

Across Contexts: Variations in Stress, Resilience, and the Mental Health and Wellbeing of  
American Indian and Alaska Native College Students at a Predominantly White Institution

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**Abstract**

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American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) undergraduates experience significant mental health disparities within higher education contexts, yet limited research has examined the specific stress and resilience processes shaping AI/AN students' mental health and wellbeing at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Existing literature often treats AI/AN students as a homogeneous population and primarily emphasizes deficits, overlooking both the heterogeneity of AI/AN students' experiences and the diverse resilience resources they draw upon to navigate college environments. The present study explored the ecological stressors and psychosociocultural resilience resources influencing AI/AN undergraduates' mental health and wellbeing at a PWI. Guided by Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model and Gloria and Rodriguez's (2000) psychosociocultural (PSC) framework, this study employed Riessman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis to examine the mental health experiences of AI/AN undergraduate students on a PWI campus. Analysis explored how students' relationships to Native culture and community shaped their experiences of stress,

resilience, and wellbeing within the PWI environment. Three major findings emerged. First, students' chrono- and macrosystemic experiences shaped students' relationships to Native culture and community in meaningful ways, which in turn influenced how students experienced and interpreted the PWI environment. Second, stress processes were ecologically patterned, with students experiencing different configurations of stressors across ecological system levels that reflected these relationships. Although students shared exposure to many of the same institutional stressors, the meaning, intensity, and psychological impact of these experiences varied according to students' sociohistorical contexts and ecological positioning, producing qualitatively different ecologies of stress, including experiences of dislocation, intermediary strain, and cultural disconnection. Third, resilience emerged through the integration of psychological, social, and cultural resources that reflected students' ecological contexts and cultural-community relationships. These resilience processes helped students sustain wellbeing through maintaining cultural continuity, navigating competing responsibilities, and restoring connection to Native culture and community. Importantly, findings highlighted the significant role of psychological resilience resources, an often understudied dimension of AI/AN resilience, with students utilizing sophisticated strategies for cognitive reframing, emotional regulation, meaning-making, and coping alongside social and cultural sources of support. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that AI/AN students' mental health experiences within PWIs are contoured by ecological context, shaping the stress and resilience processes through which students navigate university life. Findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to move beyond pan-Indigenous and one-size-fits-all approaches and instead develop culturally responsive supports that recognize the substantial diversity within AI/AN students' experiences. Implications for institutional practice, mental health support, and future research are discussed.

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## Prologue: Terminology and Scope of Study

### *American Indian/Alaska Native*

There are a number of terms used interchangeably to describe members of tribal communities in the literature, including “Native American,” “Indigenous,” “Native,” “American Indian,” and “Alaska Native.” These terms themselves convey multiple meanings and are often misappropriated or misunderstood, which further dilutes who they are intended to identify or represent (Christman, 2019). On account of the heterogeneity and unique political status of the 574 federally recognized tribal nations in the United States, tribal affiliation is the most precise and meaningful manner of identification for AI/AN individuals. While this author recognizes that the majority of AI/AN individuals prefer to be identified by their tribal membership and that there are important reasons to honor this preference, the heterogeneity of tribal affiliation among AI/AN college student populations requires a more inclusive term to illuminate patterns of persistence and wellbeing. As such, for the purpose of this paper, the term “American Indian/Alaska Native” (AI/AN) will be used to refer to a member of any Indigenous tribe of the United States, including those who identify as AI/AN in combination with other races/ethnicities (Christman, 2019). Because this term is self-determined and is typically used to denote an ethnoracial categorization, it is important to qualify that it does not necessarily signify enrollment in a tribal nation or an active relationship with a tribal community (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013).

Despite the limitations, there is a well-founded rationale warranting the use of this terminology for this study. The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force designated “American Indian” and “Alaska Native” as preferred terms for the members and descendants of members of indigenous tribes and affirmed that this language is appropriate for identifying groups comprised

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of individuals affiliated with different tribes (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Since then, these terms have become the most commonly employed labels within and outside tribal communities and have been adopted by individuals, intertribal agencies, activist groups, and tribal organizations to describe themselves and their broader Native communities (Walbert, 2009). More relevant to the purposes of this paper, mental health and educational disparities among higher education populations draw from national surveys and college enrollment data, which rely on the AI/AN term to capture their Native students' experiences. Given the widely accepted use of these terms for populations of diverse tribal members, the AI/AN term was utilized for this study to be consistent with the language self-selected by tribal community members and existing literature in this field.

### ***Predominantly White Institutions***

The proposed study is primarily concerned with the experiences of AI/AN undergraduate students attending higher education institutions where they represent a significantly small percentage of the student body. Only 8.7% of all first-time, full-time AI/AN college students attend one of the 36 accredited tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) (Keith, Stastny, & Brunt, 2016). This recent finding suggests that the great majority of AI/AN undergraduates (91.3%) pursue post-secondary education in settings where they are members of an underrepresented minority and likely have their needs overlooked or neglected as a result of their marginal numbers (Oxendine, Taub, & Cain, 2020). The overwhelming majority of AI/AN undergraduates attending traditionally white institutions may be explained by the limited opportunities on and within close proximity of reservations to pursue advanced degrees that enable AI/AN students to obtain the necessary certifications to serve and protect the sovereignty of their communities (Cech et al., 2017). Given these enrollment patterns, the scope of this study aims to understand

the experiences of AI/AN undergraduates on the campuses they typically seek higher education and likely experience the greatest number of stressors with the fewest specialized resources.

Prior scholarship has termed these institutions that are not TCUs as “Non-Native Colleges and Universities” (NNCUs) in an effort to elevate the AI/AN student experience within the research, an important refutation of the term “Predominantly White Institutions,” which further privileges whiteness (Oxendine, 2015). Brown and Dancy (2010) define “Predominantly White Institutions” (PWIs) as higher education institutions that report that their student body is comprised of 50% or more White students. The NNCU term is specifically designed to extend beyond “Predominantly White Institutions” (PWIs) to include Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs) where AI/AN undergraduates remain a significant minority (Oxendine, 2015).

While this author aims to center AI/AN students’ experiences and perspectives in this discussion, the narrower term, “Predominantly White Institution” (PWIs), allows discernment of the unique psychological, social, and cultural stressors perceived on traditionally white campuses that may not be salient at other types of NNCUs. Specifically, the term “PWI” unequivocally names that these campuses are framed with Eurocentric norms and values that implicitly and explicitly privilege whiteness in ways that stoke a hostile racial climate and create institutional barriers AI/AN students must contend with to achieve their degree. Despite these institutional obstacles, a majority of AI/AN undergraduates seek degrees at PWIs for the aim of “gaining access to power, authority, and an opportunity to exercise control over the affairs of everyday life” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 14). As such, the current study aims to examine the experience of AI/AN undergraduates on PWI campuses with the intention of addressing the ways these institutional stressors impact their mental health and wellbeing.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

College campuses are straining with growing numbers of undergraduates struggling with increasingly acute mental health problems, all while contending with insufficient resources to meet these accelerating student needs (CCMH, 2023; Gallagher, 2014). Psychological and behavioral disorders are the leading causes of disability among young adults and emerging adulthood marks the age of onset for most lifetime psychiatric disorders (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Xiao et al., 2017). It is estimated that more than a quarter of Americans over the age of 18 have a diagnosable psychological disorder and three quarters of these disorders emerge by age 25 (Kessler et al., 2007). As increasing numbers of young adults enroll in higher education, the prevalence of mental health problems manifesting on college campuses is climbing and progressively reflects the general population (Xiao et al., 2017). Given the rapid rise in mental health disorders among adolescents broadly (Twenge et al., 2018), surging mental health concerns on the university level have predictably outpaced increases in student enrollment (Duffy, 2019). Auerbach and colleagues (2018) determined that over a third of first -year college students meet criteria for a mental illness at some point in their life and 31% within the last year. As recently as the 2022-23 academic year, 46% of American college students reported a lifetime diagnosis of a mental disorder (Healthy Minds Study, 2023). There is no question that mental health has become an imperative issue shaping the higher education landscape.

The transitional stress associated with beginning college (e.g. increased academic rigor, moving away from home, living more independently, resulting changes in social networks and relationships) coincides with the existing challenges of emerging adulthood, a developmental stage known for its instability, ambiguity, feelings of “being in between,” and period of identity exploration, which further contributes to psychological distress (Mowbray et al., 2006).

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Considering this critical timing, the expanding college student population represents a demographic with significantly elevated risk for developing and/or aggravating existing psychopathology (Xiao et al., 2017). Furthermore, as earlier onset of mental health disorders predicts higher severity and chronicity of pathology as well as diminished response to treatment, college represents a vital window for meaningful intervention with lifelong implications (Kessler et al., 2007; Thulin et al., 2023).

### **Mental Health Inequities Among Underrepresented Students**

The vulnerability of undergraduates to mental health problems is far from uniform. While mental health symptoms have worsened for all student groups over the last decade, the troubling increase is starkest among racial and ethnic minority students (Lipson et al., 2022). College student bodies are increasingly heterogeneous and diverse student groups endure varied experiences on campus that further contribute to disparate educational trajectories and mental health outcomes (Kim, Soler, Zhao, & Swirsky, 2024; Eisenberg et al., 2013). Despite efforts to understand and address the growing mental health burden in higher education, there remains a dearth of research exploring the mental health of racial and ethnic minority college students, the underlying factors contributing to lasting inequities, and the unique needs of historically marginalized students who are underrepresented in the literature (Lipson et al., 2022).

### ***Mental Health of American Indian/Alaska Native College Students***

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) undergraduates are the *most* underrepresented population in higher education, accounting for roughly one percent of all college students and maintaining the lowest enrollment and persistence of any minority group (de Brey et al., 2019; Ginder and Kelly-Reid, 2013). In light of this, AI/AN students have often been relegated to the margins and footnotes of higher education research. As Shotton et al. (2013) highlights, AI/AN

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college students are frequently omitted from scholarship and university-wide data sources, an exclusion poorly rationalized by their small sample size and “statistically nonsignificant” results.

Strayhorn and colleagues (2016) aptly note that this lack of inclusion in research informing higher education policy and practice has further marginalized the AI/AN student population by erasing their existence on campus and contributing to their “invisibility” in PWIs. Furthermore, the existing research base specifically examining AI/AN underrepresentation in higher education is overwhelmingly framed around what and how AI/AN students are lacking, rather than focusing on the broader ecological factors *imposing* barriers to success or identifying AI/AN students’ leverageable strengths and resources (Shotton et al., 2013). As AI/AN students represent a minority of the minority population on PWI campuses, they are habitually cast in these either invisible or tokenized, even pathologized, roles as simultaneously “marked and absent,” both of which damage AI/AN students’ authentic sense of belonging and perceived membership in these post-secondary spaces (Brayboy, 2004; Tachine, 2015).

AI/AN students have been eclipsed from multi-institution studies and data analyses exploring the mental health crises among college students and left largely *unrepresented* in higher education research used to inform intervention and programming (Gone & Trimble, 2012; Lopez et al., 2024). As such, the mental health needs of AI/AN students have long been left obscured despite growing evidence that these students experience substantial psychological distress, mental health disparities, and barriers to accessing care on college campuses (Wilkie et al., 2024). Over the last decade, AI/AN undergraduates experienced the greatest increases in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation paired with the largest decreases in flourishing of all racial/ethnic minority groups (Lipson et al., 2022). As student mental health continues in a downward trend most detrimental to AI/AN undergraduates, it is paramount more studies focus

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on understanding the factors impacting AI/AN students' mental health to inform more effective interventions and culturally responsive approaches to support.

Lastly, the AI/AN student population is not a monolith. As a self-determined ethno-racial category encompassing students from 574 federally recognized tribes, varied geographic regions, and diverse relationships to Native identity, culture, and community, the term "AI/AN students" captures substantial heterogeneity rather than a single, uniform experience (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; Shotton et al., 2013). Research that collapses this diversity into a single racial category not only obscures within-group differences but also reproduces deficit framing, one-size-fits-all solutions, that fail to meet Native students' needs. Studies attending to this diversity are essential for understanding how mental health varies across Native students lived contexts.

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### **Contextual Stressors Driving Mental Health Inequities**

College is a period marked by significant developmental, social, emotional, and academic transitions that expose students to new and acute sources of stress (Lipson et al., 2015).

According to stress process paradigms, psychological distress is the result of exposure to stressors and is buffered by an individual's coping resources and responses (Pearlin, 1989). Even low levels of stress exposure have been found to increase undergraduates' risk of meeting criteria for a mental health diagnosis and suicidality, which is worrisome given that a vast majority (75% of undergraduates) report encountering at least 1-2 stressful experiences (Liu et al, 2019).

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Importantly, populations are differentially exposed to stress based on their social location and stressors stemming from one's sociohistorical context can multiple, compound, and accumulate over time (Pearlin et al., 2005). Students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups encounter race-related stressors, both interpersonal and systemic, that increase their risk of experiencing psychological distress and developing anxiety and mood-related disorders

(Billingsley, 2019; Cokley et al., 2011). These stressors include overt racism and explicit and implicit forms of bias including microaggressions, stereotype threat, and isolation (Wilkie et al., 2024). Racially hostile campuses are damaging to historically marginalized students' academic performance and mental health (Keels, Durkee, & Hope, 2017). College students' experiences of discrimination are strongly correlated with increased distress, social isolation, and suicidality and these effects are compounded when students report multiple areas of discrimination (CCMH, 2023). Historically marginalized students experience more discrimination, less satisfaction and belonging on campus, and more psychological distress than their white peers (Lee & Barnes, 2015). These experiences can drive individual psychopathology and mental health inequities at PWIs; perceived discrimination was shown to account for a significant part of the relationship between racial/ethnic minority status and increased mental health problems such as anger, anxiety, depression, and loneliness among college students (Cokely, 2011; Jochman et al., 2019).

In addition, underrepresented students may contend with a myriad of other contextual stressors stemming from or intersecting with their marginalized status that likely further undermine their wellbeing on PWI campuses (Eisenberg et al., 2013). For example, AI/AN college students experience the highest rates of food insecurity (55 %), housing insecurity (69 %), and homelessness (19 %) (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Students' financial stress has also been found to contribute to greater risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Furthermore, identifying as a first-generation college student predicts increased depression, anxiety, academic problems, and perceived campus hostility as well as lower sense of belonging (Keefe et al., 2020). Importantly, chronic stressors that emerge from institutionalized inequities embedded within university structures are likely more taxing than intermittent, short-term difficult circumstances that surface on the college campus. Recent

research indicates that campuses where racial/ethnic minority students are *substantially* underrepresented impose considerable strain on their students of color that likely contributes to elevated rates of psychopathology (Abegaz, 2019).

AI/AN undergraduates further encounter culturally specific stressors within the PWI setting that are shaped by broader social, cultural, and sociohistorical contexts (Fish & Syed, 2018). These stressors often operate across multiple levels of students' environments and may directly and indirectly influence their mental health and wellbeing in ways that are not always visible or recognized. For AI/AN college students and their families, the sociohistorical context of higher education, as a methodical instrument of colonization used to assimilate AI/AN peoples into the dominant culture, continues to shape students' experiences on campus (Brayboy, 2004). As a result, the PWI setting may function as an overarching source of stress that reflects these enduring structural and historical dynamics and continues to mold their experience.

Research has focused on how these distinct and culturally relevant stressors, including cultural incongruity and isolation, acculturative stress, race-related victimization, racism, and family separation thwart their sense of belonging on campus and impede their college persistence efforts (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017; Tachine et al., 2017). However, there remains a considerable knowledge gap in understanding how proximal and distal culturally specific stressors at PWIs impact the mental health and wellbeing of AI/AN undergraduates. Experiences of historical trauma represent one distinct and significant culturally relevant stressor that has been explored and found to burden AI/AN college students with considerable distress while diminishing their psychological resources (Tucker et al., 2016). Charting the broader constellation of culturally salient stressors impacting AI/AN students' wellbeing would provide a more nuanced understanding of the needs of AI/AN students at PWIs and thereby inform more

effective and culturally responsive approaches to student support to address inequities (Fetter & Thompson, 2023). Furthermore, the heterogeneity of this population shapes students' exposure to stressors in distinct ways, producing meaningful within-group variation in both risk and resilience that likely contribute to differences in mental health outcomes (Gone & Trimble, 2012).

### **University Support and Building Resilience**

Universities have a vested interest in and responsibility for student mental health given its clear implications for academic success and persistence. Unaddressed mental health problems have a broad and corrosive impact on student performance, contributing substantially to impaired academic functioning, lower grade point averages, and increased risk of “stopping out” or leaving college altogether (Eisenberg et al., 2009). National data indicate that significant proportions of undergraduates experience depression or anxiety severe enough to interfere with coursework, and many students who withdraw attribute their departure to mental health challenges (ACHA, 2023; NAMI, 2012).

Conversely, higher wellbeing is consistently linked to stronger academic performance and retention, underscoring that the promotion of students' mental health is central to both individual success and educational equity (Keyes et al., 2012). Mental health also shapes students' social integration and sense of belonging, factors that are especially critical for historically marginalized students (Byrd & McKinney, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Psychological distress both undermines belonging and is exacerbated by social isolation and disconnection from the campus community, creating a reciprocal cycle that heightens risk for attrition (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Given that AI/AN students report higher levels of distress and lower belonging than their White peers (Lipson et al., 2022; Strayhorn et al., 2016),

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understanding the contextual factors that influence their mental health is essential for designing effective and equitable supports.

As sites of both learning and development, colleges are uniquely positioned to better understand risk and protective factors and support student mental health and wellbeing (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Lipson et al., 2022). Traditional approaches to addressing mental illness often rely on reactive, resource-intensive strategies that focus on mitigating pathology after symptoms emerge, rather than proactively supporting wellbeing (Seppala et al., 2020). This approach may contribute to worsening inequities for racial and ethnic minority students who, despite endorsing greater psychological distress, are less likely to access existing mental health services on campus (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Lipson et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2022). AI/AN college students have among the lowest rates of treatment service use, which may be attributable to culturally-specific stressors (e.g. historical trauma) that predicts greater distrust of campus health care systems and less favorable attitudes towards help-seeking (Lipson et al., 2022; Stewart et al., 2023). Campus-based mental health services that rely on struggling students to seek help and emphasize reactive intervention may fail to meet the needs of AI/AN college students by overlooking both culturally relevant stressors and potential barriers to engagement in existing forms of support.

### ***Identifying Resilience Resources***

In shifting the focus on how to effectively support AI/AN students, we must explore and understand the ways to nurture resilience in this population. Resilience is commonly understood as an individual's ability to "adapt, persevere, and thrive" in the face of challenges (DeCano, 2018; Luthar et al., 2000). Contemporary research has conceptualized resilience not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic, protective process supported through the interaction of internal and external resources that enable individuals to overcome adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten,

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2001; Masten, 2011). Through this lens, resilience reflects the capacity to draw upon relationships, cognitive and emotional processes, and broader sources of support to maintain and enhance wellbeing over time.

For AI/AN communities, cultural resilience has been conceptualized as a state cultivated through traditional practices, ways of thinking, and community-based values that support adaptation, perseverance, and thriving in the context of ongoing colonial oppression (Drywater Whitekiller, 2010; Heavyrunner & Marshall, 2003). AI/AN undergraduates therefore draw upon culturally grounded forms of resilience embedded in their identities, relationships, and community connections, as well as a range of psychological, social, and cultural resources to succeed in higher education (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). Psychological resources, including self-beliefs, self-esteem, and perceived ability to cope with barriers and stressors, have been identified as vital to students' adjustment and persistence (Thompson et al., 2013), with AI/AN undergraduates also reporting reliance on internal sources of resilience and coping strategies to navigate challenges and manage anxiety related to their transition to campus (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018). Greater psychological resilience among AI/AN adults is further associated with fewer historical loss-related emotional symptoms (Brisette et al., 2020), and although rates of service utilization remain relatively low, counseling has been shown to reduce psychological distress among AI/AN college students (Isadore et al., 2024; Lipson et al., 2022).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to elevate the missing AI/AN undergraduates' voices in the national conversation about the mental health crisis in higher education and the scholarship informing university-based support efforts. Underrepresentation of AI/AN college students has silenced their distinct experiences on PWI campuses in these discussions and rendered their

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unique mental health concerns invisible. This disenfranchisement perpetuates the colonial legacy of education undermining AI/AN communities' sovereign right to determine their own needs and solutions. Building an understanding of the mental health landscape of AI/AN undergraduates from their *own* perspective by centering the stories of their experiences honors Indigenous self-determination.

