognitive, and economic gains for individual students that are passed on to the future generations of their families. Students who choose to pursue higher education come to campus with a variety of factors important to their identity and development, including their race, family socioeconomic background, academic preparation and achievements, experience within higher education, and overall

commitment to the institution they have decided to attend (Tinto 1975, 1987). Although Tinto's initial recommendations focused on the idea that a student should reject their community values to be successful in college, this is counterintuitive to Tierney (1992a, b), who believed attending college was only perceived as a ritual by dominant majority students rather than minority students who often connect the concept of ritual to culture.

Mark and Harris (2012) discovered roommates who were different in their racial identity led to stereotype reduction as well as increased friendships that crossed races. Colleges and universities promote on-campus living spaces as an opportunity to experience diversity and have access to different perspectives and ways of knowing (Foste, 2021). Selecting to live in on-campus housing provides students an opportunity to experience these differences for the first time (Blimling, 1993). However, studies have shown experiences of racism are common and more akin to broader campus climates (e.g., Harper et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Johnson, 2003). According to Johnson (2003), White students often have higher regard for the campus climate in university housing than non-White students. Many students come to campus from precollege environments where their experiences are segregated. Often for White students, they experience racially insulated lives, whereas for students of color, their experiences with racial difference are often optional. This is where experiences in campus housing are often the spaces where these experiences collide (Foste, 2021).

As the population of Native students increases on campuses and across higher education, the need for additional resources in student services increases as well (Minthorn, 2014). As Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) observed:

> [If] we cannot create an environment in which (Native) students begin to "feel at home" at the university, all the special programs and support services we can dream up will be of little value in attracting and holding them in significant numbers. (pp. 4–5)

Evaluating Tinto's (1993) model, it is challenged in its applicability for students who identify with racial or ethnic minority communities, showing they must create communities that center on having the same belief systems and understandings (Braxton et al., 2014). This idea can be applied to the creation of LLPs that mirror the lived experiences of their residents.

History of Living Learning Programs

Living Learning Programs (LLPs) were first developed as residential communities and mirrored models developed at Cambridge and Oxford, where students lived, dined, and studied beside their peers and faculty members (Blimling, 1993). The creation of these social communities centered around clubs originated at Cambridge, Oxford, Princeton, Yale, and Harvard and served as a nexus for the start of what colleges and universities have now created as LLPs (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The first formalized LLP started at an experimental college program founded at the University of Wisconsin by Alexander Meiklejohn (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Nelson, 2001).

There are many different definitions of LLPs, with Inkelas (2007) developing comprehensive typologies of LLPs. Three that applied closely to the creation of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi of the 17 listed were cultural programs, transition programs, and sophomore programs. A clear mission statement, as well as stated goals and outcomes, is

important to the creation of a successful LLP (Inkelas, 2007). LLPs find the greatest effectiveness if their stated objectives are in alignment with the theme of the community (Inkelas, 2007). As stated by Inkelas (2007), some common goals of LLPs include an opportunity for increased interaction with peers and academics outside of a classroom, a deeper sense of social integration into the greater university community, and an opportunity for students to feel connected to cocurricular experiences that enhance what they learn in the classroom. Living Learning Communities (LLCs) exist within a larger body of literature that focuses on LLPs, which has been examined through research including the National Study of Living Learning Programs (NSLLP; Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

National Survey of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) began in 2001 and was funded by College Student Educators International (ACPA), Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), University Housing Officers International, the Association of College and University Housing Officers–International (ACUHO-I), and the National Science Foundation. In 2003, after reviewing the literature conducted up until that point on LLPs, a survey instrument was developed by the research team, and it was tested on four different campuses. This allowed an opportunity to evaluate the best strategies in collecting data, to develop a strong sample, and to test both its validity and reliability. In 2004, after its first run, the survey was then distributed to 24,000 students on 34 campuses in the United States. The survey was redistributed to those respondents in 2007 to have a better understanding of the long-term effects of their

LLP experiences. Simultaneously, the original survey was sent to a new group of students who were starting at LLPs on those same campuses.

Four case studies were created from LLP communities that had data indicating the exceptional nature of the work that was being done. Survey data had also been collected from faculty and staff in both 2004 and 2007 who were leading the LLP programs on their campuses to have a better understanding of the program and organizational components of their programs (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The LLPs that were the strongest in the study had a well-articulated connection between the student affairs and academic affairs divisions that were in partnership, had a clear vision of their learning objectives and expected outcomes, and were connected to their specific community to provide multiple opportunities for engagement (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

Astin's (1993) inputs-environments-outcome (I-E-O) model was the theoretical framework for NSLLP (2007). As defined by Brower and Inkelas (2010), "in the I-E-O model, student outcomes result from both student inputs (or precollege characteristics) and college environments (various classes, programs, policies, etc., with which students come into contact while in college)" (p. 38). Studies cannot focus on only one programmatic element in one college; rather, they must examine all factors of a student's experience to understand how influences simultaneously affect a student's experience (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). While this model will not be utilized as a framework for the intended study connected to this literature review, as Minthorn (2014) discussed, housing for specific groups of people allows students from differing backgrounds to create a space in which they feel comfortable and safe, with connections to their culture that are

connected to their identity. With increased attention to differing population groups on university campuses, higher education must be in tune with these differences of experience as well as cultural, social, and religious practices (Minthorn, 2014).

In NSLLP (2007), students surveyed indicated their interactions on a peer-to-peer level in the residence halls were the most important factor in their experiences, and that if these living environments had climates that were supportive, it was affiliated with positive associations around belonging, college transition, understanding of diversity, and interest in giving back to communities (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2007) As Baker and Pomerantz (2001) discovered, students who chose to join LLCs were overall more satisfied than those who did not regarding their on-campus experiences and also perceived campus services more positively than those who chose not to participate.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) discovered that between 2006 and 2018, participation in an LLC on the student's college campus occurred only for roughly 15% of first-year students. ACUHO-I listed roughly 125 universities and colleges that identified several LLCs on their campuses. As Inkelas (2018) stated, "from an equity lens, one of the more compelling outcomes associated with LLCs is the contribution they make to supporting the success of specific student populations, particularly historically underserved students" (p. 6). LLCs that offer support to historically underrepresented populations help in creating supportive networks with peers as well as academic networks, and these types of programs deserve institutional care (Inkelas, 2018). NSLLP (2007) identified that LLPs are high-impact practices that work,

should be seen as the center of higher education, and are counter to the idea that higher education is merely a mill for degrees (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

Collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs across university systems can be challenging. As Inkelas (2018) stated, "the organizational structure of contemporary postsecondary institutions coupled with the faculty's lack of knowledge about the role of student affairs and student affairs' lack of knowledge about faculty makes collaboration between these entities challenging" (p. 32). Although members of the faculty are usually focused on the creation and advancement of knowledge, student affairs staff are usually concerned with student development and their needs to be successful (Magolda, 2005). The differences between these divisions can create misunderstandings about who is responsible for what aspect of the LLC (Inkelas, 2007). As Brower and Inkelas (2010) noted, LLPs "exist within the culture of their institutions" (p. 23). What is created with regards to staff, programs, and the overall budget must be framed within those same frameworks at the institution. Although overall coordination of LLPs is critical across academic affairs and student affairs divisions, it can be difficult if the institution is decentralized (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). As Brower and Inkelas (2010) identified:

> In short, successful LLPs … might be considered microcosms of what our colleges and universities can and should be: intentionally designed learning environments that work doggedly to maximize student learning, and particularly student learning related to the high-order skills and abilities that allow students to become citizens and leaders of the world. (p. 43)

As Shapiro and Levine (1999) identified, there are four main types of LLCs: "(a) paired or clustered courses; (b) cohorts in large courses or first-year interest groups (FIGs); (c) team-taught courses; and (d) residence-based programs, also known as living-learning programs" (p. 335). The literature has specified the main difference between LLPs and other learning programs, which is the residential component, where they engage not only in a coordinated academic effort but also in extracurricular and programming focused on the community in which they live where the "living and learning are combined seamlessly in students' college experience" (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003, p. 335). LLPs have become popular as high-impact practices and range from one-year transition programs to assist first-year students in acclimating to college, to fully developed four-year programs that facilitate learning and growth across the entire collegiate experience. They have also been developed with academic requirements for high-honors students or are available as open to students from any type of learning ability or background.

More than half of the programs assessed for NSLLP (2007) did not have any academic credit attached to their LLPs. Although 28% offered only one course, 23% had no faculty integration, and 64% worked with one to three faculty members. By comparison, 85% of the LLPs had student affairs professional integration in their programs, with their most common involvement being through mentorship, event creation and implementation, administrative tasks, and residential staff oversight (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The LLPs that were assessed did not have formal requirements for students to participate in extracurricular activities. Within the study, 11% to 23% of the programs did require students participate in orientation, activities centered on community

building, projects with a group, and community service. As for optional opportunities for further programming, groups for studying and multicultural field trips and outings topped the list (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

Overall, LLCs have shown positive effects for students in their engagement in their academic community through greater engagement overall; a stronger connection to peers, faculty, and staff; and personal development in intellect, learning, and integration (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). A challenge of LLCs overall, however, is sustainability. Many of the learning communities that exist depend on a "single champion" who was focused on the details or organization, as well as curriculum, and would often fade if that champion left their position or the institution (Inkelas, 2018). Overall, students who participated in LLPs made the transition to college more easily than their peers in both academics and in social community development. As Inkelas and Weisman (2003) reflected:

> Over the past few decades, higher education researchers studying the impact of college on students have argued that one phenomenon distinguishes between those students who benefit from the college experience and those who do not. This phenomenon has been defined using different labels, including the concepts of involvement integration, engagement and quality of effort; however, the premise remains similar: student outcomes are related to the amount of effort—both physical and emotional—that students put into their college experience. The more effort students put into their college experiences, or the more involved or

> engaged students are with their college environments, the more likely they are to exhibit positive cognitive and affective development. (p. 338)

These students were also more likely to be interested in applying their knowledge to new situations as well as developing their skills focused on critical thinking. LLPs were also found to have positive effects on students who may live in an LLP hall or floor but not be formal participants of the program, perceived as effects that were secondhand (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Longerbeam et al., 2007). Students who participated in LLCs were more likely to engage in other high-impact practices during their time as college students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Brower and Inkelas (2010) discovered even when students participated in an LLC for 1 year, they experienced long-lasting positive effects. Those who participated during their first year of college had increased confidence in themselves, wanted to engage in mentorship opportunities with their near peers, and continued to be interested in civic-community engagement even after three years. This is relevant given the number of different types of LLC programs evaluated through NSLLP. Brower and Inkelas (2010) identified three characteristics of successful LLPs: (1) having a strong student-academic affairs partnership and presence, (2) identifying learning objectives that are clear and have an academic focus throughout the program, and (3) capitalizing on using community related opportunities to support learning whenever and wherever students are (Brower & Inkelas, 2010, p. 42).

Benefits for students extend from more social integration as well as peer-to-peer interactions for LLC students (Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). It is important within comparisons across LLCs not to lump together programs to make sample sizes larger, but

to understand and to take differences in structure into account in assessment (Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). It is important to note that LLC research will always be impacted by the effects of self-selection, because students are deciding to participate and typically have stronger indicators that they will be successful in college (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Students need their living communities to feel supportive of their goals and to have opportunities to work together in groups (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). If students feel that their college or university is supportive of their learning endeavors, it can influence their own development in their intellect (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Native Experiences in Housing

As Shotton et al. (2013) observed, Native students are often asked to justify their identities and cultural connections in NNCU spaces. In her article, Minthorn (2014) detailed an incident that happened at a Midwest land-grant institution with a high Native population that resulted in the creation of a Native LLC on campus. There is a team assigned to the described LLC, including the faculty member who serves as the Native American coordinator alongside staff members in residence life who are committed to learning cultural competency and understanding of Native student experiences. The funding for the LLC was donated by a benefactor as well as through designated housing funds, and events such as biweekly meetings as well as other cultural and social activities are supported.

Housing on Minthorn's (2014) campus included residence halls that were traditional, suite style, and apartment style. At the time of the incident detailed in the

study, there were more than 23 LLCs that existed on the campus with specific interests such as culture or major for students from which to choose. Initially, the Native-focused LLC had been in the traditional-style residence halls but was moved to the deluxe-suite facility. The suites shared a common living area with four bedrooms and two bathrooms. This LLC had designated 8 to 10 of these suites to its participants and the kitchen and dining area was in a shared space with the other suites on every floor—it was within this common space that many of the students connected and built a community with one another. This area also held artwork by Native artists that provides a celebration of culture for both the current and the future students who decide to attend. The community established an agreement where smudging protocols could take place to welcome in the beginning or end of a semester.

The incident that grounded the importance of this agreement and the creation of the LLC happened after the first month of a new semester when a student asked for a smudging ceremony to be performed in her room. Within this institution, the Native coordinator, who was Minthorn (2014) at the time, would invite an elder to share the history of the LLC and then explain the smudging practice and process to the student or students. In this situation, the elder came to smudge the students in the shared living space of the LLC. After the smudging ceremony, the community resident assistant (RA) shared with Minthorn (2014) that the elder who had come to smudge the space was approached by two other RAs and asked what he was doing there and if he had been smoking marijuana. The elder chose not to answer their questions and continued walking.

After this report, Minthorn (2014) hosted a conversation with the director of housing as well as the RA supervisor to discuss how the incident had been handled. Despite the importance of responding to incidents that can occur in student life, Minthorn (2014) detailed to the team how disrespectful their ask of the elder had been. This event caused uncertainty for the Native students within the LLC as to whether the institution truly respected or honored their belief systems in their living environment. Although the incident itself was negative, a better understanding of cultural protocols and a more responsive environment for Native students was created. The housing team committed itself to learning about the cultural protocols, informing other residents of when smudging ceremonies were going to take place, and opening the community to learn more about the practice. They also understood how important it was to read literature regarding Native student experiences in higher education as well as inviting their RAs to join events with the Native community.

The current literature looks to highlight examples in NNCUs where students' culture, community, and traditional values are exemplified in housing opportunities, centered in the four Rs (i.e., respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Singson et al., 2016). As Singson et al. (2016) assessed, “for most Native students, living spaces are an essential component to their belonging and persistence. Therefore, campus housing is well positioned to facilitate and increase support of Native students through their second home, the residence hall” (p. 111). Singson et al. (2016) grounded their research in the four Rs—respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility—to

center cultural connection to community, space, and spirituality within college housing concepts. Singson et al. described the four Rs as follows:

- **Respect**: Respect is foundational in many Native American cultures. This involves respecting Native students as people and recognizing the multitude of cultural wealth they bring, including oral traditions, treaties, and Indigenous knowledge systems.
- **Relevance**: An institutional curriculum, including the extracurricular, should include relevant topics, such as Indigenous history of governance, and service-learning opportunities within Indigenous communities or centers to which Native students can relate. This also means that how a Native individual is evaluated should be culturally relevant.
- **Reciprocal relationships or reciprocity**: Learning is not one way; the mutual sharing of culture and traditions and placing equal value on Indigenous and institutional knowledge is a way to develop good relations. The Indigenous community and its members should be included when designing institutional programs such as learning communities.
- **Responsibility**: Indigenizing programs and curriculum is not just the responsibility of the institution. It is also an Indigenous responsibility to take action by speaking out against wrongs and participating in curriculum and programming design. (p. 113)

Many Native people base their level of wellness both physically and emotionally on the wellness of the greater community (Singson et al., 2016). As Singson et al. (2016)

challenged based on Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS, n.d.) framework, “the evaluation of projects that provide services to Native communities should include four dimensions—spatial, social, spiritual, and experiential—that conceptually define Native communities” (p. 1). Within the university housing context, incorporating the histories of the communities who once occupied the land is important to be integrated into learning and engagement for students, creating that environment through spatial contexts and collaboration (Singson et al., 2016). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) called on institutional policies that prevented students from feeling welcome to campuses. As Singson et al. (2016) observed:

> All institutions of higher education occupy Indigenous land—an Indigenous community was removed, and an institution now occupies that place. Higher education institutions are increasingly becoming more sensitive to Native students’ needs, as seen in their developing a policy for use of traditional medicines, engaging in Indigenous connection to place and environment, building multicultural advocacy and community in residential settings, developing markers and legacy traditions that help in addressing contemporary issues, and recognizing ways to increase knowledge about the histories of the land. (p. 121)

The hope for the creation of settings like these was to increase retention and persistence through systems of success focused on Native ideologies.

At the University of Arizona, a community focused on residential success for Native students was created called *O’odham Ki*, translated in the Hopi and O’odham languages to “the People’s House” (Singson et al., 2016). Honoring the local spiritual

protocols and practices was essential to creating a space for Native students, especially with the diversity of tribal nations that can be represented on a college campus (Singson et al., 2016, p. 117). The staff centered Native ways of knowing and value systems. There was an openness to allow Native spirituality and faith systems to be incorporated into the living community. During move-in, there is a prayer ceremony conducted that includes the students moving into the residence halls, their families, and faculty and staff from the university community. Their residential life team is supportive of the burning of sage or cedar and created protocols to make this possible, including collaborating with the local university police department and fire department to shut down the alarm system to honor them. The opportunity to develop a reciprocity relationship with peers, staff, faculty, and alumni is important, and the programming at the beginning of orientation at O'odham Ki was focused on this relationship development through sharing a meal together (Singson et al., 2016). This reciprocity allows the students and families to get to know the institutional support systems better while also allowing the faculty and staff to learn more about working with Native people (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Singson et al., 2016).

