

FACE THE DAY

Face the Day:

Stories of Indigenous Survivance and Advancement That Weave a Blanket of Knowledge for

Northwest Indian College Employees

Christina R. Grendon

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Supervisory Committee

Dawn Hardison-Stevens, Ph.D., Chair

Charlotte Côté, Ph.D., Member

Merissa Good, Ed.D., Member

School of Education

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Abstract

Stories constitute the fundamental essence of Indigenous existence. Through personal narratives that encompass family, trauma, triumph, experiences, and survivance, along with story-sharing sessions designed to capture employees' stories, this storywork integrates an employee orientation framework for Northwest Indian College, a Tribal College and University located in Washington state. By exploring various methodologies of employee development, this research delineates the concept of Indigenous professional development and emphasizes the significance of the participation of all employees, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in its incorporation. It also delineates the history of Tribal Colleges and Universities, thereby interweaving concepts of identity and community, Indigenous education, and Indigenous theories and methodologies, which are integral components of functioning within a tribal college. I employ weaving as a metaphorical framework that encapsulates the five core values of the Northwest Indian College, *səla-lex^w* (our strength comes from our old people), *schtəngəx^wən* (we are responsible to protect our land), *xwləmi-chosən* (our culture is our language), *leng-e-sot* (we take care of ourselves and others), and *xaalh* (life balance).

Keywords: Tribal College and University, Northwest Indian College, Trauma, Trauma-Informed, Indigenous Education, Indigenous Theory and Methods, Employee Orientation

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This journey is not mine alone. It has taken me over 40 years to be at peace with my story and share it with the world. I dedicate this work to all the little Rez kids out there who don't think they will ever make it. Guess what?! You will! And to the select few teachers from Lummi Head Start circa 1978 to Room H at Mt. View Elementary School to the high school band room and beyond, I am here today because of the care and support you shared with me. Many have made it possible for me to say *íigwícid* (thank you).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Stories are the essence of human existence. Every individual across all times on earth, past, present, and future, possesses experiences that are intricately woven to form their own distinct narrative. Everyone's story has the potential to intertwine with others, yet ultimately each person will interpret these stories from their unique perspective, and in the end they will each have a different interpretation. Every story guides our beliefs and actions, thereby shaping our personal worldview and building relationality. This story comprises snapshots of one individual's journey toward understanding the world.

The Little Girl's Story

The voices were getting louder and louder. The little girl lay in bed wondering if the shouting was a dream. She rummaged around her bed for her new Spiderman flashlight her mother had bought her while grocery shopping. The dark was not her favorite place to be. The voices started shouting again. The little girl slid out of bed and tip-toed to her bedroom door. She was glad she had her flashlight so she could see. Turning on the bedroom light would draw too much attention down the hallway. She cracked the door open, catching a glimpse of her parents arguing in the living room. The little girl scurried back to bed, burrowing deep down into the covers. Having her head under the blankets made it difficult to breathe, but it was the only way she felt protected when her parents were fighting. At four years old, she did not understand why her parents were yelling at each other, she only knew it frightened her.

The voices were raised in loud shouting again. This time they were accompanied by banging noises. Heavy thuds echoed as if someone was hitting the wall. It had been a while since the little girl had been woken up in the middle of the night. She and her mother were living in a single-wide mobile home located at the Lamplighter Trailer Park. The environment was

unfamiliar because they had just moved there, yet the sounds that woke the little girl were very familiar. The little girl walked into the hallway, half asleep. Her mother was at the front door. She was frantic as she put her shoulder into the door trying to keep it from being pushed open. The little girl wondered who was on the other side. Then she heard a pleading voice begging to be let in. It was her father. The little girl's mother finally noticed her standing in the hallway, she said, "Get ready to go!" The little girl could see the chain lock securing the door. Despite being four and a half years old, she was smart enough to understand that it was not going to hold forever. The little girl scrambled back to her room, standing there looking around at everything. They had not been living there for very long, so all the little girl's belongings were still unorganized. Christmas gifts from just a month prior were scattered around. The little girl started gathering items she wanted to take with her. There was a playdough set she wanted to take, but the pieces were scattered and difficult to locate. It would not be any fun if pieces were missing. As she was sifting through her toys, her mother appeared in the doorway. "Let's go!" Her mother swiftly scooped the little girl and a blanket, then ran down the hallway towards the back door. Her mother cautiously opened the back door and peered outside. Just then, there was a loud crash at the front door. The little girl's father had forcibly broken through the door. Her mother, with the little girl in her arms, rushed out the back door. She hurried down the stairs to their yellow Ford Pinto mini station wagon with wood panel siding. The little girl's mother pulled on the front door handle. It was locked! She tried the back door. It was also locked! The little girl's dad appeared in the back door. Her mother whispered, "Hold on," and the little girl wrapped her arms tightly around her mother's neck. The little girl caught a glimpse of her father standing at the top of the stairs. What did he have in his hands? She soon realized he was clutching his hunting rifle. It was not uncommon for her father to carry it around in the gun rack mounted in the rear

window of his 1954 Ford F-150 pickup truck. The little girl's mother started running. There was a loud BOOM! The little girl's father fired his gun. There was another boom and then another. The little girl's mother was crying. She dropped the little girl to the ground, her feet stumbling as she attempted to flee. The little girl lay there on the cold, frozen ground beneath a sky filled with stars. The air was crisp, and the stars sparkled. The little girl saw her father standing beside her. She managed to stand up and plead, "Daddy. Please don't shoot anymore." Her father looked down at her. His expression changed. He softened as he realized what he had done. His voice trembled as he responded, "Yeah, ok," waving his hand dismissively at the little girl like he was pushing her aside. The little girl collapsed. A loud, animalistic yell pierced the night air as the little girl's father realized what he had done. The little girl lay on the ground with a large bloody bubble coming out of her stomach, helpless. One last gunshot was fired, the loudest of the night. The little girl felt the rifle strike her feet, and then she felt the limp body of her father fall across her legs. The night went silent.

The little girl and her mother's recovery was long and tedious, with countless doctors' appointments and physical therapy. The injuries they sustained left both their right hands incapacitated. They had to relearn basic skills as they went from being right-handed to left-handed. The little girl was attending the reservation's Head Start and was fortunate that the teachers supported her rehabilitation. They worked one-on-one with her to ensure kindergarten readiness. The Head Start did not have a physical therapist or occupational therapist, only community members trained as teachers who loved each child as if they were their own.

The little girl's life was seemingly normal. Most people remained unaware of the incident she had endured unless they caught a glimpse of the scars that covered her hand. The inquiries were never the same, but the little girl knew who was genuinely concerned and who was simply

being nosy. She preferred not talking about her scars and would often avoid the questions or tell those who were inquiring it was a burn, especially if it was someone she felt was just being nosy. The scars told a story that most people would not understand. Curiosity always turned to pity.

Elementary school brought more questions about the little girl's scars. The little girl's classmates were always curious about what happened to her hand. The little girl would either walk away or tell them it was from a burn. The little girl disliked being the center of attention, but with the scars on her hand and her slow, choppy reading, it seemed she could not escape the spotlight. The little girl dreaded having to read aloud. During small group reading, she would wait to go last, hoping time would run out before it was her turn. When the class took turns reading paragraphs aloud, the little girl would count the people in front of her and then count the paragraphs to find the one she would have to read. She would practice reading the paragraph in her head while the others were reading. The little girl would not only miss out on what her classmates read, but practicing never helped her read smoothly.

The little girl felt protected by the adults in the school building. Her teachers understood what she had been through and showed genuine compassion for her. However, in the fifth grade, this changed. The little girl was not fond of her teacher because the teacher was one of those people who asked a lot of questions out of nosiness instead of concern. One day, the class was given an assignment to write about what they dreamed of being when they grew up. The little girl had no idea. Her world was filled with Tribal workers, medical workers, and teachers, none of whom seemed glamorous. Her teacher asked the class to gather on the carpet, where she asked each student to share what they had written down. The little girl listened to her classmates excitedly talk about what they dreamed of being when they grew up. Her stomach was in knots. The anticipation of the teacher calling on her almost had the little girl in tears. She had written

the only thing she could think of on her paper, but it was not for others to hear. The little girl's grandmother loved to write. She had written several stories about the little girl's father and his siblings from when they were growing up. In that moment, the little girl convinced herself that being a writer was something her father wanted to do, so that's what she wrote on her paper. The teacher called on her to share, and the little girl refused. The teacher asked her again, and she still refused. The little girl tried to explain why she did not want to share, but her teacher would not listen. The little girl was sent to the hallway. It was the first time she had ever been in trouble at school. Sharing anything about her father was incredibly difficult. She sat in the hallway wondering why she had to choose something that was attached to her father. More importantly, she wondered why she did not have a dream of her own.

The little girl went on to middle school and high school, where she managed to pass her classes with high enough grades to consider college. She listened to her friends excitedly contemplate higher education and professions. One of her friends wanted to become an obstetrician-gynecologist and had plans to do her pre-med at Whitman College. The little girl wondered if being a doctor of any sort was feasible for her. Would her hand hold her back? Despite these thoughts, the little girl decided to follow her friend's path. This was another dream the little girl decided to pursue that was not her own.

The little girl graduated from high school and went to Whitman College. She was scared. A few weeks before leaving, she told her mom she did not want to go. She would be hundreds of miles away from everyone and everything she knew. The little girl's mom told her she needed to at least try. She stayed at Whitman for one semester. When she left Whitman, she left her dreams of pre-med on the curb outside her dorm. Following Whitman, the little girl attended Whatcom Community College (WCC) and Western Washington University (WWU). With no clear

direction, she took her time at WCC. She received high marks at WCC and joined the Native American club. Still, something seemed to be missing. The little girl went to WWU with plans to become a math teacher. She was good at math. While at WCC, her math instructor referred her to the math center, where she became a tutor. She also tutored her father-in-law in Algebra. Everyone around her encouraged the little girl to become a math teacher. The little girl became excited about the idea, but again it was not a dream of her own. The little girl made it through a year at WWU. She could do the work. She had friends, and she liked her professors, but there was still something missing. The little girl stopped out without finishing her degree. It was pointless and a waste of money to complete a degree in a discipline she did not feel connected to. Another abandoned dream.

The little girl went to work in the accounting field. She was good with numbers, and it was a job she could do. It was never a career, only a job. Fifteen years had passed since she was a student. The little girl had two children and wanted to set an example for them. She wanted to do more, and she wanted to work on the reservation. The little girl felt a strong call to social services. She was set on returning to WWU to pursue a degree in Human Services until she visited with a friend who was attending Northwest Indian College (NWIC). The little girl's friend attended NWIC and thought it would be a good fit for her. Her friend shared NWIC would soon have a Human Services degree but thought the Native Studies degree would be better suited for her. The little girl felt strongly about entering the social services workforce, and it was the first time she had her own dream of what she wanted to do. The Human Services degree at NWIC was in the final stages of approval. Classes for the degree would not be offered until winter quarter, but she was encouraged to enroll in the autumn quarter because she needed to complete prerequisite classes. NWIC was a new realm of education. For the first time in the little

girl's life, she was learning from Indigenous instructors. In her first quarter at NWIC, she took two life-changing classes: Cultural Sovereignty and Impacts of Colonization. The little girl sat in class one evening. Her instructor was discussing the traits the colonial settlers deemed uncivilized. As she listened, she casually said, "If that is what it means to be uncivilized, then that is what I want to be." At that moment, the little girl's dream changed again. This time it was not because the dream did not fit her but because she realized she had work to do. Reclaiming her original Indigenous identity needed to happen before she could help others. The little girl changed her major to Native Studies Leadership. This change paved the way to her decolonization, leading her to Indigenization. The little girl in this story is named Christy; today I am called Christina.

Stories within the Story

Stories like mine are not uncommon, especially amongst Indigenous people. Being an Indigenous person working at a Tribal college, stories of trauma are prevalent. Students are drawn to places where they can feel normal, seen, and heard. Navigating life, coming to terms with life-altering events, and finding compassion where most would find hate, this is how the stories within the story shape our worlds. My vision of unity and safe housing for Indigenous children brought me to NWIC to pursue a degree in Human Services, but becoming uncivilized gave me purpose and guided my empathetic path of uplifting others to be the best version of themselves.

It took half a lifetime to begin to understand my father's actions, and still, it is only a hypothesis. An Indigenous man who was taken from his home at age ten, adopted by a white family. Told to forget everything about who he previously was. Brought to his traditional homelands summer after summer. Seeing his Suiattle family on the streets of Darrington but not

able to acknowledge them. Raised in a small border town in Washington state where he and his five siblings were the only known Indians and became somewhat of a novelty. Serving in the military during the Vietnam War. His identity was full of confusion as he did not know which direction to face. With each piece pulling him in a different direction, he could not align his inner spirit, his ʔəč.

My mother's parents abandoned her and her siblings at Lummi when she was only one year old. Subsequently, they were placed in Lummi foster homes. When the school year began, the older children were sent back to Canada to attend residential school. The youngest two, my mother and her brother, remained with their Lummi foster family who eventually adopted them. The two were raised by their adopted great-grandmother until deemed too old to care for young children. My mother and her brother were placed with a foster family, where they lived until graduating high school. Her moral compass never deviated from her great-grandmother. Still today, her unwavering love is prevalent in the decades of service she has given to the Lummi Nation, the home and people of her great-grandmother. Surviving domestic violence and becoming a single parent, she rose from the ashes like fireweed after a fire, aerating the soil to promote new growth. My mother is the strongest person I know.

The most challenging part of this story is finding peace and understanding with a man who is no longer here. But his story and his very essence, along with my mother's courage and perseverance, created the person I am today. My parents, two Indigenous people, both of whom were adopted out, and defied the erasure of their Indigeneity, created a strong, empathetic, determined Suiattle woman whose heartwork is to support and promote the growth of identity amongst Indigenous people.

These stories are the foundation of this research. Every Indigenous person has a story of strength and resiliency (Smith, 2021), and we must understand that our opportunities are embedded within these stories and embrace forward movement, rather than wallow in the negative impacts. I have realized the importance of sharing my story and no longer want to bury it in the depths of my ǵǵ.

Using the stories of NWIC employees, this research aims to establish an employee orientation framework rooted in the core values of NWIC, designed to prepare employees for engagement in Teaching and Learning. This framework will enhance employees' place-based knowledge systems and influence the development of both their personal and professional identity.

Northwest Indian College: A Dream of the Old People

The Lummi people believe in a birth to grave model of education, meaning they are lifelong learners. The Lummi people take great pride in the fact that their Tribal members do not need to leave the reservation for school because they provide birth to college education (Jones, 2023; Jones et al., 2018; Leighton, 2024; Tom, 2018). The Lummi Early Learning Center¹ offers birth to pre-k education through Head Start and Early Childhood Education Assistance Programs,² the Lummi Nation School³ provides kindergarten through twelfth grade, and the Northwest Indian College⁴ offers post-secondary education. As an act of educational sovereignty, the Lummi Nation has taken control of their community's education, which leads toward self-determination and cultural sovereignty (Aguilera-Black Bear & Tippeconnic, 2015; Jones, 2023).

¹ See: <https://www.nwic.edu/about-nwic/early-learning-center/>

² See: <https://www.nwic.edu/about-nwic/campus-locations/>

³ See: <https://www.lummi-k12.org>

⁴ See: <https://www.nwic.edu>

Northwest Indian College (NWIC) is a Tribal College and University (TCU) situated within the traditional homelands of the Lummi Nation, with five extended sites across Washington and Idaho. NWIC first opened its doors as the Lummi Indian School of Aquaculture (LISA) in 1973. The purpose of LISA was to offer education to the Lummi people in a resource area that was important to their community. In 1983, LISA became the Lummi Community College, designed to provide Native people in the area with a post-secondary education. The name changed to Northwest Indian College in 1989, and the college gained full accreditation in 1993, offering two-year degrees. The year 2010 was momentous as NWIC was accredited to offer four-year bachelor's degrees. Currently, NWIC offers four bachelor's degrees and is working towards accreditation for its first master's degree (Northwest Indian College, 2013, 2023).

Mission, Vision, and Core Value Development

The name of NWIC may have changed over the years, but the vision of education for the Lummi people remains the same and is encapsulated in the mission and vision statements of the college. The mission statement of NWIC (n.d.) is: *"Through education, Northwest Indian College promotes Indigenous self-determination and knowledge."* The vision statement of NWIC (n.d.) is: *"We are committed to our students, the Tribes we serve, and advancing Tribal sovereignty for the protection and enhancement of our homelands and future generations."* It is essential that employees comprehend the significance of these words; otherwise, the college's success may be jeopardized. In a recent discussion, Mr. Brandon Morris, former Chair of the Tribal Governance and Business Management Department, shared that some individuals who have been employed at the college for an extended period remain unfamiliar with the concept of self-determination. He provided an example involving a recent job interview, where the

candidate had been with the college for a few years but lacked a clear understanding of self-determination. Despite attending Teaching and Learning sessions during their tenure, the candidate only joined in the latter part of the sessions, limiting their opportunity to develop foundational knowledge. According to Crazy Bull (2015), Indigenous self-determination and knowledge are vital for the preservation of Indigenous identities. NWIC's mission and vision statements are more than mere words; they are the roadmap and destination. They are the commitment the college makes to each student who walks through the doors.

Values serve as the moral compass that guides the college's identity. NWIC (n.d.) has five core values proudly posted in several locations and brochures: "səla-lex^w (our strength comes from our old people), schtəngəx^wən (we are responsible to protect our land), xwləmi-chosən (our culture is our language), leng-e-sot (we take care of ourselves and others), and xaalh (life balance)." These values are a way of life. They come from within and root us in place. From these values, we center the strength of our old people, the land of our people, our languages, and our innate desire to care for not only ourselves but our whole community, therefore creating balance in our lives. It is imperative for NWIC employees to understand the essence of these statements and values to effectively support the advancement of Indigenous identities.

Statement of Problem

NWIC employees consist of Lummi Tribal members, other Federally recognized Tribal members, and people of non-Tribal descent. Each person brings a unique worldview. TCUs, like NWIC, provide a safe place for Indigenous students to thrive, a place where students can start to decolonize and Indigenize. However, some of these worldviews can be harmful, especially if they are embedded with colonized ideologies.

As an alumnus and an employee of NWIC, the phrase "*TCUs save lives*" has been a prominent part of my journey. The full significance of this statement became clear only after

graduation. NWIC provided the skills and knowledge needed to start filling in the missing pieces of my Indigenous identity and develop a worldview rooted in place. During my time at NWIC, I identified a professional calling centered on teaching and supporting students through their educational journey.

As a student, my academic journey commenced at NWIC as a junior. Consequently, most of the courses were aligned with the designated degree program. There was only one instructor who was not part of the Native Studies Leadership program. Upon entering employment during my senior year in 2016, I observed that a significant number of staff and faculty were non-Indigenous. This environment contrasted markedly with the sheltered experience of being a student, where individuals were all Indigenous. The varying worldviews contributed different meanings towards mission fulfillment. A colleague aptly articulated this contrast by describing the college staff and faculty as facing different directions. This analogy resonated with words expressed by Sharon Kinley, Director of the Coast Salish Institute: “Get up! Face the day! And be present!” (S. Kinley, personal communication, 2016). This phrase emphasizes the importance of greeting each day. As a Coast Salish person, the morning ritual involves facing the day, which begins with looking east as the sun rises, reciting prayers, and preparing for the day's tasks. Within the college environment, every employee is required to have a clear understanding of their role and the college's mission. This preparation enables each individual to enter the institution and face the same direction.