Towards this end, this study will explore how AI/AN students perceive and employ their own psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources to navigate and cope with the complex ecological stressors they face within the PWI setting, with the goal of identifying opportunities to better support their mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, because AI/AN students represent diverse tribal nations, geographic contexts, and relationships to culture and community, these stressors and resilience resources are not uniformly experienced but may vary meaningfully across students' relationship to their culture and Native community, as shaped by their lived and ecological contexts. While both qualitative and quantitative studies have illuminated some of the unique challenges AI/AN college students' face on the PWI campus, these inquiries have not deeply explored how students perceive these culturally relevant stressors are impacting their mental health nor how they understand themselves as successfully managing these stressors to foster wellbeing over the course of their college experience. A clearer understanding of these varied risk and protective processes is needed to adapt existing student support services and inform approaches that leverage the strengths of this population.

The present study aims to center AI/AN students' voices and position them to define the culturally relevant stressors and resilience resources they experience, examine how these factors shape their mental health and wellbeing, and understand how such experiences differ across students' relationships to culture, tribe, and Native community. Findings may inform researchers,

university programs, and mental health professionals seeking to design culturally responsive supports that enable AI/AN students to thrive both on campus and within their broader communities.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **The Mental Health Landscape of Higher Education**

A disturbing trend of deteriorating mental health across college campuses is well established in the literature (Duffy et al., 2019; Lipson et al., 2022). The prevalence and severity of anxiety and mood-related symptoms among college student populations have risen dramatically over the last decade and a half (CCMH, 2023), with rates of severe depression, non-suicidal self-injury, and suicide attempts more than doubling between 2013 and 2017 (Duffy et al., 2019). Notably, increases in population-level distress remain consistent across multiple national data sources and a broader range of mental health indicators, including anxiety, depression, suicidal risk, self-injury, languishing, overwhelming anger (Eisenberg, 2019).

This crisis has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with annual trends indicating steeply declining mental health and wellbeing across students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (CCMHS, 2023; Lipson et al., 2022). During the 2020-21 academic year, over 60% of college students participating in a nationally representative survey met criteria for one or more mental health disorders, reflecting a 50% increase from 2013 (Lipson et al. 2022). More broadly, over three-quarters of the students on campuses nationwide report experiencing moderate to severe psychological distress (ACHA, 2023), and more than half indicate their mental health declined over the course of their college experience (Venable & Pietracha, 2022).

Depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal thinking, and self-harming behaviors are among the most common and persistent mental health problems disclosed by contemporary college students (CCMH, 2016, 2020; Gallagher, 2012). Of the undergraduates seeking mental health services on their college campus, 63% report anxiety as one of their mental health concerns and 24.1% indicate it is their primary reason for pursuing

support (CCMH, 2020). Depression remains similarly prevalent, with almost half of college students pursuing services endorsing depressive symptoms (CCMH, 2020). These problems often occur concurrently and weigh heavily on students. For example, 40% of undergraduates report experiencing depression at a level that significantly impacts their functioning, while 60% report feeling overwhelmed by anxiety during the same period (ACHA, 2018). Particularly concerning is the steady rise in suicidality; between 2013 and 2021, suicidal ideation increased by 64% among college students (Lipson et al., 2022).

Escalating psychopathology among college students also has been accompanied by declines in undergraduate subjective wellbeing (Duffy et al., 2019). Paralleling increases in psychological distress, the number of college students low in flourishing, characterized by low subjective wellbeing and diminished psychological and social functioning, increased twofold between 2013 and 2017 (Duffy et al., 2019). This pattern persisted into the early years of the pandemic, with wellbeing decreasing by 32.5% over the past decade (Lipson et al., 2022). Together, these trends suggest that students are struggling with more frequent and acute mental illness and lower levels of positive psychosocial functioning, including less life satisfaction, reduced positive emotions, and diminished sense of meaning and purpose (Duffy et al., 2019).

Early research examining variation in undergraduate mental health found that racial and ethnic minority students experience considerably higher rates of depression compared to their White peers (Eisenberg et al., 2013). These disparities persisted over time, alongside lower rates of identification (i.e. diagnosis) and treatment (i.e. medication and/or therapy use) among students of color relative to their White peers (Lipson et al., 2018). Emerging research suggests that these disparities may be particularly pronounced among AI/AN undergraduates, although the research remains limited and there is an absence of studies examining underlying causes.

Between 2013 and 2021, symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and meeting criteria for more than one mental health problem increased most substantially among AI/AN (Lipson et al., 2022). This period saw substantial increases in depression (602.4%), anxiety (781.7%), and suicidal ideation (238.4%) paired with a 59.6% decrease in flourishing (Lipson et al., 2022). The persistence of increasing distress alongside limited improvements in access to treatment suggests a widening “treatment gap” for historically marginalized students (Lipson et al., 2022). This gap underscores the need for greater attention to the unique mental health experiences and needs of AI/AN undergraduates, who remain underrepresented in the research investigating this growing public health concern.

In response to increasing demand, campus mental health services have shifted toward more reactive models of care that prioritize short-term, crisis-focused intervention (CCMH, 2020). This shift has been described as a “wait-to-fail” approach, in which students often receive services only after symptoms have intensified to a level requiring urgent attention (Bruns et al., 2016, p.157). As a result, opportunities for early identification and preventive support may be limited, placing greater emphasis on acute care. In practice, access to campus-based services often requires students to recognize their own distress and navigate complex systems of care, tasks that may be complicated by stigma and the symptoms of mental health challenges themselves (e.g. avoidance, fatigue, loss of motivation, anhedonia) (Mowbray et al., 2006; NAMI, 2012).

This service structure may be particularly mismatched to the needs of AI/AN students, who report among the lowest rates of mental health service utilization (Lipson et al., 2022). Decades of research indicate that AI/AN populations underutilize Western mental health services, often reflecting mistrust of culturally incongruent and historically colonial systems of

care (Gone, 2004; Gone & Trimble, 2012). Among AI/AN college students, experiences of historical loss thinking and discrimination are associated with greater distrust of campus health services and less favorable attitudes toward seeking care, even among those experiencing acute distress (Scheel et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2023).

At the same time, patterns of help-seeking suggest that formal counseling services may not fully align with AI/AN students' preferences and cultural contexts (Gone, 2012; Stiffman et al., 2003). Rather than turning first to specialized providers, many students seek support from peers, family members, elders, and other informal or community "gateway providers," who have been shown to effectively identify needs and facilitate connections to appropriate services when supported (Stiffman et al., 2003). Collectively, this literature suggests that campus-based mental health services may not fully capture how AI/AN undergraduate's experience and respond to stress within their broader ecological and cultural contexts on PWI campuses. As such, examining the multilevel stressors students encounter and the resilience resources they draw upon within these contexts is critical for understanding variation in mental health and wellbeing among AI/AN college students and for providing insight into more contextually grounded approaches to student support.

### **Rethinking Stress: Cultural and Contextual Dimensions**

Research consistently indicates that AI/AN populations experience higher levels of psychological distress than any other racial or ethnic groups both in the general population (Barnes, Adams, and Powell-Griner, 2010; Sarche & Spicer, 2008) and among college students (Lipson et al., 2022). Understanding these disparities requires moving beyond individual-level explanations of stress to consider the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts in which stress is experienced.

A substantial body of research conceptualizes psychological distress as emerging from exposure to environmental and social stressors, which are shaped by individuals' social positions and life circumstances (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin et al., 2005). From this perspective, stress is not a singular or isolated experience but reflects patterns of differential exposure to stressors that may accumulate and interact over the life course. Stressors can proliferate across domains of life, compounding in ways that intensify their impact on mental and physical health (Pearlin et al., 2005; Walls & Whitbeck, 2011). Early exposure to adversity, including acute trauma, chronic stress, and structural disadvantage, has been shown to have particularly lasting effects on developmental trajectories and long-term wellbeing (Brockie et al., 2015; Kessler et al. 1997; Walls & Whitbeck, 2011; Whitbeck et al, 2014). As such, distress is not an inevitable result of individual traits, but an interplay of social, cultural, and environmental factors over time.

Within research focused on AI/AN populations, scholars have emphasized the importance of situating stress within the context of colonization, historical trauma, and ongoing structural inequities. This work highlights a range of stressors that extend beyond commonly measured stressful life events, including historical and cultural loss, discrimination, violence, and cumulative forms of trauma linked to colonial policies and practices (Walls et al., 2016; Walters et al., 2003). These stressors are not experienced in isolation but are interconnected and often embedded within broader systems of colonial oppression and social marginalization. As such, psychological distress among AI/AN individuals are increasingly understood as a common, even "expected," response to sustained social and historical conditions rather than solely as an outcome of individual vulnerability or pathology (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012).

Scholars have further emphasized the importance of situating AI/AN college students' experiences within the ongoing structure of settler colonialism (Brayboy, 2005). Colonization

has been described as a “structure not an event,” reflecting enduring systems of political, cultural, and institutional power that continue to shape AI/AN peoples’ lived experiences through structural inequities, cultural erasure, and constrained opportunities (Brayboy, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Wolfe, 2006). Within this line of research, disparities in mental health and wellbeing are understood as rooted in these sociohistorical and institutional contexts rather than as products of individual deficit (Brown & Fiske, 2001; Walters et al., 2002).

Scholars have described higher education, especially PWI’s, as “colonized spaces” defined by Eurocentric norms and power structures that discount Indigenous knowledge systems and marginalize AI/AN identities (Brayboy, 2005). Education is therefore not neutral but structured by colonial logics that shape whose knowledge, identities, and ways of learning are recognized and legitimized (Brayboy, 2005). For tribal communities, higher education cannot be fully disentangled from these colonial histories and assimilatory aims (Fish & Syed, 2018). The enduring legacies of these processes may complicate how AI/AN undergraduates perceive and engage with universities. These institutions have historically functioned as sites of cultural suppression and assimilation and continue to operate through Western values that often exclude Indigenous ways of knowing (Fish & Syed, 2018). As such, the PWI environment itself may serve as an broad contextual source of stress, shaping how AI/AN students experience and navigate higher education.

Relatedly, research examining stress and coping in AI/AN communities has underscored the importance of culturally specific contexts in shaping both exposure to stress and responses to it (Walters et al., 2002). Scholars have identified the roles of family, community, spirituality, traditional practices, identity, and enculturation in influencing how individuals interpret and respond to stress (Walters & Simoni, 2002). These dimensions highlight that stress processes are

culturally embedded and cannot be fully understood without attention to the relational and cultural systems in which individuals are positioned.

Although much of this work was initially developed in studies of AI/AN adult populations, it has informed emerging research examining stress processes among AI/AN college students. This literature suggests that AI/AN undergraduates experience stressors that are both common to the college transition and uniquely shaped by their sociohistorical and cultural contexts (Thulin et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2016). Together, this body of work underscores the contextual and multilevel nature of stress and provides a foundation for examining how stressors are experienced across the ecological contexts in which AI/AN undergraduates are situated.

### **Moving Beyond Distress: A Holistic View of Mental Health**

Efforts to understand the mental health of AI/AN populations have often relied on deficit-oriented frameworks that emphasize psychological symptoms and behavioral problems (Gone, 2013). Mental health has been conceptualized primarily as the absence of psychopathology, positioning illness and health at opposite ends of a single continuum (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Keyes, 2006). While this approach has contributed to identifying disparities in psychological distress, it offers a limited view of mental health that obscures the presence of positive functioning and wellbeing.

In contrast, scholarship in positive psychology has advanced a more comprehensive conceptualization of mental health that incorporates both negative indicators of distress and positive indicators of perceived wellness (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001). The dual-factor model reconceptualizes mental health and mental illness as related but distinct dimensions, allowing individuals to experience varying levels of psychological symptoms and subjective wellbeing simultaneously (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Keyes, 2002, 2005; Westerhof &

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Keyes, 2009). From this perspective, the absence of mental illness does not necessarily indicate positive mental health, and individuals may experience diminished functioning even without diagnosable conditions.

Within this body of work, particular attention has been given to the concept of “languishing,” or low levels of subjective wellbeing in the absence of significant psychological distress (Keyes, 2002). Individuals who are not experiencing clinical levels of mental illness but report low wellbeing often demonstrate poorer psychosocial functioning, reduced work productivity, and diminished overall health compared to those who are flourishing (Anataramin et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002; 2004, 2006; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Languishing alone has been shown to be as dysfunctional as mental illness for most outcomes (Keyes, 2007). This distinction is especially important in higher education contexts, where students may not meet criteria for psychological disorders yet still experience disengagement, lack of meaning, or limited connection that negatively impact academic and personal functioning. Attending to these experiences allows for a more comprehensive understanding of student mental health that extends beyond the presence or absence of distress.

Applied to higher education, this perspective expands the focus from solely reducing psychological symptoms to recognizing variation in students’ overall mental health functioning. Research operationalizing the dual-factor model has identified mental health profiles based on combinations of psychological distress and subjective wellbeing, including students with *complete mental health* (low psychopathology, high wellbeing), as well as those considered *vulnerable or at-risk* due to low wellbeing despite minimal psychological symptoms and those identified as *symptomatic but content* due to high wellbeing despite a high level of distress (Antaramian et al., 2010, 2014; Eklund et al., 2011; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Importantly, these

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groups differ meaningfully across indicators such as engagement, achievement, psychosocial functioning, and physical health, with students reporting low wellbeing often faring worse than their peers even in the absence of diagnosable mental illness (Antaramian et al., 2010; 2014; Eklund et al., 2010; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). By identifying students who might otherwise be overlooked as “mentally healthy,” this scholarship highlights the need for more comprehensive conceptualizations of student mental health (Antaramian et al., 2010). Institutions are therefore called not only to address distress but also to recognize and respond to varying levels of wellbeing, including experiences of *languishing* that may signal risk for poorer academic and psychosocial outcomes (Keyes et al., 2010; Westerhof & Keyes, 2009).

This multidimensional perspective is particularly important in research with AI/AN populations, where deficit-based approaches have historically pathologized communities while minimizing strengths and adaptive processes. By recognizing that wellbeing and distress can coexist, this approach supports a more balanced understanding of mental health that attends to both stress and resilience while avoiding reductive interpretations of AI/AN student experiences. At the same time, most conceptualizations of subjective wellbeing have been framed by dominant cultural perspectives and locate the determinants of wellbeing primarily within the individual. Diener's (1984) original construct framed wellbeing as inherently subjective, based on individuals' evaluations of their life circumstances and emotional experiences. In contrast, Indigenous scholars have emphasized that wellbeing is fundamentally relational and embedded within broader family, community, cultural, spiritual, and environmental contexts (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Within many AI/AN worldviews, individuals are understood as interconnected with family, community, tribe, and creation as a whole, and wellbeing is

conceived as the maintenance of balance and harmony across these relationships rather than solely as an individual psychological state (Hill, 2006).

Given this relational orientation, a sense of belonging may be particularly critical for AI/AN students' subjective wellbeing in PWI contexts (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Tachine et al., 2017). Defined as the perceived experience of being accepted, respected, valued, and connected within a campus community (Strayhorn, 2012), sense of belonging is consistently regarded as a critical determinant of student success. For historically marginalized students, belonging functions as a "theoretical antecedent to persistence" and is a metric of higher education student success that replaces a singular emphasis on long-term outcomes with a deeper appreciation of students' ongoing experiences and development (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 786). Belongingness is well established as integral to AI/AN students' college persistence (Oxendine et al., 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Tachine et al., 2017) and may serve as a key indicator of subjective wellbeing on PWI campuses. More generally, feelings of membership and connection are consistently associated with greater happiness, psychosocial functioning, and life satisfaction (McAdams and Bryant, 1987; Schlachet, 2000). As such, belonging reflects an important dimension of wellbeing that aligns with AI/AN students' relational understandings of wellness.

This scholarship highlights the importance of conceptualizing mental health as a multidimensional construct that includes both the presence and absence of distress and varying levels of wellbeing, from flourishing to languishing (Eklund et al., 2011; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). In line with this, the present study examines student mental health through multiple indicators of psychological and relational functioning. In addition to symptoms of psychological distress, domains such as positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are

used as indicators of wellbeing to capture how students experience mental health and wellbeing in higher education (Seligman, 2011).

### **Conceptualizing Resilience**

AI/AN populations demonstrate remarkable resilience that contributes to variation in mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Jon-Henderson et al., 2023). Early resilience research was grounded in the study of children who demonstrated positive adaptation despite experiencing significant adversity, often in contrast to children with similar risk profiles who experienced less favorable outcomes (Werner, 1993). Within this early work, resilience was conceptualized as a binary, fixed, individual quality, and an inherent protective attribute that one either possessed or lacked (Werner, 1993). More recent research has shifted toward conceptualizing resilience as a dynamic *process* that unfolds within a transacting system, moving away from trait-based understandings toward process-oriented perspectives (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2011). Masten (2011) broadly redefined resilience as “the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development” (p.2). This reframing emphasizes that resilience is not an inborn characteristic, but a malleable process shaped by access to internal resources, relationships, and supports; and may be strengthened through the development of skills, strategies, and adaptive routines (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; Masten, 2001). From this perspective, resilience is not an extraordinary outcome limited to a select few, but a normative practice that anyone can develop with the right support. Masten (2001) describes this as “ordinary magic,” highlighting how adaptive functioning is supported through mundane processes such as forming supportive relationships, experiencing positive emotions, and developing a sense of meaning and purpose in the face of adversity.

Resilience research has shifted from identifying static and situational risk and protective factors to examining the processes through which individuals adapt to stress and adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). This process-oriented perspective emphasizes how individuals engage their available resources to navigate challenges across contexts, rather than viewing resilience as a fixed outcome or end state (Masten, 2011). Resilience as a dynamic and contextually embedded process is reflected in research with AI/AN communities, which emphasizes the role of cultural, relational, and community-based resources in supporting adaptation (John-Henderson et al, 2023). While resilience is often conceptualized as a process occurring within the individual, Indigenous scholars have emphasized that resilience is also embedded within “systemic, collective, and communal” processes that support wellbeing in the face of adversity through interactions occurring at the individual, family, and community levels (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p.85). Drawing on a “social-ecological” perspective, Kirmayer and colleagues (2011) argue that resilience may reside within the enduring relationships and networks of support found within families, communities, and broader social systems, underscoring the importance of relational and collective processes in adaptation.

Within this broader Indigenous perspective, cultural resilience refers to the ways traditional practices, values, beliefs, and cultural ways of being are utilized to adapt, survive, and thrive in the context of colonial oppression and ongoing adversity (Strand & Peacock, 2003). HeavyRunner and Morris (1997) similarly note that although the term cultural resilience is relatively recent, Indigenous communities have long engaged in cultural processes that sustain, protect, nurture, and guide youth through challenges. HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) further identified cultural resilience factors such as spirituality, family strengths, elders, ceremonial practices, oral traditions, tribal identity, and support networks as resources that support

adaptation and flourishing among AI/AN individuals, families, and communities. Consistent with these perspectives, Walters and colleagues (2002) theorize that cultural resources, including family and community support, spiritual and traditional practices, and enculturation, may buffer the effects of culturally salient stressors and promote positive mental and physical health outcomes. Subsequent research has provided support for these relationships, demonstrating that cultural factors are associated with better psychological outcomes and interact in complex ways with culturally relevant sources of stress (Walls et al., 2016).

### **Guiding Theoretical Frameworks**

The following section introduces the theoretical frameworks that guide this study. These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding AI/AN college students' mental health and wellbeing in PWI contexts, inform the organization of the literature reviewed, and shape the conceptual framework and research questions that follow.