Blending Indigenous knowledge systems into residential settings can create a success network for Native students in a Western environment that often prioritizes a meritocratic system, individual success, and ways of producing knowledge that do not align with Native epistemologies (Singson et al., p. 121). Giving Native students an opportunity to stay connected to traditional value systems allows for better overall development (Singson et al., p. 121). History centered on land should be taken into consideration for overall educational design, even hosting opportunities for students to

know place names of local sites, the tribal communities, and relationship building center reciprocity-focused learning (Singson et al., p. 122).

Within the last few decades, institutions of higher education, especially those with a high proportion of Native American students, have made specialized housing available for Native American student populations. Student affairs administrators recognized the impact that specific housing for Native American students would have upon their academic success while building a community away from home (Ecklund & Terrance, 2013). Within higher education, utilizing terms that students recognize such as sovereignty, nation-building, self-determination, and knowledge systems, students will have a deeper connection to their institution and one another (Minthorn, 2014). As Minthorn (2014) detailed, regarding best practices for Native students in housing:

- It is crucial for residence life staff to work in collaboration with Native American staff and faculty to understand the region's tribal culture and to better understand how to accommodate the spiritual beliefs of and provide related resources to the Native American students living on campus.
- If there is currently not an LLC for Native American students on a campus, residence life staff should find ways to create a residential support group for these students. The process should begin by asking them what kind of support they need for their spiritual and cultural practices.
- As residence life staff create this on-campus Native American community and plan relevant activities for these students, they should also strive to identify

Native American faculty, staff, and local tribal elders who can assist with cultural protocol and the education of other residents on campus.

- Residence life professionals should be willing to support Native American students' spiritual and cultural activities on campus by advocating for these activities, providing funding for them, and adapting relevant policies to be sensitive to and accepting of their spiritual and cultural expression. Additionally, they are encouraged to plan and to implement professional development sessions about Native American students' spiritual and cultural practices for all residence life staff.
- Finally, residence life staff should be strategic in providing a list of resources about supporting Native American students, including information about their spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices, to all who are charged with working with the Native American student population. (p. 161)

With the decision to pursue higher education, many of these students are removed from their home communities where their families, culture, and ceremonies are a part of who they are daily. What they need on campus is a safe place to be themselves and to have other students or staff who can understand and identify with them. It is for these reasons that the Native American student LLCs were developed.

Sense of Belonging

As Tinto (1987) observed, the first-year experience has been of great interest to higher education research. At the time of his study, three-fourths of all dropouts departed colleges and universities within their first year as undergraduate students. Almost 40

years later, the overall dropout rate for students pursuing higher education nationally is 40%, with 30% of those dropouts happening during the first year of college (Hanson, 2021). The intentional collaboration of student affairs and academic affairs is critical to build student success (Smith & Williams, 2007). Some institutions set a focus on communities that are centered around outcomes (Erb et al., 2015). Overall, engaging with a staff who is committed and trained in facilitating peer-to-peer engagement for students contributes to greater overall student success (Erb et al., 2015). These interactions with one another are the center of creating solidarity among students (Erb et al., 2015). As Strayhorn (2018) identified:

> [In] terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 28)

Belonging and love are in the middle of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs because essential needs such as physical requirements and desire to experience safety must first occur for the others to be possible. Because these are human needs, these apply to the experiences students have in higher education. Strayhorn (2018) defined sense of belonging as feeling important to other people (i.e., respected, valued, mattering, cared about by others, important), feeling connected to others, and finding a social support on campus. Sense of belonging has impact on persistence, retention, and academic achievement (Hausmann et al., 2007). Frequent interaction with students (i.e., peers) and

staff provides an opportunity for students to develop positive relationships that provide affirmation that they are valued, seen by others, needed by their peers, and cared about by others (Strayhorn, 2018).

As Strayhorn (2019) identified in his work centered on student belonging in higher education, he identified seven core elements of belonging:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) *in certain contexts*, such as being a newcomer to an otherwise established group, (b) *at certain times*, such as (late) adolescence when individuals begin to consider who they are (or wish to be), with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their time and energies in the future (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Sanford, 1962), and (c) *among certain populations*, especially those who are marginalized or inclined to feel excluded, invisible, irrelevant, or "left out" in said context (for more, see Goodenow, 1993a).
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (p. 159)

As Strayhorn (2018) described, sense of belonging and community are not equals, sense of belonging is a precursor to community, and it is the "feelings, perceptions, and

mindsets that accompany gaining true membership in a community" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 16). Strayhorn (2018) made the argument that students struggle to learn, study, and retain information if their need to belong is not met.

The transition from high school to the first year in college can present many challenges for undergraduate students, especially in making new friends (Erb et al., 2015). Goodman et al. (2006) defined a transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33) and creating a group of friends helps students to strengthen this transition. Practices that can work to build this solidarity among students include what Erb et al. (2015) described as "purpose driven programming" and living learning communities (p. 11). These can offer objectives that are unifying for students, and communities that build upon those goals cannot be overemphasized in their importance. Creating halls specifically designed for first-year students builds space for those students to feel connected to one another based on experience and to connect as a larger unit (Erb et al., 2015). As Pike (1999) discovered, academic integration of programming, as well as consistent interactions with peers, has positive effects on gains that students have in their educational experiences. This can have a strong effect on how students implement their skills centered in critical thinking to have upward trends in outcomes focused on intellect (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Although yearly or monthly events encourage some normalized interaction, weekly events have an opportunity to create consistent interaction by "highlighting the importance of coming together as a unit" (Erb et al., 2015, p. 9). Advisors in residential halls or staff planning events that have diversified engagement levels for students can

ignite student engagement in an inclusive way that truly meets the needs of students where they are. This can include faculty engagement, which further widens the horizon of engagement across campus (Erb et al., 2015).

Students, as individuals, carry identity factors connected to communities and can include factors such as the location from where they are, their cultural identity, or their attachment to a particular group. Creating bonds with peers is grounded in the hope that there will be a community on campus for which a student shares the same outlooks and values in life (Erb et al., 2015). As Kuh et al. (2008) encouraged, peer engagement is highly influential for student success, and institutions must learn how to mold experiences around this engagement to reinforce academic expectations. This is why the creation of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC and its impact on Native student sense of belonging at USD is an important study for the field of higher education and Native student experiences.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

Introduction

After a review of research literature that focused on Native history in education, contemporary Native data in South Dakota, and LLC impact on college students in Chapter 2, I observed limited research has been conducted on the specific experiences of Native students in four-year University Housing. To better understand the lived experiences of Native students in predominantly White institutions, it is essential to understand their experiences in their university dormitories as this can have a larger impact on their sense of belonging. Additionally, and even less present, was research focused specifically on Native student experiences in Native-focused LLCs, a high impact practice in higher education (Fink & Inkelas, 2015).

Additionally, this chapter contends with traditional higher education literature focused on concepts of Western higher education sense of belonging. In Lopez (2018), a study on sense of belonging in Native students, Lopez observed within their literature review two-thirds of the Native students surveyed show persistence through college was influenced by their supports they had socially, as well as family. While sense of belonging from the lens of higher education is about making connections across campus, this study addressed this gap in the larger body of literature by examining and understanding Native student experiences in one Native-focused LLC at the University of South Dakota.

Founded in 2021, Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC has been a recruitment and retention tool for Native students at USD. During its first year, according to Little (2025), the LLC's retention at USD was 77% at the end of its first semester (fall 2021 to spring 2022) and 88% for the second semester (spring 2022 to fall 2023). Averaged across the entire school year, retention of the of Native students who participated in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi was 71%. From fall 2024 to spring 2025, 44 of the 48 students who selected into the LLC returned for their second semester of college (Little, 2025). The provided data documented above demonstrates the impact of this program on Native student retention at USD.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD?

Indigenous Methodologies

It was important that Native or Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies are, as Wilson (2008) described "inseparable and blend from one into the next" (p. 70) throughout this research study. As Smith (2012) articulated, "research adds to, is generated from, creates or broadens our theoretical understandings. Indigenous peoples have been, in many ways, oppressed by theory" (p. 39). Being an Indigenous researcher comes with the responsibility that what is collected is not solely for me as an individual, but for a larger community of Native students, their families, and their tribal nations. Western approaches to research often view participants as having control of their narrative via the researcher, whereas an Indigenous researcher allows for the lived

experience of the participant and inclusion of that participant to guide the process. This reciprocal understanding prioritizes that any research conducted involving Native people should be collaborative, people-focused, and ultimately belongs to the community for which the research is being conducted—not solely to the academy. For the purpose of this dissertation, member checking with the students who interviewed was followed up on to determine their consent of publication.

Ontology

As Smith (2012) identified regarding Indigenous thought processes with anti-positivism, I carry my identity with me and cannot separate my own lived experience from the research conducted or the experiences of the students I have previously and currently work(ed) with. It is important to acknowledge this program was created within the confines of a Western institution, so the factors and ways these spaces center imperialism continues to be vital and important to the lens within which this research must be viewed (Smith, 2012). A postmodernism approach aligns most closely with my own ontological views, as being a Lakota researcher informs and creates a different ontological perspective centered in land, community, and cultural knowledge.

Epistemology

Indigenous Standpoint Theory

Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Foley, 2003) states and provides the allowance for additional methods of epistemology through which Native people have come to understand the world. The theory highlights four needs:

- First, that the researcher conducting the study is Indigenous.

- Second, that the researcher understands Western frameworks so that they are not limited by them.
- Third, that the research be for the benefit of the researcher's community.
- Fourth, (ideally) that the first language of the Indigenous nation be preferred in conducting the research.

It is understood while using this theory that while the current landscape of literature cannot return to precontact ways of knowing and seeing the world, we can privilege these factors as research is approached by and for Native people. As Coates et al. (2023) described, "as a discursive method of inquiry, it provides the opportunity to reveal the way in which knowledge is constructed and unravels Western knowledge paradigms from Indigenous ways of knowing" (p. 906). A non-Native researcher will never understand the complexities of Native identity, culture, community, and ways of seeing the world, and in the same light, will never feel the same level of empathy towards this work as a non-Native researcher (Coates et al., 2003). Creating a home away from home environment for students, where they experience what being part of an extended family unit feels like, informs their lived experiences as college students at USD.

I center Lakota concepts as central and important to understanding kinship and creating Native spaces within systems of Western higher education. This was through the first three needs in Indigenous Standpoint Theory in particular: the need for Indigenous led research, the understanding of Western frameworks in higher education, and the benefit of the extended Native and higher education communities. For the fourth tenet,

concepts were frame-worked in the Lakota language as much as possible with the understanding that I am not a fluent Lakota speaker—though I intend to be someday.

Oceti Sakowin Centered Framework

After I concluded the student interviews, I conducted conversations about Lakota thought, identity, place, belonging, and home with Dr. John Little, mihingna (Standing Rock Dakota, husband) and with Dr. Delphine Red Shirt, ina (Oglala & Sicangu Lakota, mother), my thought partners in the creation, implementation, and cultural balance of Wiyuksinyan Unpi Tipi LLC. The inclusion of our three perspectives represents an Oceti Sakowin centered thought approach to the field of higher education.

Research Design

Methods

This dissertation is a qualitative analysis of Native student experiences in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC and how it informs their sense of belonging at USD. For the methods portion of this research, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews. The interview questions focused on personal stories about where the students are from, what factors were important to them in their college selection process, why they chose to attend USD, how they experienced Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC, and how their relationship to their identity changed due to their participation. These interviews explored if the LLC was a factor in students' decisions to attend and to stay at USD. Additionally, I analyzed retention and persistence data collected through the university regarding Native students in the LLC to understand student experiences in selecting to participate in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi from semester-to-semester.

Narrative Inquiry

As Creswell (2013) identified, qualitative analysis studies should consider their studies spatially in how they are mapped together to visualize what is being reported. Within this framework, the method of research was narrative inquiry. The spatial visualization was in the form of a star, a mapping of a network of kinship across all its points for students, which is described in further detail in Chapter 5. As Cirks (2021) identified in their own research about Native student experiences of persistence in graduate school, "narrative inquiry, in the form of storytelling, was a culturally relevant method of sharing the voice of American Indian student" (p. 8). Within Tribal critical theory, Brayboy (2014) identified integrating Western thought with Indigenous ways of knowing allows for learning within Western frameworks to privilege cultural identity. Oral tradition is integral for Lakota as well as many other Native communities, so narrative inquiry, or storytelling, privileges both Western and Native ideologies to framework this research.

Study Population

Participants in this research study were current or former participants in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC at USD at the time of this study. I interviewed both current and former participants and defined them as follows:

- Current participants are defined as current undergraduate students still living on campus and either (1) received a half-housing scholarship or (2) did not receive the half-housing scholarship but have elected to participate despite not having any financial incentivization.

- Former participants are defined as current undergraduate students, current graduate students, or recent graduates who formerly lived on campus and either (1) received a half-housing scholarship or (2) did not receive the half-housing scholarship but have elected to participate regardless of not having any financial incentivization.

Source of Participants

I invited all current and former participants of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi from fall 2021 to spring 2024 to be interviewed. As of spring 2024, I sent this email to 66 individual email addresses. I received participant information with permission from USD's University Housing division.

Recruitment Process

I sent emails to the confirmed list of current and former participants, and I made a verbal announcement at Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC's weekly programming (see Appendix A). As requested through a meeting with USD's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was clear in my correspondence to current students about my current role as the Director of Native Student Services at the University of South Dakota and this research was conducted for my doctoral program at the University of Minnesota—not for the purpose of internal or external data sharing or evaluation at USD.

Screening

I was not evaluating students' grade point average (GPA), academic progress, or any other factors related to their standing at the university; only that students had been

participants within the program during a chapter of their journey at USD. There was no need for additional screening of the self-selected participants.

Payment

Every student who participated in a one-hour interview received a $50 Visa gift card as compensation for their time. I sent compensation after their one-hour interview was completed. This funding to provide compensation for students was provided by the Clayton and Odessa Lang Ofstad Foundation, a partnership grant with USD Native Student Services and Title VI for the Vermillion K–12 school system.

Study Procedure

In total, 10 students accepted the invitation to interview and participated in a one-hour interview session. The session was recorded for purposes of transcription and analysis. At the start of the interview, I asked the interviewee to review a consent form (see Appendix B) and asked to confirm it had been reviewed ahead of any questions being asked. I asked a set of semi-structured interview questions during one-hour Zoom interviews (see Appendix C). Semi-structured formatting allowed for some of the questions to be followed up to regarding clarification of details or need for additional information.

Data Preparation

I transcribed the interview data set collected using Zoom's transcription services. After every interview, I saved and named the transcription by the order of the interviews and numbered "Interview 1," "Interview 2," and so forth.

Data Cleaning

After all interviews were completed, I listened to each interview individually while reading what Zoom transcription services had transcribed. While I conducted this close listening, I edited the transcription content if what they shared was documented incorrectly. I also edited repetition of particular words from the transcripts. Once the data were cleaned, I saved the document as a new file and renamed using the order of the interviews number (i.e., "Interview 1_CLEANED:," etc.). I added line numbers at the end of every cleaned interview and all identities of the students who interviewed were replaced with the aliases they had selected at the start of their conducted interviews. After this was completed, I read the interviews a second time to begin coding.

Coding and Categorization

To analyze this data, I identified codes and themes and coded directly. If something a student shared corresponded to a particular concept, I identified it in real time. I then wrote down that term next to the sentence or word to which the concept was connected. A master list of all terms was kept during this process and a set of 153 terms were identified and documented (see Appendix D).

The reasons to code these interviews by hand included (1) the desire to absorb the content fully in the research process without using assistive evaluation technology and (2) the personal connection I had to the individual interviewees. There was no intention for any concept to emerge out of the data set if it did not occur naturally within the coding process, beyond the one question about belonging that was asked of interviewees.

Once the data was fully coded, the document was saved as another file and renamed (i.e., “Interview 1_CODED,” etc.). These coded interviews were what were used for the data analysis. After all these terms were identified, they were listed in alphabetical order in a separate document, which served as the formal codebook for the interviews. Each of the interviews was then read for a third time to utilize the entirety of the codebook for every transcript and to determine which codes belonged in which interview with a full lens on the themes that appeared. Once I read and counted all the interviews, I ranked the terms chronologically by number of mentions from highest to lowest and then numbered in descending order. For codes with the same number of mentions, I ranked chronologically and then alphabetically.

Data Care

I first recognized the connection to these individuals and viewed their role as data to be analyzed second. The students who opted to participate in this dissertation study have lived experiences that matter both inside and outside of the parameters of this analysis to the researcher who works with them regularly in different capacities.

Data Assumptions

I conducted these interviews with students who were invested in a community that I participated in alongside them as part of a family unit that extends across their experiences together. Due to these prior individual relationships with each person, it was important that any information shared about the student came directly from their interview. No additional context or knowledge from our previously established

relationship was included as additional context or frame working of what they shared. I transcribed all information presented in their one-hour interview.

Thematic Analysis

The key themes and patterns within these data are shown through the overlap of student experiences in the observations they shared and the terms that aligned with their lived experiences.

Potential Challenges

Position at USD

In my current role as the Director of Native Student Services at USD, I have worked with many of the Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi students in personal, academic, professional, and cultural capacities. I understand my positionality to their college experiences is not without previous commitment, knowledge, or connection.

Land-Based Ways of Knowing

The title of the LLC and much of the programming hosted by the retention team is centered within an Oceti Sakowin lens, which means the concepts are focused on a specific region and tribal communities that are related to each other. This tribal specificity is not representative of all students' identified tribal communities that are served in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC. I keep in mind that sense of belonging may be impacted through student experiences who may identify as visitors on traditional tribal homelands that are different than their own.