It did not take long to recognize that my perspective on mission fulfillment diverged from that of my colleagues. This divergence stemmed from my educational background at NWIC and the professional development opportunities made available to me.

Professional Development

Professional development (PD) is distinctive for everyone. Before my employment at NWIC, I perceived professional development primarily as attending conferences and acquiring knowledge outside my immediate community. Like Andrews (2018), a Western perspective predominantly shaped such viewpoints and did not incorporate cultural content. Since becoming engaged with NWIC, my understanding of professional development has evolved significantly. This research offers a brief insight into the professional development journey.

Personal Development

I attended three other colleges before enrolling in NWIC. During that period, I was considerably younger and did not comprehend why I found it challenging to remain engaged in my academic pursuits. It was not a matter of incapacity, but rather a lack of perceived significance. My enrollment at NWIC marked a pivotal moment; I realized I did not need to suppress my authentic self. I recognized aspects of myself within my instructors and envisioned a future aligned with my chosen field. To the best of my recollection, no other experience has evoked such clarity. The affiliation of community and environment, alongside Indigenous knowledge, was a fundamental element that had previously been absent.

Upon commencing employment at NWIC, I gained a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous education. I developed a contextual awareness of my own identity and acquired knowledge of Tribal sovereignty, Tribal self-determination, Indigenous theories, Indigenous methods, Indigenous research, and a visionary framework established by the late Willie Jones, Sr., Lummi Elder, leader, and educator. When individuals spoke in xwlemi-chosen, I was able to recognize a few words, which facilitated a basic comprehension of their communication. My

familiarity with these subjects was not the result of growing up within the NWIC community, rather, it stemmed from the mentorship, instruction, and education received at NWIC.

Professional development has played a crucial role in my success at NWIC because it has informed my personal development. The Coast Salish Institute (CSI) offered the new Native Studies Leadership faculty opportunities to engage with Elders, both past and present. I was privileged to meet with Wayne Morris (Tsartlip First Nation), the late Ruby Peter (Cowichan First Nation), the late Bill James (Lummi Nation), the late Willie Jones, Sr. (Lummi Nation), and Stan Greene (Stó:lō First Nation). The stories they shared provided invaluable insights into the educational experiences of Coast Salish people from various nations. Although their accounts differed slightly, they conveyed a common message: education is rooted within the home, with grandparents, aunties, and uncles serving as primary educators.

Experiential learning represents an Indigenous pedagogical approach to education. The fundamental premise of experiential learning methodology is learning through example, experience, and reflection. Tom (2018) illustrates this concept in her dissertation by recounting a story in which Tribal Elder Tom Sampson (Tsartlip First Nation) described how he acquired knowledge from Elders during his upbringing. He told Dr. Tom that his teachers would walk him around the longhouse, sharing stories and the history of their people. Periodically, they would pause to check his understanding. If he could accurately recount what he had heard, they would proceed; if not, they would go back and start again. This process enhanced Tom Sampson's capacity for attentive listening and attention to detail. The late Ruby Peter also engaged in such a technique in our professional development sessions. Ruby would start each day by asking each participant to recount what they learned the previous day. She would repeat the process before lunch and before departing for the day. A personal experience with Ruby left a lasting impression

on me. She employed Indigenous instructional methods to reinforce the knowledge she shared. I value these professional development opportunities greatly, recognizing that only a small minority at NWIC has had access to such experiences. Additionally, I acknowledge that learning about cultural teachings is not commonplace in many Indigenous communities.

The words of the late Norma Joseph (Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe) remain ingrained in memory. During a council meeting, she remarked, “There is more to education than those fancy degrees” (N. Joseph, personal communication, 2019). Her words were impactful, akin to inadvertently stepping into a patch of Devil’s Club, an Indigenous plant with small thorns that cause a burning sensation and numbness, yet revered by Native peoples for its many uses, including its medicinal properties. Joseph’s words persisted in my thoughts for days, and the discomfort lasted even longer. Despite my efforts to expand my cultural knowledge, I questioned how she might not have recognized that. It took time, but I eventually understood why she directed those words towards me. She recognized my efforts and also saw that other ‘leaders’ within the Tribe were not exerting the same effort. Her intention was to ensure I comprehended that there remained work to be done, which is why I continue to develop my Indigenous knowledge through cultural teachings alongside my academic pursuits.

Absolon (2022) describes this concept as “a dual knowledge bundle” (p. 73). This aligns with the objective we aim to cultivate among our employees at NWIC. Our goal is not to alter individuals' identities but to augment their existing knowledge base with an additional layer of understanding. NWIC employees should comprehend their personal identities, origins, and how this contextual awareness can support their professional endeavors. This example builds understanding of Indigenous teaching models used in this research. Looking ahead, how might leveraging similar models enhance employees' capabilities at NWIC?

Employee Development

Definitions of professional development vary among individuals. The purpose of constructing an employee training framework is to provide employees with an opportunity to lay a foundation for expanding their knowledge. For some, this may involve Indigenous knowledge; for others, understanding Indigenous peoples; and for all, it will focus on identity. It is clearly understood that individuals will approach this work with differing levels of knowledge, acknowledging that not everyone will be Indigenous. Conversely, not all Indigenous individuals will possess a contextual understanding of what it entails to be Indigenous. The employee orientation framework aims to equip employees with the necessary tools to develop the skills and knowledge essential for success at NWIC.

Leighton (2024) concentrates on K-12 public education; however, her insights are pertinent within a Tribal college context. She writes, “I hope to inspire current public-school educators to embrace Indigenous methods of education – to honor the stories and traditions of Indigenous peoples and recognize their value in the classroom” (Leighton, 2024, p. 27). The legitimacy of Indigenous education has been historically underestimated since the onset of colonization. Our wholistic⁵ approach to teaching was unfamiliar to colonial settlers and, consequently, deemed invalid. Rather than engaging in mutual learning, colonial powers often imposed their methods upon us. Leighton (2024) further asserts, “By merging a Traditional Way of Knowing with a Westernized Way of Doing, we can create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that empower all students” (p. 28). This principle is also upheld at NWIC

⁵ I use Absolon’s (2022) term, wholistic, throughout this paper instead of holistic. Visually, wholistic suggests something is whole or unbroken whereas holistic visually suggests hole or a missing piece in something solid.

and forms the foundation of their teaching and learning philosophy. It bears resemblance to Absolon's (2022) concept of the dual bundle.

When NWIC employees instruct students on how to harness their Indigenous intelligence within the Western educational context, the goal is to ensure they will be capable of achieving life's successes. Evidence demonstrates that the challenge faced is that not all employees understand what a "Traditional Way of Knowing" (Leighton, 2024) entails, how to cultivate it, or how to integrate it with Western methodologies. The words of Tujague & Ryan (2021) must also be considered:

Cultural safety was seen as a step beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity.

Cultural awareness is acknowledging that someone you are working with has culture different to yours. Cultural sensitivity is taking steps to understand your own culture and life experiences and how they impact others. Finally, cultural safety is said to be present when the recipient of your work considers you safe and not a threat to their culture being accepted (p. 2).

Even if employees understand what a traditional way of knowing is, they also need to be considered a person who is culturally safe. Developing an employee orientation framework will offer tools to facilitate this understanding, with mentors being particularly beneficial.

Mentor Development

Mentors play a crucial role in shaping our perceptions of the world and our professional pursuits. Dr. Compton, a former employee of NWIC, described his experiences in developing relational accountability as a non-Indigenous individual. He recounts an initial visit to the Pacific Northwest and shares his experiences with a professor who fostered a passion for botany. He discusses his return to the Pacific Northwest and a reverence for the land and its inhabitants.

Through mentorship received during his early years, he was able to adapt to the Teaching and Learning model at NWIC (Crazy Bull et al., 2016). Dr. Compton was a mentor to many, serving both as an instructor and colleague. He considered himself an equal, rather than superior to others. Jones (2023) emphasizes the importance of mentorship among Indigenous peoples as a sacred duty rather than merely an act of self-care. As a non-Indigenous person, Dr. Compton exemplified this sacred duty more effectively than many Indigenous individuals. His narrative reflects humility and illustrates how mentors such as his father and professor contributed to shaping his ideological perspectives.

As a non-Indigenous employee at NWIC, Compton (2016) brought foundational knowledge to the college and actively expanded this understanding through participation in the Teaching and Learning program. Compton contributed to the development of students and colleagues by fostering their learning and equipping them with the essential plant knowledge necessary for land stewardship.

Teaching and Learning Development

Currently, employee orientation at NWIC does not include information regarding this subject. The only education provided to employees about the Indigenous peoples they serve, Indigenous education, or mission fulfillment occurs through their personal experiences, such as attending NWIC as students or participating regularly in Teaching and Learning sessions. The current teaching and learning initiative was implemented in 2007 (Crazy Bull, 2015). Over the past eighteen years, there has been minimal change in the Eurocentric worldview among NWIC employees despite efforts by the teaching and learning team. The philosophy underpinning teaching and learning aims to equip faculty with skills in cultural context, teaching methodologies, and content knowledge (Crazy Bull, 2015). The teaching and learning model is

designed to bridge knowledge gaps among employees and thereby improve students' classroom experiences. Some employees are hesitant to attend teaching and learning sessions due to uncertainty about the content. DuPre (2019) states, "We might not agree on what these inclusion processes should look like, and this is further complicated when we are working on territories that are not our own" (p. 3). Nonetheless, NWIC's teaching and learning design and implementation are informed by both Indigenous thought and practice and Western educational knowledge regarding student success (Crazy Bull, 2015). This model provides an opportunity for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals to authentically participate and express their identities, even on land that is not their original land base.

As an institution within the Tribal colleges, NWIC bears the responsibility to its students to provide them with an educational experience that seamlessly integrates culture and academics. This objective can only be achieved through the collaborative efforts of all NWIC employees, united by the common goal of ensuring our students' success.

My personal and professional development is unique, and it is understood that not everyone in the college has been offered the same opportunities. Developing and implementing an orientation framework is the first step toward helping employees build their authentic identity, create a sense of belonging, and build continuity throughout the college. Implementing an employee development framework rooted in Indigenous knowledge and guided by NWIC's core values will afford both new and existing staff a clearer understanding of their identities and equip them with the necessary tools to support students effectively. Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory emphasizes that "colonization is endemic to society" (p. 429). Without adopting a similar philosophy in teaching and student support, efforts towards decolonization risk unraveling. Reverting to familiar practices is often easier than engaging in self-reflection on

what may be missing. Many students arriving at NWIC have attended public schools, which means that their fundamental knowledge base is derived from a colonized perspective, and their cultural values may not have been validated or embraced within their educational experiences.

An Indigenous Teacher Preparation Framework (Tom, 2018)

Dr. Lexie Tom's (2018) dissertation served as a guide in the development of my work. Tom (2018) was not only one of my instructors at NWIC, but she also hired me as faculty and is still a mentor. Her theoretical framework was the basis for my professional and personal development, as it focused on the training of Indigenous instructors at NWIC. Within this training, I learned to bring into effective action repetition and continuous cycles of learning as well as reclaim my original Indigenous identity. This work aims to bring Tom's (2018) work into practice by incorporating some of her model into an employee orientation at NWIC.

Statement of Purpose

This research aimed to establish an employee orientation framework rooted in the core values of NWIC, advancing NWIC towards mission fulfillment. This framework will enhance employees' place-based knowledge systems and influence the development of their personal and professional identity. The design of the framework will meet all potential employees at the door, welcome new employees into the house (NWIC is also referred to as the Honorable House of Learning (Tom, 2018) and offer employees continuous learning opportunities for improvement.

Research Questions

1. What essential knowledge regarding identity must employees of Northwest Indian College possess to ensure their success?
2. In what manner does Northwest Indian College guarantee that employees employ a wholistic approach when engaging with students to prevent any potential harm?

Framework

This research employed a metaphorical framework embedded within an Indigenous conceptual framework, guided by the teachings of səla-lex^w (our strength comes from our old people), schtəngəx^wən (we are responsible to protect our land), xwləmi-chosən (our culture is our language), leng-e-sot (we take care of ourselves and others), and xaalh (life balance). I used the metaphorical framework of Coast Salish Wool Weaving to intertwine the stories of this research. As a weaver, we must choose the correct materials, dimensions, and purpose as well as follow the protocols we have been taught to ensure the finished product is the best version of itself. According to Kovach (2009), a conceptual framework "provides insight into the researchers' beliefs about knowledge production and how those beliefs will impact the research" (p. 41). An Indigenous conceptual framework offers a means to perceive the world through an Indigenous lens, enabling the theoretical perspective of the Indigenous researcher to be integrated throughout.

Kovach (2021) writes, "It is *critical* to be aware that this conceptual framework is a bundle holding all its parts, *including* the four core foundations of Indigenous epistemology (knowledge), ethics (axiology), community, and self (self-referent, experiential knowledge)" (p. 46). Wilson's (2008) Indigenous research paradigm presents an additional approach to conceptualizing an Indigenous framework. Both paradigms emphasize the importance of building relationships with the community, self, place, and research. This encompasses Wilson's (2008) concepts of epistemology (comprehensive systems of knowledge), axiology (moral principles and their influence on universal relationships), ontology (the relationship to knowledge), and methodology (comprehending knowledge through an Indigenous perspective rooted in place).

Conclusion

It is through our stories that we heal our spirit. *Christy's Story* is unique to me, but the trauma within the story is prevalent among Indigenous people. The disruption colonization brought to our people caused significant harm to our identity and understanding of what it means to exist as a people, causing a multi-generational gap in knowledge. Long ago, the words self-determination and sovereignty did not exist because our old people lived a life where these terms were automatic. Today, TCUs provide a safe place for Indigenous students to attain higher education. NWIC goes one step further by teaching students to reclaim and assert their original and authentic identity and knowledge to promote Indigenous self-determination. I was fortunate to learn this as a student and bring it into my career at NWIC. However, most employees have not had the same opportunity. An employee orientation framework woven with Indigenous knowledge would not only provide employees with the same knowledge but also offer the tools and skills necessary to help our students work through their traumas, reclaim their authentic identity, and ensure belonging. In turn, students would leave NWIC equipped to reciprocate what they learned with their own communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“Critiquing others’ work does not fit well within my cultural framework because it does not follow the Indigenous axiology of relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 43). These words resonate more today than the first time I read them 11 years ago. The literature that I have read is more than books and articles, it is the thoughts, breath, and love of the authors who wrote them. Indigenous people are continually in relation with the world around us. A reciprocal relationship has been built with these stories, and it is my duty to weave them into a story that honors their original words.

The Student’s Story

Whatcom Community College (WCC) provided a new outlook on reading. While attending WCC, students were required to take *Introduction to Successful Learning*. The class had course requirements that every student had to check off, but it also had room for students to choose their own curriculum. In this class, the instructor rekindled Christy’s relationship with reading. As a young adult, Christy’s reading skills were clunky. The instructor had assessed Christy and determined her reading level and comprehension were not the issue; it was the connection between her eyes and brain. The occasional distractions of Christy’s inner monologue would also derail her reading cadence. The instructor set Christy up with a computer program designed to increase reading speed while not diminishing comprehension. The end of the quarter came, and Christy’s reading was smooth; her words per minute had increased and her retention remained intact. For the first time in her life, Christy felt proud of her reading skills.

Unfortunately, skills will diminish if they are not used. Christy figured this out when she started attending Northwest Indian College (NWIC). The polished reading skills she built at WCC had dwindled in the nearly 20 years that had passed. Christy’s reading had not fully

reverted, but reading was a difficult endeavor again. During her bachelor's and master's programs, she had to be intentional with her time. Christy was apprehensive about applying to a doctoral program, as she knew the reading would be more intense than in both of her other degrees. She waited four years before applying. Christy knew the barriers that were in front of her. Would she make it through a doctoral program?

The number of students I have encountered at NWIC who are like Christy is astonishing. As an instructor, watching for the indicators that a student might be struggling with reading is second nature. Receiving help early in college was essential to my success and I want to ensure NWIC students have the same opportunities.

Honoring Literature

Working at a Tribal College requires a comprehensive understanding of not only the host community but also the institution's wider community. Individuals who come to work at Northwest Indian College often assume that their experience mirrors that of working at any other public institution. However, this perspective is problematic, as employees with a colonial mindset tend to impose Western ideologies and pedagogies within an Indigenous context. Students who attend Northwest Indian College do so because they seek an Indigenous education grounded in Indigenous values.

The amount of reading a doctoral program demands is unbearable and for someone who struggles, it can bury them. The NWIC students served as a reminder to listen to my own advice and seek the necessary help. A suggested tool to aid reading has been text-to-speech technology. Indigenous people originate from oral societies, so hearing the words as well as following along in the text is beneficial. Without a text-to-speech program, I would not have the knowledge of the authors to weave into my story.

Tribal College and University History

For this literature review, I have chosen to organize the scholarly literature along the following themes: the history of tribal colleges and universities, identity and belonging, Indigenous education, Indigenous theories and methods, and trauma and suicide. The history of Northwest Indian College was shared earlier in this paper, situating this research in place. An overview of the history of other Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) will provide a deeper understanding of the important role they have within Tribal communities.

The vision for a university unique to Indigenous people first surfaced on March 2, 1911, when a man by the name of August Breuninger wrote, “a University for Indians is the greatest step that we educated Indians could make in uniting our people” (Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018, p. 96). It would be decades until the first Tribal College and University (TCU), Diné College, would open in 1968 (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2022; Boyer, 2015; Crazy Bull, 2015; Nichols & Monette, 2003; Stull et al., 2013) on the Navajo Reservation (Crazy Bull, 2015). Since the inception of TCUs, the biggest hurdle has been, and remains, funding (Boyer, 2015). Defying the odds, today, there are 35 accredited TCUs across the United States (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2022). Crazy Bull (2015) characterized Tribal colleges as “unique, culturally rich, culturally relevant, reservation-based, ...[and] underfunded miracles” (p. 35), a depiction that resonates with the founding principles of TCUs, which were inspired by the civil rights movement and aimed to provide educational opportunities within Tribal communities (Boyer, 2015).

TCUs are in a unique position to offer Indigenous students a pathway to higher education while also incorporating traditional knowledge, Tribal languages, Indigenous belief systems, Tribal histories, and community values, which lead to the preservation of cultural identities

(Crazy Bull, 2015; Boyer, 2003; Guillory & Ward, 2008). Some are cultivating an Indigenous identity for the first time, while others are enhancing their Indigenous identity. Since most TCUs are chartered by the local Tribal community, students attending these schools are attaining an education in a place that feels like home (Barden, 2003). For many TCU students, this means they do not feel the need to leave their identities at the door (Guillory & Ward, 2008; Stull et al., 2013).

TCUs are also an act of Tribal self-determination and sovereignty (Boyer, 2015; Crazy Bull, 2015; Crazy Bull & Guillory, 2018). Tribal communities that charter TCUs have oversight of higher education for their community members, which allows for curriculum grounded in culture, language, identity, and place (Stein et al., 2003). Students not only complete the general education courses required in higher education, but they also engage in courses grounded in the development of their communities. “*TCUs save lives*” is a phrase heard in my student orientation in 2014. NWIC saved me by offering skills and knowledge needed to build my cultural identity. Because of this experience, I have a deeper understanding of what it means when someone says, “TCUs save lives.” As an act of self-determination, Tribal communities are providing higher education opportunities, which in turn helps their people become less reliant on others (Barden, 2003).