#### ***Reconceptualized Ecological Systems Model for Native Americans in Higher Education***

Bronfenbrenner conceptualizes development as occurring within the nested, interacting systems in which the individual is embedded. The conceptual model envisions the individual's environment as concentric, interrelated spheres: the microsystems at the innermost level (*i.e. an individual's immediate environments such as family and school*), followed by the mesosystem (*i.e. the interconnections between an individual's different microsystems*), then the exosystem (*i.e. indirect social environments that impact the individual such as caregivers' workplaces*), and finally the macrosystem at the outermost level (*i.e. cultural values, customs, and structures that influence the inner levels of the individual's environment*), all of which are cut across by the overarching chronosystem (*i.e. life transitions and evolving sociohistorical circumstances*).

**Commented [JM16]:** Seems to me that this should come first in Chapter 2. You go for talking specifically about AI/AN students, then back to the general student population, and then back to AI/AN. It is confusing. If you start with the general model, once you talk about the Indigents stress coping model - you can then easily segue into the MH landscape of AI/ASN students.

**Transactional effects.** These systems are not fixed or static, but dynamic and mutually influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A transactional-ecological approach emphasizes that stressors and buffers operate within an “interactive network,” such that mental health outcomes emerge from the cumulative interplay of contextual conditions and individual processes rather than isolated risk factors (Alcantara & Gone, 2007). Prior scholarship has applied an “ecosystemic framework” to identify AI/AN-specific risk and protective factors at the societal, cultural, community, familial, and individual level (Burnette & Figley, 2016). This reflects that AI/AN individuals’ reciprocal interactions with different aspects of their environment contribute to mental health inequities and demonstrating the utility of this approach for understanding AI/AN mental health (Burnette & Figley, 2016). Accordingly, an ecological perspective supports multilevel analysis to unpack the interactive processes that give rise to psychopathology, thereby

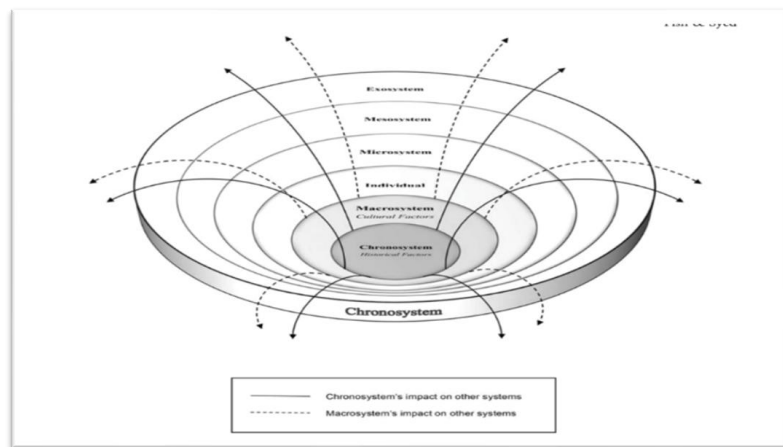


Figure 1. Reconceptualized Ecological Systems Model (Fish & Syed, 2018).

informing interventions that target the social and structural sources of stress (Alcantara & Gone, 2007).

**An Indigenized ecological model.** Fish and Syed (2018) reconceptualized the ecological model for AI/AN populations by centering the macro- and chronosystems to foreground culture,

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history, and settler colonialism as organizing forces of everyday life (see Figure 1). This reframing centers the cultural and sociohistorical experiences of AI/AN communities as the context through which all other systems must be understood, acknowledging that “any consideration of the present-day experiences of Native Americans must be grounded in the past” (Fish & Syed, 2018, p. 391). These reordering shifts analytic attention outward, positioning macro- and chronosystem forces as primary contexts through which all other systems are experienced.

Within this reconceptualized ecological model, each system reflects distinct yet interconnected dimensions of AI/AN students’ experiences in higher education. At the chronosystem, students’ experiences are situated within ongoing sociohistorical processes, including the enduring impacts of settler colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and shifting federal and tribal policies that continue to shape access to education and relationships with institutions. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, ideologies, and structures, including dominant Eurocentric norms within higher education as well as Indigenous worldviews that emphasize relationality, community, and cultural continuity.

The individual level reflects students’ identities, self-concepts, and lived experiences, including their relationships to Native identity, enculturation, and personal histories of navigating both Indigenous and Western contexts (Fish & Syed, 2018). The microsystem includes students’ immediate environments, such as interactions with peers, faculty, Native student organizations, and campus spaces, where experiences of belonging, marginalization, or cultural affirmation are directly encountered contexts (Fish & Syed, 2018). The mesosystem captures the interactions between these settings, such as the alignment or tension between students’ home communities and university environments, or between cultural values and

institutional expectations contexts (Fish & Syed, 2018). Finally, the exosystem reflects broader institutional and structural contexts that indirectly shape students' experiences, including university policies, availability of culturally relevant resources, representation of AI/AN faculty, and access to financial, academic, and mental health supports contexts (Fish & Syed, 2018)..

Within this study, this reconceptualized ecological model provides a structure for identifying and organizing the multilevel stressors AI/AN undergraduates encounter across their ecological contexts in PWI settings. Together, these interconnected systems illustrate how AI/AN students' experiences of stress and resilience are embedded within multilevel ecological contexts, in which historical, cultural, and institutional forces interact with students' immediate environments and individual experiences.

***Utility of an indigenized ecological model.*** This reconceptualized ecological framework recognizes colonialism as an ongoing structural condition shaping AI/AN students' experiences at PWIs while centering Indigenous culture, community, and knowledge systems as sources of strength through which students navigate environmental stressors, adapt, and practice resilience (Brayboy, 2005). Importantly, by centering the chronosystem and macrosystem, this framework also provides a way to understand how students' relationships to cultural identity, tribal community, and Indigenous kinship networks are shaped by their sociohistorical and environmental contexts. Variations in where students were raised, their access to cultural practices and relationships, and the ways colonial processes have affected their families and communities over time contribute to differences in how students understand and experience their identities, their connections to tribal community, and their place within Native kinship networks in PWI settings. In this way, attending to students' unique ecological contexts helps situate variation in both stress exposure and the resources available to support resilience.

### ***Psychosociocultural (PSC) Model***

There is a dearth of literature examining the mental health of AI/AN undergraduates on PWI campuses and the limited research base is primarily framed around elevated risk, psychological distress, and psychopathology rather than the resilience processes that contribute to wellbeing (Lipson et al., 2022). Research on psychosocial adjustment and subsequent persistence among underrepresented college students provides a useful foundation for understanding how students navigate the college environment and the factors that shape their experiences of stress, adaptation, persistence, and wellbeing (Segura-Herrera, 2008). While psychosocial adjustment is a construct distinct from resilience and wellbeing, this literature base provides important context for understanding the college-going experiences of racial and ethnic minority students.

Psychosocial adjustment has been defined as the “maintenance of emotional wellbeing, supported by the development of adaptive techniques for coping with change or other difficult experiences and feelings” (Iacovino & James, 2016, p. 64) and is typically assessed by the presence or absence of stress responses within the college environment (Hurtado et al., 1996; Segura-Herrera, 2008). As such, psychosocial adjustment parallels concepts of resilience as a process of adaptation and perseverance in the face of adversity while situating it within the college setting (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2011). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that psychosocial *mal*adjustment can result in poorer academic performance, increased anxiety and depression, and lower persistence rates among students of color, indicating that college adjustment contributes to aspects of psychological wellbeing (Iacovino & James, 2016).

Early higher education research regarding underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students was largely grounded in deficit-oriented frameworks that narrowly defined college

success as degree completion while overemphasizing cognitive variables (e.g. academic achievement, intellectual ability), ultimately contributing to underrepresented students' underachievement and attrition (Keith et al., 2016). More recent scholarship has shifted attention toward the broader non-cognitive and contextual factors that shape students' ongoing college experiences, reframing student success from a narrow focus on long-term outcomes to a more comprehensive understanding of students' lived experiences, including their sense of belonging, experiences of stress and adjustment, and integration within the university environment (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

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Gloria & Rodriguez (2000) developed the psychosociocultural (PSC) model as an approach to develop an “integrated conceptual and contextual understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural factors” (p. 146) within the PWI setting that influence students' psychosocial adjustment to college and, in turn, their persistence in higher education. The PSC model was applied in research to examine the noncognitive dimensions of students' college experiences and the contextual factors shaping their adjustment and persistence in PWI settings (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). The PSC model posits that student success within PWI settings is influenced by three independent yet interrelated domains that influence psychosocial adjustment across the college experience: *psychological* (i.e. variables such as self-beliefs, self-efficacy, coping strategies), *social* (i.e. constructs related to social connections and relationships inclusive of perceived support from peers and family, sense of belonging, social networks and connections, etc.) and *cultural* (i.e. constructs related to worldviews, values, and beliefs inclusive of cultural values systems, ethnic identity, cultural congruity, acculturation, etc.). These domains reflect key dimensions of students' experiences

that shape how they interpret and respond to stress and adversity and navigate the university environment over time (Gloria & Robinson, 2001).

In subsequent applications, the PSC model was used to examine stress coping processes and psychological wellbeing among Latinx undergraduates in PWI contexts, demonstrating that factors across psychological, social, and cultural domains (e.g. self-esteem, coping strategies, perceived barriers in the social environment, and cultural fit) were associated with students' ability to cope with stress and maintain wellbeing (Gloria et al., 2005; Gloria et al., 2009; Segura-Herrera, 2008). Later research extended the use of the PSC model to AI/AN college students, primarily in relation to psychosocial adjustment and persistence rather than mental health or wellbeing outcomes specifically (Gloria & Robinson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2013).

As such, the PSC model has been less frequently applied to explicitly examine resilience processes or variation in mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, the PSC model functions as a metatheoretical framework, allowing flexibility in the specific variables included within each domain and enabling the identification of population- and context-specific factors across psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of experience. This multidimensional emphasis is consistent with broader resilience research among AI/AN populations, which identifies psychological, social, and cultural/spiritual as the three "health protective domains" central to health and wellbeing (John-Henderson et al., 2023). As such, the PSC model provides a useful framework for examining the range of resilience resources AI/AN undergraduates draw upon as they navigate stress within their ecological contexts on PWI campuses.

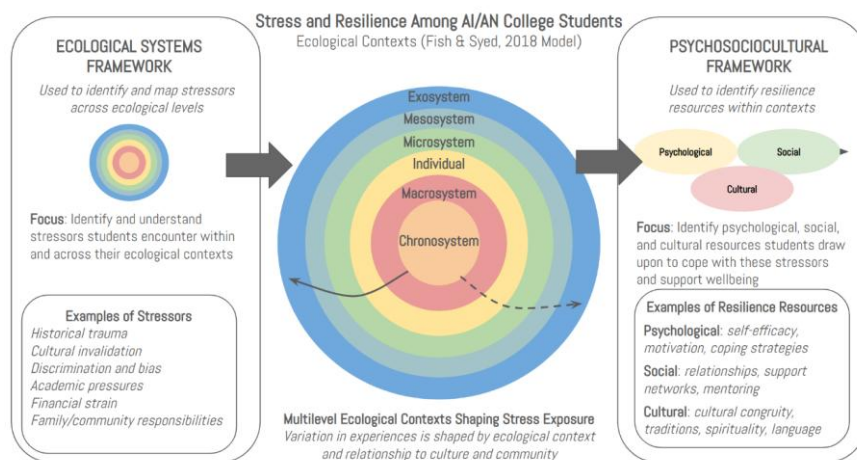
### ***Integrating Frameworks for the Present Study***

The conceptual framework for the present study brings together Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model with the psychosociocultural (PSC) model to

examine stress and resilience among AI/AN college students in PWI settings. Fish and Syed's model provides a structure for mapping layered stressors across sociohistorical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal environments, while centering settler colonialism as the broader context shaping the institutional structures and relationships AI/AN students must navigate, and how those experiences are further shaped by students' relationships to culture, tribal community, and Native relations.

The PSC model complements this ecological perspective by identifying the psychological, social, and cultural resources students draw upon to interpret, respond to, and adapt to these stressors, offering multiple pathways for strengthening resilience within the PWI context. Used in tandem rather than as a single integrated model, these frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to understanding mental health and wellbeing among AI/AN undergraduates while allowing for examination of variation in students' experiences as shaped by cultural identity, community, and broader ecological contexts.

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**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework guiding the present study. Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model and the psychosociocultural (PSC) model are used in tandem to examine stressors across ecological contexts and the psychological, social, and cultural resources students draw upon to navigate them. These frameworks are applied in parallel rather than integrated into a single model.

## **Stress and Resilience in AI/AN College Students on PWI Campuses**

The stress associated with the transition to college, including separation from home, new social environments, and increased academic demands, combined with the developmental timing of these major life changes, increases students' vulnerability to psychological distress and mental illness (Duffy et al., 2019). Few studies have examined the epidemiology of mental health problems specifically among AI/AN college students (Lipson et al., 2022; Thulin et al., 2023). In the absence of robust campus-specific data, patterns observed among AI/AN adolescents and emerging adults provide important context for understanding the broader mental health landscape of AI/AN undergraduates. Across national samples, college-aged AI/AN youth report the highest rates of substance use, depression, anxiety, and suicide compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Beals et al., 1997; Boyd-Ball et al., 2006; Manson et al., 2000; Whitbeck et al., 2008). At the same time, the considerable heterogeneity of AI/AN students' tribal affiliations, community ties, and cultural identities caution against treating these patterns as uniform.

AI/AN college students report greater psychological distress, mental health concerns, and lower wellbeing than their peers (Lipson et al., 2022). For example, using American College Health Association survey data, Hop Wo and colleagues (2020) found that Indigenous college students endorsed higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance use than non-Indigenous students, with greater functional impairment associated with these symptoms. Although drawn from Canadian samples, these findings offer useful context for understanding the heightened stress burden experienced by AI/AN students on predominantly white campuses.

### ***Culturally Specific Stressors***

AI/AN adolescents contend with multiple, transacting ecological stressors that contribute to psychological distress and broader educational, socioeconomic, and health disparities

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(Burnette & Figley, 2016). As AI/AN youth transition to college, they encounter additional stressors on campus while often continuing to navigate those in their home and community contexts. While consistently understudied among AI/AN college populations, a substantial body of research documents culturally relevant stressors affecting AI/AN adolescents and emerging adults, alongside scholarship identifying barriers that impede AI/AN students' college success. This section synthesizes these parallel literature bases to identify culturally specific stressors that shape AI/AN undergraduates' mental health and wellbeing.

***Historical Trauma.*** Historical trauma has been described as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations...which emanates from massive group trauma” (Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011, p. 248). Brave Heart's seminal work identified “historical trauma” as a specific traumatic stress response to historical oppression collectively experienced by AI/AN communities, broadening the diagnostic framework of post-traumatic stress disorder to account for cumulative, multigenerational trauma (Brave Heart, 2003; Hartmann et al., 2019). This construct acknowledges distress within ongoing colonial conditions, including losses of land, language, and culture, threats to sovereignty, persistent discrimination, and entrenched social inequities that are experienced not as simply past events but as continuing realities (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Rather than functioning as distant history, these collective experiences of loss remain psychologically salient and shape contemporary wellbeing.

Historical loss thinking, defined as the frequency with which AI/AN individuals think about cultural and communal losses and the emotional responses associated with those thoughts, positions intergenerational historical trauma as a proximal and ongoing stressor characterized by intrusive thoughts, negative emotions, and somatic symptoms (Whitbeck et al., 2004; Hartmann et al., 2019; Walls & Whitbeck, 2011). These thoughts are common across AI/AN populations

and consistently associated with anxiety, depression, anger, isolation, shame, and distrust, with associations persisting even after accounting for more immediate stressors such as economic hardship or discrimination, suggesting historical loss represents a distinct and culturally specific source of stress (Whitbeck et al., 2004, 2009; Walls & Whitbeck, 2011). This stressor emerges early, with AI/AN adolescents reporting thoughts of historical loss at rates comparable to or exceeding those of their caretakers and extends into college settings (Whitbeck et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2016). Among AI/AN college students, higher levels of historical loss thinking are linked to greater anxiety, depressive symptoms, rumination, and suicidality, a process scholars conceptualize as content-specific repetitive negative thinking that consumes cognitive and emotional resources and heightens vulnerability to psychopathology (Tucker et al., 2016). For AI/AN undergraduates at PWIs whose histories are intertwined with assimilationist educational policies, this stressor may be particularly pronounced as participation in these settings can render cultural losses more visible and personal, amplifying distress and undermining cultural and self-continuity by disrupting students' sense of connection to both past and future selves within institutions that have historically sought Indigenous erasure (Chandler & Lalonde, 2003; Fish & Syed, 2018).

**Cultural incongruity and identity strain at PWIs.** AI/AN students frequently experience stress stemming from misalignment between their cultural values and the dominant norms of PWIs (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). The “subtle and pervasive features” of campus environments, including institutional practices, social expectations, and instructional pedagogy, signal whose identities are valued and whose are peripheral, contributing to diminished belonging, psychosocial strain, and reduced persistence (Geronimus et al., 2016; Gloria & Robinson, 2001). Students commonly describe feeling alienated or disconnected from campus

because of the attitudes and behaviors of their peers and faculty (Yang et al., 2006). Because AI/AN cultural identity is grounded in extended relationships and relational ways of being, this isolation carries particular weight (Flynn et al., 2012). Geographic and relational separation from families, tribal communities, and cultural traditions that anchor their identities further intensifies this strain. For many AI/AN students, relocation to a PWI produces a “double isolation,” distancing them from both home communities and the campus social environment, undermining belonging and invalidating their sense of “personhood” (Tachine et al., 2017).

At a structural level, cultural incongruity refers to the broader mismatch between the values, norms, and expectations of students’ home communities and those embedded within PWIs (Thompson et al., 2013). Within educational settings, AI/AN youth often navigate two cultural systems experienced as contradictory: Indigenous worldviews emphasizing relationality, interdependence, collaboration, and collective responsibility, and the dominant Eurocentric culture that values individualism, competition, and linear conceptions of time (LaFromboise et al., 1993, 2006, 2010; Iacovino & James, 2016). Transitioning to a PWI widens this gap geographically and experientially, intensifying students’ sense that they must operate within an environment that devalues or misunderstands their cultural ways of knowing and being (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). This discrepancy has been associated with poorer academic adjustment, diminished belonging, and lower persistence, particularly for students with a strong cultural identity (Gloria & Robinson, 2001; Huffman, 2001; Tachine et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2013).

Beyond this environmental mismatch, acculturative stress reflects the internal strain of negotiating identity across these competing cultural demands (LaFromboise et al., 1993, 2006). Balancing enculturation within Indigenous communities and pressures to assimilate into dominant campus culture demands considerable “cultural dexterity,” which can function as both

an asset and a source of psychological strain. This “walking in two worlds” entails continual decisions about which values, behaviors, and identities to foreground, demanding sustained emotional and cognitive effort (LaFromboise et al., 2010). Among AI/AN adolescents, acculturative stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, somatization, shame, and alienation (LaFromboise et al., 2010). Within PWIs, students with strong cultural identities often report pressure to modify or suppress aspects of themselves to succeed academically (Cech et al., 2019), confronting what Brayboy (2004) terms “the brutal bargain” of assimilation or marginalization. For students from reservation-based communities, this tension extends across settings, as attempts to adapt to campus norms risks criticism at home for “acting too white,” weakening connection to both contexts (Cech et al., 2019). This identity-based tension contributes directly to psychological distress while compounding challenges to belonging and persistence. Collectively, cultural incongruity and acculturative stress function as chronic, culturally specific stressors shaping AI/AN students’ mental health and educational trajectories.

**Racism, discrimination, and campus marginalization.** In addition to acculturative pressures, AI/AN college students contend with persistent racism and ethnoracial bias embedded within PWIs (Cech et al., 2019). Chronic underrepresentation and limited public knowledge of contemporary AI/AN communities foster reliance on reductive stereotypes and misrepresentations, exposing students to both overt prejudice and subtler forms of marginalization (Burkley et al., 2017; Fryberg & Eason, 2017). On campus, students describe experiences of “exoticized othering,” the delegitimization of Indigenous knowledge, and expectations to serve as cultural representatives or educators for peers and faculty, all of which mark them as outsiders and impose additional emotional and cognitive labor not required of their white peers (Cech et al., 2019). Fear of acting or performing in ways that confirm these

stereotypes, commonly referred to as “stereotype threat,” further generates psychological and physiological stress that undermines learning and wellbeing (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Beyond these interpersonal biases, AI/AN undergraduates often navigate racially tense campus climates shaped by both everyday microaggressions and institutional structures that produce isolation, marginalization, and separation from core aspects of their cultural identity (Tachine et al., 2016). Campus racial climate is defined as “part of the institutional context that includes community members’ attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and expectations around issues of race, ethnicity, and diversity” (Hurtado et al., 2008, p. 205). Some AI/AN undergraduates describe their campus as at best “unaccommodating” and at worst “hostile,” reporting both passive and active forms of racism on a regular basis (Jackson et al., 2003). These experiences, including exclusion, tokenization, discrimination, open hostility during discussions of historical or cultural issues, and verbal or physical victimization, undermine students’ sense of connectedness and impede their persistence in college (Lundberg, 2014; Perry, 2002).