Accurate Data Collection

One of the biggest challenges the retention team at USD has been met with is accurate and robust data collection of Native students on campus. As Deloria (2004) noted about the study of Native people in academia "(w)ith Western thought primarily a binary yes/no method of determining truth, so much data is excluded, and so limited are the possible answers that Western knowledge might be regarded as a mere classification system devoid of valid conclusions (as cited in Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004, p. 18). Native identity is complex. While it is often misidentified as a racial category, one of the most important factors in understanding Native identity is through understanding tribal sovereignty. Sovereign tribal nations identify tribal citizens through different methods such as lineal descendancy or blood quantum.

Current students at the University of South Dakota specifically represent more than 34 tribal nations on campus (Native Student Services, 2025), which means each of those 34 tribal nations has different ways of determining who they consider to be a citizen. This can impact how a Native student self identifies. Within the context of USD's Native Student Services as a division that serves Native students, any student who self identifies as Native, regardless of their tribal enrollment status, is encouraged to participate and be served by our community. This is critically important in creating a familial network and a space centered on acceptance, solidarity, and intersectionality.

In accordance with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, if a Native student checks one racial identifier (i.e., Native American), they are included in institutional data

as a Native American student on campus. If a Native student marks multiple races when self-identifying, they will be categorized as multiracial in institutional data. USD does not piece out this information in their data analysis that is submitted to the federal government. Little (2025) has tracked internal student data based on who USD knows self-identifies as Native, regardless of if they would be categorized as such through IPEDS data. This has greatly assisted the Native Student Services team in demonstrating to the University of South Dakota how many students are truly served, which has proven to be significantly larger than what is reported on the university's data dashboards.

Personal Connection

There are many personal and familial connections to the programming and the success of the LLC that are important to acknowledge as potential bias, as has been previously shared. The decisions for why and how Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi was created and has been structured were directly from my own personal observations and a network of relatives and chosen family who created it. I view the interviews, coding, and data analysis as not an end point to a research project—but as a reciprocal responsibility that the students I interviewed and I have to one another. Many of the students both pre- and post-interview said that they wanted to be helpful to me because I had been helpful to them. This is part of a circle of reciprocity Native educators have with students in their lives, which is the community and Lakota focused lens that I am committed to in the work that I do. I am intentional in my hope that my gratitude is reflected in this analysis.

Lakota Lens

Simultaneously, the personal connection to the research reflects an intimate and relational level of care. It is important to acknowledge that I am a Lakota researcher focusing on an Oceti Sakowin dominant LLC on the traditional homelands of the Oceti Sakowin people and neighboring tribal communities. This research, and the concepts around creating home on our homelands, are inextricably linked to being a Native person. I cannot separate my lived experience from this research, which is central to Indigenous Standpoint Theory. When Native staff commit to creating community for Native students, they also make a commitment to their families, communities, and tribal nations. These promises are precious and grounded in an historical framework as many promises from non-Native institutions that have been made have not come to fruition or have been broken. As a Native person working for such an institution, the level of responsibility and expectation one is held to is different than that of our peers.

Limitations

Native American students continue to be a demographic that is overall understudied across the literature. Because of this limitation, the context of these student experiences was difficult to compare to others in the literature. While this research centered on different Native students' experiences, this is one LLC at a midsized Midwestern university with a particular on-campus and community culture. It is also an LLC led by predominantly Oceti Sakowin related community members, with a predominantly Oceti Sakowin student demographic. The experiences of those students may not be universal across all Native student experiences.

Presentation of Findings

While each student experience was unique, the purpose of this research study was to understand if participating in an LLC creates a sense of belonging for Native students at USD. In centering Native student experiences, I understand how much creating community can contribute to ways of knowing and students' overall experiences of feeling like they belong. The presentation of findings of this dissertation analysis begin with individual student stories, taken directly from 10 semi-structured interviews. Every student's section is identified by the name they selected as their alias in the interview process. The quotations selected for the analysis component of this study's findings sometimes utilize an ellipsis to focus the quotes on sections I was analyzing. Within these interviews, there will be references to Megan Red Shirt-Shaw (me, as the Director of Native Student Services), Dr. John Little (Director of Native Recruitment and Alumni Engagement), Brooke Jackson (Coordinator of Native Student Services), and Julianna Benge (Native Student Advisor) as students discuss staff who have assisted them along the way. There will also be references to the NACC and the division of Native Student Services (NSS).

This doctoral study examined how active participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC affected sense of belonging at USD. Additionally, this research sought to understand if Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi contributed to retention for Native students through providing students an opportunity to live with other students who understand their lived experiences. Community is created through centering and prioritizing Native perspectives every week for the students who participate, allowing them to be removed from their

experiences being one of only a few at a predominantly White institution. This study addressed the following research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD?

Chapter 4

Findings

> *I think this is one of the most unique programs that USD offers. It's quite different from any other … organization, a program, community, yeah. It's a lot different to all the other events that are offered on campus. And it makes it—I'm not trying to say better, but more distinguished compared to others, since it has so (many) things to offer and so many benefits that is within the program that makes it more eye appealing and more engaging for people who are a part of it, [because] they won't be able to experience it elsewhere on campus. So, I like how unique the program is, and how, trying to think, how it is able just to bring people in, even from like other departments on campus. You just get to meet a whole bunch of people through this program, through guests, it's not just solely people in LLC … it's more broadened. And you get to meet more people and bring more people in and … I think it's amazing. (Kayla)*

In this chapter, I detail the findings from 10 student interviews of current and former participants in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC at USD. The students who opted to interview were either (at time of interview) current undergraduates, recent graduates, or current graduate students who participated in the LLC as undergraduates. Below, Table 1 includes participant demographics including their name, year in school at the time of interviews in 2024, self-identified tribal affiliation, and where they were at the time of this dissertation's publication in 2025. I decided to identify the students by their year at USD, because in my experience the number of years they have been on campus is more

indicative of their college experience than their credit completion and status (i.e., freshman, sophomore, etc.).

Table 1

Interview Participants

Name	Year of school in 2024	Tribal affiliation	Status at time of publication in 2025
Adele	Graduate student	Crow Creek Sioux Tribe & Meskwaki Nation	Enrolled graduate student at USD
Billie	First-year	Crow Creek Sioux Tribe	Departed from USD
Elizabeth	Third-year	Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians	Graduated from USD
Kayla	Third-year	Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Tribe	Graduated from USD
Maroon	First-year	Standing Rock Sioux Tribe	Enrolled undergraduate student at USD
Megan	Just graduated	Choctaw Nation	Full-time career
Pascal	Fourth-year	Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe	Graduated from USD
Paul	Second-year	Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate	Enrolled undergraduate student at USD
Ray	Second-year	Oglala Sioux Tribe	Enrolled undergraduate student at USD
Star	First-year	Rosebud Sioux Tribe	Departed from USD

Within this interview data set, six of the nine federally recognized tribes within the state of South Dakota were represented: Standing Rock, Rosebud, Crow Creek, Sisseton Wahpeton, Oglala, and Flandreau. The additional four tribal nations affiliations are in North Dakota (Turtle Mountain), Michigan (Sault), Oklahoma (Choctaw), and

Iowa (Meskwaki). Additionally, eight of the ten students interviewed have continued towards degree progression at USD.

There are a few important differentiations for the reader regarding some of the references the students who were interviewed made. First, students often referred to Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC, NSS, and NACC interchangeably. This could be for several reasons informed by the day-to-day experiences I have had as the Director of NSS at USD. For some of the students, their introduction to the NACC was through the LLC—so they affiliated the two as similar spaces. Some of the students involved only came to the NACC specifically for LLC programming. In juxtaposition, some of the students spent all their time at the NACC including through their LLC participation and see that the NSS division and staff is what supports and runs the day to day of the NACC as well as student retention efforts. As Dr. Little explained—the NACC is the ship, the LLC is the anchor, and NSS is the sail (personal communication, April 4, 2025). The division, physical space, and program have worked in unison to move the community and are inextricably linked to one another.

It is also important to note the following interviews are varied in whether the students lived on the designated Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi floor, received the half-housing scholarship, or learned about the opportunity at the same time. It is a commitment of the NSS team that all students be treated the same regardless of whether they receive funding or live with other Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC participants.

This study was a qualitative analysis of interviews that share the experience of being a participant in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC. This diversity of lived experiences

and time spent as participants in the LLC is relevant to the data analysis. This dissertation addressed the following research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD?

Student Stories

Maroon

"It started with a young age, I just wanted to go to a college that really benefited me and my family." (Maroon)

Maroon was a first-year student at USD affiliated with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (SRST) and from McLaughlin, South Dakota. As she became older, she started to align her hope of attending a large school out of state with the realization that finances were going to play an important role in her decision-making. In her selection process, she considered the cost of tuition, room, and board, as well as transportation to and from campus while also reflecting on finding a school with a program of study that she felt passionate about.

While all these considerations had always been important to her, she admitted attending USD was a last-minute decision. She received the Regents Scholarship that allowed her to attend any South Dakota school, and when she found out USD had the only law school in the state, she decided to attend. While many of her friends from high school had chosen to attend other in-state universities like Northern State University (Northern) and Black Hills State University (BHSU), Maroon was set on attending USD. She knew in her final decision there were not going to be very many students from her hometown, and it would be different from what she previously experienced.

Maroon shared her introduction to Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC was when she was first being recruited to USD by Dr. Little. In her initial conversations with Dr. Little, she was uncertain if she was going to attend. Once she decided, she did more research and in submitting her housing application, selected the LLC. She realized in her requirements for college the importance of having other students who understood her lived experience was critical to her experience.

The half-housing scholarship available to attendees of the LLC was also an important factor for her because finances had been a big consideration in her college selection journey. Initially, Maroon was hesitant to be around many different students from different tribal nations but "as the weeks and the months went by then I … started to get used to everybody, and you know, like everyone shared their experiences where they were from … I just felt like I wasn't alone in choosing a college." Much of her hesitation extended from a feeling in high school where she was concerned that sometimes choosing to pursue an education felt like a competition among her peers:

> So once I got to USD, and then the LLC, then I kind of felt like, you know, everyone has their own path and you know, I felt like … it was going to be the same as I felt in high school, but then it was not. You know, everyone's really nice, they were all really open and welcoming.

Maroon expressed that despite her initial hesitation, the program had made an impact on her growth and her experience in college:

> I was talking about this with my dad and my grandma, when they came to the Wacipi (*Wacipi is a campus and community wide event to celebrate culture and*

> *tradition*) they were telling me that like I've changed so much within the last year and it was because of college, but I told them it was because of this program. They really helped me a lot … coming out of high school, I was really, you know, had like a small-town girl mindset, and I didn't think I could fit in with other people like wherever they came from and I just felt like I was alone. And when I came into this program … it's made me more interested in college … everyone was going for different things, different fields, different interests.

Maroon attributed her connection to community within the LLC through "shared beliefs and experiences" particularly with her first-year class, who made her "not feel alone." Having friends who are Native in a big university made her feel connected, after feeling concern she was not going to fit in which led to uncertainty of how she was going to find a sense of belonging:

> … this community—this program—it gave me like a sense of like, yeah, I do belong here, you know. I chose to go to college. I chose to study in something that I'm really interested in and … it just made me feel like … I do belong here. This is my path and I chose this. And this program has really like … contributed to that and made me more made me more like a feeling of belonging.

Her experience within the LLC allowed her to connect with other first-year students but also older undergraduate and graduate students, who served as mentors for her:

> … it really helps a lot with … incoming people like not even freshmen, just people who … like want to be in higher education. They want to succeed in

> finding, like a—what do you call it—like a back support. This program is that for them, you know, if they have like a setback or a challenge, the people in the living, learning community, they can help with that. They're not gonna like fight it alone, you know. They basically just help you. They uplift you.

Star

> *"I'm very thankful that I was able to be a part of it, and I will continue to be a part of it." (Star)*

Star was a first-year student at USD affiliated with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (RST) and from Mission, South Dakota. When Star was selecting a college, family was a very important factor to her. She was admitted to USD, South Dakota State University, and BHSU. Her best friend had chosen to attend USD, but she also attributed it to wanting to take a risk—"so I just took a chance, and I'm glad I did. I really enjoy it here."

Star learned about Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC through a conversation with Julianna when she was helping her with housing. She confirmed she wanted to participate when Dr. Little followed up with her to discuss the final details of her enrollment. An important aspect of participation for Star was going out and being active in the community. While the half-housing scholarship was a factor in her decision to join, she expressed worry that if she was not involved, she might just stay in her room and self-select to stay in. She shared this in her interview in reference to a conversation she had with Dr. Little about joining the LLC:

> Well, one thing sold me … every Wednesday we have … food with everyone … and then he's talking about doing different activities. And the one example he

> gave was, we just came back from roller skating. And I was like we get food and we gotta go out and do these like fun activities. Oh, my gosh! This sounds awesome, and it gives me a half-housing scholarship and it just drew me in.

When she began to make friends, it allowed her to feel she was a part of a community: "I would say it most definitely has impacted my experience in college because without it I probably wouldn't have gotten out, I probably wouldn't have known people." Culture has also been an important part of her experience on campus "it just feels so fulfilling learning my culture again and starting to get back into that. And it just, it's like I'm finding myself again. And it's helping me in this journey in college." In addition, meeting different people who were role models contributed to her learning process, "just learning people's perspectives on life and how it shaped their way of success."

Billie

"It's home, away from home … you're like a second family." (Billie)

Billie was a first-year student at USD affiliated with the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe and from Chamberlain, South Dakota. The two factors that influenced Billie's selection process was her nursing program at USD as well as the Native cultural resources available to students. She decided she wanted to participate in the LLC because of the half-housing scholarship as that was an important financial consideration as well as Billie's own expectation that the program seemed "really fun!"

Billie's involvement in the LLC had been centered on having a connection or the experience as a member of family, and she was grateful for the opportunity:

> I kind of got like my own little family out of it. Everyone gets along, and it's just, the meetings were always helpful. It felt like it was kind of like, just like a family gathering every week … because I've always been around like a big family. And then so, moving, it was like, I also had no roommate. So, it was just always like me in my room, and then, like, it's like Wednesday, something I look forward to, because that's when we met, and that's whenever … I was with a lot of people.

When Billie came to USD, she was concerned about her classes but found there were other students who understood her lived experiences, and Native culture was more accepted than it had been in high school:

> I learned more about people, and like how far people have made it, especially with … the guests we have, and it made it easier to make friends and … get to know other people who have … (the) same experiences with you.

On reflection, one of the experiences Billie wished she shared with her peers was living on the designated Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC floor expressing: "I … didn't … know … most of the same people everyone else knew, because … everyone was on … the same floor with the same RAs, who always … came to the NACC as well." She felt other students were able to get to know one another better because of having those shared experiences, as well as having the RAs who were designated for the floor.

Adele

"I wouldn't be the person I am today." (Adele)

Adele was a first-year graduate student in the Master of Public Health program at USD affiliated with the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe and Meskwaki Nation and from Dell

Rapids, South Dakota. She graduated from USD with a bachelor's degree before returning for a master's program. Initially, when she was selecting a college, she focused on her basketball career and wanted to play at the collegiate level. She also knew pursuing a degree in the sciences was important because in her long-term goals, she hoped to be a pharmacist or a physician. Scholarships became an important factor in her decision process, and she was reflective of how much a school was going to give her, dependent on size.

When Adele decided to transfer to USD from another four-year private institution, athletics were no longer a factor, so a priority was on selecting a school that would help her get into medical school. Also important was what option would be the most affordable, and what would keep her near her family. She ultimately selected USD for having the only medical school in the state of South Dakota, and because her parents had both attended SDSU, she wanted to "be a rebel and join the Coyote nation." The USD campus became a place where a transfer student like Adele could branch out not knowing a lot about the school. She wanted to have connections to the medical school, "find the right people," and get involved.

Adele acknowledged her housing process was different than a first-year student's experience. Selecting a dormitory plan, she thought signing the contract would provide her with better opportunities for affordability and allow her to live in Coyote Village, a dormitory where many upperclassmen lived. Instead of being placed in Coyote Village, Adele was placed in a three-person room on the corner of one of the older residential halls. Because of where they placed her, she thought being a junior transfer (and housing

only being guaranteed to first years and sophomores) would position her to be granted a housing release, and she decided to sign a lease to an apartment. After applying for the release, she was denied by housing to be released from her dorm contract, which meant she would have to keep both. After connecting with what was possible through the LLC, the half-housing scholarship was offered to her to assist with her unexpected dual living costs. Adele shared with or without the half-housing scholarship, she would have gone to the programming every week: "I kind of forgot about the scholarship. And I just went to … every Wednesday programming. It was great. It's a lot of fun. Didn't really seem like it was mandatory when I went." She also shared because of the experiences she had in high school as a Native person, she was very impacted by the experiences she was able to have with her peers.

It's great to have other people that go through similar life experiences with you. They also look like you [because] I went to a high school in Dell Rapids, South Dakota where they were, only like less than five people who looked like me in my high school. So … it was really fun to see how we all grow through our academics and in our education and then also how we just experience life and how we talk about it. It was really cool to just see how other people are so passionate about other things in life, and like what they're really good at … just seeing like artists and architects and business majors, it was just crazy to me … I'm a STEM major, so it's hard to like, we just all had really different life experiences. So just what made you do that? Or what made you do this? I think, having that community … where you all have the same race, but very

different passions is one way to thrive in college, and I think that's … what the LLC really like gives to the Native students here at USD.

The LLC changed her perspective on her culture, having come from a school where she was one of only a few Native students and would sometimes experience racism from her peers: "I feel like coming here and just getting involved right away really helped me expand my knowledge on Native culture, and just who I am and where my people come from." She noted being in the LLC even impacted the clubs she decided to join at USD, and her connection to culture and community:

> I wouldn't be (in) the position that I'm going to be after med school. I think it's like … important … to have the LLC to keep our culture … going. So, people … know because they don't teach it in school. It's hard to learn at home, because your parents already know and they're not, maybe they don't want it. Maybe they don't teach you because they don't know too. So, it's I think it's to teach our culture is just, you have to have it like integrated in education.