Northwest Indian College (NWIC)

NWIC is a Tribal College with its main campus situated on the Lummi Reservation in Washington State. In addition to the main campus, there are five satellite sites located on the lands of the Tulalip, Port Gamble S'Klallam, Muckleshoot, Nisqually, and Nez Perce Tribes (Northwest Indian College, 2025a). NWIC originated as the Lummi Indian School of Aquaculture (LISA) in 1973 (Northwest Indian College, 2026). In the early 1980's as LISA enrollment dwindled, the Lummi Nation tasked Willie Jones Sr. (Lummi Nation leader,

visionary, and educator) with approaching the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) in Washington, DC, for permission to open a Tribal college. The first few times Willie went to ask, he was denied. The Lummi Nation leaders told him to keep going back. Through persistence, Willie received permission, and Lummi Community College was opened in 1983. The first classes that were offered revolved around activities the community was already doing (Northwest Indian College, 2023). In 1989, Lummi Community College changed its name to Northwest Indian College. In 1993, NWIC became accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) to offer associate-level degrees. In 2010, NWIC was authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees (Northwest Indian College, 2026). Currently, in 2026, NWIC is working towards accreditation to offer master's degrees.

The workforce at NWIC is comprised of a blend of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals. It is imperative for personnel at Tribal Colleges to comprehend this context and demonstrate a willingness to support all facets, particularly the cultural aspects.

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)

AIHEC was established in October of 1972 to act as a united voice for TCU's (Gipp & Faircloth, 2003; Stein et al., 2003; Top, 2003). The consortium was developed by the six original TCUs: Sinte Gleska College (Rosebud, SD), Oglala Sioux Community College (Pine Ridge, SD), Turtle Mountain Community College (Belcourt, ND), Standing Rock Community College (Fort Yates, ND), Navajo Community College (Tsaile, AZ), and Hehaka Sapa College of D-Q University (Davis, CA) (Gipp & Faircloth, 2003; Top, 2003). The intent of AIHEC was to create a bridge between the TCUs and the federal government, with a focus on funding and organization. The development of AIHEC supported TCUs in "curriculum development, human resource development, administration, board training, fundraising and regional accreditation

preparation” (Hill, 1994, p. 9). AIHEC still provides support for the 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities⁶ in operation today through funding opportunities, program initiatives, and promoting Indigenous sovereignty.

Identity and Belonging

Driving to work on a sunny spring morning, I witnessed a sight that nearly stopped me in my tracks. The morning had been rushed, and I was running late. My drive goes past Ferndale High School (<https://ferndalehigh.ferndalesd.org>), and just on the south side of the high school, a young man with long dark hair, wearing a cedar hat and carrying a hand drum, was walking towards me. My initial thought was, what is this kid doing? The emotions hit all at once, initially as panic, then relief, and lastly joy. Growing up in Ferndale, none of the Indigenous students would have attended school with a cedar hat and drum. The reflections of what NWIC students have shared over the years flooded my thoughts. The younger generations do not typically feel the shame surrounding identity like the older generations did while attending public school. As the panic eased, the tears began to swell in my eyes. The confidence the young man exuded was a beautiful sight.

Leighton (2024) offers a separate example of a xwlemi (Lummi) boy who wanted to carry his drum with him while in school. As the principal, Leighton did not have an issue with this, as it gave this boy a sense of belonging, which Jones (2023) described as

...a feeling felt once someone knows who they are and where they come from. It is an accomplishment of identifying and mastering gifts. It's receiving knowledge and then, in return, devoting your life to your community. Belonging is defined as knowing who you are individually and your role within the community. (p. 45)

⁶ <https://www.aihec.org/about-aihec/>

However, the boy's teacher, a non-Indigenous person, saw it as a disruption. The non-Indigenous teacher was practicing what Restoule & Nardozi (2019) refer to as "universalism" (p. 327), the belief that everyone is the same and lacks unique and defining qualities. Many Indigenous students have similar experiences as they are silenced in the classroom and expected to disassociate from their cultural identity (Marker, 2000; Bang et al., 2016).

The drum not only informs the xwlemi boy's identity but is also an extension of his being; separating him from his drum could be damaging to his psyche (Maaka, 2019). The xwlemi boy wanted to self-identify as a Tribal person as described in the fourth tenet of Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit, which states, "Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification" (p. 429). Jones (2023) described identity as a connection to a place. According to Montoya (2025), "we must understand who we are to better understand our own leadership style and behaviors" (p. 47). The drum served as the xwlemi boy's link to his homeland. It represented his cultural identity and functioned as a means of asserting his self-determination and sovereignty. He comprehends his identity and demonstrates his leadership through song.

Leighton (2024) saw this experience for the xwlemi boy through the fifth tenet of TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2006) fifth tenet, "The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (p. 429). The student carrying his drum showed his love for his culture and his sense of belonging.

Although these examples reflect the experiences of students in middle and high school, those attending college have similar experiences. NWIC students enter at different stages of understanding their identity. According to Crazy Bull (2015),

Although the mission statements of the tribal colleges describe the cultural, social, and economic roles of the institutions, they only touch upon the true intention of tribal colleges, which is the preservation of our identities as tribal people for all of eternity. (p. 37).

NWIC is committed to upholding the words of Crazy Bull (2015) by ensuring that each student leaves the college with a better understanding of their identity and sense of belonging than when they first entered. However, fostering an Indigenous identity is complex (Young, 2022), and students at NWIC are frequently in the early stages of building theirs. According to Jacob (2012), like the xwlemi boy, our identities often become diminished because of the microaggressions we experience from our surrounding communities. Pewewardy (2002) states, “traditional Indian educational practices provided the skills needed for any tribal society to function adequately within their natural environment” (p. 25). The drum is an extension of the xwlemi boy and the traditional education his family is instilling in him. I know the xwlemi boy. He is now a young man. Had his parents not been grounded in their own cultural identity, his experience in middle school could have diminished his confidence. Instead, his identity remained intact, and he has a strong sense of belonging.

Indigenous Education

Indigenous education encompasses more than merely acquiring knowledge about Indigenous peoples, it involves applying ancestral wisdom and experiences to promote thriving. According to Craig and Craig (2022), “Our ancestral methods of teaching, learning, and knowing must be the focus of all our endeavors” (p. 30). This assertion is particularly significant given that Indigenous knowledge systems are among the oldest, dating back to time immemorial (Lipe,

2019). Pewewardy (2005) echoed the sentiments of Craig and Craig, affirming that “Indigenous perspectives are rooted in Indigenous experiences, cultural and political” (p. 141).

Indigenous education empowers students to navigate higher education pathways without losing their Indianness (Cross et al., 2019; Elliott-Groves & Fryberg, 2018). Learning based on Indigenous cultures is most effective when such cultures are central to the educational experience (Absolon, 2010; Middleton-Moz et al., 2021). Tom (2018) recounted how an Elder was instructed during his childhood. He described how, as a young boy, the Elder would walk around the floor of the longhouse while his teacher conversed with him. Occasionally, they would pause, and the teacher would inquire about what the boy had learned. If the boy's response satisfied the teacher, they would proceed; otherwise, they would revert and begin again. This process could last for hours or even days. Pewewardy (2005) characterized this as a “traditional educational system” (p. 141) and further explained, “These traditional educational systems were culturally and linguistically designed to provide education informally through parents, extended families, elder members of the tribe, and religious and social groups” (p. 141). Elliot-Groves & Hardison-Stevens (2020) refer to this as witnessing. As Coast Salish people, we have an obligation to share knowledge we learn.

Understanding Indigenous education is crucial when engaging with Indigenous students. According to Tippeconnic (2004),

formal education within the enclosed walls of schools continues to be a forceful tool employed by dominant powers to create boundaries for controlling and shaping the minds of youth and adults, aiming to eradicate or weaken their Indigenous identity and to assimilate them into mainstream society. (p. 36).

Tippeconnic (2004) also described what Indigenous education is not, referring to the public school system model in which many Indigenous students have been immersed. This model has contributed to a lack of success among Indigenous learners. Styres (2019) argued that Indigenous education should be the primary focus, with Western education functioning as support. The core of Indigenous education must incorporate Indigenous values and uphold the integrity of Indigenous cultures (Pidgeon, 2019).

Cole (2006) reminds us that education does not always mean being educated. Indigenous education is a transformative process that promotes growth. Unlike Western education, learners are not striving towards the next milestone. It is not about climbing the ladder, achieving the next level; Indigenous education is about the journey (Harris, 2002). This model was presented to me as the birth-to-grave model (Sharon Kinley, Lummi Tribe, Director of the Coast Salish Institute, NWIC, personal communication, 2016), where everyone is on a separate journey along a horizontal continuum, and we do not reach the same milestone at the same time. Students are not competing with anyone, which gives them time to reflect and correct at any given time. This method of teaching is used in some of the courses at NWIC. For most students, it is the first time encountering an education system where they are not told the answer to memorize. It is frustrating, but with time most embrace this new style of learning.

Indigenous Theories and Methods

Indigenous theories and methods offer Indigenous people a way to engage in research that is wholistic, allowing us to bring our unique worldviews into our work. Wilson's (2008) *Research is Ceremony* sets the stage for Indigenous researchers. As Indigenous people, we know what a ceremony is and the preparation involved in hosting a ceremony. We would never show up on the day of the ceremony without preparation. There are protocols that need to be followed,

people to visit, and materials to gather. The same is true for research. While many of the same components are in Western research, there is one main ingredient Western research does not have: heart. Heart is love, and it is relational (Absolon, 2022). Indigenous people cannot set aside the relationships we possess with the land, water, animals, plants, trees, spirit, and both the living and non-living humans. We believe that we are accountable to these relationships, and we must uphold and maintain them (Absolon, 2022; Chilisa, 2012; Dei, 2008; Dei, 2013; Wilson, 2008).

Metaphors frame research from both philosophical and experiential lenses. According to Wilson (2008), “stories and metaphors are often used in Indigenous societies...as a teaching tool” (p. 17). Metaphors allow us to share a story within a story by taking an abstract idea and making it relevant within the research. Kovach’s (2009) “Nehiyaw Methodology (Plains Cree knowledges)” (p. 45) is a metaphor. Kovach (2009) paired a conceptual framework with the Nehiyaw Methodology and chose the following key qualities to guide the research: “(a) holistic epistemology, (b) story, (c) purpose, (d) the experiential, (e) tribal ethics, (f) tribal ways of gaining knowledge, and (g) an overall consideration of the colonial relationship” (p. 44). This method centers Tribal epistemologies; therefore, it is important to note that if the conceptual framework were to come second, it would not work. Wilson (2008) described Indigenous epistemology as more than knowing something; it is the relationships built through a mutual reality. “Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our cosmos. Indigenous epistemology is our system of knowledge in their context, or in relationship” (Wilson, 2008, p. 74).

I find myself in a battle with Kovach's (2009) use of holistic. It is not in the concept or the word choice, but it is the English language. In Wilson’s (2008) explanation of epistemology,

he described elements of our knowledge that we would deem as whole. While Kovach's spelling of holistic is correct, Absolon (2022) would argue it suggests there are *holes* in something, while using the variation of wholistic visually implies something is *whole*. Earlier, I stated my intention was not to critique other authors' words but to weave their words into my story. The intention is not to criticize Kovach's word choice but to point out how convoluted the English language is. Harris (2002) shared a similar view, writing, "The English language is often a poor vehicle for conveying Indigenous concepts" (p. 189). The use of Absolon's (2022) wholistic instead of Kovach's (2009) holistic to describe epistemology is a better choice of words for this study, especially when Wilson's (2008) definition of epistemology is taken into consideration.

Kovach's (2009) key qualities embody the seventh tenet of Tribal Crit (Brayboy, 2006), "Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples" (p. 429), as well as the ninth tenet, "Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change" (p. 430). Indigenous ways of being and knowledge systems historically have been told as fables. It is through the work of Indigenous scholars that validity has been given to our ontology (reality), epistemology (knowing), and axiology (values), which allows us to tell our stories through an Indigenous lens and worldview.

Stories are the wool that weaves our history, memory, family, and cultures together to form the warmth and protection of Indigenous communities. The wool used in weaving comes in different thicknesses and lengths. Each variation serves a different purpose, just like our stories do (Archibald, 2008). As a method of research, our stories bring to life our ontology, epistemology, and axiology. It is not only about the stories of yesterday; it is the ability to use

our current experiences and our thoughts for future generations to justify a purpose. To say our stories are not valid data is like saying fire is not hot.

Trauma and Suicide

Is there a word for that in the language? This is a question that has been posed to me over the last ten years when asking my mentors questions. Reading literature about what Indigenous people have endured since primary contact, one word has stood out: trauma. Turning to my mentors, I asked them if there is a word for trauma in the language. The question started a discussion of different words that might correlate to trauma: war with oneself, conflict, shock, stress, or harm, but no real word for trauma. The discussion went beyond a word, with a reminder that long ago, if something traumatizing occurred, there were teachings and ceremonies that helped our people deal with difficult situations. Colonization forced Indigenous people to abandon those practices. I do not like to say we lost those practices because they still exist. But for self-preservation, we placed them on a shelf to keep them safe.

Trauma is something that happens to a person; it is not a state of being. It is the response a person has to a wound, whether it is physical or mental (Linklater, 2014). For Indigenous people, it is has become a state of being. Colonization and assimilation have created a disconnect between our ancestors' way of life and the modern lifestyles of today. "Traumatic memory contributes to Indigenous people's experiences. In theory, Indigenous knowledges and contemporary research indicate that inter/multigenerational trauma is passed on through parental/institutional patterning as well as through bloodlines" (Linklater, 2014, p. 23). While learning my original language, Lushootseed, the instructor taught the class the word *stulig^wəd*. In English, this word is used to say blood. Investigating the word further, it breaks down into *stul*, from *stulək^w*, which means river, and *ig^wəd*, which means the inside of a human or animal.

Stuligwæd literally means the river inside a human or animal (Bates et al., 1994). Long ago, rivers carried Indigenous people where they needed to go, and today the rivers inside of us carry our traumas. Instead of a free-flowing river, makeshift bodies of water are formed that people call lakes and reservoirs. Over the years, these bodies of water have collected what has happened to us. The experiences of stolen land, boarding schools, public schools, adoption, loss of language, culture, and identity, reservations, and drugs and alcohol are traumatic. These experiences or memories are passed from one generation to the next, carried through their blood (Pihama et al., 2017). They serve as our stories and have come to define who we are (Elliot & San Pedro, 2023). It is up to each of us to decide if the trauma will be the star of the story or just a supporting role.

Generational trauma has impacted Indigenous people in many ways. One of the biggest impacts has been suicide. According to Elliott and Bang (2023), “American Indians and Alaska Natives were 3.5 times more likely to die by suicide in contrast to the racial/ethnic group reporting the lowest rates” (pp. 267-268). It is uncertain why the suicide rates among Indigenous people are higher than those of other groups. I have often wondered if my father’s fate would have been different had he been connected to his community, land, and ceremonies. “Disruption to the relationship with their traditional territory affects their ability to live their lives according to their traditional laws and, in the process, impinges on their sense of identity” (Elliott & Bang, 2023, p. 272). While there is no evidence that connection and identity are the answer to suicide, when someone feels like they belong, they want to continue to participate (Elliot-Groves, 2018). Linklater (2014) states “strong identities, sustainable living and healthy patterns of relating created resilient peoples that thrived in some of the most challenging lands and environments in the world” (p. 36). We need to remove the dams from our rivers and let the trauma that has collected in the lakes and reservoirs run into the oceans. Cleanse our minds and bodies of the

wounds that were inflicted on not only us but our ancestors. Reclaim our culture and return to the land and ceremonies our ancestors once held in high regard. It is time to take those practices off the shelf because we are the protectors, and we are ready to heal.

Trauma-Informed

“The violent acts of colonisation, including genocide, have left a devastating legacy. Historical trauma, collective trauma and cultural trauma have broken down the fabric of a once rich and healthy culture” (Tujague & Ryan, 2021, p. 2). As we continue to understand what trauma is, the real question that needs to be examined is: how do we reduce the effects within Indigenous cultures? One approach people have been using is reframing the questions asked when inquiring about trauma. Petrone and Stanton (2021) state, “a well-cited example is that when a student is not behaving in accordance with school expectations a teacher might ask “What happened to you?” rather than “What’s wrong with you?” (p. 538). Tujague & Ryan (2021) use a similar approach, but instead of asking what happened, they ask, “What is that person’s story?” (p. 2). There is compassion behind asking about a person’s story.

In *The Little Girl’s Story* section of this paper, when the fifth-grade teacher sent the little girl to the hall for being disobedient, if the teacher had taken time to ask the appropriate question, she might have understood the circumstances. “Trauma-informed education approaches give particular attention to trauma that occurs during childhood since research has shown that childhood trauma can negatively affect a student’s capacity for self-regulation, organization, comprehension, and memorization, affecting students academically and socially throughout their schooling experience” (Petrone & Stanton, 2021, p. 538). Many NWIC students have endured childhood trauma and have used it as an excuse not to do well. They have been successful at gaining leniency with this approach. Unfortunately, this keeps students in a state of trauma. Employees at NWIC must do better with our students by finding the fine line between

compassion and accountability. As frustrating as the incident in the fifth grade was, it did not hold me back; it made me stronger.

Conclusion

The themes discussed in this chapter- history of tribal colleges and universities, identity and belonging, Indigenous education, Indigenous theories and methods, and trauma and suicide - are significant to this research. They are part of the knowledge systems that employees at NWIC need in order to be successful. Christy's story could be the story of several NWIC students. TCUs were established to provide a safe place for Indigenous students to explore higher education. NWIC has embraced this philosophy by offering a robust Indigenous education ingrained with pathways for students to explore their original authentic identities. Reaffirming their original identities, students establish a sense of belonging. Identity and belonging are important components of utilizing Indigenous theories and methods. If research is going to use Indigenous methodology, then it must include Indigenous knowledge that comes from a specific place (Kovach, 2018). My understanding of this system goes beyond my experience as faculty. As an alumnus, I have experienced each of these themes firsthand, leading to a perspective that differs from my colleagues who were not students at NWIC, are not Indigenous, or have not reestablished their original authentic identity. This literature supports the work of NWIC.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Compromising who we are, what we know, and where we come from is unacceptable” (Absolon, 2022, p. 130). Indigenous research has given us a platform to conduct research without compromising who we are. Indigenous theories and methods are the tools that allow us to utilize our own knowledge systems. This research utilized a metaphorical framework (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021) within an Indigenous conceptual framework (Kovach, 2021), allowing my worldview to be present within the story. Through the stories of NWIC employees, I sought to answer the questions: What essential knowledge regarding identity must employees of Northwest Indian College possess to ensure their success? And in what manner does Northwest Indian College guarantee that employees employ a wholistic approach when engaging with students to prevent any potential harm? The stories were gathered by the Indigenous research method of story sharing. The participants were welcomed into the story sharing space with informal conversation. When the time felt comfortable, I shifted the conversation toward the story sharing session. I explained to each participant that story sharing is like an unstructured interview and there would not be a set of questions they would be asked. Story sharing is a time for them to share with the researcher what it is they think the researcher needs to hear at that point in time. As a starting point, the research questions were shared with each participant.

Christy’s Story

Christy sat staring at the pages of her textbook. She had re-read the same pages at least four times. It was her second quarter at NWIC, and her mind was flooded with thoughts of failing. The class was CSOV 301: Indigenous Theory and Methods: We Own Our Knowledge and it was the first time Christy had taken a class solely dedicated to research. The book was *Indigenous Research Methodologies* by Bagele Chilisa. The pages were filled with unfamiliar

terms. Christy's common practice was to read with a dictionary in hand to look up definitions of words she did not know. All she could do was laugh. She was reading the dictionary more than she was reading the book. Despite the challenging material, Christy made it through the course with high marks.