Experiences of discrimination and microaggressions are well documented among AI/AN adolescents and young adults, with exposure to racial profiling, racialized comments, and derogatory verbal attacks linked to depressive and anxiety symptoms, lower self-esteem, social withdrawal, suicidal ideation, anger, and increased substance use, with cumulative exposure compounding risk over time (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Fryberg et al., 2008; Jones & Galliher, 2015; Melander et al., 2013; Sittner Hartshorn et al., 2012). These patterns extend into college settings, where nearly all AI/AN undergraduates report experiencing at least one microaggression in the past year (O’Keefe & Greenfield, 2019) and prolonged exposure contributes to “racial battle fatigue,” an exhausting stress response in which individuals must continually devote cognitive and emotional resources to anticipating and coping with racism

(Smith et al., 2012). Such chronic vigilance depletes resources that might otherwise support academic engagement, social connection, and psychological wellbeing (Smith et al., 2012).

Research in the broader community further indicates that AI/AN adolescents and young adults experience disproportionate rates of bullying, race-based harassment, verbal threats, and violent victimization (Campbell & Smalling, 2013). Within the PWI context, AI/AN undergraduates face the highest risk of physical or sexual victimization on college campuses, experiences associated with poorer academic performance and heightened distress (Patterson et al., 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Collectively, these interpersonal and structural forms of racism operate not as isolated incidents but as chronic, compounding stressors that shape AI/AN students' campus experiences and contribute meaningfully to mental health inequities at PWIs.

**Family, community, and relational strain.** Strong relational ties to family, extended kin networks, and tribal communities are central to AI/AN cultural identity and serve as vital sources of meaning and support. At the same time, these connections can generate unique stressors within college environments structured around individual achievement and rigid academic timelines. AI/AN undergraduates frequently report difficulty balancing academic responsibilities with familial and community obligations, including traveling home to provide care, attend ceremonies, or participate in funerals, commitments that can disrupt academic performance and persistence (Flynn et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2010; Lopez, 2018; Waterman, 2012). In one survey of AI/AN students at a PWI, family responsibilities were cited as a primary reason for dropping out or considering withdrawal (Lee et al., 2010).

Negotiating competing expectations across home and campus contexts may also strain relationships and identity. Students describe tension between pursuing educational goals and fulfilling family or cultural roles, alongside uncertainty about their family's acceptance of their

aspirations and fears of being perceived as distancing themselves from or “giving up” their tribal identity (Fish & Syed, 2018; Guillory, 2008). Given the centrality of relationality in Indigenous worldviews, these conflicts can be particularly distressing, as students broker competing obligations while navigating increasing independence and reduced social support precisely when academic and developmental pressures intensify.

Broader family and community stressors likely further shape AI/AN students’ psychosocial adjustment (Guillory, 2008). Elevated rates of caregiver psychological distress and substance misuse within some AI/AN communities are associated with downstream effects on youth mental health (Bassett et al., 2014; Whitbeck et al., 2006), while repeated exposure to community loss and premature death creates a collective grief burden that compounds emotional strain (Sarche & Spicer, 2008; Tingey et al., 2014). For students away at college, these heavy realities often require difficult decisions about returning home during times of crisis or mourning, intensifying role conflict and stress as they carry the weight of their own grief (Lopez, 2018; Waterman, 2012). Together, these family- and community-based pressures operate as culturally specific, relational stressors that likely affect both AI/AN students’ mental health and their persistence in higher education.

**Material and structural strain.** In addition to culturally specific and relational stressors, many AI/AN undergraduates contend with material hardships rooted in broader structural inequities (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). National data indicate that AI/AN college students experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity (55%), housing insecurity (69%), and homelessness (19%), the highest of any racial or ethnic group in higher education (National Native Scholarship Providers [NNSP], 2022). These forms of economic precarity create chronic stress that interferes with students’ ability to meet basic needs, focus academically, and remain

enrolled (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Shotton et al., 2013). Financial strain is consistently associated with increased risk for depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among college students (Eisenberg et al., 2013), and many AI/AN students also navigate intersecting challenges such as first-generation status, which predicts greater psychological distress, academic difficulties, and reduced belonging (Keefe et al., 2020). Within PWIs where AI/AN students are significantly underrepresented, these structural pressures may be further amplified. Campuses with larger White majorities report higher levels of race-related, academic, interpersonal, and psychological stress among students of color, suggesting that material and institutional stressors intersect to heighten vulnerability to mental health concerns (Abegase, 2019). Collectively, these findings underscore material insecurity as a critical contributor to AI/AN students' mental health and persistence in higher education.

### **Psychosociocultural Sources of Resilience**

Resilience is most fundamentally conceived as an individual's ability to positively adapt in the face of adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Despite enduring generations of colonization and ongoing structural inequities, AI/AN communities demonstrate profound individual and collective resilience, sustaining "cultural continuity," community ties, and tribal sovereignty across time (Chandler & Lalonde, 2003; Evans Campbell, 2008; Hartmann et al., 2019; Teufel-Shone et al., 2018). Research has consistently highlighted the remarkable resilience of AI/AN individuals across the lifespan, from adolescence (Lafromboise et al., 2006; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012) to adulthood (Reinschmidt et al., 2016).

However, resilience scholarship within AI/AN populations has often relied on earlier theories that frame resilience as an exceptional outcome in the face of extreme adversity (e.g., historical trauma) rather than as an ongoing process of adaptation that can be strengthened and

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developed (John-Henderson et al., 2023; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012). At the same time, research on AI/AN health inequities has predominantly adopted deficit-oriented approaches focused on cataloguing risk factors; consequently, even strengths-based responses have tended to treat resilience as a static set of protective traits to inventory rather than examining the dynamic processes through which individuals and communities actively promote wellbeing (John-Henderson et al., 2023). Recent reviews therefore call for a shift toward examining the protective processes of resilience to best guide prevention and health promotion efforts (John-Henderson et al., 2023; Teufel-Shone et al., 2018). This process-oriented perspective aligns with the present study's emphasis on identifying resilience resources that can be cultivated to support AI/AN college students' mental health.

To organize this review, the following section applies the PSC model to examine the psychological, social, and cultural sources of resilience. Drawing from research on AI/AN young adults broadly and the limited scholarship on AI/AN undergraduates, this framework identifies the culturally relevant resilience resources that may support AI/AN students' mental health and thriving on PWI campuses.

**Psychological Resilience Resources.** Psychological resilience resources encompass the internal skills, beliefs, and coping processes through which individuals appraise stressors, evaluate available resources, and mobilize adaptive responses, including habits and strategies that reduce vulnerability to stress and promote subjective wellbeing (Fletcher et al., 2006; Fredrickson, 2011; Rutter, 2007). Among AI/AN adults, psychological resilience predicts lower depressive symptoms and better mental and physical health, with adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal associated with fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms (John-Henderson et al., 2023; Schure et al., 2013; Tyra et al., 2021). Within college contexts,

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intrapersonal resources including positive self-beliefs, perceived coping efficacy, and motivation support psychosocial adjustment and persistence among AI/AN undergraduates (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). Although these resources operate at the individual level, many are culturally grounded in Indigenous identity, spirituality, and collective ways of understanding adversity.

Positive culturally relevant self-concepts, particularly collective self-esteem, or a sense of pride in and positive perception of one's cultural group, reflect a collectivistic orientation of self-belief that enables students to locate themselves within their broader community and affirm their cultural identity (Thompson et al., 2013). Collective self-esteem has been linked to better adjustment, greater persistence intentions, and higher retention among AI/AN undergraduates (Thompson et al., 2013). Similarly, confidence in one's ability to cope, including the culturally specific construct of communal mastery, which emphasizes shared coping efficacy rooted in collectivistic worldviews, predicts lower distress following stress exposure among AI/AN adults (Hobfoll et al., 2002; John-Henderson et al., 2023). AI/AN students also draw on culturally specific appraisal-focused coping strategies that support meaning-making and emotional regulation on campus and are associated with increased persistence (Keith et al., 2016; Shield, 2009). Spiritual practices such as prayer operate as culturally grounded coping strategies that help AI/AN college students reduce stress, find personal strength and direction, and persevere in higher education, though their role in promoting mental health outcomes specifically remains insufficiently understood (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003).

Storytelling similarly functions as a powerful culturally grounded psychological resilience resource that affirms cultural identity and continuity while shaping how individuals understand adversity (Wexler, 2014); communal “narratives of resilience” reinterpret collective histories of oppression as stories of persistence and adaptation, providing an explanatory lens for

ongoing personal and communal stress (Kirmayer et al., 2011). These culturally based narratives offer “cognitive and rhetorical resources for resilience” that rescript cultural loss as stories of survival and resistance, while “narratives of survivance” further portray Native communities as active, evolving, and self-determining, fostering empowered identity and meaning-making that may strengthen collective self-esteem, coping efficacy, and protection from psychological distress (Hartmann et al., 2019; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Together, these findings suggest that psychological resilience among AI/AN undergraduates is not solely individual but deeply embedded in culturally grounded identities, beliefs, and interpretive frameworks that sustain wellbeing in the face of stress. At the same time, there remains limited research examining how these culturally specific psychological resilience resources contribute directly to AI/AN college students' mental health and wellbeing.

**Social Resilience Resources.** Social resilience resources refer to the supportive relationships and networks that provide emotional and informational support, advice and guidance, academic assistance, and practical aid, and are deeply rooted in Indigenous relational worldviews that emphasize interdependence and locate identity within family, community, land, and ancestors (Garrett, 2014; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Salis Reyes, 2019; Thompson et al., 2013). Across AI/AN populations, social connectedness is consistently associated with better psychological and physical health, underscoring the centrality of relational support to resilience and wellbeing (FitzGerald et al., 2017; John-Henderson et al., 2023). Among AI/AN adolescents and young adults broadly, strong family relationships, intergenerational mentorship from elders, and support from caring adults in the community are associated with higher self-esteem, greater resilience, increased wellbeing, and lower risk for depression and psychological distress (Baldwin et al., 2011; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012;

Whitesell et al., 2009). These findings suggest that social relationships serve as foundational resilience resources across development with clear implications for AI/AN college students.

Within higher education specifically, access to strong social ties both within and beyond the campus environment has been consistently identified as one of the most robust predictors of psychosocial adjustment and persistence among AI/AN undergraduates at PWIs (Gloria & Robinson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2013). Extended family support provides encouragement, culturally grounded coping strategies, and motivation to persist, particularly during the transition to college, while maintaining connections to home communities provides emotional grounding and a sense of purpose (Flynn et al., 2012; Marroquín & McCoach, 2014; Waterman, 2012). Many students describe aspirations to “give back” to their tribal communities as a culturally meaningful source of motivation that sustains perseverance and affirms their educational pursuits as relational rather than individual endeavors (Brayboy et al., 2015; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Waterman & Lindley, 2013). Together, these off-campus relational ties function as interconnected sources of support that reinforce belonging and sustain persistence across the college experience.

Campus-based relationships represent equally critical social resilience resources, with supportive faculty relationships among the strongest predictors of psychosocial adjustment, belonging, academic success, and persistence intentions among AI/AN undergraduates — particularly when characterized by warmth, genuine care, and cultural respect (Brown & Robinson, 1997; Jackson et al., 2003; Marroquín & McCoach, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2013). Peer relationships similarly play a pivotal role in students' transition and retention, with supportive connections, particularly with other AI/AN students and through culturally relevant spaces and organizations, buffering feelings of isolation and providing shared

understanding and community on campus (Flynn et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2003; Shotton et al., 2007). Peer mentors, in particular, help students navigate academic and social challenges, connect to campus resources, and adapt to college life, and students report stronger adjustment and persistence when peer networks include other AI/AN students and when friendships function as familial extensions that affirm their cultural identity and presence on campus (Oxendine, 2015; Shotton et al., 2007). These findings indicate that resilience is fundamentally relational for AI/AN students and underscores the importance of supports that strengthen rather than replace students' existing relational ties as a foundation for wellbeing and success in PWI settings.

**Cultural Resilience Resources.** Cultural resilience resources refer to the identities, practices, and worldviews that anchor AI/AN individuals within their tribal communities and provide meaning, continuity, and belonging. Across the lifespan, cultural connection has been consistently linked to better mental and behavioral health outcomes and serves as a protective factor buffering the effects of stress and adversity (Gone & Calf Looking, 2011; John-Henderson et al., 2023; Walters & Simoni, 2002). Research on cultural continuity suggests that connections to enduring cultural identities, community institutions, and collective histories may function as important protective resources that support wellbeing among Indigenous peoples (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, 2003). Within a psychosociocultural framework, these resources include cultural identity, engagement in traditional cultural and spiritual practices, bicultural competence, and cultural congruity within the university environment (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). A strong sense of cultural identity is associated with higher self-esteem, greater school belonging, fewer depressive symptoms, increased optimism, and better social and academic functioning among AI/AN youth and young adults, and further buffers the negative effects of discrimination on psychosocial functioning (Jones & Galliher, 2007; Galliher et al., 2011; Markstrom et al., 2011;

Smokowski et al., 2013; Wexler et al., 2014). Beyond identity alone, enculturation, which refers to active participation in cultural activities, values, traditions and ceremonies, language use, and community events, is predictive of increased flourishing and reduced psychological distress across AI/AN youth and adult populations, while also mitigating acculturative stress and depressive symptoms associated with discrimination (Kadin et al., 2015; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Stumbling Bear et al., 2018; Whitbeck et al., 2008; Wexler, 2014; Wolsko et al., 2007). Traditional spirituality similarly provides purpose, healing, and direction as an important coping resource, with engagement in spiritual practices linked to lower risk of substance misuse and suicidality (Garroute et al., 2003; Kulis et al., 2012; Mmari et al., 2010).

Because AI/AN students often “walk in two worlds,” bicultural competence, or the ability to negotiate and adapt across both Indigenous and dominant cultural contexts one's cultural identity, represents another critical cultural resilience resource; AI/AN youth who maintain strong traditional ties while developing competence navigating Western institutions reporting higher self-esteem, lower hopelessness, and better mental health (Burnette & Figley, 2016; Kulis et al., 2012; LaFromboise et al., 2010). Within PWIs, bicultural competence enables students to draw on their cultural identity to overcome hostility in the campus environment and persist through college, and when institutions support cultural participation, cultural identity and biculturalism are associated with greater academic achievement, adjustment, and retention (Fish & Syed, 2018; Huffman et al., 2001; Pewewardy & Frey, 2004). These findings suggest that resilience for AI/AN students is deeply cultural and rooted in identity and community connection, underscoring the importance of strengthening opportunities for cultural engagement as a vital pathway for promoting wellbeing.

At the institutional level, cultural congruity, the degree of alignment between students' cultural identities and the campus environment, represents a particularly consequential cultural resilience resource (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). Greater congruity predicting stronger psychosocial adjustment, academic success, and persistence whereas cultural discontinuity contributes to alienation and departure (Huffman, 2001; Lundberg, 2012; Marroquín & McCoach, 2014). Institutional environments that affirm AI/AN identities through cultural spaces, programming, and representation foster belonging by validating students' language, kinship, spirituality, and heritage, and qualitative research further indicates that students' sense of belonging depends on whether their Native identities are meaningfully reflected and valued within the institution itself (Huffman, 2011; Tachine et al., 2017). Although cultural congruity has been examined primarily in relation to belonging, adjustment, and persistence, these outcomes represent key indicators of wellbeing and highlight the institutional role in supporting AI/AN students' mental health.

**Interrelated Dimensions of Resilience Resources.** From a psychosociocultural perspective, psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources do not operate in isolation but are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing (John-Henderson et al., 2023). Strengthening one domain may amplify the protective effects of others; for example, supportive relationships with faculty and peers (social resources) can foster greater cultural belonging and comfort within the university environment (cultural resources), which in turn may increase help-seeking and engagement with campus supports (additional social resources) and contribute to psychological wellbeing (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018). Understanding how these dimensions function together highlights the ways in which resilience is supported through overlapping and interacting resources and underscores the importance of coordinated approaches

to supporting AI/AN undergraduates in PWI settings (John-Henderson et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the present study seeks to identify the psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources AI/AN students perceive themselves as drawing upon and to examine how these interrelated resources support coping and wellbeing on campus.

**Institutional Gaps in Supporting Resilience.** Despite growing attention to resilience among AI/AN college students, existing institutional approaches to student support remain limited in scope with respect to promoting holistic wellbeing. University-based programming supporting the psychosocial adjustment of AI/AN undergraduates has largely focused on strengthening social and cultural resources (Lopez, 2018). These efforts include fostering relationships with peers, faculty, and tribal communities and enhancing cultural connection and belonging through Native student centers, family and community engagement initiatives, and home-going practices (Guillory, 2009; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Waterman, 2012). In contrast, comparatively less attention has been given to cultivating psychological resilience resources. When psychological supports are included, they are often embedded within narrowly focused interventions, such as suicide prevention programs, rather than integrated into broader efforts to promote wellbeing (Muehlenkamp et al., 2009).

At the same time, emerging research suggests that AI/AN students actively draw upon psychological resources, including coping strategies, self-efficacy, and adaptive cognitive processes, to navigate the demands of higher education (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013). These internal resources not only support individual adaptation but may also reinforce social and cultural forms of resilience, highlighting the interdependent nature of these domains (John-Henderson et al., 2023). However, the relative underemphasis on psychological resilience within both research and institutional practice points to a gap in

understanding how these resources function alongside social and cultural supports to promote wellbeing. Accordingly, there is a need to comprehensively identify the psychological, social, and cultural resources AI/AN students draw upon within their ecological contexts. Mapping these interrelated resilience resources offers a pathway for identifying overlooked areas of support and informing more holistic, culturally responsive approaches to promoting mental health and wellbeing among AI/AN undergraduates in PWI settings.

### ***Heterogeneity in Native Identity and Student Experiences of Stress and Resilience***

Together, the preceding sections illustrate that AI/AN undergraduates encounter layered culturally relevant stressors while drawing upon psychological, social, and cultural sources of resilience, yet these processes are unlikely to operate uniformly across students. Despite this, AI/AN undergraduates are often treated as a homogeneous group in higher education and mental health research, obscuring how differences in cultural identification, community connectedness, and engagement in traditional practices may meaningfully shape both stress exposure and access to protective resources. Existing research has most commonly examined Native identity through the lenses of enculturation and bicultural competence, both of which have been identified as important resilience resources (LaFromboise et al., 2010; Kulis et al., 2013; Whitbeck et al., 2008). However, variation in these dimensions may itself shape stress exposure, as higher enculturation has been associated with increased perceived discrimination, historical loss thinking, and elevated risk for depression, anxiety, anger, and substance misuse, while dexterity navigating multiple cultural systems can function as both a source of strength and stress, particularly when students experience incongruence across home, community, and campus contexts (Ehlers et al., 2013; Jones & Galliher, 2015; Tucker et al., 2015; Walls et al., 2016; Whitbeck et al., 2008, 2009).

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These findings suggest that cultural connection may function simultaneously as a source of strength and a point of vulnerability within colonized environments, and that the benefits of cultural engagement are context-dependent; for example, bicultural competence has been shown to buffer hopelessness most strongly among AI/AN youth in urban settings (LaFromboise et al., 2010). Students' relationships to culture and community are therefore complex and multifaceted and cannot be fully represented by single indicators such as level of cultural participation or bicultural competence, as AI/AN students represent diverse tribal affiliations, family histories, and community contexts, including variation in geographic location, urban or reservation life, intertribal or multiracial heritage, and differing levels of connection to Native community and cultural practices (Kulis et al., 2013). These differences shape the cultural systems students move between, the meanings they assign to their identities, and the relationships they have to their Indigeneity, likely contributing to variation in both stress exposure and resilience processes (Kulis et al., 2013). Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of attending to heterogeneity within AI/AN college populations and examining stress and resilience processes with attention to the depth and complexity of students' cultural contexts.