Kayla

> *Without this program I do not think I would have the same feeling of home. Thinking about my college experience if I did go … in my state that I'm from, I don't think I would have … gotten that connection where I … have people in my life that … I can consider family. (Kayla)*

Kayla was a third-year student at USD, affiliated with the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Tribe from St. John, North Dakota. Kayla's most important factors in choosing a college were "moving somewhere that had people that didn't know me

[be]cause I felt like a lot of people judged back in my hometown." Kayla also expressed wanting to meet new people and learn about Native culture. She stated:

> Since growing up, I didn't have much of that exposure so I want to dive deeper into that and so I did my research and found USD had good Native student services through all the, I guess social media stuff, articles that I found and then I also was looking at if they had a marketing program and a good business school so since our business school was accredited and had good representation, that's why, that was a big factor to me.

She had originally been set on attending the University of North Dakota, but in reflecting on it being very close to home, she came upon USD's email sitting in her junk inbox. Kayla first learned about the LLC through connecting with staff member, Dr. Little, who was in contact to ask if she was interested in the LLC:

> I was like, that'd be a cool program to be a part of since I wouldn't know anyone here. And its Native student based, feel like that was a great way to make friends so that's why I wanna be a part of it. And then the scholarship that's offered through it. That wasn't a big factor to me since I didn't get it. But I'm like, I still want to be involved, I still want to be included in it. So, I think, having that people making process just engaging with each other is a great way for me to be welcomed on campus.

As Kayla indicated, she was not eligible for the half-housing scholarship because of the amount of aid she received from USD in other scholarships. she still felt it would

be a good opportunity to meet others, connect with a community, and be engaged as a part of the weekly program:

> It's a good way to relax throughout a busy week. I think one of my best moments each week is during the programming that we have weekly cause it's always laughing and smiling and whatnot and it's just a great way to feel more welcomed on campus … personally, I'm so busy hectic in the business school … being both involved with everything and with the LLC it's not quite as a big requirement in my schedule. It's just more of a want. I wanna do it, I wanna be a part of it and instead of I need to fulfill a specific thing … just the people in it just makes me feel I don't know, comfortable. It makes me feel that I'm welcomed. And I don't know, makes me feel like I have a break in the week since it's not high stress, high maintenance.

Kayla's role models in leaving her family were her own siblings who were successful in their accomplishments before her, and she truly sees USD as her "home away from home." As she further reflected:

> So, coming to USD and being a part of this program made me feel like I belonged here, and I didn't get so lonely, just because of the people in it are so supportive and willing to give an extra hand in whatever I needed.

The structure of the weekly programming was very helpful to Kayla, a busy student, leader, as she expressed, "knowing that I can go to an event where I can see my fellow relatives, it's a great feeling knowing that I could laugh and enjoy my time and have the opportunity just to be a part of that experience."

Megan

> *It also helped me feel like a little bit more at ease with like being a Native kid at USD, because there was. It was like kind of isolating a lot of the times, because, you know, I was in political science and philosophy which are like … I don't know. I feel like there's a lot of kids who are like kind of well off, or (in) pretty White fields. And that's great, and they're all nice. But it was really nice … to chat with Native people like who kind of get it. (Megan)*

Megan was a new graduate from USD affiliated with the Choctaw Nation, from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. When Megan first considered where she wanted to attend college, she hoped to attend what she called a "little Ivy" on the east coast, but when it came time to start the application process to college, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented her from pursuing her desired goal. There were two factors that impacted her decision; first, she did not want to attend her first year of college online, and many of the schools she was applying to informed her that it would be online. Second, she was worried, not knowing what the outcome of the pandemic would be, especially with the safety of her immediate family and grandparents. These two considerations made the decision to attend USD easy.

Once Megan learned she would be fully funded at USD, she understood the cost effectiveness in comparison to other schools. In addition, USD, in comparison to the other SDBOR schools had a liberal arts college program with a strong political science program. She liked knowing there was also a strong study abroad program. Megan also

did not want to attend one of the local private colleges in Sioux Falls because it felt too close to home. She first learned about the LLC through an email:

> And then I think, like the last week of school or something, my freshman year, I got like I happened to be in the NACC, and I got like cajoled … not like not cajoled, but like I remember, I think maybe John was like "hey, you should really do this. It would be really, really good, like, I think you would like the living learning community. It's our first year. And oh, by the way, did you learn that there's a scholarship with it?" And I was like, Oh! Tell me more! And I, yeah, he told me all about it, and I was like, sign me up.

The most important factor for Megan in ultimately committing to the LLC was the half-housing scholarship provided an opportunity for her family to be worry-free financially:

> I was excited because it seemed like a learning opportunity without any homework, or like expectations … I would just show up every week and get to learn something cool without like doing homework or reading an assignment beforehand, or like having to expend really any energy. And so that was … really exciting, and a cool draw.

Despite moving off campus and no longer receiving the LLC scholarship, Megan continued to attend the LLC programming and naturally became a mentor to first year students in the LLC. Megan was in the first cohort of the LLC and observed the transition between its first year and first cohort into it becoming more structured as the semesters progressed:

> I really appreciated it a lot. It got me out of my like dorm room … at night, which I think now that, like everyone's on their phone or on their computer, like, I feel like the temptation to just stay in and not go out and never do anything was super strong. And the LLC always like got me out, and with other people and chatting so it definitely was positive in that way … sometimes and like I don't know, there was definitely like an immediate kind of sense of like, oh, we're in this together. And like, you know, we're trying to build community and so that was like one of the best parts about it. So yeah, it was overall, just like an awesome, awesome experience.

Megan credited her involvement with student organizations with her connection to the LLC. She connected with older student leaders at the start of her sophomore year who shared with her more about elections to Tiospaye Student Council, the largest Native student organization on campus that facilitates the Annual Wacipi (Powwow) every year. She credited her Tiospaye engagement with being one of the best experiences she ever had, and felt it was connected to her involvement in the LLC. Since Megan had to start college during COVID-19, she shared:

> [The] LLC spring boarded me into like just a whole like sense of community like it led me to Tiospaye, it led me to, you know all these great, you know like mentors. And it just … opened my eyes to like all the stuff that Native people were doing at USD, that I could like be a part of.

One of Megan's wishes was that while she enjoyed being part of the first class in development, she wished she was able to have the experience of having upperclassmen

who were able to mentor her. At the same time, the program provided Megan with an opportunity to connect with advocates across campus who she felt related more strongly to her belief system and understandings about herself:

> I would like to say that the one thing the LLC taught me, and this is a piece of advice that I get a lot is that, at any institution, there are always people who are working to make it better and working to make it more inclusive, and you got to find those people and you gotta stick by them because I felt that a lot. Like my freshman year, I felt like there are no Native people at USD, and I feel alone all the time. And the only kids I see are these like White political science majors who are like, you know, telling me what I should or should not believe, and you know they they've never worked a day in their life, and you know whatever, and I'm sure everyone has their own complicated story, but that's just how it felt to me. And you know, being in the LLC taught me that, like the way that you experience college, or you experience like your education can change so much based on like who you choose to seek out and be around and like a huge part of your education, is being around the right people who can teach you things, and who will take the time to like mentor you and look out for you and teach you what you need to know. And so that was like just a huge lesson that, like, you know I can tell now, my sophomore year was so much better than my freshman year, because I like fell into the lap of the right people.

Paul

> *It's been the highlight of my week every week since freshman year. Wednesday night is always the biggest thing on my schedule. I love it. I love being able to meet new people, do new things, see new things, try new things. And it's just something to look forward to every week. (Paul)*

Paul was an incoming junior at USD, affiliated with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, and from Flandreau, South Dakota. The important factors for Paul in selecting a college, were the cost of attendance, location, and campus community. Paul had toured campus three or four times during high school. He had been to USD many times prior because his mother was an alumna. Through her connection, Paul received the Coyote Legacy scholarship, awarded to children of alumni in the state of South Dakota. He met Tse Chi "Chad" Yen, an admissions officer who had previously been in the Native recruitment role at USD, at the Wacipi. Chad gave Paul an overview of the LLC and "it just sounded like an amazing opportunity for me to connect with students my age with my similar background and be a part of something bigger than myself."

Paul ultimately felt it would be beneficial to be around other like-minded students who understood his experience: "I thought I could do better surrounded by people I feel comfortable with, and forming good connections and lifelong friends, which I think I did." The half-housing scholarship was an important factor in Paul's decision that assisted in covering gaps in the other areas scholarships did not cover for him. The LLC and NACC have helped him through the times when he felt he was missing events at home in his community. Much of the community Paul found through the LLC, NSS, and

the NACC allowed him to feel connected with peers and made him feel that he can be successful in college:

> Yes, I'm so drawn to the NACC. Freshman year I was there every morning at 9 AM first semester till about 12 PM and I was just so drawn to it, and gave me a space where I could express myself, be myself, and a study space where I could study with other students, too … [it] just has such a positive energy, and everyone there cares for each other, and it just feels welcoming and safe. It's like, this is corny, but like it's like a warm hug every time you walk in there.

Paul shared that ultimately the power and importance of the LLC has been just in being around people who care about engaging in the same experiences:

> Just being around each other, it's good cause it gets hard being at college, but knowing that there's other people just like me, going through the same thing and they're there for you, and you're there for them every Wednesday night I'm reminded of that, and it's definitely helped me get through some of the harder times in college.

Paul wished that during second semester of sophomore year, he continued to apply himself to attend programming because his level of participation dropped because of other things he had going on. He shared that this impacted his sense of belonging to the community when he chose to participate in things not related to the community.

Elizabeth

> *I really struggled to make friends my first semester at USD. It was a big school, and I'm from a small town, so I didn't really know how to navigate such large*

> *crowds of people. And so when I came to my 1st LLC meeting, I found a lot of people who had a lot in common with me, and everyone was really friendly and welcoming. So that helped me decide to stay and come back. (Elizabeth)*

Elizabeth was a senior at USD, affiliated with the Sault Sainte Marie tribe of Chippewa Indians, and from Huron, South Dakota. The two important factors in Elizabeth's college choice were in evaluating affordability as well as scholarship availability. Elizabeth had future aspirations to attend medical school, so it was important to find a path forward that would allow her to graduate with low student loan debt. Ultimately, she selected USD. A peer mentoring program called Wawokiya Peer Mentoring (now renamed Iwanciyehci Peer Mentoring), enabled her, through her mentor, to attend an LLC program. As she shared:

> I feel as though I was able to make a ton of connections that I still have today … my connections are still growing today from my time with the LLC. I was able to find my current roommate, who is one of my best friends.

Before Elizabeth joined the community, she was still grappling with working through her own identity as a Native person, but she felt welcomed as part of the community and connected to other students. Despite not receiving a half-housing scholarship, Elizabeth found connection and belonging through being an active participant in programming in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi, which was not dependent on the financial incentive. She observed students from many different factors and backgrounds found solidarity within the community:

> I think that the living, learning community really takes in students from all different backgrounds and find and establishes a sense of home away from home. And so … it's huge. I think, just making a community for people that need a community. It's amazing.

As Elizabeth expressed, the importance of understanding these differences was integrated into creating a community where all feel valued and accepted. She felt comfortable to be on a path of discovery through her experience being involved, which was not dependent on financial incentivization.

Ray

> *"I'm like, I'm doing good for my people, and I think it's been great." (Ray)*

Ray is a sophomore at USD, is affiliated with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, and is from Martin, South Dakota. When Ray was thinking about where she wanted to attend college, two important factors were affordability and finding a community that felt like home because "my home has brought like, just like a really strong sense of support." Ray came from a large family who supported her academic aspirations and athletic achievements, as she shared:

> [Honestly] growing up on the reservation, I feel like Native support. Other Natives like, no matter like whether you're related or like your families don't really get along like everybody wants to see the youth succeed. And growing up, I really felt that from my rez.

Ray was given an opportunity to run at the Division I level at USD, and when the USD admissions office reached out and then Dr. Little reached out, she decided the LLC would

be a good fit. Dr. Little shared a lot about the Wednesday programming and that there would be meals and speakers, so Ray was excited to be connected to a community beyond just athletics. She expressed she would have been a part of the LLC even without the scholarship amount: "… it just brought me a lot closer to, especially like you and John and a lot of other like Native students and helped me build like a sense of community."

She felt the community impacted her in large ways like being able to listen to speakers like the Olympic gold medalist in the 10,000-meter run at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Billy Mills, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, like Ray. She expressed meeting Billy Mills was like a dream come true:

> [It] like helped me feel like I wasn't alone, like there was a lot of it like it made me realize there was a lot of others … Native students on campus that are … in the same position as me, being like a first-generation student, and being like this is like your first time away, like hours away from home.

Ray was driven as a student athlete by knowing other students back home looked up to her and saw her as a role model. The LLC provided another space where she felt empowered by the experience of students who both understood and valued her lived experience.

Pascal

> *[Feeling] like I was, that I could be a person to go to for Native students, and quite a few came to me which was like really like empowering to feel that I don't know, like I am some sort of leader in their lives, which is kind of crazy to think*

> *that I was once a mentee, and now the mentor. I know I'll always be a mentee but stepping into that mentor role is what being an RA … helped me learn how to be. Even though it was a really like hard job. I'm really glad that I had that. (Pascal)*

Pascal was a senior at USD, affiliated with the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, and from Flandreau, South Dakota. For Pascal, being close to home was a very important factor for attending college as well as affordability. Initially, she was determined to attend SDSU, but when she visited USD, her perspective changed. When she first toured USD, she was unaware the NACC existed. She received emails from NACC staff members but knew little about what the community had to offer to students. As she shared:

> When thinking of colleges, I didn't like fully think about the cultural change, like that wasn't my number one thing. But when I visited I kind of like thought about it, and how important it would be, and I'm so glad that I chose USD because my freshman year was so hard and if I said didn't find my like community at the at the NACC, I definitely would have had like a really harder time, and I probably would have dropped out if it wasn't for the NACC.

As Pascal further shared:

> … coming to the Native American Cultural Center and hearing like welcome to the NACC every time you come in, I feel like that's what it like really, truly feels when you're in a community, being just welcomed into it every day.

Pascal remembered when she went to visit campus, she learned about the LLC and found out she would be part of the first class if she wanted to join. “I don't know. I

just always learn to (expect) things always falling through. So I didn't know like it would. Actually. I'd be a part of this community, and I'm really glad [I] was part of it." The half-housing scholarship was an important factor for a student like Pascal, who was not an enrolled member of any tribal nation that limits educational funding available for federally enrolled tribal members. Pascal's experience in the LLC was further enhanced as one of the first Native RAs for the Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC floor, an experience on which she reflected:

> It wasn't my greatest experience, but being the first residential assistant was pretty cool, was a cool experience, being able to be like the first Native RA on the living learning community. But it got to be really difficult [because] I dealt with like really hard situations, like [sexual assault], racism. There was just a lot of issues. But at the same time there was a lot of like good memories like having room hours, and I had my emotional support animal with me and my little rez dog. And everyone would just come in and like, come, see her, and like we'd all be in community together in my little room with my dog, which is really cool, good memory.

Analysis of Themes

A cross-analysis of the interviews showed many terms and concepts that overlapped across these individual student experiences. The analysis of different concepts was centered around the research question: How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD? While it would be pertinent to evaluate every term affiliated within these interviews, for the purpose of this dissertation,

the concept of belonging was connected to five tenets that came up most frequently throughout the interviews: *community* (77 mentions), *connection* (38), *experience* (28), *being Native* (25), and *support* (25). This framework creates what I often reference in my own day-to-day work as a network of a care. If a student experiences feelings of community and connection through experience, being affirmed in their identity of being Native, and support, then it is more than likely they experience a sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging

An expression of sense of belonging is the question of whether students feel like they are going to fit in with their peers and greater community, particularly in the transition from high school to college during a time when they are working hard to figure out who they are and what is important to them. Maroon discussed her fear of attending college:

> I really did not know if I was gonna fit in, even in a big university or big college, you know, like I said I was coming from like a small town to like a big university with different range of people, and I wasn't really sure where I was gonna belong, or even like be placed in and like, be in this community, you know, oh, no this community—this program—it gave me like a sense of like, yeah, I do belong here, you know. I chose to go to college. I chose to study in something that I'm really interested in and yeah, it just made me feel like, yeah, I do belong here. This is my path and I chose this. And this this program has really like, what do you say, contributed to that and made me more made me more like a feeling of belonging.

When the students interviewed reflected on their decisions for selecting the college they felt was going to be the best fit, many made their determinations for where they wanted to attend based on the themes reflected in this analysis. However, sense of belonging is one of the strongest precursors to success and retention for Native students and as Peters et al. (2024) described in their case study, Dakota sense of belonging is "a relational and reciprocal concept through which each individual feels valued and is of value through an interdependent kinship system" (p. 1). The students reflected the LLC helped solidify the feelings that many of them questioned when they first came to college, like Star reflected:

> My sense of belonging … I never really felt like I belonged. And when I came to USD it was like even more out of place. I didn't know anyone … the only person I knew lived in a different dorm. We had different schedules, everything, and I was like okay. And just as I kept saying, (the LLC is) just so welcoming. So come, join us. Come, do this. Oh, you should come to this! Oh, my gosh, you go into that! Can I join you? It's just you feel so included. It just makes you feel so like loved, so happy to be a part of anything. And that helped me, I would say mentally, and when my academics started going down, that made my mental health go down, but no matter what, I never felt like, I was out of place.