During Christy's senior year at NWIC, she engaged in an internship as part of her senior capstone class. She chose to become a teacher's aide in the Native Studies Leadership (NSL) program, which was also her program of study. Christy was placed in CSOV 301 with the same instructor she had as a student. Hearing the content a second time, along with helping students, allowed for a better understanding of the content. Christy was later hired as an instructor for the NSL program, and the first class she instructed was CSOV 301.

Metaphorical Framework

Using a metaphor to frame research is a technique I learned at NWIC. A metaphorical framework constructs a visual representation to facilitate the conceptualization of the work. The metaphor chosen for this research is weaving. Weaving is a systematic process similar to teaching. Prior to initiating a weaving project, it is essential to gather the necessary supplies, develop a design, and outline a pattern. The preparatory steps involved in weaving are analogous to the measures taken to ensure quality education at Northwest Indian College, including determining the methodology, identifying the intended audience, defining the purpose of the weaving, and considering any familial patterns or color schemes.

Weaving synthesizes diverse textures, resources, colors, techniques, beliefs, and values. The initial stages of the process may be uncertain. Our wool might be tangled, and there may be doubts regarding the compatibility of certain colors. Additionally, our wool supply may be limited, raising concerns about completing the project. However, through diligent effort,

patience, and prayer, our weavings ultimately come together harmoniously. This metaphor is derived from the following dream.

The dream centered around extensive weaving. The size of the weaving was so monumental that it spanned the side of a longhouse. It remained on the loom, which was constructed from small trees. There was tremendous admiration felt for this weaving while pondering the feasibility of creating a piece of such magnitude. Its purpose was questioned, as was its use by anyone. Someone spoke, leading to the realization that this was not in the present but in a pre-contact era. The individual explained that it was a ceremonial weaving, crafted over more than a year by a group of weavers who collaborated seamlessly, rendering the work flawless and indistinguishable in the collective effort. The weaving was intended for a chieftainship potlatch, coinciding with the day of the event. This new leader was observed and then commenced the ceremonial giveaway.

When it was time to distribute the weaving, the leader indicated the large blanket, stepped aside, and the attendees eagerly approached. They used knives to cut portions of the powerful weaving to take with them.

This dream narrated a story from a time before our presence on this land. It encompassed lessons that guided the metaphorical comprehension reflected in this research. The objective of this study was to develop a framework, similar to a large weaving, for employees at Northwest Indian College (NWIC) that will empower them to elevate their professional identities and expand their knowledge base, thereby ensuring uninterrupted student development. The vision portrayed does not involve a single individual weaving the large blanket; rather, multiple people are depicted working together. This theme is consistently demonstrated at NWIC.

This narrative aligns with NWIC's philosophy, where the large loom symbolizes the educational environment. It is a place where both students and staff come together to enhance their lives. The initial phase of weaving involves warping the loom. The warps are the vertical wool strands on the loom, representing the students. They arrive at the institution prepared to acquire skills and knowledge. Subsequently, the wefts are introduced: the horizontal wool strands that traverse from left to right across the loom. The wefts are interlaced with the warps, thereby strengthening the weaving. The weaver signifies the employees of NWIC, who contribute knowledge to the fabric of learning.

The weaver determines the appropriate technique and design to employ. The weaver meticulously maintains proper tension and secures the ends as needed. Each weaver who approaches the loom demonstrates the same diligence and confidence in being part of the narrative, or fabric woven. This level of care is analogous to the attentiveness that NWIC employees should extend to students. The potlatch symbolizes graduation and celebrates the achievements of both students and employees. Additionally, the cut-off pieces symbolize the students; each student departs from the college as a unique fragment of the weaving. Their wool is woven with the skills and knowledge intended for them. The employees at NWIC have supported their development into their destined selves through a wholistic, place-based, and individualized Indigenous education system.

Lessons of a Weaver

Values are intrinsic. They are the beliefs that come from within that each of us considers important. The NWIC values were derived from the Lummi community and serve as guiding standards for employees. They must understand the values and implement them in their work; if

they do not, fulfilling NWIC's mission will be difficult. The core values are: *səla-lex^w*, *schtəngəx^wən*, *xwləmi-chosən*, *leng-e-sot*, and *xaalh*.

səla-lex^w

səla-lex^w is a *xwləmi-chosən* word that signifies, "our strength originates from our elders. From them, we receive our teachings and knowledge and the advice we need for our daily lives" (Northwest Indian College, 2025b). It embodies an inherent strength bestowed at birth and cultivated throughout one's lifetime. This belief allows us to reflect on our ancestors' lifestyles and learn to emulate their conduct. According to Tepper et al. (2017),

Because the weavings are alive, they radiate the feelings of the weaver. Some people teach that you should not weave when you are angry or sad. The weaver should feel confident she is doing the right thing at all levels and following the teachings. Then the weaving will contain good feelings, love, prayers, and protection – Chief Janice George, Squamish. (p. 153)

The robes, blankets, sashes, and headbands crafted by weavers are considered powerful entities. Weavers are instructed to be attentive and mindful while at the loom. They are advised to clear their minds and harbor only positive intentions in their hearts. All prior sensations and emotions experienced before sitting at the loom, along with those present during weaving, are believed to imbue the finished work. In addition, we are encouraged to pray to our ancestors during the weaving process, seeking their protection for the work and those who will receive it.

schtəngəx^wən

schtəngəx^wən is a *xwləmi-chosən* word that translates to "we are responsible to protect our territory. This means we take care of our land and water and everything that is on it and in it" (Northwest Indian College, 2025b). We serve as the original stewards of this land. Historically,

the land sustained our people for thousands of years prior to the arrival of colonial settlers and continues to support us presently. As Squamish Elder Joseph shared, “The weavings were primarily made from mountain goat wool, dog hair, nettles” (Portland Art Museum, 2016). Our weavings are imbued with vitality. They embody the spirits of the materials, namely, the wool and plants, the breath of the weaver, and the prayers of the Ancestors who directed the craftsmanship.

The Coast Salish people believe that all entities possess a life, even after their natural end. As hunters and gatherers, there is a reciprocal practice of seeking permission first. This process includes explaining the reasons for taking the lives of our relatives, offering a prayer to recognize their significance, and providing reassurance that only what is necessary will be taken, with all parts utilized. Wilson (2008) describes this concept as relational accountability, emphasizing that our responsibilities extend not only to ourselves but also to animals, land, plants, water, and both living and non-living entities.

xwləmi-chosən

xwləmi-chosən translates to the Lummi language. The deeper meaning, in relation to NWIC values, is that “our culture is our language. We should strengthen and maintain our language” (Northwest Indian College, 2025b). The language directs the work, which is why the values are articulated in *xwləmi-chosən*. This language was bestowed upon us by the Creator (personal communication, Bill James, 2018). According to Tepper et al. (2017), “these are the teachings that get passed on to you in ceremony; they are the same from the beginning of time – Chief Janice George, Squamish” (p. 145). In *xwləmi-chosən*, *nith tu o* describes the phrase from the beginning of time, representing an era when the earth was dark and all the gifts, including

language, were bestowed upon the people of this place. xwləmi-chosən governs all work and remains alive within the hearts, awaiting emergence.

leng-e-sot

leng-e-sot is a xwləmi-chosən word that translates to “we take care of ourselves, watch out for ourselves, and love and take care of one another” (Northwest Indian College, 2025b). The Coast Salish people are communal by nature, residing in multi-generational homes and providing for all members. Through collective effort, the community remained alive and prosperous. We recognize that we are responsible for one another, even if individuals do not originate from our community. Tepper et al. (2017) wrote,

Weavers are a powerful voice in the community. They were individuals who provided wealth-building skills. This knowledge was highly valuable. Historically, weavers kept people warm, contributed to wealth, and maintained purity within the nation. They also marked life cycle transitions and offered protection in both worlds – Chief Janice George, Squamish. (p. 153)

Weavers serve their communities by providing protection, which manifests through warmth, prayers, good intentions, and well-being. This protective nature is intricately woven into every strand of fiber within their craft. Furthermore, weavers bear the responsibility of self-care by releasing negative energy and cultivating a positive outlook. It is essential to cleanse one’s heart and mind to maintain overall well-being.

xaalh

xaalh is a xwləmi-chosən word that loosely translates to "life balance/sacred" (Northwest Indian College, 2025b). Many interpret this form of balance as the work/life balance we endeavor to achieve. Others might perceive it as the equilibrium between Indigenous and

Western methodologies. A minority, however, recognize it as a spiritual, cultural, and daily-life balance. Nonetheless, in our experience, it signifies the understanding that one must lead a balanced life to avoid becoming overwhelmed in any one domain. According to Tepper et al. (2017),

Everything starts with an open heart and open mind; this way we are taking in the teachings from the spirit world, our own Ancestors. Though we may do new ways of ceremony, they are still ancient ones. We are with the Ancestors; we are weaving for our great-great-grandchildren, teaching them to hold on to our culture, we will be there when they need us. – Chief Janice George, Squamish. (p. 154)

A weaver's sacred balance is best encapsulated by the xwləmi-chosən phrase 'netse mot i shqwelowen,' which is loosely translated as 'one heart, one mind' in English. This expression signifies not only the unity of hearts and minds working in harmony but also indicates that all individuals engaged will be aligned with one another. All hearts and minds involved operate as a unified entity. The profound significance of this phrase is challenging to articulate. It embodies a deeply rooted spiritual connection that, until one personally experiences this connection, can only be comprehended superficially.

Weavers sit at the loom in harmony with themselves. The hearts and minds are unified and are intrinsically connected to the work. This connection extends beyond what is immediately visible, uniting the surrounding Ancestors, the upcoming ceremony for which the weaving is prepared, the individual for whom the weaving is intended, and the future generations who will inherit the creation.

Unlike the weaver who sits at their loom with their wool and tools ready to weave, NWIC employees are still in the process of learning how to effectively utilize the core values on

a daily basis. Some employees have successfully integrated these values into their work by applying them in response to student assignments, justifying budget allocations, and validating student concerns. However, for the majority, there has not yet been a significant influence of these values or their application. Therefore, it was important to employ NWIC's core values as a framework for this research. If employees encounter these values during their orientation process, they will be more likely to incorporate them into their daily routines.

Weaving the Pieces

Employees of NWIC enter college with differing worldviews and need diverse perspectives that help build capacity. The weaving metaphor shared above is seamless and raises the question of how to align NWIC employees' worldviews with the college's vision and mission. An essential first step is for employees to understand who they are and where they come from; this will enable them to use their own experiences to connect with students, whether through teaching, advising, mentoring, or assisting with daily life skills. Indigenous education employs a holistic perspective, as Indigenous peoples are continually navigating a fine line between Western and Indigenous education. The responsibility is to find ways to integrate the two educational paradigms (Absolon, 2022; Leighton, 2024) by providing opportunities for employees to deepen their understanding of Indigenous education. In doing so, NWIC will be better positioned to deliver a wholistic education to its students.

Theories

Three Indigenous theories guided this narrative: Object Relations Theory, Empowerment Theory, and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). Each has similarities and differences that build connections between weaving and professional development within higher education institutions, primarily through Indigenous knowledges.

Object Relations Theory

The Object Relations Theory asserts that individuals have a moral obligation toward all elements within our environment (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Not only do we bear this obligation, but we also establish relationships with all living and non-living entities, including land, water, plants, and animals. Meixi et al. (2022) state, “Indigenous systems of relationality – the ethics, worldviews, beliefs and practices, and moral precepts of being in relation with the rest of the living world – are the cornerstone of Indigenous knowledges” (p. 2). It is further understood that any decisions we make will inevitably impact these beings. As an Indigenous researcher, there exists a responsibility to safeguard the world and to ensure it is left in a better condition than its original state.

Similarly, employees must understand they are accountable not only to themselves but also to the community, the college, the students, and their work. Building mutual relationships will strengthen employees' connections to the college, giving them a sense of belonging.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment Theory serves as a distinguished call to action. Once individuals acknowledge their environment and cultivate relationships, empowerment theory facilitates a transition to an improved state. According to Mahle (2018), “the recognition occurs when somebody has been in an oppressive state and has come to realize that the current condition is a detriment to themselves, their families, and their people” (p. 6). Empowerment theory advocates using voice to enhance our world. Additionally, empowerment theory is dependent on object relations theory; prior to taking action, it is essential to establish a mutual relationship. I chose empowerment theory because once employees build accountability with themselves, through

their identity as well as with their role at the college, they will be ready to move students towards self-determination.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

Brayboy's (2005) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) emerged from Critical Race Theory. TribalCrit is grounded in the beliefs, values, and knowledge of Indigenous communities.

Brayboy's (2005) TribalCrit consists of nine tenets:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples; but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. (pp. 429-430)

Brayboy (2005) asserted that, “TribalCrit provides a theoretical lens for addressing many of the issues facing American Indian communities today” (p. 430). While all of Brayboy’s (2005) tenets are important to Indigenous people, this research will use tenets four, five, six, and eight to ground and support this research and to decolonize employee practices at Northwest Indian College.

Methodology

Stories served as the primary method for this study. According to Kovach (2021), “story within Indigenous oral tradition is about connection and is indispensable to Indigenous cultural sustainability” (p. 156). Stories are the data of human existence. They embody our hearts, minds, and spirits and allow lived experiences to take on a life form (Marin et al., 2020; Muniz, 2025). Three different forms of stories were acknowledged in this study: traditional stories, personal stories, and stories shared with research participants.

Traditional Stories

A traditional story, also known as an origin/creation story, is a narrative that originates from within a Tribal nation. These stories are often referred to as myths, legends, and folklore in Western society because they are believed to be untrue (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021). Within our Indigenous communities, these stories are our history. Brayboy (2005) states, “Indigenous people have strong oral traditions, which are used as vehicles for the transmission of culture and knowledge” (p. 439). They guide us through what we know to be true. These “stories were, and are, vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective” (Kovach, 2021, p. 158). The telling and receiving of

traditional stories are integral and necessary parts of Indigenous culture and effective tools for teaching (Napoleon & Friedland, 2016). Traditional stories provide rich, supportive content through the lens of the Ancestors, as well as the community that holds and tells them.

Personal Stories

Personal stories serve to situate individuals within a specific context. They constitute lived experiences and significantly influence ontologies and epistemologies (Wilson, 2008). These narratives make the researcher's voice integral to the research process. Our personal stories establish a connection between the reader and our worldview, thereby increasing relevance. Furthermore, our experiences become a form of knowledge transmitted across generations (Absolon, 2022). Leddy & Miller (2024) assert that “storytelling is a key element of Indigenous pedagogies” (p. 54). Sharing our personal stories fosters relationships and mutual understanding.

Story Sharing

Permitting individuals to share their narratives constitutes an invaluable approach to data collection. Narrative sharing is an organic and natural method of acquiring information, distinct from structured interviews that operate with predefined questions or scripts. Instead, it offers participants an opportunity to express what is in their hearts at that particular moment. Narrative sharing is transformational, relational, and empathetic (Mahle, 2018). When participants recount their stories, it can serve as an act of healing (Starks et al., 2010). This approach allows the researcher to pose a broad question, enabling participants to share whatever they believe the researcher needs to hear at that moment. The primary responsibility of the researcher is to listen attentively with an open heart and mind.

Listening

It is imperative to incorporate listening as a research method, particularly since stories cannot exist without listening. The narratives of our community extend beyond mere words; they serve as vessels of our survival, repositories of our history, carriers of our lessons, and are fundamental to our identity. We employ stories not solely to disseminate information but also to receive it. Our stories are dynamic entities that nourish our spirits and evoke our senses. Active listening is essential. In the film *Huchoosedah: Traditions of the Heart*, the late Kenny Cooper emphasized, “we were given two ears and one mouth for a reason” (Jennings, 1995). This has resonated throughout my life. Essentially, our purpose is to listen more than we speak. Archibald (2008) introduced the concept of a third ear, the heart. This suggests that this adage should be revised to three ears and one mouth. The heart, as our most vital organ, plays a central role in interpreting information.

Listening encompasses more than mere auditory reception; it involves embodying the spoken words, eternalizing the messages, and, when appropriate, sharing them with others. The listener bears a significant responsibility because once the knowledge is transferred, they become accountable for conveying these words to the subsequent recipient (Hall, 2018). I hold numerous teachings regarding listening. The late Ruby Peter (Cowichan First Nations, Tribal Elder, personal communication, 2018) characterized listening as being receptive to receiving what is communicated. Our posture plays a crucial role in this process. We sit with an open posture, which means our arms and legs are not crossed. Crossing arms and legs can serve as a barrier to effective communication. Resting hands on the legs and keeping feet grounded fosters a welcoming environment for spoken words.

The information conveyed indicates that consuming food and beverages during listening activities facilitates the digestion of spoken words. Words, together with nourishment, sustain our bodies. As food traverses the stomach, it passes near our hearts, where relevant words can reside. The remaining words circulate through our bloodstream and are ultimately deposited in their designated locations. The teachings that Wayne Morris (Tsartlip First Nations, Tribal Elder, personal communication, 2017) imparts to all learners in his vicinity stem from knowledge acquired from his grandmother, who frequently insisted that he sit down for a meal during her visits.

In sum, listening encompasses more than merely hearing words; it involves tasting, smelling, feeling, and seeing the spoken words. NWIC instructor McCluskey, Sr. (Lummi Nation, personal communication, 2014) characterizes active listening as a state in which an individual concentrates solely on the speaker, with no other voices present. It requires the capacity to block out all external stimuli and align all senses with the words being articulated. Most importantly, when engaging with Elders, incorporate listening as a fundamental Indigenous approach, as they may request that you refrain from recording or taking written notes. Active listening will facilitate precise data collection.

Institutional Review Board Process

Historically, Tribal communities have been the targets of unethical research. Researchers have entered our communities, claiming to do work that will preserve our culture, language, and history. Ultimately, this has resulted in the theft of intellectual knowledge and property. Many Tribes continue to fight for the restoration of their rights (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2021). My priority is to ensure that no one is harmed during my research. To that end, I adhered to strict human subject protocols. I was in a unique position because the Institutional Review Board

(IRB) process was mandatory not only for the University of Washington but also for the Lummi Nation. All research conducted within the Lummi Nation must also receive approval from the Tribal Council, a body of elected Tribal members who govern the Nation, in the form of a letter of support.

The Lummi Nation uses the NWIC IRB for all research conducted within the reservation boundaries to ensure that the research is ethical and does not involve sensitive subjects. The summer before the school year in which my research commenced, I met with the IRB coordinator to ensure we had a mutual understanding of the application process. We reached a mutual understanding of the process and the items that would need to be obtained and submitted.

The NWIC IRB application was submitted first. I met with a panel of 10 IRB members and presented my research proposal. The panel asked clarifying questions and gave feedback about the proposed research. The last question asked was from a Tribal Elder. The question was “If you were asked to go to the Culture Commission, would you have a problem doing so?” My reply was that I had no problem with that. I had nothing to hide, so of course I would meet with the Culture Commission. What I did not count on was that this question would become a condition for approval. It took three months to receive final IRB approval from NWIC. If I had realized that this question would become a condition, I would have asked clarifying questions.

The journey over the three months was one of patience. The priority was to figure out how to get on the agenda for the next Culture Commission meeting. I sent an email to the director of the Schelangen department. There was no response to the email, which did not surprise me. Thinking about cultural teachings, when requesting time with an Elder, you must do so in person. I lost count of how many times I visited the Schelangen department looking for the

director, but it was strategic in that I did not go at the same time. After two and a half months of attempting to connect with the director, they were finally in the office. We discussed my proposal and before leaving they asked for a copy. It took two weeks before the Schelangen department director decided that my proposal did not need to go to the full Culture Commission. It was a glorious day when the email arrived with one sentence: “You have Schelangen or cultural approval.” This process was a reminder that even as a member of the community, research within Indigenous communities is taken seriously and protection of our Tribal histories, languages, and intellectual property is a high priority.