To better capture this complexity, research has begun to conceptualize Native identity as a multidimensional and contextually embedded construct (Kulis et al., 2013; Markstrom, 2010). Markstrom (2010) proposes that AI/AN identity is comprised of multiple interrelated dimensions that operate across different levels. At the local level, identity reflects how individuals understand and experience their connection to being Native, including how they self-identify (e.g. tribal affiliation, self-perception as Native, percentage of Native heritage), their relationships to family, tribe, ancestors, land, and broader Native community, and their engagement with cultural practices, language, values, and spirituality (Markstrom, 2010). These

overlapping dimensions of identification, connection, and culture highlight that identity is not a singular attribute but a multifaceted and lived experience. Beyond this, identity is also shaped by broader social and historical contexts. At the national level, identity reflects the ways in which individuals navigate multiple cultural systems and the sociohistorical conditions that influence those experiences. This includes the lasting impact of family and community histories of colonization, experiences of cultural disruption or continuity, and the need to negotiate values across Indigenous and dominant societal contexts, as well as the acculturative influences that arise when individuals are embedded within more than one cultural system. Students may therefore vary in how they identify along a spectrum of bicultural, multicultural, or hybrid identities, reflecting differences in their exposure to and participation in multiple cultural environments (Markstrom, 2010).

Fish and Syed's (2018) ecological model is particularly useful for examining these dimensions of Native identity as they are lived across contexts, aligning with Markstrom (2010) by centering the role of sociohistorical context and emphasizing that development is shaped not only by immediate environments but also by the ongoing and intergenerational effects of colonial oppression. Within this framework, the chronosystem captures students' own life trajectories alongside the broader sociohistorical circumstances shaping their families and communities over time, including intergenerational experiences of cultural displacement, disruption, and adaptation. At the same time, the macrosystem reflects the multiple cultural systems students navigate, including Native community contexts and dominant institutional environments such as PWIs (Fish & Syed, 2018).

Attending to these systems helps illuminate how broader sociohistorical and cultural contexts influence students' more immediate experiences. Students' chronosystems and

macrosystems influence the microsystems and mesosystems in which they participate, including their family, community, and educational environments, and in turn shape how they understand and express their identities. Through this lens, students' self-identification, their sense of connection to tribe, family, ancestors, and community, and their engagement with cultural practices, language, and values are understood as emerging within these layered and interacting contexts rather than residing solely at the individual level. AN ecological perspective therefore provides a way to capture the multidimensional aspects of identity defined by Markstrom (2010). Differences in students' upbringing, community context, family histories, and cultural exposure, such as being raised in predominantly Native versus non-Native contexts or raised immersed within culture versus reconnecting during college, may influence how students perceive their relationships to culture and community within PWI settings. By situating identity within these multilevel and evolving contexts, an ecological perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of how students experience being Native within PWI settings and how these experiences shape both their exposure to culturally specific stressors and their access to resilience resources. Accordingly, examining how students describe their relationships to culture and Native community provides a critical lens for understanding variation in stress and resilience processes among AI/AN undergraduates.

**Defining culture and community.** In the present study, culture is understood as encompassing the shared meanings, values, practices, histories, ways of knowing, and relationships that are embedded within connections to family, community, land, spirituality, and tribal traditions (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Drawing on Indigenous scholarship, culture extends beyond participation in specific traditions or activities and reflects broader ways of understanding, relating to, and engaging with the world that are grounded in family, community,

and collective life (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011). From this perspective, relationships to Native culture and community cannot be reduced solely to engagement in cultural activities or any single dimension of cultural connection, but may be experienced and expressed in diverse ways that reflect variation in students' family histories, community contexts, cultural experiences, and opportunities for connection.

### **Purpose of Current Study**

AI/AN undergraduates are frequently omitted from large-scale studies examining the growing mental health crisis on college campuses, and there is limited research explicitly exploring the mental health and wellbeing of AI/AN students in PWI settings (Lipson et al., 2022; Shotton et al., 2013). Existing research largely focuses on discrete stressors (e.g. historical loss thinking) associated with psychological distress and therefore captures only a narrow portion of the mental health experiences of AI/AN undergraduates on PWI campuses (Thulin et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2016). Additionally, little research examines how these experiences vary across AI/AN undergraduates' sense of identity, connection to their culture and Native community, and patterns of enculturation, limiting understanding of the heterogeneity within this student population. A more comprehensive inquiry into the stress and resilience processes shaping AI/AN undergraduate mental health and wellbeing is necessary to identify meaningful pathways for prevention and intervention.

To this end, the present study first seeks to identify the proximal and distal sources of stress AI/AN undergraduates perceive as impacting their mental health on PWI campuses and how these stressors influence their wellbeing over the course of their college experience. Second, the study explores the psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources AI/AN students describe drawing upon to adapt, persevere, and thrive in the face of these stressors. Finally, the

study examines how students' experiences of stress and resilience vary in relation to their relationships with culture and Native community, including differences in cultural connection, community ties, and ecological contexts that shape how students experience being Native within PWI settings. Collectively, these aims center the voices and lived experiences of AI/AN undergraduates in discussions of student mental health in higher education and inform more culturally responsive approaches to student mental health support within university settings.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study explores the following research questions:

- 1) What sources of stress do American Indian/Alaska Native undergraduates perceive as impacting their mental health and wellbeing at a predominantly white university?*
- 2) What sources of resilience do American Indian/Alaska Native undergraduates perceive themselves as drawing upon to support their mental health and wellbeing?*
- 3) How do students describe their relationships to culture and Native community, and how do these relationships shape their experiences of stress and resilience?*

### Chapter 3: Research Methods

*“The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary...it stirs up silence, conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.”*

(Smith, 1999, p.1)

#### Methodological Considerations

The present study employs a qualitative research design grounded in narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008) and guided by an ecological systems theoretical lens (Fish & Syed, 2018).

Although this study does not employ an Indigenous methodological framework, research involving AI/AN communities requires careful consideration of the historical and ongoing harms produced through extractive and colonizing research practices. Indigenous scholars have long documented how research has frequently positioned Indigenous peoples as objects of study while privileging Western systems of knowledge production and interpretation (Smith, 2012). As a result, mistrust toward research institutions and investigators may exist within AI/AN communities, underscoring the importance of approaching research involving Indigenous participants with reflexivity, respect, and accountability.

Qualitative research involving communities impacted by settler colonialism can work toward more ethical and responsible practice by engaging in decolonizing and relational approaches that emphasize critical reflexivity, reciprocity, respect for participants’ self-determination within the research relationship, and attentiveness to Indigenous relationality and ways of knowing (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Accordingly, while grounded in narrative inquiry, the present study sought to adopt a decolonizing lens and incorporate relational and participant-centered practices intended to support trust-building, mutual respect, and relational accountability throughout the research process (Davidson, 2016; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018; Wilson, 2008). These considerations informed the design and implementation of the study, including efforts to prioritize participants’ voices, contextualize narratives within broader

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Your methodology section is 50 pages long. This is too long. This chapter needs to be the methods you used for your particular dissertation data collection, not a focus on all the different methodologies that have been used to collect AI/AN data. You don’t get to the procedures for 33 pages. The procedures are how you collected the data. So, describe what you did and why - briefly. We don’t need a long rationale for each type of methodology you highlight here. This is to be a concise section that allows another person to replicate your study. Each procedure, interview process, semi structured interviews should be brief with a rationale described - 1-2 paragraphs at most.

ecological systems, and conduct the research in ways attentive to relevance, respect, and responsibility toward AI/AN student participants (Smith, 2012). These commitments shaped the relational and participant-centered practices described throughout the following sections.

### **Study Design: Narrative Inquiry – Story as “Method and Meaning”**

The present study employed narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008) to explore AI/AN college students’ perspectives on their mental health experiences within a PWI context. Narrative inquiry was selected in part because of the central role of stories and storytelling within many Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge transmission. As Kovach (2009) notes, “Story is practiced within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge, such as...narrative inquiry. It is recognized that story as both form and method crosses cultural divides” (p. 96). Although the ways “story” is understood and used vary across cultures and require attention to the cultural assumptions shaping “contextualized knowledge,” narrative inquiry and Indigenous knowledge systems nevertheless share a respect for stories as sources of knowledge and meaning-making as well as recognition of the important relationship between storyteller and listener (Kovach, 2009; Tachine, 2015). Brayboy (2005) further emphasizes the importance of honoring storytelling and oral knowledge as “real and legitimate forms of data” that also “serve as a way to orient oneself and others toward the world and life” for Indigenous people (p. 439). Similarly, Tachine and colleagues (2016) described storytelling as reflective of relational ways of knowing in which stories are shared within relationships (between storytellers and listeners) and are often for the benefit of those listening.

**Rationale.** Narrative inquiry is grounded in the premise that people experience and understand their lives in “storied form,” referring to a family of methods focused on generating and analyzing stories for meaning (Cisse & Rasmussen, 2022; Riessman, 2008). Within narrative

inquiry, “people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories...composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). Narrative inquiry has become an increasingly valued qualitative methodology within fields concerned with understanding human experiences because people naturally respond to questions about challenges and significant life events through storytelling (Meraz et al., 2019; Riessman, 2008). Importantly, narrative inquiry assumes that these stories are imbued with meaning. Stories are not simply recountings of events, but narrative reconstructions through which individuals interpret experiences, organize meaning, and communicate how they understand themselves and their lives to others (Riessman, 2008). Through storytelling, individuals actively curate and connect experiences in ways that “construct who they are and how they want to be known” (Riessman, 2008, p. 15). Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited for exploring psychological experiences because stories richly illuminate thoughts, emotions, motivations, actions, and consequences while revealing how individuals connect these dimensions within lived experiences (Riessman, 2008). As such, this approach provided a meaningful method for examining how AI/AN college students interpreted and made meaning of their experiences of the multilayered ecological stressors affecting their mental health and wellbeing as well as the psychological, social, and cultural resources they drew upon for resilience.

Narrative inquiry is further distinguished by its emphasis on preserving the integrity of the storyteller's account. Riessman (2008) explains that narrative inquiry relies on “extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories” (p.12). Attending to the intact story recognizes AI/AN college students as knowledgeable interpreters of their own experiences and supports participants’ agency in how their stories are represented in higher education research, such that “story works as a

decolonizing action that gives voice to the misinterpreted and marginalized" (Kovach, 2009, p. 98; Riessman, 2008). Although narrative inquiry is "case-centered" and grounded in individual stories, it also enables researchers to theorize across narratives to illuminate broader collective patterns, allowing the present study to preserve the holistic and nuanced nature of individual AI/AN students' stories while identifying shared experiences that reveal systemic conditions affecting AI/AN student wellbeing within PWI contexts (Riessman, 2008; Tachine, 2015).

### ***Situating-Self Within the Story: Researcher Positionality and Bias***

Western research traditions that claim "objectivity" by minimizing the identities of researchers and depersonalizing the research process have often been experienced within AI/AN communities as a "smash and grab approach to seeking knowledge" (Kovach, 2009, p. 99). In contrast, Indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of acknowledging the relational context in which research occurs, including the relationships between researcher, participants, community, and place (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). This is especially important within narrative , which relies the deeply personal process of storytelling; as Kovach reminds, "In asking others to share stories, it is necessary to share our own, starting with self-location" (Kovach, 2009, p. 99). Within Indigenous communities, practices of self-location and "relational placing," or introducing oneself by outlining one's relationships to community and place, cultivate trust and accountability. Within research contexts, these practices also locate the researcher in relation to the work, the community, and broader systems of power and knowledge production (Fast & Kovach, 2019). Engaging in reflective examination of positionality is therefore essential when conducting research involving AI/AN communities.

**Relational Placing.** My connection to AI/AN communities is rooted the relationships I formed with elders, students, and families of the Quileute tribe while serving as a teaching

assistant on the La Push reservation. These relationships have deepened over the past decade and remain central to my personal and professional development. The Quileute community provided a powerful, foundational model of resilience and wellness that continues to shape my work as a researcher and clinician, and my ongoing relationships with members of the community continue to inform my understanding of relational accountability.

**Self-Location.** As a White, female school psychologist working in a profession historically positioned as both a “helping” and “teaching” field, my identity situates me within systems that have long assumed the authority of the researcher or professional as the “knower.” These identities create significant tensions in conducting research with AI/AN students. I am not only an outsider to the community of AI/AN undergraduate participants, but aspects of my identity also represent the legacy of colonization within this student community, evoking histories of forced boarding schools, cultural eradication, and harmful interventions carried out under the guise of “good intentions.” Additionally, as a White researcher, I carry the broader histories of exploitative and dehumanizing research conducted on Indigenous communities. Recognizing these tensions required ongoing reflexivity regarding power, interpretation, and representation throughout the research process. To support more equitable and relational research practices, participants’ own stories and interpretations were centered throughout the study. Students identified the stressors and resilience resources shaping their mental health experiences through interviews and sharing circles, positioning participants as primary knowledge holders regarding their own experiences and communities. Sharing circles were co-facilitated by an AI/AN collaborator to support culturally responsive storytelling practices and participant comfort. AI/AN student participants were also invited to engage in the analytic process in order to examine and challenge my interpretations of their narratives. Wilson’s (2008) reflective

questions regarding relational accountability, reciprocity, researcher responsibility, and obligations to participants (e.g. “How do my methods help build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?” p.77) guided ongoing reflexive examination of assumptions, decision-making, and accountability throughout the study.

My experiences collaborating with AI/AN students and tribal communities in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest as a teacher, youth advocate, school psychologist, and therapist have deepened my awareness of the ecological stressors AI/AN youth often encounter within predominantly White educational settings and the implications of these stressors for mental health and wellbeing. These experiences have also afforded me the privilege of witnessing the profound resilience reflected within tribal communities through cultural traditions, extended kinship networks, spirituality, collective responsibility, and enduring systems of relational support. These experiences informed the questions guiding the present study, which intentionally invited participants to speak to both the stressors emerging from majority-culture norms and institutional structures within university environments and the resilience rooted in cultural and community contexts. Finally, my training as a school psychologist shapes my orientation toward systems-level approaches to mental health and wellbeing. At the same time, psychology’s traditional emphasis on the *individual* as the primary locus of analysis presents tensions within this research, as constructs such as subjective wellbeing and psychological distress are often conceptualized as internal, individual experiences rather than fundamentally relational ones. To address this tension, the present study situated students’ experiences of wellbeing within broader relational, cultural, and ecological contexts and incorporated constructs of cultural resilience emphasizing the role of family relationships, spirituality, tribal identity, social support networks, and traditional practices in supporting wellbeing (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003).

## Study Setting and Participants

### *Establishing Place: Research Setting*

The present study was conducted at a large, public, predominantly White research institution in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States (PNWU; pseudonym). PNWU is situated on the ancestral lands of the Duwamish people, located within and partially funded by a state comprised of the territories of 29 federally recognized tribes, and historically tied to a region encompassing 8 additional tribal nations. As a national leader in the public higher education of AI/AN undergraduates, PNWU serves as a valuable setting to examine both the stressors and sources of resilience shaping the mental health of AI/AN college students and their corresponding academic successes and challenges (NCES, 2020).

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### *Participants*

Participants in this study were seven American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) undergraduate students enrolled at PNWU. Students participated as members of a cohort engaged in a broader student-driven action project funded by the PNWU Resilience and Compassion Seed Grant. Within this project, students collaborated with the researcher to explore the mental health challenges facing AI/AN students on campus and identify sources of stress and resilience shaping their wellbeing, evaluate a prevention-focused resilience and wellness course as a potential pathway of mental health support, and design student-determined interventions to promote AI/AN student resilience and wellbeing.

The present study focuses specifically on the narrative data generated during the first phase of the broader project, which involved examining students' experiences of stress and resilience within the university context. Participants contributed their lived experiences through interviews and sharing circles while also engaging in aspects of the broader project's

collaborative inquiry as participant-researchers. All participants identified as AI/AN undergraduate students and reported some level of involvement in AI/AN student organizations, Native community spaces, or Native student support programming. Efforts were made to include students representing diverse tribal affiliations, cultural backgrounds, academic standing, and personal backgrounds to capture a range of experiences within the AI/AN student population.

**Participant backgrounds.** Of the seven participants in this study, four were from Washington, one was from Oregon, one was from Colorado, and one was from Alaska. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old and represented academic standings from freshman to senior year. Six participants identified as female and one participant identified as a trans man. The following sections briefly introduce each students' demographic and cultural background and self-reported involvement in Native campus community. More detailed ecological narrative analyses integrating participants' stories with psychometric interpretation are presented in the results chapter. A summary of participants' ecological contexts and psychometric results is provided in Table 1 (Appendix E).

**Virginia.** Virginia was a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in environmental studies who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and White. She grew up in a rural reservation community in eastern Washington, living primarily with her White mother outside the reservation while maintaining close ties with her Native father and tribal community. She attended public school on the reservation, where she participated in language and cultural programming and remained actively connected to cultural practices and family relationships. At PNWU, Virginia occasionally attended Native student organization events and programming at the Native student center and at times met with Native faculty and the Native student academic advisor.

**Sylvia.** Sylvia was a 20-year-old sophomore majoring in public health who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and White. She grew up in a rural reservation community in eastern Washington, living between her mother's home in the nearby town and her paternal grandmother's home on the reservation. She attended public schools on the reservation, where she participated in Salish language and cultural programming, and described cultural teachings and practices as deeply embedded within her family relationships and daily life. At PNWU, Sylvia reported that she rarely joined Native student organization meetings but sometimes attended events organized by the student group and programming at the Native student center, and occasionally met with Native faculty for support.

**Hope.** Hope was a 25-year-old senior majoring in American Indian studies with a minor in education, learning, and society. She identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and White and described maintaining strong ties to her tribal community through family relationships, visits to the reservation, language learning, and involvement in Native advocacy and community organizations. On campus, Hope described the Native community at PNWU as her primary campus community and held leadership roles within the Native student organization and powwow committee while regularly organizing and facilitating group meetings, workshops, events, and cultural programming and engaging with Native faculty, staff, and student support resources through the Native student center.

**Forest.** Forest was a 20-year-old junior majoring in American Indian studies and environmental studies who identified as a nonbinary trans man and American Indian/Alaska Native, describing himself as a "mixed urban Native person." Raised in a major city in Oregon, he grew up actively involved in urban Native community organizations, powwows, and intertribal advocacy alongside his family while maintaining connections to his tribal

communities through regular visits to the reservation. At PNWU, Forest held leadership roles within the Native student organization and annual powwow committee and regularly organized and participated in cultural events and Native student programming. He also reported frequently meeting with Native faculty and accessing support through the Native student center.

**Lily.** Lily was a 20-year-old sophomore majoring in American Indian studies and environmental studies with a minor in education. She identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and described growing up in a suburban Washington community adjacent to a reservation belonging to a tribe with which she had no affiliation. Lily characterized herself as reconnecting with her culture after growing up with limited ties to her tribal community. At PNWU, she described herself as highly involved in the Native campus community through leadership roles within the Native student organization, employment at the Native student center, powwow participation, and ongoing engagement with Native faculty, advisors and support resources available through the Native student center.

**Joy.** Joy was a 20-year-old sophomore majoring in medical anthropology who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native and White. She grew up in a predominantly White semi-rural community in Colorado with limited exposure to Native community and described much of her cultural learning as “self-guided,” supported primarily through stories shared by her grandmother. On campus, Joy described herself as broadly involved in student activities and identified the Native student organization and Native student center as central aspects of her campus engagement, serving in leadership roles and regularly participating in Native student programming and support spaces. She also shared that she frequently met with Native faculty and at times sought guidance from the Native academic advisor.