Some students expressed their experiences were greatly impacted by the ability to go to LLC programming and be in the NACC where there was a community that made them feel like they were part of something larger than themselves. As Billie described,

the listening, welcoming, and openness of the LLC contributed to her own feelings of belonging within her experiences as a college student:

> I feel like … towards the beginning of the year, when I didn't know (many) people, it was still like I felt like I belonged, because whenever I showed up at the NACC it was like always like so welcoming, and everyone was so open to being like, hi! What's your major like, who are you? It's just like, it made me feel (like I belonged) because everyone was just so open to getting to know me, and then it made me more open to get to know other people.

The ability for sense of belonging to be accessed through openness and a willingness to be vulnerable with one another was evident across the student interviews. Engagement across peers was also important, especially within shared experiences, as Pascal expressed:

> I have really felt a sense of belonging every single day that I've been here and I'm really glad to have came here instead of any of the other schools I picked, [because] having a community at your college is so important because college in itself is so hard. Especially as Native student, first gen, low income. You just have to really find your community. Otherwise, it's gonna be a really hard time.

The shared experience not only of identities but also of bonding across divisions, majors, and hopes for career outcomes is something that many of the participants reflected on as well. The LLC is not limited by major or program, so the students are diverse across their areas of study and career interests. Many of the first-year students are in the process of determining what they want to study, while older students are making

more conscientious decisions about their academic pathways forward. This is because the LLC does not have a formal academic component so students do not feel there is any academic pressure affiliated with attending Wednesday night programming, only accessing the half-housing scholarship. As Adele reflected about her own pathway forward:

> … having the LLC has made me feel like I belong here at USD a lot more, I think, if I didn't see other people who looked like me, I'd kind of have imposter syndrome … with going to med school, a lot of people have imposter syndrome. But just knowing that all these people who I know right now are also getting their doctorates … like 10 people are going … for their doctorates, which is crazy … just knowing that other people have their doctorates … it does make me feel like we belong here at USD … and I think USD and the LLC has really done a great job with showing the successes of others and how like you can take the steps to do that, too. So, I think that it's really helped me with my belonging, especially coming again as a transfer. I love talking about how I transferred, but being a transfer, you don't feel like you belong as a transfer you're like, oh, I don't belong at my old school, so why would I belong here? But then, just when I, the first day when I was moving in … Brooke and John and Megan were very prominent to say, like … all of you guys belong here like this schools for everyone like, you guys are gonna be great. So, I think yeah, the LLC is very good at giving a sense of belonging.

All students, whether they are first-generation to attend college or transferring from another university, coming into the community are given the same opportunity to engage and be involved. The team who leads the LLC is focused on creating moments of learning and turning away from structures of judgment that prevent students from learning more about themselves. The focus is to make sure that any conversation around culture is open and welcoming to every student who wants to learn more about themselves and provides an opportunity for students to be mindful of how they approach their own identity as a Native person. As Elizabeth identified within her own sense of self:

> I would say that my sense of identity has been evolving and changing with time, and at the beginning, before I joined the LLC, this was not a community that I would have felt that I would, I would not have felt comfortable identifying myself within—and that's completely changed. I think it's easier—well, it's changed because I'm now able to recognize that … doesn't mean identical identities. And so just acknowledging that being Indigenous can be a spectrum of tradition and growing up on a reservation, not everybody grows up the same way and looks the same way, acts the same way. And so, I think once I've come to that realization with the help of the LLC, I've been able to find a sense of belonging.

In creating an environment that supports a sense of belonging for Native students through this LLC, Native identity is a spectrum, and Native students should feel they can learn about themselves in a safe and authentic space. As Pascal shared:

I really had a great experience, like learning and expanding on my culture. And I'm still learning and being part of the living learning community like has helped that, especially during the Wednesday night events … a lot of the people that come in, they talk about like their cultural journey, and how … they didn't grow up learning their culture, and now they're coming back to it, or they grew up that way. But like their parents didn't want to talk about it … just seeing everyone's different perspectives has really like changed mine.

The exposure students in the LLC felt in seeing other peers connecting with culture in different ways and on different timelines is critically important. Megan described the experience of speakers sharing about their lived experiences with LLC participants,

I feel like they were just really, really honest, with, like their struggles, or like the you know, the road that they had walked to get where they are like, you know, they would just be super honest, they'd be like yeah, I really, really, really struggled when I was a kid or they would say, stuff like, you know, they would there a lot of times it would be critical of like their, you know, the institutions that they work at now like if it was USD or another institution or you know, even a museum or something like that, they would say, it's not perfect. But you know, I just appreciate, I always felt like the people who we were speaking with were super frank and super honest about you know how they got to where they are and the work that they're continuing to do, and in pretty much every other speaker series, or like program that I've ever been to at USD it kind of felt like the

> speakers were just gassing themselves up, and they were just like kind of bragging about how like cool they are, and how much they've contributed, or they've done, and I never felt that way at the LLC. I always felt like the emphasis of the LLC and all the speakers was like here's the imperfection, here's how we're working through it, here's how we're doing it together, and you know, and you can do it, too. That was like the tone of every single meeting that we did. So that was like something I really, really, really valued and enjoyed yeah, during my time there.

Being able to share the imperfections of a college experience as a Native student was a valuable experience because it shared the realities of what students in the LLC might experience during their own time. Many of the students were also able to see aspects of home they missed being away from home, as Paul shared:

> Being away from home here at USD it's been difficult to maintain, like a—like do things like singing, being around the drum, being around the language, but the staff there, and NSS they do a really good job at giving students exposure to that because a lot of us are away from home where that is usually available to us.

Through events and different opportunities to engage, students were able to map out their college path not only through their academic pathways but also through the experiences within the LLC.

Community

For Lakota people, community is typically defined as those who were in relation to you. Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi is a curated community for students that provides them an opportunity to easily find peers as well as faculty and support who can make connections

that will make them feel one part to a greater whole. Tinto's (1997) definition of community is broadened beyond academic or social to include cultural, which is the anchor of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi's framework on building community—that the students identify as Native or are interested in connecting around Native identity for their field of study.

For many of the interviewed students, they were interested in how the community they came from back home would align or differ from the type of community they were going to experience when they attended college. In this case, the LLC includes a group of Native students, many of whom are from the nine tribal nations of South Dakota or regionally adjacent to USD. Many identify as first-generation to college. In her interview, Star shared her experience with community prior to coming to USD had been more challenging, and her perception of what she was going to experience when she came to college was going to change. The peer-to-peer care these participants experienced helped them to identify community as an anchor to how they experienced belonging:

> Well on the reservation like community was kind of broken. So, I didn't really know what that was and then to go to USD, and everyone was just so welcoming, so encouraging like, oh, you can do this! Oh, you got this! Oh, my gosh, you should come join us! You wanna do this! … it just makes you so happy, and it makes you feel like … you belong, 'cause I remember feeling out of place at first and that's why I feel like a sense of belonging. And then I try to just, becom(e) part of the community. People that make you feel like you want to join. And when I joined, my friend started joining in and it's just, now I see community so much

> better, and I just, I don't know. It's making me wanna think about switching my major into doing something with community development.

Through the LLC's modeling of a community where students felt supported, a student like Star could see herself in a career pathway centered on recreating those same feelings. In Ray's interview, she expressed her community had been very supportive of her as a Native student and athlete, so she was hopeful to find a community that matched the one she had already been a part of. These differentiations about the type of environment Native students are seeking are important, because every student is going to experience community in a different way dependent on their lived experiences. Some of the students interviewed identified they felt supported by their communities and families, while others felt their communities or families did not build as pure of a sense of belonging as they have through the LLC. As Elizabeth discussed:

> I think that my college experience would not be near what it is without LLC. I mean, that's where I found my community, and without it I don't know where I would be, but I can guarantee that I wouldn't feel as much support as I do now.

Many of the students came in with an understanding that this component of finding their community was critical to their success at the institution of their choice. This was rooted in knowing there would be a particular identified community they related to at USD, through either their identity as a Native person, the area of study they were interested in, or as in Ray's example, athletics. For their community as Native people, many expressed the LLC, the NACC, and NSS as a division provided them with a common denominator of understanding who they are and where their chosen community

exists within the institution. These three places are where many students feel like they do not have to explain who they are, as Ray reflected in her experience being on a team that is predominantly non-Native:

> I think … like being an athlete like I built a community with, like all the athletes and like my coaches, but I think this also gives me … another community that … reminds me of home, like it feels like I could, I can truly be myself … whenever I'm at the NACC, like around other Native students, and I think it's just something like I missed, especially.

Many of the students expressed Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi helped them to find an easy footing into a community at college, and for many this curation of a regularly scheduled program and the guarantee there would be peers there to be around became critically important to their well-being. As Adele expressed, the positivity of the LLC was what made her feel she was truly a part of the community:

> I don't think I've ever really had a community that was this positive, just always uplifting, since I was like on a basketball team. That's always a positive experience. But I think just having that close knit of a community always rooting for your successes, no matter if they know, like how much work you put into it or like how much you thought about it. They always root for you. It's, it just means a lot to a student who is taking classes and then doing clubs and then studying it's really hard … college is hard. So just having that community to help push you along is important to a college student, especially when you're a freshman, and you just left your home and you're taking your first exam in college … I mean I

> can't imagine how hard it is, but it is. It's hard when you're six hours away from your family You've never been away for that long. So … having … this community … like so widespread throughout USD, which I think is really cool because the LLC touches a lot of people. So just having this widespread community always rooting for you is important to college students trying to obtain their degrees.

While Adele was able to experience this community grow and change throughout the few years she participated, Billie, as a first-year student, also identified this was a very important part of her success and sense of community at USD:

> Our … community that we have being in that, it's like everyone gets along. We all spend time with each other, and I think like the more you go the more people you know, and then like it, just like you don't have to worry about like coming there and like thinking, this person doesn't like me. It's always just like, oh, I'm excited to see these people. I'm excited to talk today and [do] what we're gonna do today.

Being a part of a supportive community is also connected to the students learning more about themselves and defining the things that are important to them as individuals away from their families and the communities who knew them before. Maroon expressed this about herself in seeking a community to help her learn more about who she was and what was important to her away from her experience in high school:

> And when I went to college, I wanted to be different … be my own person … show people who I am, and I can tell that I've really have been myself and really been like outgoing, you know, talking to people and it was because of this [LLC]

> program, and it was because of you know me being involved in Tiospaye Student Council, that really helped me a lot, you know, be involved with campus students, you know, the staff, even community members in Vermillion, you know all of that, that really helped me a lot, and it helped me become like the person that I want to be, and not the person that I was.

The LLC also became an opportunity for students to get to know Vermillion better. In a small rural town, this can be an important factor as students grow throughout their undergraduate time and eventually move off campus and into the community. Elizabeth expressed the LLC was a good opportunity for her to be connected to a place she felt unfamiliar with and that had a community of its own:

> … through the living learning community, I got to know my peers at USD, I got to know faculty, but I also got to know the town of Vermillion, which was really a surprise for me, because I didn't have a lot of people that I knew to go see movies with and things like that. And so having a community that would invite me out to a movie on this night or catering in from a local restaurant on another night was really awesome.

Ultimately, the goals of a community are to feel connection across lived experiences, and to feel others are integrated into a space where everyone feels welcome and, as the next theme demonstrates, connected. The kindness of a community extends into a student feeling they are integrated into a family that makes them feel like their desire to belong matters.

Connection

For Lakota people, connection is the root of survival. Being connected to the community around you, the seasons, the responsibilities of your role within that society, and the students' reflections on what this means, is as an extension of community, as Elizabeth expressed in her interview:

> In my hometown growing up … it's a small town, so I would consider myself having a community during that time, but I never felt connected or seen past a superficial interaction. Coming to USD and getting to know the individuals through the living learning community, I feel like I've not only been able to join a community but also found a second family. And so, the struggles that would come with moving to a new town for a university such as missing my family, that has really made a huge difference, and I think mentally as well, it's made all the difference finding my people.

Many of the students expressed that the connections they made to their peers was critically important to their experience in college, and that the LLC helped them get connected to other students by finding friends and mentorship. Maroon reflected on this experience after her first year of college:

> … it just makes it more enjoyable about going to college, because I didn't think I was going to make any friends, and I did, and it was because of this program. You know, it brought people together. If this program wasn't there, then I felt like I would have kind of been alone, and I didn't, wouldn't make (many) connections or memories with these people.

The weekly Wednesday night commitment and expectation encourages students to develop a consistent connection to their peers, to the experiences of the program, and to a routine. This became an important factor many of the students reflected on; having a meal on the same day every week that provided a consistent way for them to attend and engage with a safe community every week. As Pascal shared in looking back on her first year of college:

> Well, especially as a freshman you don't want to be locked up in your dorm. So, it was like really nice to be able to look forward to every Wednesday night. That would be doing something, even if it was just a little game night at the NACC, and then they provided free food, which is really nice for all college students to have. I don't know it was just really great to like, have something [to] look forward to.

As Pascal indicated, students felt the connection was not something they had to initiate themselves but would be guaranteed as a part of their expectation throughout their participation in the program. Consistency provides a natural framework for relationships and mentorships through building connection to grow and deepen, as Kayla reflected:

> … the big factor of it would be getting closer with the mentors and the people that are a part of it such as you, John, and all the other people that help out with it. I think it's a good way to learn more about the Native American culture and also connect with others on campus. And through the program I was able to make friends with people that I probably wouldn't have met, just because of the different curriculums and different programs that is involved with the LLC.

Many of the students affirmed connecting with other students who understood their lived-experiences and who knew what being Native was like were important, as Adele highlighted:

> The thing that I enjoyed the most is just meeting everyone … like I've said before I wouldn't have met probably a good chunk of these people if I wasn't in the LLC. And like, they're all just amazing positive people that are working for a degree just like you and just learning that others look like me, and they're going for higher educational degrees. It's empowering and then also just gives you hope for the future that there are going to be Natives out there with educational degrees. And … it's hard, college is hard, but we're doing it. I think that that's just impactful to see others going for degrees.

Many of the students reflected the speakers who come to share their own lived experiences to the LLC during Wednesday night programming impacted the way the students see themselves. They felt connected when they saw themselves in the speakers who came to tell their stories across the generations, as Maroon referenced:

> They chose what they wanted to do, and they did it, and they came back to show that you can do it, and that made me feel like, oh, okay, well, if they are the living like proof of that. If they can do it, if they wanna do it, then they can do it. And it made me feel like, okay, well, if they can do it, then I can do it. And it made me really think about it thoroughly, about what I wanted to do and what I plan to do with it.

For first-year students, these reflections of pathways in life allowed them to see there are many different career and success pathways moving forward that can come out of following what they are passionate about. Ultimately, the connection students felt was defined and solidified by their ability to engage weekly and see as well as be themselves within a family unit and furthered the next coded tenet of sense of belonging as experience for students.

Experience

The LLC's framework is anchored in learning through experience, centering a different way of knowing than traditional Western norms of academic in-classroom learning. While many LLCs provide something modeled more like a scholar's program, many of the students shared they liked the model of being able to attend and experience an event and community. Adele reflected on this further:

> It's just something you don't get like at SDSU or other colleges … when I was at Northwestern we had something called the Bridge Scholars, which is just basically you get a scholarship for being ethnically diverse, I would say, which is really cool but then we have like monthly meetings, and we just like go to someone's house and eat. But we wouldn't really talk about like the topics that we should have talked about with being in Northwest Iowa, and I think that's something that the LLC provides is just talking about how we can take back our education, how we can take back like just control.

The experience aspect of the LLC was anchored on the weekly Wednesday programming, which is what the NSS team plans for the students who wish to participate.

However, experience in the LLC is also connected to living on the designated LLC floor with other Native students, like Pascal indicated:

> Being able to live with other Native students. Seeing more people that look like me like every day especially you will like see people on campus like here and there, and you go to the NACC you'll always see like that familiar face but like seeing a familiar face like every day like when you wake up, go to bed. It's really nice. Especially like when you're making friends with them, like my roommate was the first like one of the first people I met and she lived on the floor, and we became best friends.

Although this opportunity to have continued peer-to-peer engagement through the dormitories served as a really important factor for many of the students, those who did not live on the physical floor of the LLC indicated the experience component of the weekly Wednesday programming was worthwhile to them, and they wanted to continue their participation. Their decisions not to live on the LLC floor could be for myriad reasons, including being upperclassmen and wanting to live off campus or for other factors. Kayla reflected more on this:

> … even coming from an outside perspective, I think it offers as much even if I lived outside of the residence hall. So, it doesn't solely rely on that, it is also a part of weekly programs that makes it stand out as well.

While the experience of the LLC had living on the same floor as a component, it did not appear to be the anchor or foundation for the participating students. Instead, the weekly programming was what students felt defined the LLC's experience. As Megan

reflected within her own experience of living on the floor and then moving off, she had the free will to decide if the LLC was something of which she wanted to continue to be a part of. To her, without the half-housing scholarship or living on the hall, she felt the community continued to be important to her:

> I mean, even after I moved off campus my senior year, and I didn't get the scholarship anymore. I still came to a lot of the LLC events. So, it wasn't the only thing, and it was valuable, even without the half-housing scholarship, but that was just huge, like … it was like a massive incentive to like go and also be a part of it.

Many of the students also described how being involved in the LLC impacted experiences that they chose to engage in as college students. Being able to meet other students across the LLC who engaged in different pathways in their academics as well as diverse extracurricular pursuits allows students in the LLC more exposure to what they might want to be engaged in. Adele discussed how this impacted the trajectory of her engagement on campus:

> … being involved in the LLC really impacted the clubs I joined. I also think it made me want to be a physician more, just learning how hard it is to get a college education as a Native individual. Nevertheless a master's, nevertheless a doctorate, so I think it just—joining AISES [American Indian Science & Engineering Society], joining SACNAS [Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science], joining Tiospaye, joining the mentoring program. I wouldn't have been able to do that without the LLC

> program and I don't think I would have found a community here at USD like I would have hoped to coming to a new college.