Two months into the NWIC IRB process, the decision was made to submit to the University of Washington (UW) IRB, in case there was a delay. In stark contrast, the UW IRB process only took four days. The delay in research was not ideal, but the lesson is that everything happens exactly the way it is supposed to. The why might not be immediately apparent, but when the time is right, we will find clarity.

Participants

Participants for the story sharing sessions were recruited by email and word of mouth. The participants are current part-time and full-time employees of NWIC located at the Main Lummi Campus. The choice to focus on the Main Lummi Campus employees was made due to time constraints. With five satellite sites located in five different Tribal communities, permission from each Tribal community would have been needed.

Selection was based on five categories: new employees, current employees, former employees, members of the teaching and learning team, and community Elders. The definitions of these five categories are as follows:

1. New employees were defined as individuals who have been employed by NWIC for less than one year. Participants within this category were selected from faculty, exempt, and classified staff.
2. Employees currently in service were defined as those who have held employment for a period exceeding one year. Participants in this category included faculty, exempt, and classified staff.
3. Past employees are those who have fully exited their employment at NWIC within the last five years. Participants in the category were considered Main Lummi Campus employees during their employment.
4. The teaching and learning team were defined as employees who held an active leadership role within the teaching and learning committee.
5. Community Elders were identified as Elders within the Lummi community. Priority was given to Elders currently employed at NWIC; subsequently, preference was extended to Elders with prior employment at NWIC; and, ultimately, consideration was given to other community Elders.

The target number of participants was between ten and twenty. Over 10 employees responded to the email expressing interest in participating in a story sharing session, but due to scheduling conflicts and a shortage of time, only seven participated. All participants were current employees.

Story Sharing Sessions

Story sharing is an Indigenous method of gathering data and does not rely on a fixed set of questions to guide the participant. It allows participants to tell the researcher what they believe the researcher needs to hear at that moment. As an Indigenous person, I compare story sharing to

visiting. When visiting with someone, it is an organic experience. We are not there seeking something specific. Instead, we are digesting all the thoughts being shared. It is the researcher's job to sit and listen as the guest shares what they have in their heart. Story sharing serves two purposes. First, the researcher does not guide the participant toward a specific answer. Second, participants often share information and ideas the researcher may not have considered, making room for discoveries and stronger findings.

For this research, seven story sharing sessions were conducted with staff and faculty at NWIC's main campus in Lummi. An invitation to participate was sent via email to employees working at the Lummi campus. Several employees responded to the invitation, but only seven participants scheduled story sharing sessions. Five story sharing sessions were held in the participants' offices, one session was held in the researcher's office, and one session was held via Zoom. I wanted to ensure each participant was in a comfortable space.

At the beginning of each session, we took time to informally visit. The informed consent form was thoroughly explained, and clarification on story sharing was provided. A copy of the research questions was provided, along with an explanation that they did not have to explicitly answer those questions. They were free to talk about their thoughts on an employee orientation framework.

Informed Consent

Our stories are the essence of who we are, and we must be mindful of the emotions that sharing them can trigger. Informed consent is the researcher's promise to the participant that the participant is more important than the research. Participation in the story-sharing sessions was voluntary and could be halted at any time. Participants were given the opportunity to review their

transcribed story-sharing sessions to analyze or change what was captured. All research has potential benefits and risks. The potential benefits of this research are:

- Guidance for an employee orientation policy at Northwest Indian College
- Development of employee orientation materials for existing and future employees at Northwest Indian College
- Community empowerment, both locally and globally, through the recognition of the contributions made to this unique employee orientation framework

The potential risks for this research are:

- Emotional discomfort from talking about experiences
- Increased stress from experiencing emotional discomfort during story-sharing sessions
- Damage to social reputation or personal relationships from disagreements or misunderstandings that come from information shared in this research.

Participants were given the choice of anonymity, and all seven participants chose to be named in the research. They were also given the choice to be audio recorded, and all seven participants gave permission to be recorded. The recordings were transcribed. Both the recordings and the transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected laptop for the next five years. At the five-year mark, all the participants agreed to have their recordings and transcriptions archived within the Lummi Nation.

Analysis Technique

The story sharing sessions were transcribed individually for each participant to ensure their stories were captured as intended. Participants were provided the opportunity to read their transcribed story-sharing sessions, allowing them to make edits and comments. I understand

story sharing sessions are equivalent to visiting, and participants may have shared information that was meant only for me. It was important to offer them the opportunity to change or rescind parts of the conversation, especially if the information shared was not meant for the public. Once participants verified their transcripts, the stories were analyzed thematically to identify common themes. The literature review themes (identity, belonging, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Indigenous education, and trauma and suicide) are an important piece of this research and were considered throughout this process. Once the story sharing sessions were transcribed, I looked for additional themes. The themes that emerged from the story sharing sessions were students, mission fulfillment, teaching and learning, mentors, identity, training, and worldview. Some of these themes were the same as those that appeared in the literature review: teaching and learning and identity, while the remainder of the themes were different. The differing perspectives are meaningful to the development of an employee orientation framework.

Conclusion

Weaving is more than a metaphor; it is my inherent right. It is a skill that my great-great-grandmother carried that manifested in me. Thinking as a weaver allows me to see the patterns emerge and understand which pieces to intertwine. Christy's story shares the beginning of my journey and relationship with Indigenous theories and methods. NWIC is the first place I encountered Indigenous theories and methods, and this holds true for most students and employees new to NWIC. Learning Indigenous research has strengthened my worldview because the process has forced me to look deeper into my original identity. Indigenous methodologies demand that my values and knowledge be part of the work instead of an afterthought like Western methodologies. Indigenous research considers the teachings of my people, the land, and our language, instructing us how to not only take care of ourselves but others.

Chapter 4: Findings

“Sit down and listen, and that’s the thing, our ancestors used to say (Chief Simon Baker, transcript, 17 February 1992)” (Archibald, 2008, p. 47). Our stories are our history. The words of our ancestors continue to shape our knowledge. Through their experiences, we have grown, survived, and continue to thrive. The research participants’ stories share their learning journey as they navigated and continue to navigate their employment at NWIC. Their words bring awareness to the needs of the college and will become historical institutional markers. I made an invitation. They responded, so I sat and listened.

The Woman’s Story: Returning Home

The woman sat on the edge of the bed. The early morning sun was shining through the window. It was warm for April. She had mixed emotions about the day. The woman had recently accepted a position with her Tribe, and this was her first day. Her duplex was about a mile away from where her father grew up in Blaine, Washington. The woman reminisced about her days as a child, walking around Blaine. Back then, the small town seemed larger than life. She and her cousins were given the freedom to roam. Going to Peace Arch Park to wander through the gardens and play at the playground. Hopping the ditch into Canada and then back again. Walking to the Thriftway grocery store for her grandma. Checking the mail at the Post Office. Gazing at the walls covered in postal boxes was such a novelty, as was the post office box key. It was larger than any other key on the ring and was oddly shaped.

The woman’s mind shifted away from her memories and wondered what her father’s memories would have been. Growing up, her grandmother shared stories about her father and his siblings, but the woman never had the chance to hear her father’s version. The woman’s thoughts shifted again, wondering what it must have been like for her father and his five siblings to come

to Blaine for the first time. They had already been removed from their home on the Suiattle River and were living in a group home in Everett, Washington. The woman recalled the story her grandmother had shared about meeting the two youngest siblings for the first time. The woman's grandparents did not have any children of their own and decided to adopt. While visiting the two youngest, the woman's grandmother noticed an older girl watching them like a hawk. The grandmother asked the social worker why the older girl was so intent on their business. The social worker told the woman's grandparents that the girl was the oldest sister of the two they were visiting and added that there were three more siblings. The woman's grandmother would always pause at this point in the story. The next part often choked her up. The grandmother would take a deep breath before continuing her story. After the visit, the grandparents went to the car. Once inside, the grandmother turned toward the grandfather. The grandfather took a deep breath and said, "Well, Mother, I guess we are getting six."

The woman's thoughts came back to the present day. She was getting ready to make the one-hour-and-forty-two-minute drive. Ninety-four miles to the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Reservation. The woman was going home. This was not just her homecoming; it was her father's homecoming too. Even though the woman's father had visited his birthright homelands, he never had the opportunity to reclaim his original identity. It was no coincidence that her journey home started in Blaine.

The woman was excited to be working for her own people. NWIC instilled the importance of going home to work for our own people after receiving an education. It was a bittersweet moment. The woman was leaving the Lummi Nation, a Nation that helped raise her, a place she had called home her entire life, a place where, although she was an outsider, she was rarely treated like an outsider. She understood her role and was quick to correct anyone who

thought she was Lummi. The woman was heading to her traditional homelands. She would be an insider but with caution, understanding that being from a place did not automatically make her an insider. There were people in Sauk-Suiattle who had lived and worked at the Tribe since it was federally re-recognized in the 1970s. The woman knew that even as an insider, her place was on the outside until she was invited in.

Gaining the trust of Tribal members took time. The members the woman worked closely with accepted her faster than those who saw her around the community. Over time, the community embraced her as a true insider, realizing she was there to help and did not want to take anything. Her return home fulfilled a dream she did not know existed. She thought about moving closer but cautioned herself with a reminder to wait until after elections.

The woman had voted in Tribal elections since she was in her early twenties. She was not a stranger to the pendulum swings the Tribal council was prone to. It was common for a family to hold several seats for years, then one year have those seats overturned to a new family. This year, the council seats were distributed evenly amongst the families. The woman survived Tribal elections with her position intact and thought she was safe for another year. No one could have predicted what happened next. A petition circulated the Sauk-Suiattle General Membership asking for the removal of three seated council members. This act allowed the remaining council members to appoint new members to the vacant seats, swinging the pendulum towards a new majority. The woman was certain she would eventually be out of a job. Small Tribe politics do not care about who becomes a casualty.

One by one, the woman watched Tribal members lose their jobs. She knew it was just a matter of time before she was next. It was a sunny Friday at the end of February. The woman sat alone in her office since everyone had left early that day. She heard the outside door open. She

had a feeling this was the day she would be asked to leave employment. The chairman appeared in her doorway with an envelope in hand. They walked over to the woman, handed her the envelope, and asked her to turn in her phone and keys before she left. The woman looked at the chairman with a bright, warm smile and simply said thank you.

Reflections

Driving home that afternoon, the woman thought about the event that had just taken place. The director of finance was released from their duties, and the Tribe did not escort them out. They did not have another employee watching them pack their belongings. They did not search their bag on the way out, nor did they have a police officer escort them out of the building. There was trust and no cause. She was an obstacle to a bigger agenda, a Tribal member who became collateral damage. She was fired by her own people.

Understanding our roles is not an easy task. Human beings yearn for acceptance and belonging. Going home to Sauk-Suiattle, she knew she already belonged; it was the acceptance that was going to be difficult. Most of the people at the Tribe viewed her as an outsider despite her exceptional attendance at all the Tribal hosted events. There is still a small piece of her that craves acceptance, but the clarity she has in her identity is all that is needed to know she belongs.

Sarah McMenamin

Sarah McMenamin is a non-Indigenous employee at NWIC. At the time of our visit, she served as the Associate Dean of Two-Year Programs. She has been with the college for two years and acknowledges that she is a guest both at the college and the Lummi community, which is the charter Nation for NWIC. I have had the privilege of working with Sarah in multiple settings at NWIC. Part of my community-grounded praxis project was spent observing her work re-creating

NWIC's First Year Experience. Then, during my first year as the Department Chair for the Native Studies Leadership program, we worked alongside one another on multiple projects.

Once we were settled into the story sharing process, Sarah expressed how important it is that people who come to work at NWIC understand that the worldview they bring to the college is not going to be the same as everybody else's. As someone who is not a person of color, it is different working in an environment where you are not part of the majority. As a guest, your viewpoint is not the lens everybody else is approaching the work through, so it is important to understand that you are not going to be right.

Non-Indigenous people do not always know or understand the history of Tribal nations. Sarah emphasized the importance of guests being willing to learn about Lummi education. Not only the present-day education system at Lummi, but the historical context and how it connects to the mission of the college and self-determination. She went on to explain how learning this has been helpful for her. Instead of centering herself in the work, she has realized she is not the focus; the students are. "It's about them building knowledge, advocacy, agency, power for themselves in their community. And we are assisting with that." Employees who come to work at NWIC must share the same view.

Working at a Tribal institution, especially as a teacher, people need to do their homework to understand not just the job but also the place. Sarah highlighted the importance of understanding NWIC's mission and values. Often, prospective employees come in with the same mindset they would at a Western mainstream institution. They do not understand what a TCU is, nor do they know anything about the host Tribe. A few hiring committees are adding interview questions pertaining to NWIC's mission and values, and it is reflected in those new hires. The hiring committees can form a better understanding of the candidate's knowledge about NWIC,

which is beneficial upon hiring. New hires, especially those who directly face the students, have a shorter runway for learning. Sarah pointed out that the students are the experts, as they bring their lived experiences, and the staff and faculty are here to facilitate. The Western education system situates formal knowledge before lived knowledge. It also values history from one perspective and does not leave room for the perspective of the many Indigenous nations that come from this land. We need faculty who are willing to listen to the stories their students bring into the classroom and accept these stories, even when they contradict what the faculty learned through their formal education. “I think that as a guest you have to be really...strong in your own self because when you mess up or when you are wrong, you have to be able to hear that without running away or crumbling.” Employees need to be willing to approach the work as a learner.

Teaching and Learning has played an integral role in Sarah’s development as an employee at NWIC. She shared her own onboarding experience, which consisted of watching the NWIC 40th anniversary video and reading several documents, including the seven-year accreditation report, the Longhouse Model, and the Honorable House of Learning. No context was shared about the documents. It was not until she started attending the Teaching and Learning sessions that she was able to make connections between what she read during her onboarding, the mission, the values, and her job. Her experience prompted her to develop her own onboarding practices for the new employees she would be supervising. She created a deck of slides in consultation with the Teaching and Learning team.

Sarah suggested that Teaching and Learning should start each school year revisiting the mission and the values. This would be an opportunity to define both and develop a clear direction for all employees for the school year.

We always, always, always need to be brought back to our mission and our values and not people's individual interpretation of those...shared understanding, common language, common understanding of what those are and how to use them in our everyday work. Creating education modules and implementing training for employees would be a step towards aligning worldview.

Emma Norman

Emma Norman first began her employment at NWIC in 2001 as part of the Upward Bound Program. She later transitioned into a faculty position, moved away for two years, returned to NWIC, and has served as the Department Chair of the Native Environmental Science program since 2014. I have had the privilege of knowing Emma since 2016, when I started my employment at NWIC. We have served on various committees together. Emma is a non-Indigenous person of Italian American and Welsh heritage.

Emma's tenure at NWIC has brought her into contact with numerous Lummi Tribal members. She talked about Meltona, a traditional fishing village site on Lummi Island; Portage Island, a small island at the tip of the Lummi peninsula; and the history of NWIC. Recounting her takeaways from each person she has learned from, Emma said these experiences were her onboarding. She went on to say, "I think that is a gift, but you have to also be open to it and to receive that." As a guest in a Tribal community, understanding that the people hold the knowledge, not the textbooks, can be difficult. And realizing that community members take time out of their lives to share information is priceless.

Experiencing the community we work in helps ground people to place. Emma spoke about her experience when she first came to work at NWIC and how she was taken on field trips to visit important sites around the community. In her first couple of years, she was taken to

Lummi Island and the site of the Lummi Indian School of Aquaculture (LISA) several times. She commented regarding Lummi community members who come in as students and employees, “I always find it interesting when people have never been to the LISA site.” Sites like LISA, the Nooksack River, local creeks, the Lummi sea pond, and the Lummi Day School hold rich community history and should be experienced in person, not just in theory. It is not only the places within the community that are significant, but also the people of the community. Emma was fortunate to build relationships with Lummi Tribal members. Throughout the years, she has called upon them to be guest speakers in the classroom and in speaker series for NWIC and beyond. Emma acknowledges the college was smaller when she first came here, giving more space to build these relationships. As the college has grown, forging similar relationships with community members has become difficult.

NWIC is a special place to work. It is grounded in relationships, relationality, and integrity. It is non-transactional. It can be arduous work, but it is heart work. Emma recalled a meeting with a colleague about a canoe shed, but they ended up talking about deer, hunting, and other stories. Taking time to build relationships and connect on a personal level with colleagues builds community within the college. She shared another story about learning not to take herself too seriously. In her early years as faculty, an employee who was also a Tribal member played a prank on her. She was running a minute or two late. She scrambled into the classroom, where her class was waiting for her. The other employee was with the class. They had turned the clock ahead by 15 minutes. The other employee put his hand down on the table and told her that NWIC has a rule: if you are 15 minutes late, students can leave. Emma said her face dropped. At that point, the other employee let her know they were just kidding. She shared that these familial relationships are important because they help us recenter ourselves and serve as a reminder that we are not the center of the work at NWIC; the students are. We come to the classroom with knowledge to facilitate and to open space for students. Everyone must be willing to leave their egos at the door and embrace humility.

Working at NWIC entails a learning curve. Employees must be willing to acknowledge the cultural differences and be willing to be uncomfortable. Emma pointed out how the Teaching and Learning team is comfortable with silence when we ask a question. In a predominantly white institution, there is no room for silence. If a question is asked and no one answers after a minute, they move on. At NWIC, we will sit in silence for five minutes waiting for someone to answer. She went on to explain this is an important lesson because it acts as a reminder for employees to give students the space to answer. If we do not, then we risk excluding students from the conversation.

According to Emma, prospective employees need to know NWIC is not like other higher education institutions. She suggested that NWIC incorporate messaging on the website to offer insight into our uniqueness. NWIC employees are forward-facing to the students, their families, and their communities, meaning our work is done in the open for all to witness. We represent the college and the community will remind us of that.

Matteo Tamburini

Matteo Tamburini is a non-Indigenous mathematics faculty member and has been with the college for over a decade. Matteo has not only brought experience in his discipline, but he has implemented a vision that connects students and their culture to math. Using shapes in the world around them, students develop algebraic equations to find the patterns. He has embraced NWIC's grow your own philosophy by identifying math skills and knowledge in Lummi students and fostering their growth to become teachers. Matteo is currently mentoring one of those students to be his successor.

Within the first few minutes of visiting with Matteo, he shared some words that were a pivot point for him at NWIC and helped him frame the college's intentions. He described being in a meeting, and the Dean of Indigenous Studies, Sharon Kinley, shared, "the point of the college, in her words, the way I remember them, was that in 500 years from now, there are still

people who remember what it means to be Lummi.” Matteo went on to say that he reflected on these words and understood they applied not just to the Lummi community, but to all Tribal communities NWIC serves. The words stood out to him because until this time the mission of the college had not been clear to him. When people are new to the college, there needs to be clear messaging, like this one. Teaching and Learning provides exposure to similar messaging, but it would be valuable during the onboarding process for people to receive an explicit and precise message.