**Grace.** Grace was a 19-year-old freshman in the honors program pursuing a pre-medical academic path who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, White, and Asian American. She grew up primarily in Alaska following her parents' divorce, while intermittently spending time with her mother and extended family on a reservation in Washington in her early childhood. Grace described experiencing limited and inconsistent engagement with Native cultural practices growing up and often feeling uncertain about her place within cultural communities. At PNWU, she reported attending Native student organization meetings and occasionally participating in organization events and programming at the Native student center, though she had limited involvement with Native faculty or campus support resources.

***Gathering Students: Recruitment Procedure***

The design of the present study sought to maintain relational accountability at all stages of the research process and therefore approached recruitment as a deliberately relational process embedded within the AI/AN campus community (Wilson, 2008). Recruitment procedures were designed to reflect respect, reciprocity, and responsibility toward the AI/AN community at PNWU while supporting the development of research relationships grounded in trust (Wilson, 2008). As Kovach (2009) emphasizes, research involving AI/AN communities should be situated “firmly within the nest of relationship” (p. 99). This relational orientation reframes recruitment from the selection of anonymous individuals toward the development of committed, mutual relationships centered on goals meaningful and relevant to the AI/AN campus community. Such accountability also requires reciprocity, ensuring that research contributes to or “gives back” to the community it engages. As Kovach (2009) asks, researchers must consider: “Did the research assist the community? Could the community make sense of the research?” (p.149). These

guiding considerations informed recruitment of student participants as collaborators within the broader project within which this study was situated.

Seven AI/AN undergraduate students were recruited to participate as a cohort of AI/AN student representatives within a collaborative project funded by the PNWU Resilience Lab aimed at identifying ways the university could better support the mental health and wellbeing of AI/AN students at PNWU. The PNWU Resilience Lab is a university-based collective of students, faculty, and staff that promotes student wellbeing through research, education, and campus-based programming while supporting student-led efforts to cultivate resilience and advocate for systemic change toward a more inclusive campus culture. The broader PNWU Resilience and Compassion Seed grant project had three primary goals: (1) establish a cohort of AI/AN undergraduates to identify mental health challenges and sources of stress affecting AI/AN students on the PNWU campus, as well as the sources of resilience they draw upon to cope with these stressors; (2) share relevant lessons from an existing wellness and resilience course aligned with student-identified concerns and needs; and (3) support the AI/AN student cohort in designing and proposing culturally centered, prevention-focused solutions for promoting AI/AN student wellbeing at PNWU. Participants joined the researcher as participant-researchers within this broader project; however, the scope of the present study is limited to the first goal.

Participation in both the project and the study required substantial time and emotional labor from AI/AN student participants. The stories, insights, and cultural knowledge shared by participants carry significant value for their communities as well as for the broader PNWU campus community. Within many Indigenous communities, offering a gift to storytellers conveys respect and recognizes the value of the knowledge shared. To demonstrate reciprocity and respect for participants' contributions, AI/AN student participants were compensated

through the PNWU Resilience and Compassion Seed Grant at an hourly rate consistent with campus student employment.

**Recruitment Procedure.** Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with existing AI/AN student organizations, AI/AN faculty and staff, and university-based AI/AN student support programs. The researcher contacted AI/AN student associations, the AI/AN student center, campus-based AI/AN student support programs, the American Indian Studies department, and AI/AN academic advisors to request assistance sharing information about the seed grant project and study through listservs, student meetings, or other communication channels. Recruitment materials included a digital flyer describing the project's purpose, information about the researcher, and a link to a Google Form allowing interested students to request additional information. Organizations with digital or social media platforms were also asked to share the flyer and survey link through online channels. Similar strategies have been identified as effective for engaging AI/AN students in research (Salis Reyes, 2019; Tachine, 2015).

Consistent with Indigenous relational protocols, recruitment extended beyond distributing recruitment materials to establishing personal connections with prospective participants. Kovach (2009) notes that "for a story to surface, there must be trust" (p. 99). Within many Indigenous communities, this trust is built through a protocol of "relational placing" in which individuals introduce themselves by outlining their connections to community, place, and Indigeneity. Relational placing functions as a form of relational accountability ensuring that "both community and researcher are known to each other" (Fast & Kovach, 2013, p.22). To honor this practice, individual virtual meetings were scheduled with each student who expressed interest through the Google Form. These meetings provided an opportunity for the researcher to introduce herself, share her connections to AI/AN communities, describe the goals and structure of the seed grant

project and corresponding study, and answer students' questions. Establishing these initial relationships allowed participants to determine whether they felt comfortable engaging in the study and helped situate the research process within a broader network of relationships surrounding the AI/AN student community (Tachine, 2015). During these meetings, students were also informed about opportunities to participate as co-researchers within the broader project, including involvement in aspects of data analysis, authorship on future manuscripts, and potential use of findings for student advocacy or campus programming. Students were also told about the hourly compensation available through the seed grant project. Those who elected to participate then scheduled an individual interview.

**Sampling Strategy.** The study employed a combination of snowball sampling and purposeful sampling to identify participants. Snowball sampling drew upon the interconnected networks surrounding and supporting AI/AN students at PNWU, including AI/AN faculty, advisors, support staff, and student organization leaders who were familiar with students with rich experiences and an interest in discussing issues related to mental health and wellbeing (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2001). Furthermore, engaging with students' extended support networks served as additional opportunities for relational placing and fostering a greater sense of trust, familiarity, and comfort with the researcher, study, and project. These stakeholders were provided information about the project, offered an opportunity to meet virtually, and invited to refer or share the opportunity with students who might be interested. Joined participants were also encouraged to share information about the project with other AI/AN students in their networks and to bridge connections with interested peers. Snowball sampling has been shown to be effective for recruiting AI/AN college students in research contexts (Oxendine, 2015; Tucker et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling was used to confirm that participants identified as AI/AN

undergraduates at PNWU and to capture a range of experiences within the AI/AN student population. Recruitment efforts intentionally sought students connected to AI/AN student organizations or related campus programming, suggesting that AI/AN identity was an active component of their student experience. Efforts were also made to include students representing diverse tribal affiliations, enculturation levels, academic years, home community contexts, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Patton, 2002; Salis Reyes, 2019).

### **Gathering Stories: Methods of Data Generation**

Data for this study was generated through three sources: semi-structured individual interviews, sharing circles, and a background survey. Together, these methods provided opportunities for participants to share stories of their experiences as AI/AN students at PNWU in both individual and collective contexts, while also providing contextual information about participants' backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews (Drywater Whitekiller, 2010; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018; Tachine, 2015) and sharing circles (Tachine et al., 2016; Waterman, 2019) have been successfully used in prior research with AI/AN college students to explore students' perceptions of their experiences at PWIs and to identify both the risk and protective factors shaping those experiences.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Following the initial introductory meeting, each AI/AN student participant completed one semi-structured individual interview to gather initial stories of their experiences. Interviews are commonly used within narrative inquiry because they create "narrative occasions" in which speaker and listener collaboratively construct meaning through dialogue, allowing participants to develop rich, extended storied accounts of their experiences through this interaction (McCance et al., 2001; Riessman, 2008; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). This relational framing aligns with

Indigenous scholarship emphasizing that knowledge emerges through relationships and shared engagement rather than extraction of information (Wilson, 2008). Accordingly, interviews in this study were approached as relational conversations that prioritized attentive listening, respect for participants' knowledge, and collaborative meaning-making. Interviewing is also widely used within mental health practice as a means of building therapeutic relationships and understanding psychological functioning, making it a particularly appropriate approach for gathering stories related to AI/AN students' mental health experiences (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide a flexible and participant-centered format for gathering stories relevant to students' mental health experiences. While guided by prepared questions, the semi-structured format allows researchers to adjust the sequence of questions, clarify ideas, and ask additional questions as stories unfold, cultivating "long sections of talk" (Bhattacharya, 2017; McCance et al., 2001; Riessman, 2008). This relaxed and balanced format positions the researcher to "open up topics" while encouraging participants to shape the direction and depth of the conversation, allowing stories to "breathe" as narrators determine what is shared and when (Kovach, 2009, p. 99). By relinquishing rigid control over the interview structure and following participants "down their trails," researchers create space for richer and more contextualized accounts of experience while sharing power with participants and fostering greater reciprocity and relational accountability within the research relationship (Riessman, 2008, p. 24; Tachine, 2015; Wilson, 2008).

**Interview Protocol.** A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to provide consistency across interviews while maintaining flexibility to follow participants' unique narratives and probe for additional detail to cultivate "extended accounts of lives in context" over the course of conversation (Riessman, 2008, p.6). The protocol included broad, open-ended

questions with targeted follow-up prompts designed to elicit deeper stories about participants' experiences of stressors, resilience resources, psychological distress, and wellbeing in the PNWU campus environment. Open-ended questions were intentionally used to encourage participants to share stories in their own words and according to their own narrative structure, unencumbered by the research framing. Leaving the questions open, interpretable and directable by the participants aligns with Indigenous storytelling traditions by empowering participants to determine how their experiences and knowledge are communicated rather than constraining responses within rigid question-answer formats (Brayboy, 2005). Interview questions were informed by relevant literature as well as the researcher's professional experiences working with AI/AN students and tribal communities in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest as an educator, therapist, and instructor of an undergraduate wellness and resilience course. The protocol was piloted and iteratively revised in consultation with an AI/AN psychologist, an AI/AN graduate student in the field of public health, and an AI/AN undergraduate attending a large public PWI similar to PNWU. The initial interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

### ***Background Survey***

Participants completed a brief background survey following their individual interview using an electronic survey platform (Appendix B). The survey gathered demographic and contextual information to situate each participants' narrative within their broader cultural and educational background. Initial questions asked participants to report their age, gender, tribal affiliation and enrollment status, current class standing, birthplace and upbringing, current place of residence (e.g. on-reservation, off-reservation, rural, suburban, or urban), type of K-12 schooling attended (e.g. tribal, public, BIE, private, religious, etc.), and how they self-identify (e.g. American Indian, Alaska Native, Native American, biracial, multiracial, etc.).

**Measures.** The survey also included several validated measures to provide additional perspective on participants' cultural identification, enculturation, and experiences of culturally specific stressors. These measures included the American Indian Bicultural Inventory (AIBI), American Indian Enculturation Scale (AIES), Adolescent Historical Loss Scale (A-HLS), Historical Loss Associated Symptoms Scale (HLASS), and the Cultural Involvement and Detachment Anxiety Questionnaire (CIDAQ). Collectively, these measures helped contextualize participants' narratives by providing insight into cultural identity, engagement with traditional practices, and experiences of macrolevel stressors such as historical loss and acculturative stress. Responses were used descriptively to place participants' stories within their cultural and ecological context rather than as variables for statistical analysis.

***Critical constraints of psychometric tools.*** Although the majority of the measures included in the survey were developed in close collaboration with Native communities or by Indigenous scholars themselves, the use of psychometric assessment within AI/AN mental health research nevertheless warrants critical reflexive consideration. Measures included in the present study such as the HLASS, A-HLS, and AIES were developed through substantial engagement with Native communities and drew directly from Indigenous participants' descriptions of culturally specific experiences, values, and forms of distress and resilience (Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012; Whitbeck et al., 2004; Whitbeck et al., 2009). At the same time, these instruments remain embedded within broader Western psychometric traditions that rely on categorization, quantification, and the operationalization of complex cultural experiences into measurable constructs. Indigenous scholars have cautioned that Western research and measurement practices are historically intertwined with colonial projects of classification, extraction, and representation that position Indigenous peoples as objects of study rather than

knowledge holders (Smith, 2012). Such approaches may inadvertently reproduce colonial logics by positioning Indigeneity, cultural connection, or “authenticity” as traits that can be objectively measured, standardized, or compared across highly heterogeneous tribal, cultural, and historical contexts. These concerns are particularly relevant in research involving enculturation, biculturalism, and cultural involvement, where fixed or linear conceptualizations of Native identity may reinforce narrow assumptions about what constitutes “real” or legitimate Indigenous identity (TallBear, 2013). Additionally, quantitative measures may flatten the relational, contextual, and dynamic nature of Indigenous wellbeing by privileging individual-level responses over community-embedded and place-based understandings of health.

Despite these limitations, the continued use of culturally grounded psychometric tools may still offer important value when employed reflexively and cautiously, particularly in contexts where quantitative methods remain necessary for documenting inequities, examining relationships between culturally relevant constructs and mental health outcomes, and advocating for institutional recognition of AI/AN students’ experiences. In the present study, these measures were therefore used not as definitive or exhaustive representations of Native identity or wellbeing, nor as categorical systems of classification, but as imperfect, community-informed tools intended to provide contextual information in support of a broader inquiry grounded primarily in participants’ lived narratives and interpretations of their own experiences.

***American Indian Biculturalism Inventory.*** The American Indian Biculturalism Inventory (AIBI; Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Oetting et al., 1998) assesses cultural identification across two cultural dimensions: American Indian Cultural Identification (AICI) and European American Cultural Identification (EACI). The 23-item scale measures participants’ comfort with cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and customs associated with each dimension, allowing

individuals to be characterized along a continuum of cultural orientations including traditional (i.e. high AICI and low EACI), assimilated (i.e. low AICI and high EACI), bicultural (i.e. high AICI and EACI), and marginalized (i.e. low AICI and EACI). Responses are rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (no comfort) to 4 (complete comfort). The AIBI has been used with heterogeneous AI/AN populations such as those found on PWI campuses and demonstrates strong internal consistency (Rose, 2015). Subscale means were calculated for both AICI and EACI domains to characterize participants' cultural identification patterns. Because participants represented a broad spectrum of indigeneity, interpretation relied on theoretical benchmarks rather than sample-derived medians to allow for more nuanced interpretation across individuals with varying degrees of cultural affiliation. Following conventions in bicultural and acculturation research (e.g., Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Martell, 2020), mean scores of 1.00–1.49 were interpreted as *very low identification*, 1.50–2.24 as *moderately low*, 2.25–2.99 as *moderate*, 3.00–3.49 as *moderately high*, and 3.50–4.00 as *very high* cultural identification.

***American Indian Enculturation Scale.*** The American Indian Enculturation Scale (AIES; Winderowd et al., 2008) is a 17-item measure assessing participation in cultural and spiritual tribal activities, including ceremonies, prayer, language use, and engagement with other American Indians (Winderowd et al., 2008). Participants rate their level of involvement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal), with higher scores indicating greater participation in traditional cultural practices. The AIES has demonstrated strong internal consistency among AI/AN university student samples and has been used clinically to inform culturally responsive mental health interventions (Winderowd et al., 2008).

***Adolescent Historical Loss and Historical Loss Associated Symptoms Scales.*** The Adolescent Historical Loss Scale (A-HLS) and Historical Loss Associated Symptom Scale

(HLASS) measures thoughts and emotional responses related to historical trauma experienced by Indigenous communities (Whitbeck et al., 2004). The 12-item A-HLS measures how frequently individuals think about specific historical losses such as loss of land, language, and culture. Participants rate each item on a reverse-scored scale ranging from 1 (*several times a day*) to 6 (*never*), with higher scores reflecting more frequent thoughts about historical loss. The HLASS is a complementary 17-item self-report measure assessing affective responses associated with these thoughts, including sadness, anger, anxiety, and shame. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), with higher scores reflecting greater emotional distress associated with historical loss (Whitbeck et al., 2004). Both measures have demonstrated strong reliability and internal consistency in studies with AI/AN adolescents and AI/AN students (Armenta et al., 2016; Tucker et al., 2016; Whitbeck et al., 2004; 2009).

***Native American Cultural Involvement and Detachment Anxiety Questionnaire.*** The Cultural Involvement and Detachment Anxiety Questionnaire (CIDAQ; McNeill et al., 2000) is a 20-item self-report measure assessing anxiety related to navigating multiple cultural contexts among AI/AN individuals (McNeill et al., 2000). The instrument captures anxiety-related distress associated with engagement in both tribal and majority cultural environments across domains such as cultural knowledge, social involvement, and economic issues (McNeill et al., 2000). Participants rate each item on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never have anxiety/worry*) to 8 (*always have anxiety/worry*), with higher scores reflecting greater acculturation anxiety. The CIDAQ has shown strong internal consistency and reliability among samples of AI/AN college students representing diverse tribal affiliations (McNeil et al., 2000).

### ***Sharing Circles***

After completing individual semi-structured interviews, AI/AN student participants also participated in two sharing circles as an additional method of data generation. Within narrative inquiry, repeated conversations over time are often used to deepen understanding of participants' lived experiences and support richer story development (Riessman, 2008). Sharing circles were incorporated to complement individual interviews by creating a relational and communal storytelling space that aligned with the study's emphasis on contextualized, storied understandings of students' mental health experiences (Tachine et al., 2016).

Sharing circles have long served as "traditional communication tools" within Indigenous communities to identify challenges and discern solutions through culturally centered styles of collective dialogue grounded in reciprocity, respect, and support (Rothe et al., 2009; Tachine et al., 2016). As a research method, sharing circles use "an open-structured conversational style" that facilitates storytelling while respecting cultural protocols and relational responsibilities among participants (Kovach, 2009; Rothe et al., 2009; Tachine et al., 2016). This format fosters "fluidity in the formation of stories" by encouraging participants to respond to and build upon one another's narratives (Tachine et al., 2016, p.281). Within this process, "sharing" is understood not simply as the expression of individual experience, but as a relational act reflecting the interconnectedness of participants' stories and a collective responsibility to share knowledge for the wellbeing of others, offering an "interdependent perspective" (Tachine et al., 2016, p.281). In this way, sharing circles respected Indigenous collectivistic worldviews while drawing upon storytelling traditions that ensured "listening and understanding are on Native people's terms" (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 793).

Within the present study, sharing circles enabled participants to weave together stories to capture “the rich and complex contours of experience,” thickening narratives shared during individual interviews by respecting students' sense of self in relation to others and generating collective understandings of shared mental health experiences among AI/AN undergraduates at PNWU (Tachine et al., 2016, p.289; Wilson, 2008). Unlike conventional focus groups, sharing circles emphasize intentional relationship-building and interconnectedness among participants and facilitators, creating a more equitable conversational space that fosters a synergistic group process and encourages deeper, more nuanced, and authentic responses (Archibald, 2008; Rieth, 2023). By decreasing invisibility and avoiding privileging one perspective over another, the circle method further supports findings that are more representative of participants' lived experiences (Brown & DiLallo, 2020). These methodological commitments informed both the structure and facilitation approach used in the present study, including participant involvement in reviewing questions and procedures, incorporation of cultural protocols and relational placing, shared decision-making regarding timing and pacing of circles, co-facilitation by an AI/AN psychologist, and emphasis on reciprocal, relational engagement among facilitators and students.

**Sharing Circles Protocol.** A sharing circle guide outlining the general structure and guiding questions was developed to elicit participants' stories of stress, resilience, and wellbeing within the PNWU campus environment (Tachine et al., 2016). Consistent with the interview protocol, questions were open-ended to enable participants to share experiences in their own words and on their own terms (Rieth, 2023). Each sharing circle was limited to five broad guiding questions to maintain an “egalitarian, supportive, and non-confrontational” conversational environment and ensure that no clear distinction existed between the facilitators and participants who are equal (Rothe et al., 2009, p. 336-7). Facilitators used flexible follow-up

prompts included in the protocol when appropriate to support the “fluidity of storytelling” and allow students to guide the direction of the conversation (Tachine et al., 2016, p. 288).

Drawing on guidance from Tachine and colleagues (2016), the sharing circle protocol and practice incorporated three essential “anchors”: *recognition* of cultural protocols (e.g. introductions, requesting permission, seeking feedback on questions, establishing duration, structure, setting, and timing of circles, providing food and gifting), *relationship* building among participants, facilitators, and the communities they represented, and *responsibility* for maintaining cultural appropriateness and meaningfulness of the collaborative project. All three “anchors” were woven into the structure of the sharing circle protocol and process discussed in subsequent sections. The protocol (including structure and guiding questions) was developed in collaboration with an AI/AN psychologist who had recently graduated from a similar predominantly White, public, research institution and previously co-facilitated a skills-based wellness and resilience curriculum with tribal college students. It was subsequently reviewed by an AI/AN graduate student experienced in conducting sharing circles within tribal community health centers to incorporate his insight regarding the appropriateness of the protocol structure and guiding questions. The drafted sharing circle protocol was shared with participants who were invited to give feedback and make changes to both the structure and guiding questions prior to the first circle. The full sharing circle protocol is provided in Appendix C and elaboration of the procedural tenets following Tachine’s (2016) anchors will be discussed in the procedure section.