An important aspect of the LLC are the opportunities created for students to engage in professional development such as attending conferences like NCORE (formerly the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity). At NCORE, different groups of students from the LLC were given an opportunity to participate as attendees through funding NSS partnered with the Howard Hughs Medical Institute (HHMI) grant that was awarded on campus and presented on their experiences. Elizabeth shared:

> I've enjoyed that I've been able to find people that I would never have found in the first place. It's really opened up a lot of opportunities for me, such as attending the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity, which was absolutely amazing. I've also been able to attend conferences via interactions that began with the LLC so that's been really awesome as well.

These opportunities for students to continue to learn provided them with dedicated time to engage with their identity and develop a stronger sense of who they are as Native people through the experiences they had in the LLC. One of the major identity factors students come away with greater reflection of is being a Native person, and how their cultural and sovereign identity aligned with who they were as college students. This is discussed in the next theme, their identity as Native people.

Identity (Being Native)

In Lakota thought, your identity is rooted in a cultural understanding of who you are and the planning team of the LLC has always felt giving students space to explore

identity development is critical to their success. Students are provided agency to learn more about themselves as human beings in a curated learning environment, and to feel more connected to their cultural identity through mindful programming. The LLC includes individuals from tribal communities, predominantly White communities, and mixed communities. Some LLC members have strong cultural context via their family while others have little or none. It has been important for programming to be inclusive of all these backgrounds and experiences.

Creating opportunities where students can be themselves fully and learn about their culture at a pace that feels comfortable for them, is critical to creating a network of care and to help provide further opportunities for learning about their cultures. Some students, like Kayla, expressed they had different and sometimes negative experiences in their home communities prior to college:

> Well, the whole program is about a family. It's all about the people who wanna learn about each other, be comfortable with each other. So, my community back at home, it kind of depends on last names. So, I guess my last name wasn't a part of … the tribal councilmen and whatnot. So, I kind of felt diminished in that aspect … but coming to USD, being a part of this program, it just, it's not about like who's better than who it's just. We are all one. We are all Native American, and we're what the program has to offer. Enjoy life away from home for those of us that travel, and just I don't know, feel welcomed.

The important part of connection through identity is in building a safe family network where students can feel accepted and experience authentic spaces of learning.

Many of the participants shared they were looking for some form of this community, usually informed by the how they experienced community before arriving at USD. Being Native is an identifying factor for how they perceived themselves when they were in that community and meeting other students who experienced it in similar ways helped them to feel like they belonged. Ray reflected on being around other students who understood her lived experience:

> I think it like definitely keeps me close. Especially since, like when I'm not home like being not home like, I'm not there like going to ceremonies all the time, and like hanging around with, like my grandparents and all that like who tell me stories a lot. But…still gives me like a sense of like I'm connected with my culture, and I'm not like straying away from it.

Creating Native spaces on campus, students expressed it was important to feel their identity was both safe and validated to explore and learn more. Pascal expressed the transition from high school to college was an important differentiation, because she did not always feel like she had an opportunity to authentically explore her identity:

> I, for sure have like changed in my perspective of my culture. Before, like in high school, I've always had, like a hard time in my culture. I always felt like I wasn't Native enough especially going to like a public school where it kind of was like … I think it was like 20 to 30% Native, the rest White. So, I didn't really feel like my place there. So, it was kind of hard to navigate that. But then through that, like it was really hard to see if I'm Native enough, or like feeling too Native enough for all of the Native kids that went to public school. And then coming here, I don't

> know. I just never like felt like I had that problem especially as a freshman. All Native students were just like all going through it together, like a lot of us are also First Gen.

As Pascal explained, identifying as a Native person can be complex for students for myriad reasons. Ray also shared:

> I think it's a great program. I don't know if … there are other … high schools planning on bringing their senior class here. I think that'd be like the first thing to leave with … I think it's such like a great opportunity. And if, like kids really like, listen to like what you guys have to say about it like, I think … it's such an amazing resource and helps you like, make connections get like, make friends, and like helps, like the process of easing in going into college and getting used to a lot easier.

While USD is still a predominantly White campus, students expressed the events through Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC as well as spending time in the NACC could create the experience of feeling immersed with other Native people. Creating a space that is accepting and centered on Native identity as a spectrum of connection and lived experiences allows even more students to be involved. As Elizabeth shared:

> So, before LLC and meeting the individuals that support the LLC, I was not entirely comfortable acknowledging at least publicly, my background of being Indigenous. And it's been a journey and still is a journey. But I think with that time it's gotten easier, and I've definitely made progress … towards

> acknowledging this, and ultimately learning to be a better ally as well, and I wouldn't have had that chance or opportunity without the LLC.

The NSS team who supported and cultivated Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi as a family made acceptance a critical pillar of Native identity—referring to a space where students are not judged based on how connected or disconnected they are—as an important factor of any identity-based community. Kayla reflected on learning about diversity of thought, culture, and community during her time in the LLC:

> It makes me feel more educated since I'm … when I was growing up, I wasn't into learning more about my culture. My family wasn't, I guess, per se, traditional … we identify as Native Americans. But what does that all entail? What is a history behind it? And it's just little bits of pieces that my family has. But … it just wasn't a satisfying feeling. So, being a part of this, you get to meet people from different reservations, different communities and you get to see, like how the Turtle Mountain reservation is different from the Rosebud reservation. Just different aspects on that is just the eye-opening moment because they're like, oh, you guys do that there for a traditional celebration. Oh, we do this here. It's just educating each other. Making the yeah. Just like all about education for me, I like learning. And one mission that I have coming into college is learning more about my culture, and this is a great program to do it through the different speakers that are brought in.

This connection to learning was also incorporated into how Native identity showed up across the participants of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi. Tribal identity is varied and

complex, and while it is important for universities to center their teaching and knowledge around the traditional homelands of the nation they occupy, Native students who come to campus are diverse in their tribal affiliations, and not all students are officially enrolled as tribal members because of not meeting the parameters set forth to determine citizenship. Many national scholarships like Cobell require enrollment in federal tribes. However, NSS and the LLC have taken the position that any student who identifies as Native will be accepted, their needs as Native students served, and that is not conditional on enrollment status that is often dependent upon membership criteria for each sovereign tribal nation, completely outside of the control of the student. Even though Pascal was raised in her tribal community, she was not able to be enrolled in her tribal nation due to their enrollment qualifications. The LLC does not differentiate or require enrollment for participation, which includes receipt of the half housing scholarship for many of the students, including Pascal:

> Yes, for sure, being a low-income student, it's really hard to like find scholarships, especially since I applied to so many but I didn't get a lot of them. And college is expensive. So of course, like, I really like, of course, I wanted to be in that. And I just yeah, it was really hard going to college, and having to like also pay for it. Especially as like a Native student. I know there's scholarships that are like tended towards the students. But you have to be like enrolled for all of them, which is also part of like my problem getting more funding [because] I'm not enrolled, so I don't like qualify for all the scholarships.

Connecting with other students who have shared the same experiences can be healing for the participants. Students expressed the need to be able to band together in their experiences of being Native, particularly on a predominately White campus. Even in states with larger representation of Native communities like South Dakota, there continue to be many misconceptions and stereotypes about Native people. Ray shared her experiences as a Division I student athlete participating in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC:

> Well, I know, everyone on the track team, they know … I'm Native American … and there's definitely a lot of stereotypes that come with it, and, people … know me, but they … I know, like they don't mean harm by it, but like people make jokes about it like coming from the rez and like hearing … some of the bad things about the reservation, but they don't know, like, how good of like, how strong of a community we have and how what it's really like to live there, and so I know … when I come to the NACC like nobody … jokes like that won't be made and like I don't have to like try to brush it off and stuff like that.

Having a community where you can decompress and discuss these types of experiences or reflect on conversations with peers or other community members who are misinformed is also very important for students. The speaker series portion of the weekly programming provides an opportunity to reflect across the generations who experienced college or learning in similar ways. Many of the speakers who come to share their stories with Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi fit into this framework through talking about their own experiences within Western education systems, as Megan reflected:

> It also helped me connect with like I feel like all of the … people who came before us like it made me realize that, like there are, there are other Native people who like have blazed a lot of these trails. And so you don't have to be so … nervous about you know like, if you can succeed or not, like having all these great people come in and talk to you about … their … experiences as Native people in higher education was so cool to get to learn from them … meeting all the Native doctors and Native lawyers, and like Native professors who are … doing so well and are super well respected in their fields, made me feel like, yeah, my undergrad is going to be okay, because they've already done so much. And so, yeah, I don't have to be as stressed about it. So that was really … great.

It was clear across the interviewed LLC participants a sense of belonging in college can be greatly impacted if a sense of self is discredited by peers—particularly if misconceptions about the pieces of their identity of which they are the proudest are impacted. As Strayhorn (2012) identified, this "take(s) on heightened importance for college students given where they are generally in their personal development—traditionally at the crux of identity exploration and vulnerable to peer influence" (p. 28). As Megan articulated, showing students through LLC programming they can incorporate who they are as Native people within what Western education has to offer them in their disciplines of choice and programs of study, is important to their success:

> I feel like a lot of the LLC events were … with Native people who were like super involved in their culture, and also like really involved in higher ed and academia. And so, they like, I don't know, they were kind of like you can do both, and you

> can balance both. And I really appreciated that, because I feel like there's a lot of like cultural pressure from like Native and non-Native communities to say, you have to pick a side. Like you have to either be you know, in college, in higher education and focusing on that or you can be super traditional. And it's like an either-or. The LLC programs were kind of all about emphasizing that. No, it's a both/and situation, they're not mutually exclusive. And … I really appreciated that.

Being able to see the speakers as Native role models who overcame those same obstacles to become successful in their fields was impactful to many of the interviewees. Star reflected on an opportunity where she saw her identity reflected in the way she was able to utilize her learning about her culture to teach and share in the classroom:

> Well, I really just love stars in general. And I think the first thing was in speech we were able to give a speech about whatever you wanted, informing people, and I chose Lakota star knowledge. And I was like, I get to share my culture, something I love too like the stars, and I get to put my culture into it. And I get to share that with people, and they get to learn more about it. So, I was really excited about that. And then at the LLC when I was telling people about it, they were so excited for me, and I was like, oh, my gosh like this is actually really exciting to learn more about my culture, learn about different things that I didn't even know. And I don't know. And I just dove deeper and deeper into it. Learn different stories. And now, when I see anything about Native Americans, I look, I just watch it or read it and take a picture, it just makes me so happy.

For many of the students, coming to college provided them with a pathway to be who they want to be as a Native person. As Adele more largely reflected on her experience within the LLC, she shared the space inspired students to pursue knowledge they were not given the opportunity to experience in high school:

> I wouldn't be [in] the position that I'm going to be after med school. I think it's, I think it's like … important … to like have the LLC to keep our culture like going. So, people like know because they don't teach it in school. It's hard to learn at home, because your parents already know and they're not, maybe they don't want it. Maybe they don't teach you because they don't know too. So, it's I think it's to teach our culture is just, you have to have it like integrated in education. I think in a little bit.

The integration of community, culture, identity, and connection to the experiences of students is what many reflected through their interviews made them feel supported, the final theme analyzed within this research study.

Support

As Tinto (1993) described, "academic and social integration are essential to student persistence, and support systems can play a key role in helping students achieve these goals" (p. 100). Support comes in many different forms for the students interviewed. They expressed the support they experienced from their peers and the staff in both their recruitment and retention at USD. As Ray described:

> But honestly, I think the NACC made a really big impact on my decision like when I first came on my visit. And I met John and you [the researcher]…I really

> like saw like, how much you guys cared about the students and like everything you guys, did, you guys did it for the students. And I thought that was like something like I wanted to be a part of.

Care about their experiences was centered in students need for feeling seen as well as validated in their experiences. The mentorship component of what the LLC offered was a space that many of the students felt connected to in their reflections, like Adele:

> [It's] really nice because you have people who are older like me. And then you have people who are just coming in as freshmen. So, it's really like, not the mentoring program. But it's like a mentoring program because you do have the older individuals who go every week and participate. And they just talk to the younger kids, in how or how they're doing, or what like, what they're learning, just like to get to know them, to make it feel, like at home. I guess.

Much like their search for community, many of the students reflected on the need for support centered on encouragement. Many expressed feelings of fear of being judged at the start of college, based on their own concepts of self. Kayla reflected on this further:

> I got to meet a group of people that I feel welcome to, that I don't feel judgment from, that I can be who I am without worrying about oh, maybe I shouldn't have said that. And if I do face moments like that, I know how accepting they are, and they're just so—the people in it are just great.

Students knew they could depend on myself, John, Brooke, and other staff for any support they needed, and this was essential to their success—having mentors who

believed in their wellness, courage, and dreams. Through these student interviews and the observations made, a discussion of if Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC affected sense of belonging is discussed in the following sections.

Interpretation of Findings

Through the analysis of the students interviewed and their individual experiences, I maintained a connection to the research question. Belonging is directly connected to the five additional themes identified: community, connection, experience, being Native, and support. These themes when considered with Lakota epistemology led me to create a framework for belonging for Native students at USD. These terms can be referenced to as factors within the mission, vision, and values of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC as well as a new way of understanding belonging rooted in Lakota thought (see Chapter 5 for explanation of this emergent theory).

Significant Findings

How does participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC shape students' sense of belonging at USD?

Students felt their own sense of belonging was cultivated through multiple factors. First, students viewed belonging as being part of a community that was nonjudgmental, welcome, and open. Many of the interviewees shared their identity development was connected to their ability to fully and authentically be themselves. Their varied experiences as part of communities and families that allowed this expression to exist coincided with what they were looking for when they first came to college as new students. For those who had a community identity where they felt supported, there was an

expectation or hope they would be able to find the same structure on the other side of attendance. Megan stated:

> And all of that to say it wasn't USD who really put me there. It was the right people seeking me out and finding me outside of whatever they were required to do by their job. And so, you know, it wasn't the school that made it better. It was the people in the LLC [who] made it better. So that was my big takeaway.

For those who came from communities where they experienced judgment or a lack of sense of belonging, they shared concerns their experiences would continue to be the same when they attended college. For both groups, participating in the LLC heightened their awareness of what was possible and made them want to replicate good stewardship of what they had experienced. As Maroon expressed, "it just made it so much more impactful, for, like me, going forward because they have the same mindset as me of wanting to do better for the community themselves, you know, for their people." The students who progressed through the LLC role modeled the same feelings of warmth and connection with their peers in the LLC they saw experienced across their semesters of participation.

Second, students experienced belonging through the consistency of connection to others via weekly programming. While the presented requirements of the LLC were to maintain a half-housing scholarship, the original (and ongoing) intention of weekly programming was to maintain consistent contact between the staff leading the LLC and the students who participate. It provides an opportunity for candid check-ins and, for those for whom the scholarship is a factor, a covert way for the retention team to

maintain connection. An added factor of this, is the connection it created across peer systems for the student participants, which for many became the main factor for desire to attend. The consistency provided a natural network of care where participants, staff, faculty, and presenters can share a meal or a physical space together. As Ray reflected:

> I think it's like so every week, like we introduce ourselves, I think it's helped me get a lot more comfortable like talking to like people. I don't know, which is like been a big thing, because I haven't been like a very like I get stage fright pretty easily, so I think it told me like be more outgoing … and I think it's also definitely helped me grow my support system. I know I can depend on you, Brooke, John…almost anybody at the NACC like when I truly like genuinely need something.

The consistent practice and opportunity for growth is a factor many students pointed to, that their own expectations of feeling connected were changed by the positivity of the LLC and greater NSS and NACC community. The feeling of belonging was centered on their ability to know every week, there would be supportive staff member who felt like family alongside them, without the pressure of academic challenge or rigor. These learning experiences were folded into a need to listen, learn, and realize more about themselves as Native students, community members, and a member of a larger network of experiences that matter to them.

Third, students unpacked belonging by bearing witness to the success and challenges of others who shared similar lived-experiences and perspectives. As Adele expressed:

> I don't feel like I have imposter syndrome as much as … like most incoming med students have, because others have paved a way for me. I'm paving a way for others. I think just having that like generational educational journey is important.

She further expressed a desire for more upperclassmen to attend because of how their involvement had so greatly benefited her as a student. She understood the LLC was not a space that solely existed in the confines of where they lived contently, as the concept identified, but this content extends into being together every week:

> I like that, the older students still go to the LLC Wednesday programs. But I wish that more would go after they're not getting a scholarship anymore just after they're done living in the dorms. I think it's just fun to see what people are doing, and with their lives every Wednesday to just go see whoever you guys have brought in for the week…So I think, one, I wish people knew how much work you guys put into the programming and all the logistics of the housing, it's just a lot. And then, two, just I wish more people would go once they're done living in the LLC cause it's like a long, the longevity longitudinal, longitudinal thing that … just doesn't stop when you're a sophomore. You need to … continue seeing all the successes of others. So, I think it's important to have continual membership past the scholarship.

The role modeling participants experienced allowed them to see or project their experiences into the future in more positive ways through seeing others who can and do succeed. Overall, Native educators must challenge institutions to create spaces like Wiyuskiyan Unpi Tipi defined for and by them as culturally and community specific,

centered on the history of land, the development of higher education, and what Native people have lost in the process. At colleges and universities occupy our ancestral homelands, Native people should be given an opportunity to define our own concepts of home that center a sense of belonging for students to experience community, connection, a sense of identity (being Native), support, and experience.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

At the top of the 2015 South Dakota Native American Student Achievement Advisory Council (NASAAC) final report is a phrase in Lakota, *uŋkičhiŋčapi kiŋ iwaštepi kta ča lečhuŋk'uŋpi*, which compares in English to "we all do this so that our children will reap the benefits" (2015, p. 1). This work contributes to the larger body of literature that examines Native student experiences in higher education. Choosing to attend college for many Native students is—and continues to be—complex and education expects Native students to be successful in systems that were not created with them in mind (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Smith, 2012). Continued research centered on Native student experiences is critical to improving retention and belonging on college campuses. The analyses of studies like this one will help to inform stronger networks, policies, and high impact practices for Native students in the future. Providing opportunities for undergraduates and graduates to define what sense of belonging means to them is critical to their success in higher education.