NWIC has a question that is the foundation of the work we do not only with students. The question is, “*Who are you?*” Matteo had been working at NWIC for seven or eight years when a former student and colleague asked him what it means to be Italian. He shared, “I have been grappling with that question ever since.” Culture in the classroom needs to be from a place of knowing and understanding. There have been employees who have urged non-Indigenous people to incorporate culture but if it is not your own, then is it your place to do so? Matteo reflected on a question that was asked when he interviewed at NWIC: *Where do you see math in our own culture?* He shared that at the time, he did not have the context to answer the question, let alone do it. Reflecting on the question *What does it mean to be Italian?* as well as the statement, *500 years from now we want people to know what it means to be Lummi* and the content learned through Teaching and Learning, Matteo understood the relationship between the three and the impact it makes on the students. “If we had not understood how to transform our pedagogy, I don’t know that we would have been able to make a transition to a form of teaching and material that feels this connected.” Our stories are invaluable teaching methods and students connect to the content because of the real-life examples. Once Matteo made this connection, he added his personal example to the bottom of the page of examples he shares with his students.

Matteo talked about his journey in the practice of Capoeira and how it has paralleled his journey at NWIC. Within his practice of Capoeira, he has learned that when visiting someone else's class, he should look to the senior students in that space and model yourself after them. He likened this to NWIC as he recalled a conversation he had with a fellow employee. The colleague, who is Indigenous, stated that they were taught to seek out Elders to visit when they were not sure of something. Matteo wondered if there could be fellow employees whom others could visit and model themselves after, like a mentor. The teachings received in places like Teaching and Learning are often implicit for employees at the college, making it difficult for people to understand what they need to do. Matteo suggested that mentors who can make the teachings more explicit, especially for new employees, could help foster employee growth.

Growth also happens through experience, and it is how some lessons are meant to be learned. Matteo recalled a pre-service where employees were taken out on the canoe for professional development. He recognized there were number patterns present and started thinking about how he could incorporate this experience into his lessons. As a non-Indigenous person, incorporating cultural content is not easy and often will end in failure. Matteo recognized that even though he had one experience with paddling, there might be students who have more experience. He admitted that his mistake was positioning himself as the authority without allowing the students to bring forward their teachings first. He ended by sharing that his people say, "making mistakes is how you learn."

Julia Orloff

Julia is Aleut and an alumnus of NWIC. She currently serves as the STEM Alumni and Retention Coordinator. Prior to this position she served as an Advisor for the Native

Environmental Sciences Department. I have known Julia in multiple capacities dating back to our high school days.

Julia attributed her success as an advisor to a few of her coworkers. Their guidance in unfamiliar situations fostered her growth, providing the skills and knowledge necessary to help students. Even though she had worked 17 years in customer service positions, that experience was not enough for what she encountered working at a TCU. Many NWIC students come with trauma that we do not always know about. Providing a welcoming space to foster relationships with students is the best way to gain their trust and understanding, and making little to no eye contact and minimal conversation is nothing personal. Mentors would be beneficial for new employees, especially those who have never worked in a Tribal environment. It is important to fill the mentor role with people who will not overstep boundaries. Choose people who will guide students to a decision, not make the decision for them. Understand the vulnerability of our students and do not take advantage of their weak boundaries. We need to make sure department leads understand how to communicate this to their teams.

Julia reflected on the hiring process and where NWIC should focus its efforts. Asking the right questions is essential to finding employees who will exhibit the previously mentioned qualities. She suggested adding questions to the application and interview process that are specific to working at NWIC. Candidates need to understand that they are working at NWIC on the Lummi Reservation. If they are going to work at one of the NWIC sites, they need to understand it from the perspective of that reservation. It is not just about the lens of the reservation or Indigenous people, but about the worldview the candidate brings and the effect it has on the place and people.

Entering NWIC as a student, Julia began to understand who she is and the impacts on students. She recalled taking a class from Sharon Kinley, a Lummi Tribal member and Dean of Indigenous Studies at NWIC. People told her to take the class with a friend and cautioned that most of the discussion would focus on the Lummi people rather than other Tribal communities. Julia quickly realized Sharon was speaking from a sense of place. She credited Sharon with helping her unpack her identity. Exploring questions about the impacts of colonization has made Julia more confident in who she is, whereas before this class she would have pulled back from answering anything about her identity. She realized that boarding school changed her father's trajectory, which in turn changed hers. She has made connections with people who knew her father when he was a boy in the village, and the stories they have shared with Julia have helped her heal. Untangling her identity has benefited her work at NWIC, giving her more empathy when working with students. Her journey has also supported her position as a guest of the Lummi Nation. Referencing Hernandez's (2022) concept of a welcomed guest and an unwelcomed guest, Julia hopes she is a welcomed guest of the Lummi Nation and NWIC.

Working at NWIC is different from working for one of the public colleges or school districts in neighboring towns, and it should be. We are providing our students with an educational opportunity that is unlike their public-school experience. Julia stated she was glad this work is being done. A consistent employee orientation for all new hires will provide continuity. She stated that she has taken a few new hires around the horn (a term used by locals to indicate a trip around the Lummi peninsula) and thinks that should be part of the orientation.

Spring Petta

Spring is a non-Indigenous employee who grew up in Auburn, Washington, adjacent to the Muckleshoot Indian Reservation. She had several classmates in high school who were

Muckleshoot Tribal members. She was provided with opportunities to participate in Native art classes. “I felt an emotional connection to the art and community before I even knew anything about tribal culture or native culture.” She has a lot of respect for being here and wanted to work at NWIC because it felt like home. Spring started at NWIC in 2021 when she was hired as a Tribal Governance and Business Management faculty member. She has also worked as an English faculty member. Spring left NWIC for a while to pursue other passions. She recently returned and serves as an Instructional Designer – Faculty & Non-academic Program Support.

Spring began by sharing her journey of reclaiming her identity and how she embarked on a long genealogy quest that took her overseas. Her journey connected her with an ancestral family she had never known, which healed a part of her. Spring reflected on the question, “*What essential knowledge regarding identity must employees possess?*” by stating, “I think this innate connection to ancestral healing and knowing something about your past, but not just like ancestry.com.” She continued by sharing that she has an ongoing relationship with her deceased ancestors and a private spiritual practice for times when she needs clarity in life and has no living person to consult. The work she has done for herself informs her identity and deep relationship with her ancestors. It also aligns with the work NWIC asks students to do.

NWIC provides a non-linear learning space that values curiosity and intellect. Spring expressed appreciation for this, noting that formal education does not teach us everything we need to know. As a person with ADHD, she respects an educational space that accommodates neurodiverse or very abstract ways of approaching learning. It is about fostering each student’s innate intelligence rather than the academy’s version of success.

Spring attributed her success at NWIC to developing a personal relationship with her first supervisor, who became her mentor. Her mentor was a Lummi Tribal member and a graduate of

NWIC. Spring described them as professional, gentle, and candid. They provided guidance on what it means to be a good guest and on how to successfully navigate employment at NWIC.

Carol Follett

Carol Follett is a non-Indigenous part-time faculty member. She originally connected with NWIC through her position at Bellingham Technical College (BTC), where she helped build a partnership among the General Educational Development (GED) programs. At age 70, she attributed a large part of her learning journey to discovering and understanding the work being done at NWIC on identity recognition and self-understanding.

Carol shared that her Danish grandmother came to the United States at age seven and taught her family to always support the underdog. She encouraged her family to walk in other people's shoes and view life from their perspective. Carol kept her grandmother's words close and holds a strong desire to make a difference. She explained that during her undergraduate program, she chose to take a course in African history. She was the only white person in the class. "It was a fascinating experience because I was exceedingly shy. I always liked to blend in. The teacher seated me in the middle of the class." Carol soon realized the course was not meant for her and did not finish it. The experience was not about the "F" she received, nor was it about her lack of knowledge about the process of withdrawing from the course. It was about learning what it was like to be the minority in the room. This experience at 18 years old shaped her worldview and desire to seek ways to make a difference.

Teaching and Learning has been integral to Carol's understanding of NWIC. The methodology of examining the college's values, the identities of both students and employees, the traumas experienced and lived, and generational approaches to education has provided a different lens than that of the Western ways of BTC. Carol shared that the value-based way of

thinking that comes out of Teaching and Learning at NWIC creates community amongst faculty and staff.

Working at NWIC, Carol has realized how much she does not know about the Native American experience. She has had to revisit the history she does know to understand what she needs to learn. “Colonized way of being is isolation.” This insight has motivated Carol to revisit her own history to better understand her identity. She has spent time with her 97-year-old mother and 74-year-old sister, fitting the pieces of their lived experiences and knowledge together to deepen their understanding of who they are. This work has been difficult because she is coming from a background in a colonized Western academic system, but it has also been rewarding as she uses an Indigenous approach, which she says is far superior. Visiting her grandmother’s history, the history of Denmark, and attempting to learn her language have been enjoyable. While this journey is for her personal growth, Carol finds ways to promote the work she is doing with others in her sphere. She has found ways to encourage her friends and even colleagues at BTC. There is a certain fear that comes with taking on this kind of learning journey. She was surprised that an older white male colleague at BTC was upset when the subject of identity was broached. Carol shared that there is a fear of guilt embedded in this type of learning journey, but it is something that people of privilege must go through.

Aissa Yazzie

Aissa Yazzie is of Diné heritage. She is an alumnus of NWIC and currently holds a position as a faculty member in Native Environmental Science. During her academic journey, Aissa was engaged as a student researcher at the Salish Sea Research Center, participated in an internship during each summer, contributed as a tutor within the Math and Writing Center, and served on the Student Executive Board. NWIC established an inclusive environment of

belonging, and following her graduation with a master's degree, she expressed her desire to return to NWIC in some capacity.

During Aissa's years as a student, there were no Indigenous faculty in the science department. In fact, there were very few Indigenous faculty college-wide. Aissa expressed her frustration with this reality, noting that it often felt like students were teaching faculty about identity and belonging instead of the other way around. This was a driving force behind her desire to work at NWIC. Her time at the University of Hawaii at Manoa was healing and gave her the space to reconnect with herself, realizing she wanted to foster student growth by providing a space where students could focus on themselves rather than on their instructors' growth.

Aissa shared her experience with her first pre-service as a new faculty member. It was pre-COVID-19, and NWIC meetings were in person. The meeting was held in the Log Building on the Lummi Campus, and employees from the extended sites were also in attendance. She remembered there were a few new faculty that year. Meeting in person for the first time provided space to build a new faculty cohort. They were all starting at the same point. Aissa still engages with them. However, NWIC transitioned to Zoom meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. All-staff meetings are still conducted via Zoom. As a result, employees do not have the same opportunities to engage with one another and build a support network as they did prior to the pandemic.

Aissa also shared that NWIC needs to provide training in clerical tasks. The expectation is that people come to NWIC knowing how to fill out a reimbursement form or know who to check a car out with. There is no formal training or videos to walk employees through the steps, let alone find the forms. Aissa added that NWIC should also provide guidance for all employees

to help direct students and their needs. A student should be able to ask any employee for directions. We say the students are at the center of the work, but they are not.

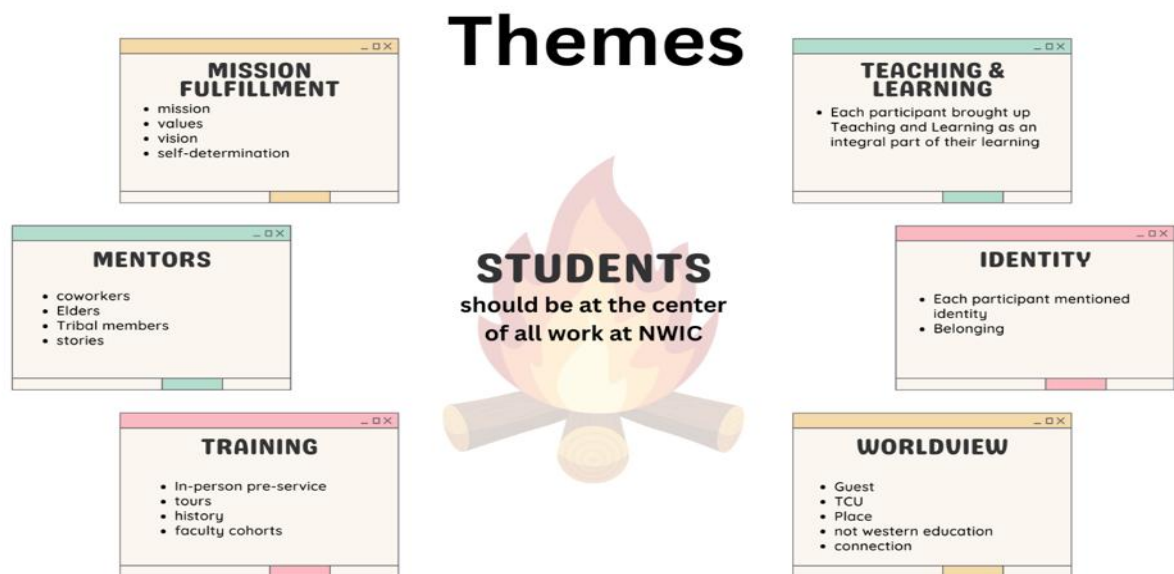
Training in emergent situations is also missing. Aissa shared that NWIC provides trauma-informed training during in-service, but it does not prepare employees for actual events. There is nothing in place that tells employees how to navigate a stressful or horrific event. If a student experiences something traumatic, they are going to tell the person they are most comfortable with. And for most employees, we have not had formal training on where to go with the incident, so more people find out than necessary.

Story Sharing Analysis

Participants were asked via the informed consent form (Appendix A) to audio record their story sharing sessions, which all the participants agreed. After each story sharing session, the recordings were transcribed and saved to a password protected laptop. I used the transcriptions to look for key phrases and words, which I documented in a spreadsheet. After all the story sharing sessions were complete, I looked for common themes or phrases shared by most or all the participants. The list was narrowed down to the themes that were most pertinent to the research. Not all themes were explicit, meaning not everyone said ‘mentors,’ but they all spoke about learning from someone at the college or the Lummi community and explained how they looked to those people for guidance.

Themes

As illustrated in Figure 1, seven themes emerged from the story sharing sessions: students, mission fulfillment, teaching and learning, mentors, identity, training, and worldview.

Figure 1*Themes*

Not all participants mentioned every theme specifically; however, they all talked about a topic that related to each theme.

Students

All seven participants cited students as a reason to build an employee orientation framework. While Emma explicitly stated that students are at the center of the work, it was clear the other participants felt the same. All participants hold positions that directly engage with students and acknowledge that we are here to serve them. Aissa's deep concern for NWIC students was evident in her repeated emphasis that their growth comes first and that it cannot happen without employees working on themselves.

Mission Fulfillment

Mission fulfillment is a key element at any institution. At a Tribal college that is framed in Indigenous values, the mission of the college is crucial to the survival of the people. Every employee at NWIC must work toward:

- Knowing the mission statement. They must be capable of reciting it from memory.
- Defining the key terms in the mission statement. It is not enough to say the words. We must believe them and incorporate them into our workspace.
- Verbalize and define the values. While the values are not part of the mission statement, they are intrinsic to the college. Employees shy away from learning the values because they are written in xwlemi-chosen, but this is the exact reason they must utilize them. If we are to decolonize education and provide an Indigenous education our languages must be part of the process.

Teaching and Learning

Participating in teaching and learning was a topic in every story sharing session. At NWIC, teaching and learning is a space for all employees to explore and connect with their original identity. It is a continuous process that promotes self-reflection and growth. For many, teaching and learning sessions are where employees experience a shift in their pedagogies and philosophies. It is through this process that we build content for the classroom. Teaching and Learning unites identity, worldview, and mission fulfillment, preparing employees to serve students in a holistic manner.

Mentors

Mentors have been essential to the success of all seven participants. Indigenous cultures are built on mentorship. Long ago, our family members were our mentors, and Indigenous people still follow this protocol. Participants shared how mentors, especially community members, have contributed to their success. Another aspect of mentorship is the “grow our own philosophy” that NWIC believes in. This philosophy provides students and employees with opportunities to be mentored into positions within the college. The vision behind this philosophy

is to have Tribal members in key positions throughout NWIC. Matteo has implemented this philosophy by mentoring a Lummi Tribal member to eventually take his place. That person started as a student, is currently finishing their bachelor's degree, has been teaching classes, and has been accepted into a master's program. Mentoring allows employees to see themselves in roles they did not think were possible. Having mentors allowed me to envision myself as part of the NWIC community.

Identity

All the participants described how identity has played a crucial role in their success at NWIC. We ask our students to explore and reclaim their original identity. Why would employees not be asked to do the same? Identity grounds us in a place. Even if that place is hundreds or even thousands of miles away, we still feel a sense of belonging, and there is no need to pretend to be someone we are not. Identity is an essential component of working at NWIC and should be a priority for all employees. We should not accept the excuse that they cannot teach something because they do not know about it. Faculty should take this as a cue to learn so they are better equipped the next time, especially those who have been at NWIC for an extended period. We owe it to our students.

Training

The success of new employees is dependent on the training they receive. Training at NWIC has not been abundantly available. Suggestions from the participants included:

- Tours of not only the campus but also the territory. Many of the non-Indigenous new hires have never been to the Lummi reservation. Understanding the land assists in knowing the people
- Sharing the history of the college and the people who charter the college.

- Training modules for clerical tasks, filling out forms, and understanding the roles of key positions within NWIC. There should also be a central repository for all forms an employee might need.
- Creating faculty cohorts brings new hires together and provides a group of people they can lean on through their first year of teaching.

While these seem like basic onboarding tasks, they have been missing from NWIC's process.

Worldview

We all possess our own worldview, but it is vital that employees understand how their worldview influences students. When people come from the dominant Western world, they bring with them the perspective of that education system. Employees must be willing to see education through a different lens. Non-Indigenous employees will not be able to see through an Indigenous lens, but they will need to be able to differentiate between Western and Indigenous education. They will also need to learn what it means to be a good guest, recognizing that they are not the authority. Shifting one's worldview comes down to one question: why do I want to work at NWIC?

Limitations

This research encountered limitations due to time constraints and biases. Staying within the parameters of a doctoral program, coupled with the three-month NWIC IRB approval process, limited the time available for the research process. The limited time also dictated the number of participants because I wanted to ensure enough time for data analysis. The final approval for the NWIC IRB came near the end of the spring quarter, which is a very busy time because of finals and graduation. This limited the opportunity for participants and made scheduling difficult.

As an employee of NWIC asking other employees to share their thoughts about an employee orientation framework, there is the potential for bias. Remaining impartial throughout the process was difficult. At times, I found myself listening to respond instead of listening with an open heart, capturing not only the words of the participants but also their body language. A fear of conducting this research was that participants would not speak freely because I serve in a leadership position within the college and am part of the Teaching and Learning team. Since this research will be used to fulfill indicators under objective 3, Implement A Comprehensive Indigenous Reconciliation Framework, and objective 4, Enhance Institutional Capacity for Sustained Growth of the NWIC 2026-2032 Strategic Plan⁷, it was important to capture the exact meanings of each participant's story. To ensure accuracy, participants were given the opportunity to read what was written and make corrections as needed. These biases are minimal, but worth mentioning.

Conclusion

Our stories are our truths. Sitting and listening to the seven participants share their experiences at NWIC gave meaning to developing an employee orientation framework. The years of service shared among the participants, their perspectives, and, most of all, their reflections and growth inspire providing opportunities for others to explore their identities and sense of belonging. When someone has a strong sense of identity, it can be intimidating to others. I have wondered over the years whether that led to the demise of my employment at Sauk-Suiattle. Knocking down the colonial walls within our Tribal entities means strengthening our original identities and helping guests understand that their role is not to perpetuate colonial ideologies but to support the work of Indigenizing.