***AI/AN co-facilitation.*** Within Indigenous research traditions, respecting cultural protocol and maintaining relational accountability in the use of sharing circles required explicit attention to the researcher’s positionality as a non-Native scholar and outsider to the AI/AN student community at PNWU. Scholars emphasize that sharing circles are most effective when

facilitated by individuals who embody “a genuine and shared sense of history, culture, values, beliefs, action patterns and pragmatic issues embedded in participants’ lives” (Rothe et al., 2009, p. 338). This shared cultural understanding and lived experience enables the facilitator to participate as an equal in the sharing process, allowing their perspective and contributions to authentically shape the collective stories generated (Rothe et al, 2009).

To support culturally appropriate facilitation, the sharing circles were co-facilitated by an AI/AN psychologist who recently completed her doctoral degree in clinical psychology from a comparable PWI and previously collaborated with the researcher in teaching adapted wellness and resilience curriculum lessons at two tribal colleges in the Midwest. Her experience as an AI/AN student at a large public PWI and her professional expertise in culturally responsive mental health practice contributed valuable perspective to the facilitation of the circles. Although differences in tribal affiliation, institutional affiliation, and professional roles positioned the co-facilitator simultaneously as both insider and outsider, Indigenous scholars note that such “complex and tensional” positions are common within research contexts exploring issues within AI/AN communities, concluding that AI/AN researchers bring knowledge and awareness of the nuances of AI/AN experiences that enable them to engage in research in culturally appropriate and meaningful ways (Tachine et al., 2016, p. 279). As Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) observe, “Indigenous people, both as researchers and participants, hold the keys to getting, analyzing, and reporting ‘good data’ in qualitative and ethnographic studies examining their lived experiences” (p.168). The co-facilitator’s presence, as an AI/AN psychologist and researcher in addition to her own experiences as an undergraduate on a PWI campus, helped build rapport with participants, facilitate discussion of sensitive topics related to mental health in a culturally informed manner, and generate rich, storied experiences of participants.

### **Process of Gathering Stories: Study Procedure**

To understand the mental health landscape of AI/AN undergraduates at PNWU from students' own perspectives, the present study gathered stories through individual interviews and sharing circles within a narrative inquiry approach. Consistent with Indigenous scholarship emphasizing the relational and contextual nature of storytelling, these conversations were approached as relational processes that prioritized attentive listening, emotional engagement, empathy, and respect for participants' knowledge and lived experiences (Archibald, 2008; Tachine, 2015). Brayboy (2005) emphasizes that gathering stories as data requires not only "listening" but truly "hearing" stories, receiving them in their fullness and recognizing their value, authority, and nuance rather than mining them for fragments of knowledge (Kovach, 2009). Archibald (2008) similarly explains that listening involves emotional and relational engagement with the storyteller, requiring "three ears: two on the sides of our head and one in our heart" (p. 8). Accordingly, the present study sought to create space for participants to share stories in ways that supported relational engagement, collaborative meaning-making, and respect for the integrity of participants' narratives.

### ***Interview Process***

Each of the seven student participants completed semi-structured individual interview. Interviews were conducted in person in student-selected locations on campus to ensure privacy and comfort when discussing sensitive topics related to university-based sources of stress and mental health experiences. The researcher offered participants light refreshments (e.g. tea/coffee, snacks), a common practice of reciprocity and respect across many AI/AN communities when visiting and sharing stories (Marsiglia et al., 1999).

At the outset of each interview, the researcher expressed gratitude for participants' willingness to share their experiences and emphasized how their stories could contribute to improving mental health support services for AI/AN students at PNWU. Framing participation as an act of "giving back" acknowledged a core cultural value across many AI/AN communities that emphasizes the interrelatedness of all things and teaches that knowledge and personal gifts are shared to honor relations and benefit future generations (Brayboy et al., 2012; Guillory, 2008; Salis-Reyes, 2019). Recognizing students' contributions in this way affirmed culturally grounded motivations for dedicating time and energy to the project while demonstrating respect for Indigenous values and ways of knowing, the project's commitment to reciprocity and community relevance, and reverence for participants and the power of their stories to inform change (Archibald, 2008). Although participants had previously met with the researcher during recruitment meetings, the researcher briefly reintroduced herself and relationally placed herself by describing her connection to the project and her relationships with AI/AN communities. The informed consent form was then reviewed, including the purpose of the study, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Participants provided written consent to participate and to have their interview and sharing circles audio recorded.

Following these introductory steps, the interview protocol described earlier was used to guide the conversation. Riessman (2008) describes interviewing itself as an "interpretive practice" in which researchers, through their presence and the ways they listen and ask questions, "critically shape the stories participants choose to tell" (p. 47). Accordingly, the researcher engaged in spontaneous analysis and reflexive reflection throughout the interview process, asking follow-up questions and offering summaries to clarify meaning while checking emerging interpretations to ensure an accurate understanding of participants' stories (Brayboy, 2005).

Because participants often shared personal, vulnerable, and at times painful experiences related to mental health and campus stressors, the researcher drew upon her clinical training to respond with empathy, warmth, and genuineness so that participants felt authentically supported, heard, and understood within the interview relationship.

Field notes were recorded during interviews to capture the holism of the conversation by noting initial impressions, emerging ideas, and the unspoken context of the interaction.

Interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. Although interviews were scheduled for approximately 90 minutes, participants were invited to continue sharing until they felt their stories had been fully expressed, consistent with cultural protocols that prioritize relationships over rigid time structures (Tachine, 2015). All student participants chose to extend their interviews, which ultimately ranged from approximately two to three hours.

### ***Sharing Circle Process***

Following completion of the individual interviews, participants were invited to take part in sharing circles facilitated by the researcher and the AI/AN co-facilitator. Scholars emphasize that, unlike focus groups, sharing circles require relationships that are “much larger and more expansive” than routine rapport building, and that prior relationships among participants and with facilitators are beneficial because they build trust by cultivating interpersonal and cultural familiarity (Tachine et al., 2016). In the present study, many participants already shared relationships through their involvement in AI/AN student organizations and campus programming or home community contexts; sharing circles were intentionally facilitated after individual interviews to give time and space for participants to develop a mutual relationship with the researcher. Together, these existing and newly formed relationships fostered trust,

familiarity, and authentic connection among participants and facilitators, creating a foundation that could be deepened within the sharing circle protocol.

Participants selected the timing and location of the sharing circles. The sharing circles were held in person at the Intellectual House, a longhouse-style facility on campus designed as an Indigenized space for AI/AN students, staff, and faculty. Conducting the circle in this setting supported a culturally grounded environment where participants expressed an established sense of belonging and familiarity. Consistent with the interview process, food and beverages were provided, as well as a small gift of medicinal tea, to respect cultural protocol and demonstrate reciprocity (Marsiglia et al., 1999; Tachine et al., 2016). The AI/AN co-facilitator opened the circle with a prayer and invited students to smudge as they joined the circle. Following the facilitators welcomed participants, expressed gratitude for their continued participation, and reiterated how their stories would “give back” to their community by informing mental health supports for AI/AN students at PNWU. Participants and facilitators then introduced themselves through relational placing by sharing where they were from, their tribal and familial connections, and their relationship to the project. During these introductions, students were invited to express themselves in their Native language (Tachine et al., 2016).

Guiding questions from the sharing circle protocol were introduced by the facilitators one at a time. Turn-taking between speakers was supported through the use of a sacred talking object that was passed among participants (Rothe et al., 2009). The researcher offered a hand-carved rattle shaped as a canoe paddle that had been gifted to her by the Quileute tribe during her time working with the community. Canoes hold deep cultural significance among many Pacific Northwest tribes as both living cultural traditions and symbols of community, cultural identity, and intergenerational knowledge (Donovan et al., 2015). They also represent cultural resilience

through the annual Tribal Canoe Journeys, an intertribal gathering in which canoe families travel their ancestral waterways to a hosting tribal nation to share songs, dances, and stories. At PNWU, AI/AN students, staff, and faculty participate in these journeys through the Shell House Canoe Family, čawayaltxʷ ʔiışəd. Participants holding the sacred object were encouraged to “speak from the heart,” “speak spontaneously” to resist rehearsing their contributions and ensure mindful listening of others’ stories, and “speak leanly” to share stories without embellishment (Rothe et al., 2009). Students were also invited to “listen from the heart” by listening non-judgmentally, respectfully, and actively to hear and connect with others’ stories (Rothe et al., 2009). Facilitators followed these same guidelines as equal circle participants alongside students.

While two to three hours were allotted for the initial sharing circle, students were given decision-making power to extend the discussion to ensure everyone had the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences. Allowing additional time prioritized the relationship over the research agenda, centering Indigenous relationality by respecting mutual decision-making, honoring cultural protocol, and maintaining relational accountability (Tachine et al., 2016; Waterman, 2019). Participants elected to extend the first circle to approximately 3.5 hours before the facility closed and scheduled a second sharing circle to complete discussions related to resilience resources, existing campus mental health services, and the potential value of a resilience course for AI/AN students. The second sharing circle followed the same procedures as the first. Throughout the process, facilitators engaged genuinely with participants by sharing personal experiences and reflections and offering words of support when students shared difficult experiences or expressed heavy emotions. This approach reflects the relational anchors of respect, responsibility, and cultural protocol that guide sharing circle practice and helped cultivate an environment that supported open and authentic storytelling (Tachine et al., 2016).

### ***Transcription Process***

Semi-structured interviews and sharing circles were audio-recorded and transcribed using a transcription service company (Sonix) to support data analysis. Participants granted permission to audio-record discussions during the consent process. To protect confidentiality, transcripts were de-identified using pseudonyms. All de-identified transcripts were uploaded to qualitative analysis software (Delve) to facilitate data organization and coding. Reissman (2008) describes transcription as an “interpretative practice” that attempts to capture complex interactions in written form and is therefore necessarily “incomplete, partial, and selective—constructed by an investigator” (p.50). To maintain respect and relational accountability, care was taken to ensure that transcriptions accurately reflected participants’ stories and that the researcher remained accountable for potential interpretative errors. Each participant received transcripts of their individual interview and the sharing circles to review for accuracy and comfort with the use of their full stories in the analysis (Tachine, 2015). Participants were invited to make corrections, clarifications, or additions to their transcripts as needed (Tachine, 2015). Using the comment function, the researcher noted initial observations, posed questions for clarification, and engaged participants in member checking of preliminary interpretations of their stories. Participants could respond to these prompts with their own comments, and any additional text provided through this process was incorporated into the transcripts prior to coding.

### ***Meaning Making of Stories: Data Analysis***

Stories generated through individual interviews and sharing circles were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry views stories as both a means through which individuals make sense of lived experiences and a way of communicating that meaning to others, with narrative analysis seeking to construct meaning from stories while

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guiding researchers to "think beyond the surface of the text" toward broader commentary (Meraz et al., 2019; Riessman, 2008, p. 13). Rather than fragmenting narratives into isolated thematic segments, narrative analysis keeps stories "intact for interpretive purposes" by "theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53), an emphasis that aligns with Indigenous analytic approaches prioritizing relational and holistic ways of knowing that attend to "an entire system of relationships as a whole" rather than fracturing it into smaller parts to be pieced together to form a new understanding (Wilson, 2008).

Among Riessman's (2008) narrative analytic approaches, thematic analysis was selected because the content of students' stories was central to the research questions. Anchored in each individual story, this approach allowed the researcher to listen for themes surfacing within each student's narrative while attending to patterns emerging across narratives, keeping students' voices and lived experiences centered in the findings. Themes developed within and across stories were informed by the study's conceptual framework, prior theory and research, the inquiry purpose, and the researcher's ongoing relationship with the AI/AN student participant cohort (Riessman, 2008). As such, analytic categories were not derived through purely inductive analysis alone but emerged through iterative engagement between participant-generated meaning, ecological coding processes, clinician-informed case conceptualization, psychometric interpretation, guiding theoretical frameworks, and ongoing researcher reflexivity.

Formal analysis unfolded across three iterative phases designed to preserve the depth of individual narratives while identifying broader patterns across participants. Each phase built sequentially upon the last. Prior to the first phase of coding, the researcher spent time "wallowing" in the data through repeated transcript review and analytic memo writing to capture initial observations, impressions, and developing themes. Drawing on clinical training, these

early memos often took the form of informal case conceptualizations that catalogued participant-described indicators of distress and languishing, identified strengths and dimensions of wellbeing, contextualized students' experiences within their biopsychosocial environments, and applied theory to map potential underlying drivers of presenting mental health concerns. Initial memos supported early insight into students' mental health within their unique ecological contexts while also helping identify preliminary patterns within and across narratives.

Consistent with qualitative and narrative inquiry approaches, the analytic focus of the study evolved through ongoing engagement with participants' narratives. Although the interview protocol included questions regarding participants' family histories, self-identification, cultural experiences, proximity to and involvement in Native and tribal communities, and intergenerational experiences of historical and cultural losses in order to capture students' broader background and contextualize their campus experiences, initial analysis focused primarily on identifying sources of stress and resilience relevant to students' mental health and wellbeing. Through in vivo and descriptive coding, ecological mapping, analytic memo writing, and within- and cross-case comparison, recurring patterns emerged regarding students' ecological contexts, relationships to Native culture and community, and experiences of stress and resilience. Participants frequently situated their experiences within discussions of family histories, community connections, experiences of cultural continuity and disruption, and processes of reconnection.

As narratives, ecological maps, and analytic memos were compared across cases, similarities and differences in students' ecological experiences became increasingly salient. Recurring patterns also emerged in how students described stress, resilience, and mental health and wellbeing within the PWI environment, and these patterns appeared closely connected to

broader ecological experiences reflected across participants' narratives. In particular, students' descriptions of family histories, community contexts, cultural continuity, cultural disruption, and reconnection appeared intertwined with how they understood and navigated stressors, narrated resilience resources, and interpreted their mental health experiences. These comparisons suggested that students' relationships to Native culture and Native community were closely intertwined with the broader ecological experiences reflected throughout their narratives. Rather than functioning as isolated dimensions of identity, relationships to culture and community were understood as part of students' family histories, community contexts, and life experiences unfolding across multiple ecological systems. These emergent patterns prompted a reconceptualization of the third research question from a broader focus on AI/AN identity to a more explicit examination of how students described their relationships to Native culture and Native community and how these relationships shaped experiences of stress and resilience.

**Phase One: Interpreting Individual Narratives.** The first phase focused on within-case analysis of each student's narrative. Each transcript was reviewed as a whole to interpret how participants described their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them (Merriam, 2009; Tachine, 2015). Using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), the researcher engaged in coding narrative segments while remaining rooted within each participant's individual story, listening for the content of what was said while preserving the integrity of the narrative as a whole. Themes were interpreted within the broader context of each student's story rather than extracted and analyzed independently of the narrative from which they emerged.

The first cycle of open, inductive coding utilized a combination of in vivo and descriptive coding. In vivo codes preserved participants' language, while descriptive codes summarized key narrative content using concise words or phrases (Saldaña, 2013). Coding focused on students'

descriptions of stressors, resilience resources, mental health and wellbeing, as well as family, cultural, community, and educational experiences. This initial coding process prioritized participants' own language and meanings while remaining grounded in the narrative context from which coded segments were drawn.

Following this first cycle of coding, related descriptive and in vivo codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories that captured recurring patterns within each participant's narrative. These thematic categories remained closely tied to participant-generated meaning while also incorporating researcher interpretation informed by prior literature, the study's conceptual framework, and ongoing analytic reflection. For example, multiple participant-generated descriptions within an individual narrative involving separation from family, disconnection from a predominantly Native community, culture shock, disconnection from peers and campus, and difficulties finding belonging on campus might be interpreted and organized under a broader thematic category such as cultural isolation. Analytic reflection questions informed by the conceptual framework and research questions served as an interpretative lens during this stage (Frost, 2021; Riessman, 2008), encouraging the researcher to move beyond the surface of participants' responses and attend to both explicit and implicit meanings embedded within participants' stories. While initial coding prioritized participant language and meanings, subsequent interpretive work involved increasing integration of the ecological framework, psychosociocultural theory, and clinician-informed conceptualization. These lenses helped deepen understanding of participants' narratives within their multilevel ecological contexts. Drawing on the researcher's clinical training, the analytic questions prompted attention to how students described their mental health experiences both explicitly and implicitly, the affective and cognitive responses accompanying experiences of stress and

adversity, and the proximal, distal, and temporal contexts shaping those experiences. This ecological lens supported interpretation of how students' stories referenced not only immediate stressors but also broader institutional, cultural, social, and ideological conditions affecting their mental health and wellbeing within the PWI setting, including influences operating across multiple ecological levels of students' lived experiences. Initial codes were broadly organized by research question around categories reflecting stressors, resilience resources, mental health and wellbeing experiences, and background context, providing a preliminary structure for subsequent thematic interpretation.

Following initial coding of each interview, analytic memos were developed for each participant to organize emerging narrative themes within the study's conceptual framework, creating an analytic structure that later facilitated comparative narrative patterning across cases (Riessman, 2008). Stressor-related themes were mapped by ecological location informed by Fish & Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model, while resilience-related themes were catalogued as psychological, social, or cultural resources according to Gloria & Rodriguez's (2000) PSC framework. Analytic memos also attended to participant-described indicators of psychological distress, diminished wellbeing, and flourishing reflected throughout students' narratives of their mental health experiences.

Although coding focused primarily on identifying sources of stress and resilience, analytic memos and ecological maps also documented participants' descriptions of life histories, family contexts, community experiences, descriptions of cultural engagement, identity narratives, and sociocultural contexts. These materials supported preliminary interpretations regarding students' relationships to Native culture and Native community as situated within their multilevel ecological experiences. Consistent with narrative inquiry, these interpretations

emerged through engagement with participants' narratives as whole stories rather than through the application of a single discrete code. Information gathered through the background survey was also incorporated into analytic memos to further contextualize each student's narrative. Scores from validated measures of cultural identity, enculturation, historical loss thinking, and acculturation stress were used to enrich interpretation of students' experiences within their broader sociocultural context. This phase resulted in a detailed narrative profile for each participant consisting of in vivo and descriptive codes, thematic category summaries, ecological maps and psychosociocultural resource inventories (see Figure 4 below), survey contextual information, narrative summaries, and analytic memos. Together these materials provided a holistic understanding of each student's ecology through which experiences of stress, resilience, psychological distress, wellbeing, culture, and community could be understood within the context of students' lives.

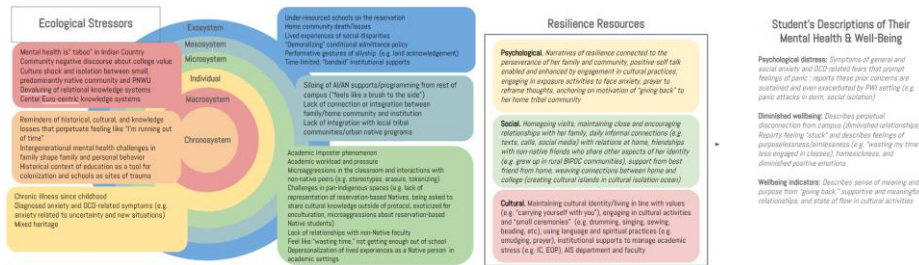


Figure 4. Example of visual accompanying analytic memo

Analytic memos also supported development of higher-order narrative interpretations that captured broader stress and resilience processes reflected across each participant's story. These interpretations synthesized multiple related thematic categories, ecological influences, and contextual experiences to illuminate how students experienced and navigated stress and resilience within their unique ecological contexts. These narrative-level interpretations were documented within participants' narrative profiles and subsequently examined across cases

through comparative narrative patterning. These narrative profiles served as the foundation for the next phase of analysis, in which ecological maps, analytic memos, and narrative summaries were compared across participants to identify recurring patterns and variations across cases.