The intent in this research was to provide a greater understanding of how an identity-based living learning community can create a sense of belonging for Native students. The hope was to better understand this work so future generations of Native college students will be able to experience community, connection, support, and a sense of self. In this study, 10 student interviews were conducted, and the students ranged across varied experiences that included their time attending college, their time as part of the living learning community, where they grew up in their childhood, and what factors

were important to them in selecting a college. These interviews allowed for an opportunity for dialogue across student experience at one public midsized liberal arts college in the Midwest.

Summary of Key Findings

Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi (A Reliance on Stars)

Within Lakota thought, Dr. Red Shirt shared a sense of belonging was inextricably linked to kinship. In Lakota, this sense of belonging is defined as "ti etanhan" or simply as "etanhan." In Lakota worldview, all things are a relative, including the land, four cardinal directions, and the sky; and all are referred to using kinship terms. The earth is grandmother, the sky is grandfather, and the four cardinal directions are brothers. Understanding these relationships allowed Lakota people to have a sense of their place and relationality to it within the world. This epistemology allowed for Native people to genuinely experience life as a Lakota person because they could see themselves as part of a larger whole. Based on an analysis and reflection on Lakota ways of knowing, I developed a theoretical framework of belonging extended from this study titled, *Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi* (*A Reliance on Stars): A Theory of Belonging for Native Students*.

In traditional ways of knowing and seeing the world, Oceti Sakowin people used star knowledge to guide them home, to signal when seasons changed, and when equinoxes and solstices occurred. Stars are also prominent in creation stories in Lakota oral tradition. Lakota people look for different guides and pathways for how one is expected to live in Lakota society and culture—one is a reliance on star knowledge to

define home and establish a sense of belonging in a community and nation, especially through knowledge passed through Lakota oral tradition. The purposeful selection of a theoretical framework, *Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi* (*A Reliance on Stars): A Theory of Belonging for Native Students* is structured as a star because Oceti Sakowin people viewed themselves as star people. Lakota belief originates in creation stories that place them in the beginning of time in the stars and at death, an individual returns home using the Milky Way constellation as a guide. This belief system is centered on interconnectedness that kinship provides across the physical universe and into the spirit world where individuals return home through the Ghost Road or the Milky Way.

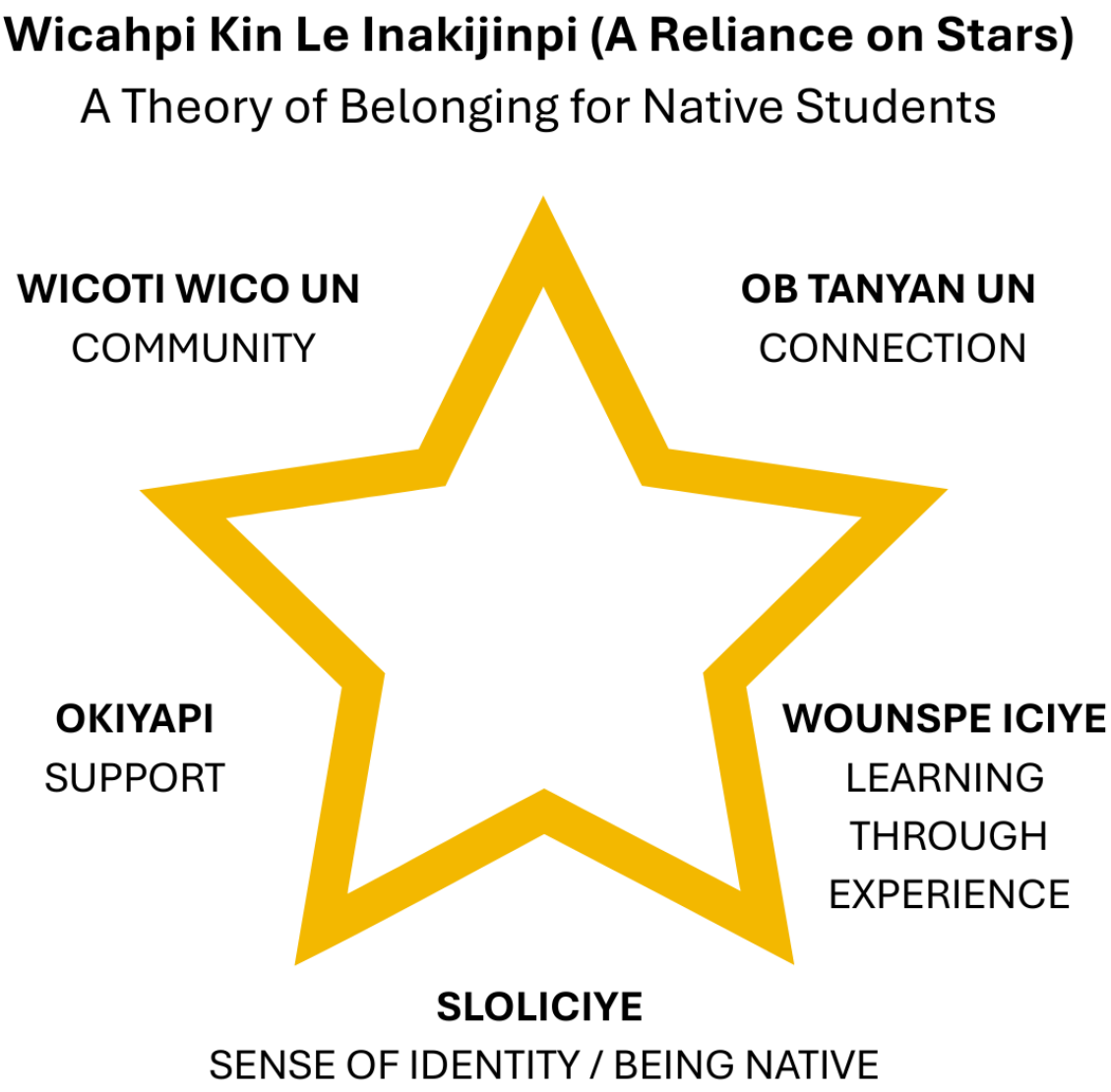
If a Native student is to experience a sense of belonging on campus and find their way to a home away from home, these five tenets, mapped out like a star, are essential:

- **Community**, Lakota defined as *Wicoti wico un*.
- **Connection**, defined in Lakota as *Ob tanyan un*.
- **Sense of Identity (Being Native),** defined as *Sloliciye*.
- **Support,** as defined as *Okiyapi*.
- **Learning Through Experience**, defined as *Wounspe iciye*.

This theory as a visual mapping is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi (*A Reliance on Stars): A Theory of Belonging for Native Students*



Note. Image created on Canva (Concept: Red Shirt-Shaw, 2025).

There are many different academic, social, familial, cultural, and community factors that impact Native student belonging on college and university campuses. In this study, a Native student's sense of belonging was anchored to five major tenets. These

terms, in English, and more importantly in the Lakota dialect, inform both current and future research in the ways that apply to Native students across multiple and diverse nations within the context of an Oceti Sakowin perspective.

A Revisit: Sense of Belonging

As Strayhorn (2018) identified:

> [In] terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (p. 28)

In utilizing Lakota concepts and in discussing sense of belonging from a Lakota perspective, Dr. Delphine Red Shirt provided a point of view that attending college for Native students is different from a Western viewpoint when regarding success in attaining higher education goals. The expectation the goal is to obtain individual accolade exists within a hierarchical and colonial framework privileged through a Western lens. In contrast, Lakota thought and expectations are predicated on the idea that students obtain skills based on their individual talents and they bring their proficiency acquired through education back to their communities. This is the cross-generational responsibility felt by many Native students who attend college, as Dr. Red Shirt further reflected:

> [That] concept of go and get some skill so you can come back and help us, whatever that skill is … that's really strong in Lakota. The value system, that is, whatever you're doing. It's not individual, it's for the collective. It's for the good of

> everybody, and in that you'll be blessed. You will also be very happy doing those things because you're using your skills for me … it's not like they're dictating to you, "you must be a doctor, you must be a lawyer, you must be a politician or an athlete." They don't do that. You have to know your own skill set. You have to know what you're good at. If you're good at art. then use it. If you're good at poetry, use it. I think that's the big difference between (us and) European (concepts) … the idea that you become a doctor because your family wants you to … for Native families, at least at the turn of sort of the reservation period into to the late century in the sixties and seventies. It was really you had to go to college because the people needed you [to]. (personal communication, January 28, 2025)

These cultural frameworks are also connected to the age group many of these students culturally belong to at the time they attend college, a time in Lakota society where college aged students are seen as young adults, before societal expectations of marriage or other responsibilities. As Dr. Red Shirt expressed, "they're very free at this point, even though they may … see college as restrictive." This freedom is anchored to the possibility of finding a space on campus that can reflect concepts of home to recenter themselves, such as Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC or the NACC. As Dr. Red Shirt positioned:

> [The] whole idea is, let's provide you with a place you can come to for … the same things that you think of when you think of home. What is that? What is your concept of home? And maybe asking them that question. And culturally … just (connecting) the hybrid of European values, Native values.

And further reflected:

> It has to do with kinship. So, a home is always open to everyone. It isn't just the mother, father, and children. It's open to your grandfather. It's open to your uncles. It's open to your cousins. If someone needed a home, this idea of homelessness or being without a home was kind of foreign. If you were having a hard time, you could move in … and helping out when they are in your home. (personal communication, January 28, 2025)

When a Native student decides to attend college, this notion of home may feel distant from their day-to-day lived experiences on campus. As Dr. John Little indicated, one of the reasons that we decided to develop [Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC was] building a space for Native students to feel at home (personal communication, April 4, 2025). When asked, Dr. Red Shirt helped to name the new living and learning community: the selected name, Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi, which translates in English to mean, “where they live contently” or “in-a-content-manner-they-dwell,” which reflects this time in their lives when they can be more carefree and supported in Lakota culture to pursue their talents. In Lakota culture, home is physically structured as a tipi and all references to home utilize the concept of “ti,” so culturally, tiwahe defines a person’s immediate family, and tiospaye signifies a larger circle of kinship or the extended family. Dr. Red Shirt described this concept of “ti” as:

> [That] place, that circular place where you can come in at any point in time, and there will be a place for you to sleep, a place for you to eat, a place for you to find relatives that you call by kinship name—but you had a personal responsibility,

> you had to abide by family rules, protocols, and if you didn't, you might be asked to leave … so, I think generally, it's the energy you bring into a home. That's your responsibility. Whatever is there, you know you and the university provide it, and they have to bring in their part … and that's what home [is]. (personal communication, January 28, 2025)

The conceptual framework of creating community (*wicoti wicoun*), connection (*ob tanyan un*), experience (*wounspe iciye*), centering being Native (*sloliciye*), and providing support (*okiyapi*) to students extends from traditional beliefs for Lakota and Dakota educators. Ultimately, their age cohort symbolizes the future, and the responsibility to them is culturally significant for all. As Dr. Red Shirt shared "I always say to students, the language is the roadmap home, but that sense of observation … and recognizing pattern … sense of belonging is knowing what the patterns in your life are, and what is it that you want" (personal communication, January 28, 2025).

This applies directly to the development of the belonging framework—*Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi* (*A Reliance on Stars): A Theory of Belonging for Native Students*—represented in a star pattern that provides guidance for Oceti Sakowin or Native students seeking place, the notion of "ti," or home during their crucial years in higher education. Students, through their experience in the LLC, are often given guidance for the opportunity to experience community, connection, a sense of their identity, learning through experience, and support, expressed in the language as: Tanyan wico un (community), tanyan ob un, ecin (because) wounspe iciye, na (and) sloliciye, ecin (because) okiyapi. Putting all of the points of the star together, the statement translates to

the idea that community creates connection for an individual who is seeking knowledge through education and identity formation, and all of this occurs with these tenets. In Lakota culture, a genuine sense of belonging is tied to kinship and how it relates to the feelings they have about themselves, those around them, and the ways they learn through experience. A powerful retention tool for college campuses is to model Native student experiences from the family cultural networks that extend from home.

Campus Beyond Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC

Dr. John Little highlighted the team who oversees retention for Native students on campus understands the controlled "home away from home" spaces are Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC and the NACC. As Bazemore-James and Dunn (2019) indicated:

> Indigenous students and staff alike experience a loss of connection to their cultural and spiritual ways as they assimilate into PWI (predominantly White institution) campus culture. Although this is not forced upon them as it once was, obtaining a college degree is increasingly necessary in today's competitive marketplace and one must conform to campus cultural norms to succeed within it. This is made more difficult when Indigenous representation is lacking and Indigenous community is hard to come by. Furthermore, non-Native institution members lack even foundational knowledge of Indigenous culture and issues students and staff experience, which leads to increased feelings of loneliness and a lack of sustainability of Native staff and faculty positions and programs. (p. 11)

What students may experience outside of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC may have an impact on their feelings of belonging, particularly in their experience in a predominantly

non-Native campus. While there is the ability to control tone setting and expectations that can happen within the center of these physical and community spaces, there are additional factors of belonging that may be impacted outside of safe spaces for them. This may include stereotypes or misconceptions about Native people, as well as an overall lack of cultural competency awareness and training.

Cultural and Contextual Relevance

This research study is significant for multiple reasons. First, it follows the impact of student's sense of belonging after the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, which was a critical time for higher education in reconsidering student support systems on campus. The concept of the Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC was conceived from a need for connection across the Native student community at USD. As Bergerson and Coon (2022) identified, concurrent with the time of the global pandemic when Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC was first conceptualized and further developed as a solution to community building:

> It takes a village to form partnerships among faculty and staff that build a sense of community and to support students where they are. When students encounter an unfamiliar situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this could be considered a transition point, where these partnerships are more important to student thriving than ever. (p. 15)

The need for community at the intersection of a global pandemic was seen by the retention team as both necessary and timely for rebuilding the community.

A second reason is, in the year 2025, identity specific support nationally, for many student constituent groups, has been under attack in the United States. The current

presidential administration in the U.S. has initiated a sweeping evaluation of any effort that may be perceived as giving students with marginalized identities any kind of preferred treatment or opportunities. As Pascarella et al. (1986), Erb et al. (2015), and other scholars have noted, empirical research focused on how the practices and policies universities create impact retention, particularly in housing around students' individual identities, is needed in the higher education literature.

While Native sovereignty status differentiates Native offices from falling under the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) umbrella in higher education, the intersectional identities many Native students encompass (many that fall under DEI efforts) has undoubtedly been impacted. At a time when funding, resources, support, and advocacy is needed more than ever, this research focuses on the importance of a community like Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi and what it has created for students. These relationships are critical in proving Western education and Indigenous, more specifically Lakota, concepts can coexist for the sake of Native students.

Differences Across Demographics

The students represented different lived experiences across where they grew up, their tribal affiliation, connection to community, and identity. As Minthorn (2020) identified:

> It is important for higher education administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty to know that it is our cultural values that guide and motivate Native American students to pursue higher education, while keeping in mind that not all of us hold the same tribal and cultural values (i.e., cultural values of community,

> responsibility, fishing/hunting, matrilineal/patrilineal inheritance, grieving practices, birthing practices, etc.). (p. 1)

The framework of this emergent theory extends from a Lakota researcher in an Oceti Sakowin place-based institution, and while that is not applicable to every student experience represented, the use of stars as a guide can be applicable or provide a model across many Native communities. The cultural context and ideology in specificity with regards to Native research is critical, with enough room for flexibility in supporting students across different cultural connectivity, as Dr. Red Shirt shared:

> It's important to be aware that there are different cultures, and that they deserve respect. And that you must know your own tribal protocols, and you encounter them because they do. And if you demonstrate that you know your own traditional values - they, too, will respect it. (personal communication, January 28, 2025)

Implications for Native Students

This research can provide insight about creating curated and intentional spaces of belonging that mirror home and incorporate weekly programming for Native students. As Little et al. (2024) identified:

> Often Native students find that their entrance into higher education marks a complete disconnect from their home community and all the support systems they have grown accustomed to relying upon. Entering higher education also creates a disconnect within the family and community. It’s not just the physical absence of Native students from their home communities but the duration of that absence that can be difficult for both the student and the community. (p. 72)

As this research demonstrated, when students feel anchored to a home through a campus provided space like the Wiyuksinyan Unpi Tipi LLC, they feel free to be who they are. The effort to create a community where students thrive, and of which they want to be a part, is vital in creating intergenerational health in the program. This is a particularly important detail because an institution like USD only guarantees housing for first-year students and sophomores. As Brower and Inkelas (2010) noted, LLPs require continuous self-reception and work to understand their possibilities and impact:

> In our site visits, we heard story after story from both staff and faculty members about the pressures of routine campus life crowding our continual discussion and planning, as well as faculty-staff differentials in the border campus overshadowing the collaborations necessary to make LLPs function well. It takes vigilance for all involved to remain in active communication and to acknowledge the valuable roles played by others in the LLP. The rewards are worth it, of course, but we do not want to sugarcoat the effort involved. (p. 43)

To feel a sense of belonging, students must be given the opportunity for peer interaction through a consistent schedule of events where they can interact. In interviewing students, they rely on these weekly gatherings for social interaction proving the Wednesday program as one of the most important aspects of the LLC.