⁷ <https://nwicis.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/NWIC-Strategic-Plan-2026-2032-Web1.pdf>

Chapter 5: Discussions

“Universities are the primary institutions that train Western scholars to reproduce themselves in the Western cultural image” (Harris, 2002, p. 187). As a TCU, NWIC strives to rewrite this statement. NWIC’s primary goal is to Indigenize the institution and produce decolonized scholars who embody their indigeneity. For this to succeed, employees trained in Western institutions must shift what they have been taught to align with NWIC’s Indigenous worldview. This does not mean that all employees become Indigenous; it simply means they approach the work with caution and recognize they are not the authority.

The original intent for this research was to answer the following questions:

1. What essential knowledge regarding identity must employees of Northwest Indian College possess to ensure their success?
2. In what manner does Northwest Indian College guarantee that employees employ a wholistic approach when engaging with students to prevent any potential harm?

All seven participants who shared their stories with me mentioned the work they have done toward their identity. But none of them mentioned any essential knowledge that employees must know. Identity is an area of personal growth, and everyone will approach it differently. A common theme in ensuring wholistic engagement with students was training. The stories that the participants in this research shared, as well as informal stories I encountered around the college, led to the formation of the employee orientation framework that will be shared in this chapter.

This research has made it clear to me that our stories define who we are and who we become. Each story that we create, that our family shares with us, or that we discover through research is a piece of our identity.

The Woman's Story: Leadership is Inherent

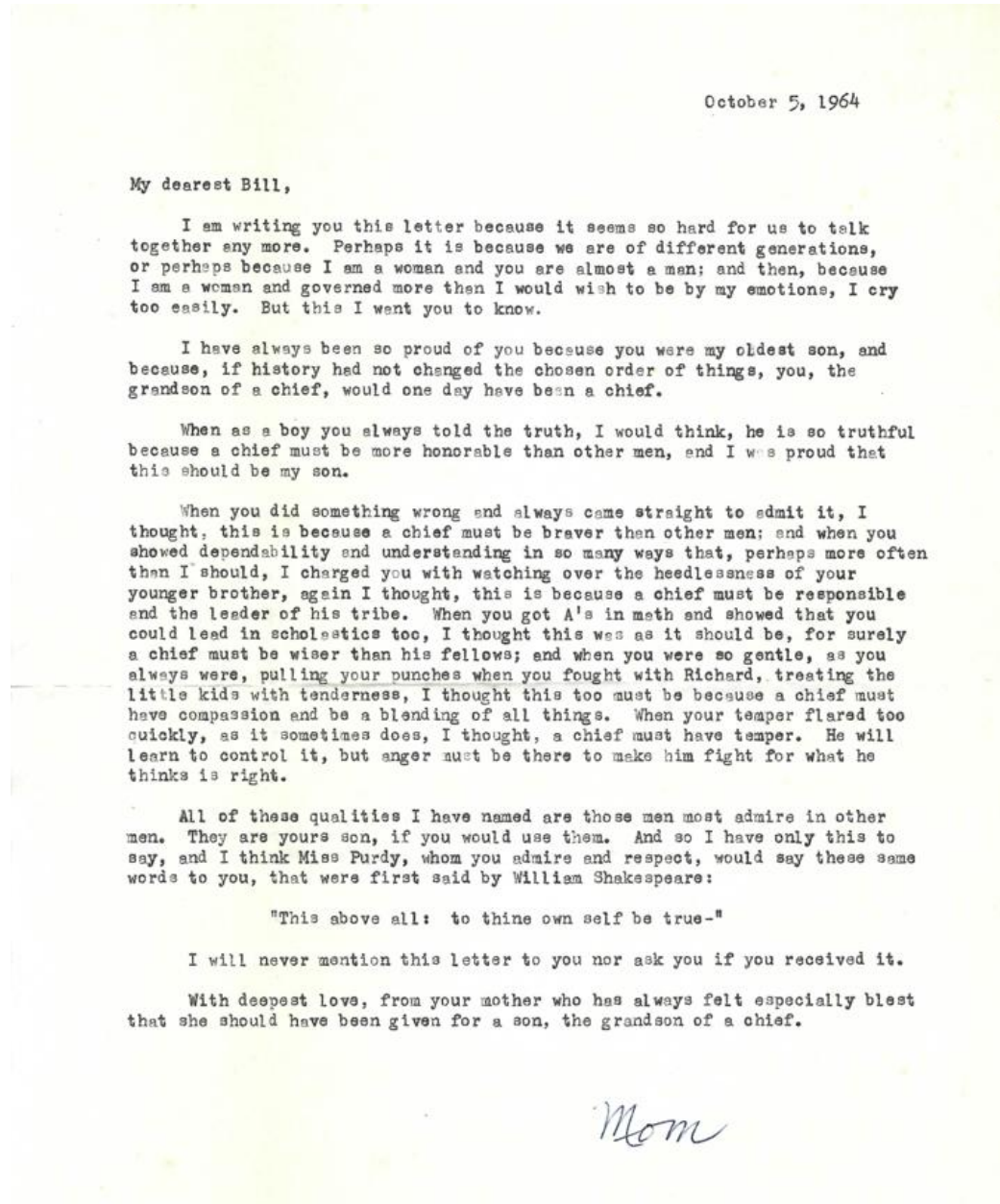
The woman was visiting her mother. She was getting ready to leave when her mother said, "Wait! I have something for you," and scurried off to her bedroom. The woman sat, waiting in anticipation. It was not her birthday, and her mother had not been anywhere recently, so she did not think it would be a gift. The woman's mother walked back into the living room with an apprehensive look on her face. She handed her a padded manila mailing envelope. The woman looked perplexed as she searched for markings to indicate what it might be. There was nothing on the outside, so she peered into the open end and pulled out a pile of pictures. The woman's mother said, "You can look at the pictures, but do not open the envelope that is in there until you get home." The woman looked at the pictures one by one. They were childhood pictures, pictures of her sister who had passed away too soon, and a couple of pictures of her father. She glanced at the envelope her mother had warned her not to open. It was aged; what had once been a white envelope was now a light beige color. The woman noticed it was addressed to her father, but there was no return address, nor was there a stamp. As her gaze lingered on the envelope, she could tell it was typed on her grandmother's old typewriter. The woman carefully placed the items back in the bigger envelope and left.

The woman got in the passenger seat of the car, looked at her partner, and said "I know I am supposed to wait until I get home, but I can't." She carefully pulled the contents out of the envelope and sat there with the envelope in her hand for what seemed like an eternity. Then she lifted the flap. The envelope had never been sealed, but there were bits of glue on it that must have transferred from the years of sitting in one of the closets in her grandmother's house. It had been over twenty years since the family had cleaned out the Blaine house. The woman was certain the letter in her hand was something one of her aunts found and held onto for her. She

pulled the yellowing piece of paper out of the envelope. The paper had been folded in half and then in thirds. She conscientiously unfolded the paper. It was dated October 5, 1964, and addressed to "My dearest Bill" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Letter



The woman took in a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, and slowly exhaled before continuing to read the typed words on the page. As the woman read the letter, the tears began to swell in her eyes. The woman should have listened to her mother, but it was too late. Her emotions were already in overdrive. She might as well finish reading the letter.

The words “grandson of a chief” took the woman’s breath away. She began to sob. How did her grandmother know her father was the grandson of a chief? Did the agency tell her? Did the woman’s father tell her in words of anger? When the letter was written, her father would have been 16 years old. It would have only been six years since the adoption. The woman continued to read. The traits her grandmother listed- honorable, truthful, brave, compassionate, and a little bit of temper were familiar. The woman reflected these traits, sharing them with a man who had only been in her life for four and a half years. Genetic memory is undeniable.

With her face wet with tears, the woman carefully folded the letter, placed it back in the envelope, and then returned the smaller envelope to the bigger one. She sat in silence the remainder of the car ride. Exiting the car, the woman wondered out loud, how many more of these gems exist?

Reflection

Lessons occur when least expected. The letter was a reminder that new stories from the past are waiting to emerge. I am continually discovering pieces of my original identity. My cousins have said we come from chiefs, but I did not put much thought behind their words. While researching my lineage, I discovered federal documents naming my great-great-great-grandfather as one of the chiefs of the people who lived on the Suiattle River, and subsequently my great-great-grandfather took on duties of caring for the people. Leadership is an inherent role. Our old people saw it as a birthright and carefully chose the next leaders, watching them

from birth. The investment families made in their children was invaluable. The training and lessons received would guide their development of leadership. Like how an orientation framework will guide employees at NWIC.

Would this have been me? I do not know, but caring for the Indigenous people of these lands continues to cross my path. When asked, “What is my why?” or reason for my work, the answer is always “to build a people.” My work is to ensure that as many Indigenous people as possible know who they are and where they come from so the future generations can still connect to their original identity.

Employee Orientation Framework

Creating an employee orientation framework that moves NWIC towards mission fulfillment and embodies its vision and values supports the alignment of Western-trained employees with the Indigenization of the college. “Faculty development at TCUs extends beyond pedagogical improvement to encompass cultural competency, community engagement, and alignment with Indigenous knowledge systems” (Colbert et al., 2026, p. 124). It is one thing to learn about the culture of the place a person is working in, make connections within that community and incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems, but if the employees cannot make the connection to themselves, will the students be able to make the connection?

After conducting formal story sharing sessions with the seven NWIC employees and participating in casual conversations with several others, I developed an employee orientation framework for consideration. Considering all the stories I listened to over the past two years, the orientation needs to start before the application process by clearly stating who NWIC is and what the college stands for on the Human Resources page and continue until the employee leaves NWIC. The end date of the orientation process is debatable, as some may argue that the

transformation and growth of self and identity may continue long after an employee leaves NWIC.

Pre-application

It is important for applicants to understand that NWIC is not the same as a mainstream educational institution. TCUs serve a unique population that historically has been oppressed in education settings. Practicing leng-e-sot (we take care of ourselves and others), it is important to articulate an accurate overview of who NWIC is and what we stand for. As part of the employee orientation process, the following changes should be made to the NWIC Human Resources (HR) website:

- Historical synopsis of NWIC. This should include a timeline of Lummi education, as well as the mission, the vision, and the values of the college.
- The Indian preference policy should be clearly listed and defined. Currently, the Indian Preference Act is referenced on both the HR page and the application but the practice NWIC follows is only found in the employee handbook and neither the application nor the HR page references it. NWIC needs an actual policy, and then it needs to be accessible through a hyperlink on the HR page and the job announcement.
- Opening Statement on the job announcements page. An opening statement would situate the job in place, acknowledging the values and the mission of the college.

Providing upfront information about NWIC and its relevant policies improves the experience for all parties involved. These steps should be included in the orientation process because it is understood that not everyone will enter the NWIC website at the homepage. If an applicant finds the job announcement on another website, they may bypass NWIC's homepage. Providing

information upfront allows the applicant to make an informed decision about applying and helps them determine whether NWIC aligns with their beliefs and values.

Pre-screening

Along with the current application packet, NWIC should add a short reflection component that asks applicants: “Why do I want to work at NWIC?” and “What do I bring to NWIC that is beneficial to the students, staff, and community?” These questions remind me of a class visit to the unceded territory of the Unist’ot’en people in British Columbia, Canada. As guests at the Unist’ot’en homestead, the class had to request permission to enter the territory by first identifying themselves and their relationship to the host. Next, the class had to explain their intentions for entering the territory and what they were bringing to benefit the host. This mirrors the protocol Indigenous people practiced before colonization. Free, prior, and informed consent helps keep territories safe. Similarly, the application reflection questions embody *schtəngəxʷən* (we are responsible to protect our land), ensuring care not only for the land but also for the people – past, present, and future. This also allows for a screening process in which interviews are offered to applicants whose beliefs and values align best with NWIC.

Interview

Currently, NWIC allows hiring managers to choose the interview questions; however, these questions do not always reflect what it means to work at NWIC. They often focus on the skills applicants need to be successful in the position, yet the same objectives could be met through performance-based activities rather than interviews. NWIC can teach the necessary job skills, but we cannot teach empathy, identity, and motivation for working at a TCU. As such, NWIC needs to develop a uniform set of interview questions that will assess candidates’ understanding of the college mission, vision, and values, as well as their epistemological

framework and worldview. In essence, applicants should be able to describe what it means to work with and for Indigenous people and the ways in which differing worldviews influence self-determination and wholistic Indigenous education. Səla-lex^w (our strength comes from our old people) should guide the interview process because our worldview is shaped by the knowledge we gain through our elders or old people.

The success of this step of the orientation depends on the hiring committee. The committee must include a current employee who clearly understands the purpose of the questions and can fairly assess the candidate. This person should come from the Indigenous Relations team being developed as part of NWIC's new seven-year strategic plan.

Onboarding and Beyond

A common theme expressed by current NWIC employees is that once hired, they are left to their own devices. However, promoting continuous improvement means NWIC must demonstrate leng-e-sot (we take care of ourselves and others) by preparing every employee from the time they sign their contract to the day they leave employment at NWIC.

Introduction to the College. In many ways, NWIC has forgotten what it means to be a host, which means there is an assumption that new employees will know how to learn about the college and the surrounding community, as well as locate necessary resources to be successful.

In response, the following must be included as part of the college orientation:

- Tour – the tour will include two parts: a campus tour and a reservation tour. The campus tour will allow new hires to become acquainted with the college campus. A map of the campus will be supplied, allowing them to take notes along the way. This will help the new employees better serve students, guests, and future new hires. The second tour will

be of the reservation. Understanding the land and community surrounding the college will help build relationality.

- History – provide the history of NWIC and Indian education. Employees will be shown the anniversary videos as well as a brief overview of Indian education. Knowing the history of a place provides new employees an opportunity to connect with the people and the land.
- Teaching and Learning – NWIC’s way of teaching and learning is different than the conventional Western model. It is vital that employees be introduced to teaching and learning early and encouraged to attend all sessions. The introductory Teaching and Learning session should share the history of teaching and learning at NWIC, as well as introduce the new employee to their role as a learner and employee within the teaching and learning model.
- Mission, Vision, and Values – Employees will be taught the mission, vision, and values of NWIC as well as the definitions that accompany them.
- Strategic and Assessment Plans – Employees will be provided copies of the newest version of the Strategic Plan and the Assessment Plan. NWIC will give an overview of the plans, sharing the most recent progress update. Employees will be shown where they fit into both plans, as well as what their part is in carrying out the work.

These activities will occur over the course of the first three to six months of employment.

Employees may encounter them before the end of this period, but it will still be important to allow for time in a more intimate setting, giving space for a less intimidating experience.

Training Modules. There are many tasks at NWIC that become second nature to employees because they have been at the college for many years. Asking for help can be

intimidating for new employees, therefore training modules and accessible repositories are important to employee success.

- Modules – Easy to follow step by step training modules for filling out forms. Examples of these forms include travel, reimbursement, and vehicle checkout.
- Repositories – A central location for commonly used college forms.
- Software Training – Training modules for the different software platforms utilized throughout the college to ensure employees have basic knowledge of how to use these platforms.
- Department tree – A department tree defines the function of each department. It has the capability to drill down to show each position within the department and the function it serves. There is a place to indicate if the position is the recipient of any forms. It will also show who currently serves in the position.

As the host, NWIC must provide new employees with the necessary tools and make them as accessible as possible. This onboarding practice aligns with the 2026-2032 Strategic Plan since communication is one of the objectives.

Continuous Training

Orientation does not end after the first week or even the first year of employment. It is a continuous process that embraces xaalh (sacred life balance) and xwləmi-chosən (our language is our culture). NWIC believes that education and learning are a transformational journey full of growth and reflection. NWIC offers in-service sessions each Friday for employees to engage in teaching and learning, trauma-informed education, and wellness activities. Depending on their level of inquiry, some employees strive to reclaim their original identity, while others work to understand what it means to be a good guest. Others, like Matteo, are working on both. Matteo

has used the in-service opportunities to reconnect with his Italian heritage and to build a math curriculum that connects students to their identity. Matteo is continuously growing in both areas by first connecting with his own children through Italian language and history and second by creating new math equations connected to Coast Salish cultural arts.

Developing and implementing an orientation process like the one outlined might not seem realistic. But as some recent guests of NWIC showed, it is possible. NWIC participated in a cultural exchange with employees of Hawai'i Community College, hosting 25 staff, faculty, administrators, and students. One person stood out in the group. They were a non-Native Hawaiian who grew up on the East Coast. They have been working for the college for about 18 years and embody the college's Hawaiian values. They spoke the language, danced every dance performed, participated in every chant, and never overstepped their role. They talked about incorporating the culture and the language into the course curriculum. Sarah observed that none of our guests were hesitant to step aside if they did not have the knowledge. When performing the songs and chants, the leader would ask those who did not know the song, chant, or dance to step back. They explained that participants needed to reach a certain level of mastery and that there was no shame in not knowing. Their knowledge came from continuous practice and reflection, which led to transformation.

Story Sharing Themes and Orientation

The seven themes that emerged from the story sharing sessions were important to the creation of the framework because they guided what future and current employees need to know. The following outlines the importance of each theme:

- Students – NWIC students are at the heart of the orientation process and should be a consideration throughout. Students should be the first consideration a potential employee has when applying to NWIC. Every position at NWIC serves students and their capacity

to learn. Students should remain the focal point throughout employment at NWIC because without them the college would not exist. As mentioned earlier, the lifecycle of the orientation is debatable

- **Mission Fulfillment** – The stages of mission fulfillment include learning the mission, understanding the mission, incorporating lessons for students to learn and understand the mission, and ultimately graduating students who exemplify the mission. The pre-screening process is the first place a future employee will showcase their understanding of the mission through their interpretation of what it means to work at NWIC. The interview process will hold space for potential employees to share their understanding of mission fulfillment through interview questions. And if hired, the continuous training model will provide space to learn more about the specific pieces of NWIC's mission with definitions and examples.
- **Teaching and Learning** – NWIC teaching and learning is a place of self-discovery, providing opportunities for employees to explore their identities and belonging. Teaching and Learning will be introduced in the onboarding and beyond section of the orientation process. Employees will be introduced to NWIC's Teaching and Learning philosophy, laying the foundation for the future in-service training courses that are held throughout the school year. The in-service sessions are part of the continuous training employees will receive.
- **Mentors** – Creating relationships with people both in the college and in the community will strengthen an employee's bonds to the college, and they will enhance an employee's quality of work. Mentors will be part of the onboarding and beyond and continuous training sections of the orientation. Supervisors will serve as an employee's first mentor

and as an employee becomes more familiar with NWIC and the community, they may establish new mentors.

- Identity – NWIC believes that identity is an imperative component to mission fulfillment. Building an original identity that roots one in place constructs a sense of belonging. The beginning stages of identity should be present in the pre-screening and interview stages of the orientation process. An employee's identity will continue to grow throughout their tenure at the college by participating in the onboarding and beyond and the continuous training sections.
- Training – The trainings NWIC offers must be varied and abundant. Training will be part of the onboarding and beyond and the continuous training sections. NWIC can offer training from the simplest of tasks like filling out a timecard to higher level training such as trauma-informed classrooms. Training builds relational accountability within employees and departments which leads to better service to students.
- Worldview – TCU's connect higher education with traditional knowledge. Worldview is the way we perceive the world around us. If individuals attend NWIC without the willingness to understand the world through an Indigenous perspective, they are undermining the very purpose of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). It is imperative that worldview be integrated at every phase of the orientation process and that it continues to develop throughout the orientation lifecycle.

Researcher's Reflection

When I first started this research, the goal was to focus on an area of NWIC that had been neglected. Observing and visiting with faculty during my Community Grounded Praxis helped me understand how employees viewed NWIC as a Western institution rather than a TCU

grounded in an Indigenous worldview. During my ten years of employment, NWIC has ebbed and flowed in creating an Indigenous governance system because there has been no clear direction for employees to engage in what they know. When I was hired in 2016, my orientation was simple: just show up. As a student, I already knew the history of NWIC and had a good idea who people were and what their jobs were. Whatever was not known was learned as needed. This is not the best method for orientation, especially for people who are brand new not only to NWIC but also to the community, because they will look to what is familiar. For most, this will be what they learned in Western institutions. Students enroll at NWIC because they are looking for an experience that is different from mainstream education. If employees at NWIC do not know anything different from Western education, the needs of the students are not being met. An employee orientation connects the dots between employees, identity, Indigenous education, and students.

As employees at NWIC, we can make or break a student's experience. The skills we demonstrate reveal a great deal to students. They can tell whether we approach our work from a Western or Indigenous pedagogy. At the heart of NWIC is the mission "Through education Northwest Indian College promotes Indigenous self-determination and knowledge," which is the acknowledgment and understanding of what is ours: the land, language, culture, and inherent rights. Each employee's role is imperative to fulfilling the mission. I had a student who came to NWIC seeking something different from the Western mainstream education they were raised in. The student's family opposed their attending a TCU, believing the education would not be valuable. They wanted the student to attend an Ivy League school. The student was set on attending NWIC, but as a compromise, they also attended an affluent college. In the end, the student's degree was issued by NWIC. While visiting with the student, they exclaimed, "I think I

accidentally learned something at NWIC.” I knew exactly what they meant. They were talking about their identity and what it means to be part of their own community.

My stories are about my experiences with Western education, trauma, Indigenous education, and navigating employment at NWIC. Appearances are deceiving. What we see on the outside does not always match what people have gone through. Western education focuses on the destination rather than the journey. Indigenous education is wholistic and encompasses all aspects of the student. It is relatable and empathetic. During my first year of teaching, I had a pivotal experience. I was walking to lunch when one of my students stopped me in the hallway. They were the first elder I had as a student. They began sharing their story of abandonment, adoption, and incarceration and broke down in tears. I did not have training for a moment like this, but I had enough sense to move us into an empty classroom, where I continued to listen. I did not listen to answer or find a solution. I knew what it was like to feel disconnected. When we learn about who we are and the experiences of our ancestors, we gain the ability to relate to others’ experiences and show empathy.

Very few people in my life – only those closest to me- know the stories that I have. The decision to share them now was not one made in haste. The possibility of pity terrified me. The decision was slow and methodical. I leaned on the words from an interview of Margaret Kovach that was shared by Absolon (2022),

It’s about your own life. It’s about who you are. It’s about how you have engaged in the world as an Indigenous person, what you know, what’s in your story. And if you’re going to do this in a way that I think is going to have meaning, and not just meaning to the larger world, but meaning to yourself, you have to go back and you have to go back into your story (p. 163).

Once these stories are in print, there is no going back. At the same time, once these stories are in print, others will realize they are not alone. If my stories help just one person, then it was worth letting the world into my personal sphere.

I have endured many painful events, but I have never let them define who I am. NWIC has helped me understand that trauma is not my identity. The land I come from, my ancestors, my current family, future generations, the language, and my inherent rights are my identity. They shape my traits and what I have to offer this world. I wonder every day whether my father had the same opportunity to reconnect with his original identity, would his fate have been different? I will never know, and that is okay. The uncertainty makes my hunger to learn even stronger because I am learning for both of us. Through the education I received from Indigenous educators, I have a firm understanding of this.

Through my mother's example, I persevered through life. Despite what we always called 'the accident,' we did not fall into the traps of victimhood. My mother always made sure we had a good life and that adult burdens did not affect me. Over the years, she has told me stories that have helped me understand why. One story she shared was about a time she had only five dollars for gas and food on a Monday. That money needed to last the entire week until payday on Friday. We lived miles off the reservation where she worked. My mother considered asking her grandma for a loan but did not want to be in her notebook. Grandma kept a notebook in which she wrote down the name of anyone who borrowed money and the amount. Even though my mother would have paid her grandma back, she did not want to be permanently in grandma's book, so she figured out how to make it until payday. Not once did she let it be known that we did not have any money. To my recollection, I never went without anything during my childhood. My mother taught me to be strong and work hard. It is her strength that I draw on to

do this work. My experiences are intertwined with my classroom content. I tell students that I am just a little rez kid.

I never saw myself as a leader because of the Western image of leadership that was emblazoned in my mind through public education. Exploring Indigenous leadership at NWIC changed my perspective on what a leader is. Instead of a top-down model where the “leader” is above everyone else and does very little, my view of a leader shifted to someone who walks alongside their people, rolls up their sleeves, and helps where necessary. Indigenous leadership puts the people first and makes sure they have what they need. As NWIC implements a new orientation process, this is an aspect that cannot be left out. We are breaking down the paternalistic ideologies of the roles of employees and replacing them with Indigenous perspectives and ways of being. This will allow students to feel comfortable approaching NWIC employees because the authoritarian atmosphere will not be present.

These stories have been my silent journey through life. Similarities have been seen in the students being served at NWIC. The experiences I had attending public schools, stumbling through a system that was not made for me. Northwest Indian College, a Tribal College that was formed as an act of sovereignty to serve the people of the Lummi community, has the power to control the harm that is done to students. Removing Western pedagogies and replacing them with Indigenous education models is the first step in providing a wholistic education to our students.

Conclusion

This research is woven together from different elements to form a beautiful blanket of guidance and protection. The strong foundation laid by past leaders of the Lummi Nation created the loom needed to weave the blanket of education. Their vision of creating an education system that would allow their children to be educated at home serves as the sketches for the blanket's

design. The students are the integrity of the blanket. They are the warps, the initial strands of wool that wrap around the loom. They are open to receiving other strands of wool. These strands are the wefts that help create the designs within the blanket. They are the knowledge of the employees of NWIC, dispersed either in a twill or a twine. The finished blanket is woven with Indigenous knowledge that has been reclaimed by each student enacting self-determination. It is a statement of sovereignty, as it guides students to protect knowledge acquired throughout their lives.

Conducting this research raised additional questions and content to explore. The results of this research are simply a framework for an employee orientation process. They do not address the details of how to carry it out, nor do they describe the assessment or evaluation process for employees. More work will be needed to develop and implement continuous training opportunities to ensure improvement. While this research was being conducted, NWIC was in the midst of developing the 2026-2032 Strategic Plan. During the development, I was not a member of the Strategic Plan Committee, but soon after the plan was presented to employees, I was added to the committee. Two of the objectives within the plan, Objective 3, Implement a comprehensive Indigenous reconciliation framework, and Objective 4, Enhance institutional capacity for sustained growth, include developing an employee orientation framework. Carrying out this work will involve visiting more employees to ensure we incorporate all components of an orientation framework. The seven people who participated in this research are only a fraction of the employees at the Lummi campus of NWIC. This research was intentionally designed to examine the Lummi campus. Further research must be done to include the five other site campuses and to reflect the unique knowledge each Tribal community possesses. Once the

comprehensive employee orientation framework is completed, the next step would be to write a policy to ensure the plan is followed.

This research has also sparked a strong desire to explore additional trauma-related topics. Traumatic experiences often trap people into believing they are defined by what happened, rather than becoming an example of what they have lived through. In 2018, stomach issues were plaguing me. Doctors conducted comprehensive examinations, but the results were ultimately inconclusive. Seeking answers, I recalled that during my first cesarean section, medical professionals had identified numerous adhesions in my lower abdomen. Considering whether my current issues were related to abdominal adhesions, I obtained copies of my medical records to consult with my physician. The records revealed more than medical information. They contained stories of the past. A letter from the on-call surgeon who performed my surgery that fateful night when I was four and a half years old. The letter was addressed to my family doctor at the Lummi Indian Health Clinic. I skimmed the letter, looking for an answer to my current situation, and saw these words: “If it were not for the fast-acting paramedics, I don’t believe she would have made it.” My heart dropped, and my stomach tied in knots. Until that moment, the severity of my injuries had never occurred to me. I could have died. It was a desperately needed wake-up call. My internal monologue was running wild, but these words stood out: “You were saved for a reason! Live life the way you were meant to.”

There is a tendency to get stuck in an ongoing cycle of trauma, which can become comfortable as it becomes a familial state of mind. The discovery of the letter in my medical records served as a reminder of how precious life is at any given moment. Consolidating my stories together in one place made me realize the necessity of more research that needs to be done to understand how we heal from our trauma.

Reflecting on the phrase that prompted this research, “Get up! Face the Day! Be present!” it is clearer than it’s ever been.

- Get up – Every day is a new day that Creator has bestowed upon us. We get up with the sun, and we do not let the challenges of yesterday weigh us down. We are blessed with life so seek adventure, visit your Elders, learn everything you can, and reclaim your authentic identity.
- Face the day – We look to the daylight in the east. We believe this is the direction our ancestors are. We acknowledge the day we have been given and we pray to our ancestors. They walk with us and are our strength and guidance.
- Be present – We must be willing to sit with what we have learned, reflecting on each lesson and preparing for what comes next. The answers to our prayers are all around us; we need to be willing to accept them or deny them when they present themselves. We can’t move forward without facing and dealing with what gets in our way

I have unknowingly lived by this guiding principle throughout my life. At the age of four and a half, my life changed forever. The only choice I had was to proceed forward and with time heal. The insights conveyed within this research are of immense value. Reflecting on my experiences with hierarchical Western education, I recognize why I did not perceive myself as a leader, despite my descent from one. I am not suited for council or other forms of top-down Western leadership. My capacity lies in caring for my people and community, where I lead by walking alongside them. We often associate oppression, trauma, and pity, thereby providing individuals with opportunities to dwell in their trauma. Instead, it is essential that we promote strength and triumph. With the support of employees who understand their identities, their role within the college, the communities they serve, and the land they walk on, we can guide students towards

self-determination while enhancing their Indigenous knowledge. The lessons derived from this understanding are invaluable and should be embraced, emphasizing a phrase I adopted while on my learning journey: *trauma informed, not trauma defined*.

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Appendices

Appendix A

NWIC IRB Approved Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Research Consent Form

Research title: Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Rooted in Indigenous Knowledge

Researcher: Christina Grendon

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to develop an employee orientation framework for Northwest Indian College that will be embedded in the core values of the college and prepare employees to participate in Northwest Indian College's Teaching and Learning.

Participation in Research

As a participant in this research, you will be asked to share your stories related to your work and experience as an employee at Northwest Indian College. Participation in this research includes one story-sharing session 30-60 minutes in length. With your permission, I would like to audio-record our story-sharing session. Within 2-3 weeks following your story-sharing session, you will have an opportunity to review the information you have shared. The review process will include a follow-up meeting lasting 1 hour. The researcher will share the transcripts of the story-sharing session to ensure accuracy. Participation in this research is voluntary. You can end the story sharing session at any point and have the option to withdraw your information. As a participant, you have the right to be named or maintain anonymity. If anonymity is chosen, you will be given a code name that only the researcher will know.

Please read this document in its entirety to understand the potential harms and benefits of participating in this research. If you decide to participate in this research, a signed copy of this document will be provided to you. If you have any questions or concerns while reviewing this acknowledgment of informed consent, please let me know.

Benefits of Research

The intended benefit of this research is to develop an employee orientation framework at Northwest Indian College that will create an individual identity and a sense of belonging for all Northwest Indian College employees. The potential benefits of this research include:

- Guidance for an employee orientation policy at Northwest Indian College
- Development of employee orientation materials for existing and future employees at Northwest Indian College
- Community empowerment, both locally and globally, through the recognition of the contributions made to this unique employee orientation framework

Potential Harm of Research

Participation in this research does include a potential risk for emotional and social harm. I recognize that as a member of the Northwest Indian College community, you have high stakes in

NWIC IRB approved 5/8/2026

this research. If you become emotionally upset or unwell at any point during the research process, please let the researcher know. You may end or take a break from the story-sharing session at any point. The potential harms of this research are:

- Emotional discomfort from talking about experiences
- Increased stress from experiencing emotional discomfort during story-sharing sessions
- Damage to social reputation or personal relationships from disagreements or misunderstandings that come from information shared in this research.

How will the information I share be used?

This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the researcher's doctoral degree in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Washington – Tacoma. The research findings and information you share will be used in the researcher's Dissertation in Practice, an oral presentation at the University of Washington – Tacoma and Northwest Indian College. Co-ownership of all the research data, findings, and information you share will be given to the University of Washington and Northwest Indian College, except for any personal, traditional, or cultural information shared by an Indigenous person. This knowledge is not for anyone but the Indigenous person who shared it; to own it and to think otherwise is a practice of colonization.

Data Storage

Documents, recordings, and transcriptions will be stored in a password protected file and will be kept by the researcher for five (5) years. At the end of five (5) years, all documents, recordings and transcriptions will either be destroyed or given to the Northwest Indian College or the Lummi Nation Archive department. The determination will be made by the participant.

Data must be destroyed _____(initials) Data will be archived _____(initials)

Researchers Agreement

I agree that any information shared with me during the research process will be represented with integrity and accuracy, to the best of my ability. I will provide orally and in writing how the information shared by you will be described within my research. Any information shared during the research process will not be included in my findings and report until you have verbally approved the representation of your contributions to the findings.

X

(Christina Grendon)

Date

Waiver of Confidentiality

I recognize that this research does not protect my confidentiality regarding the information shared. The researcher may include my name with any information I share in the representation of their findings, pending my verbal approval of how my contributions

are represented. I understand the potential harms associated with participating in this research without confidentiality and agreeing to waive my anonymity as a participant in this study.

X_____ Initial

Consent

I have read this form and understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and I can leave the research process and end a story-sharing session at any point. I have reviewed the potential harms and benefits of this research and have been allowed to ask any questions and have my questions answered. The researchers have provided their contact information should I have additional questions. I agree to participate in this research as described and will receive a copy of this form.

Participant's Name (Printed)

X_____ _____
Participant's Signature Date

Audio Recordings Agreement

I consent to audio recording during my story-sharing session, with the understanding that ownership of these recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer.

X_____ _____
Participants Signature Date

If you have grievances or complaints about this project, you can contact the Norwest Indian College Institutional Review Board at (360) 392-4224 or email irb@nwic.edu.

Appendix B*Lummi Indian Business Council Letter of Support***Office of the Chairman, Memorandum**

2665 Kwina Road · Bellingham, Washington 98226 · (360) 312-2000

*‘Working together as one to Preserve, Promote and Protect our Sche Lang en.’***TO:** Northwest Indian College (NWIC) IRB**CC:** Christina Grendon**DATE:** February 24, 2026**FROM:** Terrance Adams, LIBC Vice-Chairman,**SUBJECT:** Letter of Support from Lummi Indian Business Council (LIBC)

On behalf of Lummi Indian Business Council (LIBC), I am writing to confirm LIBC’s support to

Christina Grendon’s dissertation, “Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Woven in Indigenous Knowledge.”

At the LIBC meeting, Tuesday, February 16, 2026; Christina shared key highlights of the proposed research project to LIBC and was granted permission to proceed with the project.

In summary, the research proposes the development of an NWIC employee orientation framework rooted in Indigenous values and knowledge. NWIC mission statement is, “Through Education, NWIC promotes Indigenous self-determination and knowledge.” Christina will be utilizing the NWIC values as outlined in the NWIC HR Personal Policy Manual, as the foundation of the research.

“Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Woven in Indigenous Knowledge” aligns with LIBC mission, “Working together as one to Preserve, Promote and Protect our Sche Lang en’

If you have any questions regarding this matter, feel free to contact me at
TerrenceA@lumminsn.gov

Hey'sxwq'e

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "T. Adams", written in a cursive style.

Terrence Adams, Vice Chairman
Lummi Indian Business Council

*Appendix C**Northwest Indian College Institutional Review Board Approval*

Institutional Review

(IRB) 000039

NORTHWEST INDIAN COLLEGE

2522 Kwinana Road Building #10, Bellingham, WA 98225

IRB Office 360-392-4224 Email: irb@nwic.edu

May 13, 2026

To: Christina Grendon cgrendon@nwic.edu

Project Title: Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Woven with Indigenous Knowledge
NWIC IRB Project Number: #2026-002

Project Approval Date: 2/26/2026

Approval Expiration Date: 2/25/2027 (364 days after approval date)

Purpose of this Review: Response to conditions

Date of Review: 5/8/2026

Review Process: Expedited Review

Approval Category: Final Approval

Risk Category: NOT greater than minimal risk

Dear Ms. Grendon:

The Northwest Indian College IRB reviewed your responses to the conditions of approval for your research project *Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Woven with Indigenous Knowledge* on May 8. Your research is **APPROVED**.

Please submit the next NWIC IRB Renewal / Close-out Form at least three (3) weeks before the **Approval Expiration Date** noted above to request either Renewal, or alternately Close-out the protocol for NWIC IRB purposes.

A copy of your current informed consent form, which has been approved and **stamped** by the IRB, must be given to each study participant. As you conduct your research, please remember that:

1. Participants are volunteers or are involved in regular educational programs; they thus are free to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.
2. You must protect the participants' confidentiality, and their anonymity if your project includes that as well. The presentation of the data should not put them at risk of any negative consequences.

You must submit any proposed changes for IRB approval at least 3 weeks before you want to implement them. Access to the data is specified and restricted by the researcher and the department. If any irregularities or unexpected events occur, please report those immediately to the IRB Office. You must report any problems or adverse events resulting from implementation of this protocol to the IRB.

Please submit to the NWIC IRB both a description of the development of any planned dissemination (poster presentation, publication, etc.), and also the dissemination itself, at least two weeks before the date of dissemination. The reason is that this IRB protects Tribes and Tribal-based institutions from potential stigmatization during the dissemination process. The IRB reviews and verifies that the dissemination process is followed in the research plan approved by the NWIC IRB.

We look forward to observing your progress through the NWIC IRB annual reviews. Please contact the NWIC IRB at (360) 392-4224 or irb@nwic.edu if you have any questions.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'KRS' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Katrina
Rodriguez,
MPH NWIC IRB
Chair
irb@nwic.edu

Appendix D

University of Washington Human Subjects Division Approval

DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

March 19, 2026

Dear Christina Grendon:

On 3/19/2026, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Face the Day: An Employee Orientation Framework Woven with Indigenous Knowledge
Investigator:	Christina Grendon
IRB ID:	STUDY00025223
Funding:	None

Exempt Status

HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Categories 2 and 101). This determination may or may not be based on the Limited IRB Review process.

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.
- **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your research. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to approach possible subjects or conduct research procedures in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department).**
- **If you obtain federal funding or other support for this research, inform HSD immediately.**

Only certain types of changes to exempt research require that you submit a modification in Zipline.

For information about what changes require a Modification, refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#). If you are unsure if your proposed changes require a modification, contact your [HSD team](#) before preparing the modification.

HSD does not review or approve consent plans and consent materials for exempt research. Researchers are still responsible for providing subjects with information about the research prior to their agreement to participate. Refer to the guidance on [Exempt Research](#) for details about what information should be provided. You may wish to use the optional [Exempt Consent Template](#) as a guide.

Thank you for your commitment to ethical and responsible research. We wish you great success!

4333 Brooklyn Ave. NE, Box 359470 Seattle, WA 98195-9470

main 206.543.0098 fax 206.543.9218 hsdinfo@uw.edu www.washington.edu/research/hsd

Implemented 07/27/2023– Version 1.5 - Page 1 of 2

Sincerely,

Dana Gold, MA, CIP

IRB Administrator, Committee D

Email: deg4@uw.edu

Phone: 206.543.5602