Institutional Investment

There is a need for financial support from the University of South Dakota to support structures needed to continue programming within Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC. Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC does not receive formal funding for the program. The

funding source is Native Student Services student general fees budget line as well as generous private donor funding from the Fishback family of Brookings, South Dakota, that allows the program to continue at its current capacity. There is no specific allocation of funding from USD's University Housing or from the university administration to support it; and the only formal institutional support is in the form of a half-housing scholarships provided by the university Office of Undergraduate Admissions. In response to the lack of significant financial support, Dr. John Little stated:

> I think for our institution … a lot of folks are like really wanting to like brag about the LLC. As far as like, I've seen some of our administrators like really put a focus on it, and highlight it and celebrate it, but then…we don't have guaranteed funding for it. We've had to hustle for grant money … we've been really fortunate that we've had a donor or a couple of donors who've like made significant contributions to giving us kind of funding that…doesn't have a lot of restrictions on it. And so we've been able to utilize that for a lot of different things. And so I think … that's always been something we're always worried about. (personal communication, April 4, 2025)

The Undergraduate Admissions Office at USD allocates for the program, as Dr. Little stipulated, approximately 20 half-housing scholarships yearly, dependent upon their budget. What this indicates is that in order to increase the size of the LLC, there may be Native students participating who do not receive the same funding as their peers.

Staffing

Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi LLC and other living learning communities at USD would benefit from a fulltime position for a person with supervisory responsibility for the needs of LLCs, their RAs, and the faculty and staff on campus who oversee these programs. As Bazemore-James and Dunn (2019) identified, many Indigenous Student Affairs divisions lack resources that include enough staff to support the needs of their offices. Having the Native Student Services and tangential support team lead, fundraise, and oversee Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi means resources are pulled into different directions that may be needed in other areas of their roles.

Expansion of Existing Literature

Critically, as Erb et al. (2015) challenged, "further research should also be done to explore the implications of these practices and policies on the communal potential of first year students who are members of nondominant identity groups" (p. 18). There are very few research studies focused on Native student experiences in living learning communities, and the intent of this study was to corroborate higher education's understanding that having identity-based living learning communities in higher education is a high impact practice for students from Native communities.

Future Research

Further research is needed to further confirm the findings of this study. First, a cross comparison among different Native LLC programs could be examined about cultural specificity dependent on where a particular college is located (in what homelands

of a particular Native nations it located). Second, the impact of an academic focused LLC program on sense of belonging would be an important comparison point to this study. This study also contributes to the need for more Native student research from a student affairs professional lens. As Oxendine and Taub (2021) identified:

> [Staff], including student affairs professionals, play a crucial role in ensuring Native students feel welcomed and that they belong in their institutions … Native students view staff as making a significant contribution to their sense of belonging that is different from that of faculty. Student affairs professionals, as part of the staff population within higher education, must continue to find ways to support Native students and promote Native student's sense of belonging. (p. 117)

An affirmation of this is reflected in this study where, I, identify as a student affairs practitioner. Research on sense of belonging would benefit from a greater presence of student affairs professionals conducting research from a practitioner's lens.

This research provides additional context for Native scholars to continue to study what sense of belonging looks like for Native students academically, culturally, and socially. As Tachine et al. (2017) identified, "much of the research surrounding sense of belonging concerns the relationship between the student and the campus community. Missing is the relationality among students, their families, and home communities in developing their sense of belonging" (p. 789). Dr. Red Shirt identified this connection extends from "the idea that you belong to [your] people" (personal communication, January 28, 2025).

Additional research would benefit students through a comparison of Native LLC experiences across campuses. A study like this would provide an opportunity for the analysis of different structures and lived experiences and would contribute to the literature. Another interesting cross-comparison would be a Native-focused LLC that incorporates a formal academic course alongside the University Housing component. This would be a further extension and an additional research pathway to pursue from this study.

You Belong to That Community

As Deloria and Wildcat (2001) wrote, "the assumption of the Western educational system is that the information dispensed by colleges is always correct and that the beliefs and teachings of the tribe are always wrong" (p. 4). With more Native educators in the field of higher education, these assumptions will continue to be further challenged by scholars across Native nations. As Singson et al. (2016) observed, "[all] students, faculty, staff, and administration should strive to understand the tendency of hegemonic forces to erase the history of first peoples whose land the institution occupies" (p. 114). Tribally specific critical analysis, and a commitment to serving the community on their terms, creates stronger access to better opportunities in higher education. Native students deserve to feel a sense of home in their traditional homelands in institutional spaces.

A painted border near the ceiling space of the Native American Cultural Center, displays in words, seven principles of Lakota/Dakota/Nakota belief: Unsi icidapi/Unsi icilapi/Unsi Icinapi (*Humility*), Wachantognake (*Generosity*), Icicupi (*Sacrifice*), Wowachintanka (*Fortitude*), Wowaunsida/Wowaunsila/Wowaunsina (*Compassion*),

Woksape (*Wisdom*), and Wawoohoda/ Wawoohola/Wawoohona (*Respect*). These principles, painted words reflecting an important sense of culture, exist in the space to remind every individual entering the center that it is only through community building and connecting to one another that one can achieve a sense of self and of belonging.

The world, external to the place students call the NACC, located at 409 East Clark Street in Vermillion, South Dakota, is constantly changing. Yet, students and those who are potentially students, in Lakota we say, "who are yet to be born" (seven generations forward) are welcomed in, and as Dr. Red Shirt reflected, once you enter that space:

> You belong to that community, that community claims you. You'll always be a part of it, even if you're not living there. And they still expect you to contribute. They still expect you to do that, and you have that responsibility … You're forever responsible to your community. Once you establish it. You're building community now. It's going to be very hard to leave that.

This study opens a doorway to the possibility of further research on LLCs for Native students, in the continuing effort to build community on university campuses for Native students.

The culmination of this research witnessed the successful completion of a four-year cycle for Wiyuksinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community at USD. The number four is sacred to the Lakota people, for whom lived experiences extend across four seasons and four cardinal directions. We have witnessed four separate classes of Native students arrive on USD campus, watching these students struggle and ultimately thrive, some finish what they felt they came to achieve, and students leave. The cycle is repeated

each autumn, at a time when expectations are high and everything has potential, a new cohort of LLC participants will begin the search, perhaps for *Wicahpi Kin Le Inakijinpi*, a reliance on stars, to help them find a sense of belonging on their new campus rooted in the land of the Oceti Sakowin.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Agreement

Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi (Where They Live Contently): Creating Sense of Belonging for Native Students at the University of South Dakota

Student Investigator: Megan Red Shirt-Shaw

Please review this consent agreement before deciding to participate in the study.

Research study purpose: The purpose of the study is to learn more about the experiences of participants in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community.

Study procedure: Participants in this research study will conduct a one-hour interview with the Student Investigator.

Time required: The study will require roughly one hour of your time.

Risks: A participant might be asked a question that causes discomfort. To deal with this potential risk, the student investigator will make it clear that a participant may skip any questions, take a break if it is needed, and stop the interview at any time.

Benefits: Benefits include $50 financial compensation and the potential to provide feedback regarding your experiences in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Confidentiality: During the project, information from this study will be kept private and will be stored securely. Only the research team will have access to information that identifies you. Your identifying information will not be shared with others outside of this research study. However, organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the committee that provides ethical and regulatory oversight of research, and other representatives of this institution, including

those that have responsibilities for monitoring or ensuring compliance (such as the Quality Assurance Program of the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP)).

Any personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before we publish any report or share the results or data from this study.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of South Dakota including your Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi half-housing scholarship or participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study until the student investigators dissertation is filed at any time without penalty.

How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study, there is no penalty for withdrawing. Your decision to withdraw will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. Your decision to withdraw will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of South Dakota including your Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi half-housing scholarship or participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Payment: If you agree to take part in this research study, we will pay you $50 for your time and effort.

The researcher(s) conducting this study is (are):

Megan Red Shirt-Shaw and Dr. Tania Mitchell. You may ask any questions you have now.

If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at

Student Investigator's Name: Megan Red Shirt-Shaw

University of South Dakota

Native American Cultural Center 101

409 E. Clark St.

Vermillion, SD 57069

605-658-3587

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Tania Mitchell

University of Minnesota
Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development
319 Burton Hall
178 Pillsbury Dr SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0226
612-624-6867
tmitchel@umn.edu

You may also report a concern about a study or ask questions about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Institutional Review Board listed below.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the IRB if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.

- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Appendix B

Email Solicitation

Email

Dear Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Participants.

My name is Megan Red Shirt-Shaw, and I am a current PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota. I have chosen to write my dissertation on the Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community, and I am seeking current and former community members of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi for one hour Zoom interviews about their experiences. These interviews will be conducted throughout April and May 2024. Participants of this interview will be compensated with a $50 Visa gift card.

Respond directly to this email by XX, if you are interested in being a part of this research study.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any additional questions.

Pila maya ye (thank you),

Megan

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Tania Mitchell

University of Minnesota

Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

612-624-6867

tmitchel@umn.edu

In Person Announcement

I am currently a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota, and I am writing my doctoral research about the Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community. I am seeking current and former community members of Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi for one hour Zoom interviews about their experiences. These interviews will be conducted throughout April and May 2024 and participants of this interview will be compensated with a $50 Visa gift card. If you are interested, please respond to the email I sent to you today or you can come talk to me directly.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Agreement

Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi (Where They Live Contently): Creating Sense of Belonging for Native Students at the University of South Dakota

Student Investigator: Megan Red Shirt-Shaw

Please review this consent agreement before deciding to participate in the study.

Research study purpose: The purpose of the study is to learn more about the experiences of participants in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi Living Learning Community.

Study procedure: Participants in this research study will conduct a one-hour interview with the Student Investigator.

Time required: The study will require roughly one hour of your time.

Risks: A participant might be asked a question that causes discomfort. To deal with this potential risk, the student investigator will make it clear that a participant may skip any questions, take a break if it is needed, and stop the interview at any time.

Benefits: Benefits include $50 financial compensation and the potential to provide feedback regarding your experiences in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Confidentiality: During the project, information from this study will be kept private and will be stored securely. Only the research team will have access to information that identifies you. Your identifying information will not be shared with others outside of this research study. However, organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the committee that provides ethical and regulatory oversight of research, and other representatives of this institution, including

those that have responsibilities for monitoring or ensuring compliance (such as the Quality Assurance Program of the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP)).

Any personal information that could identify you will be removed or changed before we publish any report or share the results or data from this study.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of South Dakota including your Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi half-housing scholarship or participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study until the student investigators dissertation is filed at any time without penalty.

How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study, there is no penalty for withdrawing. Your decision to withdraw will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. Your decision to withdraw will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University of South Dakota including your Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi half-housing scholarship or participation in Wiyuskinyan Unpi Tipi.

Payment: If you agree to take part in this research study, we will pay you $50 for your time and effort.

The researcher(s) conducting this study is (are):

Megan Red Shirt-Shaw and Dr. Tania Mitchell. You may ask any questions you have now.

If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at

Student Investigator's Name: Megan Red Shirt-Shaw

University of South Dakota
Native American Cultural Center 101
409 E. Clark St.
Vermillion, SD 57069
605-658-3587

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Tania Mitchell

University of Minnesota
Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development
319 Burton Hall
178 Pillsbury Dr SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0226
612-624-6867
tmitchel@umn.edu

You may also report a concern about a study or ask questions about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Institutional Review Board listed below.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the IRB if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.

- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Agreement:

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

Appendix D

Codes

1. **ACADEMIC**
2. **ACCEPTANCE**
3. **ACCLIMATION**
4. **ACHIEVEMENT**
5. **ALLYSHIP**
6. **ALUMNI**
7. **ATHLETICS**
8. **BALANCE**
9. **BEGINNING**
10. **BEING NATIVE**
    a. BEING NATIVE – IN COLLEGE
    b. BEING NATIVE – IN HIGH SCHOOL
11. **BEING YOURSELF**
    a. BEING YOURSELF – COMFORTABLE
12. **BELIEFS**
13. **BELONGING**
    a. BELONGING – NOT
    b. BELONGING – SENSE OF
14. **BONDING**
15. **BRANCHING OUT**

16. **BURDEN**
17. **CARE**
18. **CAREER**
19. **CEREMONY**
20. **CHALLENGE**
21. **CHANGE**
    a. CHANGE – MOVING
22. **CHANGEMAKERS**
23. **CHOICE**
    a. CHOICE – IN LIFE
    b. CHOICE – OF COLLEGE
24. **COMFORT**
25. **COMMUNITY**
    a. COMMUNITY – POSITIVE
    b. COMMUNITY – BUILDING
    c. COMMUNITY – COMING TOGETHER
26. **COMPARISON**
27. **COMPETITION**
28. **CONNECTION**
29. **CONSISTENC**
30. **CONTROL**
31. **COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

32. CULTURE

a. CULTURE - LEARNING ABOUT

b. CULTURE – PRACTICING AT COLLEGE

c. CULTURE – PRESENT AT COLLEGE

d. CULTURE – SHARING ABOUT

33. DECISION MAKING

34. DECISION MAKING

a. DECISION MAKING – FOR YOURSELF

b. DECISION MAKING – WITH OTHERS

35. DIFFERENCE

a. DIFFERENCE - ACROSS TRIBES

b. DIFFERENCE – LIFE EXPERIENCES

36. DISTRUST

37. DIVERSITY

38. DREAM

39. EDUCATION

40. EMPOWERMENT

41. ENCOURAGEMENT

42. EVENTS

43. EXPANDING HORIZONS

44. EXPECTATION

45. EXPERIENCE

a. EXPERIENCE – DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE THAN ME

b. EXPERIENCE – SAME EXPERIENCE AS ME

46. FACULTY

47. FAMILY

a. FAMILY - AT COLLEGE

b. FAMILY - BACK HOME

48. FEAR

49. FEELING

50. FINANCIAL

a. FINANCIAL – HALF-HOUSING SCHOLARSHIP

b. FINANCIAL – SCHOLARSHIPS

c. FINANCIAL – COST OF COLLEGE

51. FIRST

52. FIRST GEN

53. FIRST YEAR

54. FITTING IN

55. FLOOR

56. FOOD

57. FREE

58. FRIENDS

a. FRIENDS – MAKING

b. FRIENDS – FEAR OF NOT MAKING

59. GENERATIONS

60. GIVING BACK

61. GOALS

62. GROWING

63. HELP

64. HIGH SCHOOL

65. HIGHLIGHT

66. HISTORY

67. HOME

a. HOME - AWAY FROM HOME

b. HOME - WHERE I'M FROM

c. HOME – FEELS LIKE

68. HONESTY

69. HOUSING

a. HOUSING - LIVING LEARNING COMMUNITY

b. HOUSING – BEING ON THE SAME FLOOR

c. HOUSING – LIVING OFF CAMPUS

d. HOUSING – LIVING ON CAMPUS

70. IDENTITY

71. IMPACT

72. IMPOSTER SYDNDROME

73. INSPIRING

74. INTEREST

75. INTRODUCTIONS

76. INVITING

77. INVOLVEMENT

78. JUDGMENT

a. JUDGMENT – FEELING JUDGED

b. JUDGMENT – FEELING NO JUDGMENT

79. KINDNESS

80. LABOR

81. LAUGHTER

82. LEADERSHIP

83. LEARNING

84. LEAVING

85. LENS

86. LISTENING

87. LIVING TOGETHER

88. LOCATION

89. LONELINESS

a. LONELINESS – ISOLATION

b. LONELINESS – BEING ALONE

c. LONELINESS – NOT ALONE

90. LOOK LIKE ME

91. LOVED

92. LOW INCOME

93. MASKING

94. MEAL

95. MEMORIES

96. MENTAL HEALTH

97. MENTORSHIP

a. MENTORSHIP – FROM FACULTY AND STAFF

b. MENTORSHIP – PEER TO PEER

98. MISSING OUT ON CAMPUS

99. NACC

100. NOT ALONE

101. ON CAMPUS

102. OPENNESS

103. OPPORTUNITY

104. OUTSIDE COMFORT ZONE

105. PASSION

106. PEER

107. PERSPECTIVE

108. PHYSICAL SPACE

a. PHYSICAL SPACE – NACC

109. POSITIVITY

a. POSITIVITY – LAUGHTER

110. POSSIBILITY

111. PROCESS

112. PROGRAMMING

113. RACISM

114. REACHING OUT

115. RECRUITMENT

116. REFLECTION

117. RELAXING

118. REMEMBERED

119. REPRESENTATION

120. REQUIREMENT

121. RESEARCH

122. RESOURCE

123. RISK

124. ROLE MODELING

a. ROLE MODELING – PASSION

b. ROLE MODELING – IF THEY CAN DO IT I CAN DO IT

125. SCHOLARSHIPS

126. SELF

127. SELF AWARENESS

128. SENSE OF BELONGING

129. SIMILIARITIES

130. SPEAKER

131. STAFF

132. STEREOTYPES

133. STORYTELLING

134. SUCCESS

135. SUPERFICIAL

136. SUPPORT

a. SUPPORT - SOMEONE BEING THERE FOR YOU

b. SUPPORT – LISTENING

c. SUPPORT – SENSE OF

d. SUPPORT – SYSTEM

137. SURROUND YOURSELF WITH

138. SURRUND SELF WITH

139. TEACHING

140. TIMING

141. TRADITIONAL

142. TRADITIONAL

143. TRANSFER

144. TRANSITION

145. TRANSPARENCY

146. TRANSPORTATION

147. **UNITY**

148. **UPPERCLASSMEN**

149. **VISIT**

150. **WANT**

151. **WANT**

152. **WEEKLY**

153. **WELCOMING**

154. **WOULDN'T HAVE MET**