**Phase Two: Cross-Case Narrative Comparison.** Building upon the ecological narrative profiles developed during Phase One, the second phase shifted from within-case interpretation toward cross-case narrative comparison. Narrative summaries, ecological maps, psychosociocultural resource inventories, coded stressors and resilience resources, participant background information and psychometric scores, and analytic memos were compared across participants to identify recurring similarities and differences in ecological experiences, stress processes, resilience processes, and mental health and wellbeing. Applying Riessman's (2008) approach to comparative narrative patterning, analysis remained grounded in the integrity of individual narratives while examining patterns emerging across stories.

Through iterative comparison of the seven narratives and corresponding analytic materials produced by Phase One, similarities and differences became apparent in how students described their family relationships and intergenerational histories, community contexts, tribal community exposure, cultural experiences, educational environments, and experiences of cultural continuity, disruption, and reconnection. These observations suggested that students' relationships to Native culture and community were embedded within multilevel ecological contexts spanning multiple ecological systems rather than existing as isolated aspects of identity. Consistent with the ecological framing of this study, these differences were interpreted as reflecting variation in chronosystem influences (e.g. upbringing, life trajectories, intergenerational experiences, and cultural continuity or disruption) and macrosystem influences (e.g. cultural norms, dominant ideologies, institutional environments, and relationships between

home, community, and university contexts) shaping students' more immediate micro- and mesosystem experiences.

Interpretations regarding relationships to Native culture and Native community did not emerge from distinct codes. Rather, they were developed inductively through iterative comparison of participants' narratives, ecological maps, analytic memos, survey information, and narrative summaries. Participants' descriptions of family histories, community relationships, cultural experiences, educational environments, and experiences of continuity, disruption, and reconnection were considered alongside coded stressors and resilience resources to identify recurring similarities and differences across cases. These observations informed interpretations regarding how students' relationships to Native culture and community were embedded within their multilevel ecological experiences and appeared connected to differing experiences of stress, resilience, psychological distress, and wellbeing within the PWI environment.

Importantly, these patterns were not understood as isolated identity categories, predetermined typologies, or participant-generated groupings. Rather, they represented researcher interpretations of recurring similarities and differences across students' ecological experiences. Comparative narrative patterning was subsequently used to examine how variation in students' relationships to Native culture and community appeared connected to differing experiences of ecological stressors, resilience resources, psychological distress, and wellbeing within the PWI environment while preserving the contextual specificity of each participant's narrative.

**Phase Three: Collective Narrative Analysis.** While Phase Two highlighted important variation in how students described their relationships to Native culture and community within differing ecological contexts, thereby respecting the heterogeneity of both the cohort and the

broader AI/AN community, Phase Three examined common experiences of stressors and resilience resources shared across the Native student cohort as a whole. Using the same coding procedures applied to the individual interviews, narrative segments of the two sharing circle transcripts were coded inductively through descriptive and in vivo coding. The sharing circle transcripts were analyzed as a single communal narrative, aligned with the purpose of sharing circles to elicit collective storytelling and shared meaning-making (Tachine et al., 2016). Following initial coding, an analytic memo was written to map emerging themes within the conceptual framework and support comparison across both individual and communal narrative (Riessman, 2008). Through iterative comparison of the individual narratives and the collective sharing circle narrative, broader thematic patterns of stressors and resilience resources were identified. These themes were then deductively organized according to ecological systems (stressors) and psychosociocultural dimension (resilience), informed by the models guiding the conceptual framework (Fish & Syed, 2018; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

Analysis attended to how shared stressors and resilience resources were experienced differently across students' varying ecological contexts, including differences in relationships to Native culture and community. For example, both individual interviews and the sharing circle narrative highlighted tensions stemming from the heterogeneity of the campus-based Native student community as a notable source of stress. Comparative narrative patterning illuminated how these shared stressors were interpreted and navigated differently across students' varying ecological experiences and relationships to Native culture and Native community. These differences were reflected in how students made meaning of these experiences and in the strategies they described drawing upon in response, with implications for students' sense of wellbeing on campus. This iterative analytic process enabled both attention to narrative

specificity and synthesis across the broader cohort, revealing variation in how AI/AN students encountered ecological stressors and drew upon resilience resources within the PWI environment.

Interpretive memos also examined how these stressors and resilience resources related to participants' mental health experiences. Indicators of psychological distress (e.g. feeling anxious, self-isolating, negative thoughts) and wellbeing (e.g. positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) were noted, allowing analysis to consider how ecological stressors and resilience resources interacted across students' nested environments to influence mental health and wellbeing. Collectively, these three analytic phases enabled individual narratives to be interpreted both independently and in relation to one another, illustrating how individual stories could be woven together to construct a broader "collective voice" reflecting the complex experiences of AI/AN students within the university context (Tachine, 2015; Riessman, 2008). Together, these phases moved the analysis from interpretation of individual narratives (Phase One) to interpretation of variation in how students described their relationships to culture and Native community (Phase Two), to synthesis of shared stressors and resilience processes across the Native student cohort (Phase Three).

**Consistent memoing.** Throughout data generation and analysis, the researcher engaged in consistent memo writing to record initial impressions and intuitions, preliminary patterns in the data, theoretical considerations, notable observations, ongoing questions, and reflections on data generation and analysis process (Bhattacharya, 2017). Memos were written both by hand in a journal and digitally using Google documents and served to deepen engagement with participants' narratives while documenting the analytic process. Memoing also supported

reflexivity by prompting ongoing self-reflection on the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and interpretive decisions throughout the study (Tie et al., 2019).

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

In qualitative inquiry, methodological rigor and trustworthiness are critical for ensuring the quality and credibility of findings, with credibility requiring careful consideration of whether findings reasonably reflect participants' lived experiences and voices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padgett, 2017). Strategies used to enhance trustworthiness in this study included prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Padgett, 2017). In research within AI/AN communities, trustworthiness is established through relational accountability, emphasizing respectful, reciprocal relationships among researchers, participants, and the communities they represent (Wilson, 2008). As such, relationship-building was intentionally embedded throughout the study design through prolonged engagement over approximately ten months via interviews, sharing circles, surveys, transcript review, and collaborative analysis.

Rather than relying solely on conventional triangulation, credibility in this study drew upon Wilson's (2008) process of "encircling", or building relationships with ideas in multiple ways until reaching new understanding, by incorporating multiple methods of data generation that enabled stories to be approached from different, layered perspectives that allowed insights to emerge through the relational weaving of participants' narratives (Padgett, 2017). Collaborative analysis further strengthened credibility by extending conventional member checking through ongoing participant engagement in the interpretation of findings, with participants invited to review transcripts, revise their stories, and engage with preliminary themes, an inherently relational process of meaning-making that fostered mutual thinking and consensual

understanding of participants' mental health experiences (Lightning, 1992; Padgett, 2017; Tachine et al., 2017; Wilson, 2008).

Finally, peer debriefing was conducted through ongoing consultation with a qualitative researcher familiar with interview-based methods. This process supported reflectivity by challenging underlying assumptions, validating analytic decisions, and helping ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

Results are organized around the study's three research questions, moving from individual ecological narratives to shared patterns across participants and finally to cross-narrative examination of students' relationships to Native culture and community. The first section presents ecological case analyses for each participant intended to introduce students' lived experiences within their distinct ecological contexts. These narratives situate students' experiences of stress, resilience, psychological distress, and wellbeing within the layered family, cultural, community, institutional, and sociocultural contexts shaping their lives while underscoring the heterogeneity of experiences reflected within this AI/AN student cohort. The second section briefly summarizes shared sources of stress and resilience across participants in Tables 1A and 1B, with stressors organized by ecological systems and resilience resources by psychological, social, and cultural domains. The final section examines how students described their relationships to Native culture and community and how these relationships were shaped by differences in family environments, cultural exposure, tribal community connection, educational experiences, and life trajectories. Through comparative narrative patterning across participants' stories, findings explore how these differing ecological and relational contexts shaped students' experiences of stress, resilience, and wellbeing within the PWI environment. Together, these findings illuminate both shared and divergent pathways through which AI/AN undergraduates navigate stress and resilience while centering the contextual specificity of their lived experiences.

### **Ecological Narrative Analyses**

The following ecological narrative analyses present each student's story within the layered contexts shaping their experiences at PNWU. Organized across chrono/macrosystem

influences, mesosystem and microsystem experiences, and resilience resources, these narratives provide contextual grounding for the cross-narrative themes explored in later sections.

### *Sylvia*

Adorned with beaded salmon earrings gifted by her grandmother, Sylvia brightly introduced herself as a descendant of one of the confederated tribes in eastern Washington. In recounting her relations, she referenced a second tribe she doesn't claim, explaining that, for her, cultural identity is rooted in active engagement and connection. A sophomore, Sylvia is the first in her family to attend college and hopes to bring home an education that will support her tribe.

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Sylvia grew up in a rural reservation community, moving between her White mother's "border town" home and her grandmother's house on the "rez" with her father, where she was raised in a way of life "very tied into spirituality" and "upholding yourself as a strong Indigenous woman." She attended a predominantly Native K–12 school where tribal culture was integrated through Salish language programs, elder mentorship, and tribal consultation, instilling a deep appreciation for family, community, language, and culture that was "just so ingrained in us." Growing up in a close-knit environment where her extended family remained "pretty much circled up" gave Sylvia a strong sense of coherence and belonging. Leaving for college marked a profound rupture in these relational and cultural systems. She described arriving on the predominantly White campus as "like a culture shock," explaining that the transition from her reservation-based school to a large, emotionally distant university felt "jarring." "The campus was bigger than my entire town," she recalled, and leaving meant separation not only from family but from "your literally whole community, your whole culture," contributing to loneliness, homesickness, and an ongoing sense of being "really out of

place." The underrepresentation of AI/AN students compounded this alienation: "A lot of Natives just feel like we don't belong in colleges...these institutions weren't made for us."

Sylvia's quantitative portrait reflected this positioning. She endorsed high enculturation (AIES = 100) and a strong Native cultural orientation (AIBI-NP: AICI = 3.0; EACI = 1.6), paired with moderately high cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 89) and moderate levels of historical loss scores (AHLS = 31; HLASS = 40), suggesting that while her cultural identity was deeply rooted, separation from her community and culture generated significant emotional strain.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** Sylvia's transition to college disrupted the continuity of relational systems that had once connected home, school, and community. Having grown up in a reservation community where teachers knew her family and cultural relationships were embedded within everyday life, the move to the university environment produced intense homesickness, anxiety, and feelings of disconnection. "Once I was [on campus]...I was almost sent into a spiral," she recalled. "I was very anxious and cried all the time because I wasn't used to living away from my family." Distance from home became a significant mesosystem stressor as family life continued without her: "My siblings are getting older. All my cousins are having their birthdays...time is moving and everything's happening while I'm not there." Attempts to frequently return home often intensified the emotional strain, leaving her doubting whether she could "stay past a quarter." Within the university microsystem, Sylvia repeatedly described a loss of relationality and belonging. Contrasting college with the reservation schools she attended growing up, she explained, "Back home...I knew every teacher, every teacher knew me, probably knew my parents. Here...it's like I know nobody and nobody really knows me." Large lecture halls, limited faculty relationships, and institutional practices she experienced as performative reinforced feelings of invisibility and alienation. Academic struggles further

intensified these experiences. Entering college with conditional admission and later failing a prerequisite course heightened self-doubt and feelings of illegitimacy: “I guess I feel like I’m always trying to catch up.” At times, Sylvia internalized these experiences through broader narratives about Native exclusion in higher education, questioning whether “maybe it really isn’t for us.” Sylvia also described frequent experiences of racialized misunderstanding and erasure within classroom spaces, where Native peoples were discussed as “extinct” or through stereotyped assumptions that left her feeling “disrespect[ed]” and disconnected from peers. Similar tensions extended into Native student spaces, where differences in tribal backgrounds, cultural practices, and upbringing sometimes left her feeling like “the odd one out” among other Native students. At times, she felt pressure to “tone it down” or withhold aspects of her reservation upbringing, while in other moments she felt exoticized for her cultural knowledge and language familiarity. Over time, these repeated experiences of relational disconnection, marginalization, and self-consciousness across university settings contributed to isolation and diminished wellbeing.

**Resilience resources.** In the face of disconnection, Sylvia’s resilience centered on intentional practices of reconnection that helped her maintain continuity between home, culture, and university life. Her psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources were deeply rooted in relationships with family, friends, and cultural practices that sustained her sense of belonging across physical distance. Daily contact with family through texts, phone calls, and social media helped preserve the relational rhythms of home and reduce feelings of anxiety and isolation on campus. During periods of heightened stress, such as illness flare-ups connected to her chronic health condition, these relationships provided emotional grounding and comfort. Sylvia’s strongest source of support on campus was her childhood best friend and roommate,

Virginia, who traveled with her to college. Their friendship provided familiarity, cultural understanding, and emotional safety as they navigated the transition together. Sylvia also described feeling most connected to students with rural or reservation backgrounds who “know what I’m going through,” explaining that shared experiences of “rez life” fostered “real connections” and mutual understanding. Over time, she also developed meaningful friendships with Latina peers from rural Eastern Washington whose experiences, while different, carried familiar social and geographic connections that helped bridge feelings of separation between home and campus. Cultural and spiritual practices including beading, sewing, drumming, smudging, and singing also served as important resilience resources. Sylvia described these practices as grounding rituals that helped her reconnect with ancestors, regulate anxiety, and restore a sense of continuity with her tribal community and identity. Together, these practices helped Sylvia manage distress, sustain cultural connection, and maintain a sense of belonging between home and university life.

### ***Virginia***

Virginia’s easy warmth and vibrant, animated humor punctuated her self-introduction as she spoke through an exasperated laugh, quipping, “Oh my god, there’s so many contradictions.” She identified as a descendant of two confederated tribes in eastern Washington whose ancestral territories extend into Canada, a colonial boundary that, she explained, complicates her enrollment status. A sophomore, Virginia recently pivoted to “start from scratch in environmental studies” after struggle and disillusionment in her introductory STEM classes. “I was wed out, guys, thank you,” she teased, using her humor to soften a deeper frustration with the systemic gaps she’s been stretched across in her transition to the PWI environment, where “you literally can see the disparities in person and in action.”

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Although Virginia grew up just outside the reservation, her upbringing remained closely connected to the “rez” community through family, school, and cultural relationships. Her father worked for the tribe in Fish and Wildlife, while her White mother taught Native history in local schools. Virginia described this family context as creating a “very weird, contrasting relationship” with culture and belonging. She reflected that her mother “knows a lot about our culture” but approached it from an “outside perspective,” while her father “wasn’t very traditional” and had not been taught many cultural practices himself. This created what Virginia called an “unusual dynamic,” where cultural knowledge was inherited in fragmented ways outside of relational protocol. Virginia connected these disruptions in cultural transmission across generations of her family directly to colonialism and historical erasure, explaining, “He didn’t learn this stuff because his dad didn’t pass it down to him because their parents just didn’t pass it down to them...it’s directly tied to colonialism and the erasure of Native people.” These experiences contributed to longstanding feelings of uncertainty and imposterism, often leaving her feeling “too white for some Native spaces” despite remaining actively involved in her community. As an older teenager, however, Virginia described entering a period of “realignment” as she became increasingly immersed in language learning, ceremony, and traditional practices through relationships with extended family and community members. “That’s when I really started to get a connection, to just be realigned almost,” she shared. During this period, Virginia described feeling increasingly grounded within Native community spaces and relational networks. She reflected that Native communities felt deeply interconnected: “once you know someone like, you know this person and then this is your aunt... It’s just like a big community and you really do look out for each other,” emphasizing the sense of collective care and relational continuity she experienced within community life. Cultural mentorship also

became an important part of this period of reconnection. Virginia recalled learning to bead alongside Native women in her community after receiving her first beading supplies as a gift and described language learning, canoe journeys, and salmon ceremonies as experiences that deepened her sense of belonging and spiritual connection to community. Reflecting on one canoe journey, Virginia described feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the collective storytelling and sense of shared experience within the circle: “You’re in community, but also like feeling every single person’s story almost.”

Quantitatively, Virginia’s profile reflected both strong cultural grounding and elevated emotional strain. She reported moderate enculturation (AIES = 77) and a strong Native cultural orientation (AICI = 2.67; EACI = 1.5), alongside high cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 116) and elevated historical loss thinking (AHLS = 50) and historical loss-associated symptoms (HLASS = 82). Together, these measures reflected Virginia’s description of feeling deeply connected to her tribal community and culture while simultaneously struggling with self-doubt, disconnection, and ongoing emotional responses connected to cultural loss across generations.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** Virginia described the transition from her reservation community to PNWU as profoundly isolating. She contrasted the “very tight knit classrooms” and strong sense of relational community she experienced growing up with what felt like a large, impersonal university environment: “They’re institutions, they’re not like a community.” Arriving at UW, she recalled thinking, “Where am I in this place?” after transitioning from a predominantly Native community to a campus environment that felt overwhelmingly White. Reflecting on this transition, Virginia explained, “I came from a community at the time that I had a lot of love for and they had a lot of love for me because I was doing a lot of work in my community. So it was very, very isolating.” She described feeling that her relationship with her

community “was at its best” before leaving for college and struggling to recreate the sense of relational and cultural continuity she left behind: “I was trying to find what I left at home... but you can’t replace it.” Academic competition and structural resource gaps further intensified feelings of imposterism as she shifted from being “one of the smartest people in the room” to feeling that “everyone knows more than you.” Family expectations complicated this transition, with her mother strongly encouraging academic achievement while members of her father’s family at times expressing skepticism toward higher education.

Virginia also described contradictions in how her identity was perceived across Native and non-Native spaces. Growing up, she often felt “too White” within some Native community contexts because she learned culture in fragmented ways as a descendant. Upon arriving at PNWU, however, she unexpectedly found herself feeling “too Native for certain spaces.” Even within Native student spaces, Virginia described tensions surrounding reservation identity, cultural knowledge, and authenticity. At times, she felt criticized for being “too rez” or “intimidating because I knew my culture,” while also experiencing pressure to share cultural teachings outside tribal protocol. These interactions often intensified longstanding feelings of self-doubt surrounding belonging and legitimacy within Native spaces. These tensions became especially pronounced during her campaign for powwow royalty, when she simultaneously experienced criticism from members of her home community and heightened visibility on campus. Reflecting on these layered contradictions, Virginia concluded, “It’s just like the different identities is so insanely hard to navigate.”

**Resilience resources.** Despite the emotional strain created by these contradictions, Virginia described intentionally reconnecting with herself, her culture, and her community as central to maintaining wellbeing. Psychologically, she relied on reframing strategies such as

gratitude and self-talk, describing this process as “literally rewiring yourself to listen to yourself.” Socially, she found grounding in relationships that “parallel” home, including friendships with other reservation-based Native students, Latina peers from rural communities, and AI/AN faculty who provided cultural and emotional support. Her lifelong friendship with Sylvia served as a particularly important source of continuity and understanding: “I just know she’s gonna get what I’m talking about.” Cultural practices also functioned as important resilience resources. Virginia described reconnecting with land, ceremony, and language as helping her “know myself a lot more and just kind of be a lot more connected.” Returning home for salmon ceremonies and canoe journeys restored a sense of direction, belonging, and responsibility to community: “It’s really easy to get lost...it kind of reminds me like, oh, I’m doing this for my community.” Spending time outdoors through hiking, hunting, and being near water similarly strengthened her sense of cultural connection and personal grounding. Together, these relationships and practices helped Virginia maintain connection to herself, her culture, and her community across the different settings she navigated.

### ***Forest***

Forest’s enthusiasm and sunny energy radiated through his introduction as he unpacked the intersectionality of his identity as a neurodivergent, non-binary, trans man affiliated with a Northern Great Plains tribe and one of the confederated tribes of south-central Oregon. Forest located himself as “a mixed urban Native person” who “grew up in culture,” but described college as a period where he began to anchor more fully in his own identity and community role: “I always felt like my parents’ kid rather than like actually being a person myself...now my dad is like, oh, that’s Forest’s dad, rather than Sam,” contrasting this with home where he often felt he was “Sam’s kid rather than Forest.” Now a junior double majoring in environmental studies

and American Indian studies, Forest joked that balancing the two disciplines allows him to move between “having to fight” in one classroom and “being able to breathe” in another, reflecting the intentional strategy he developed “to get that balance” while navigating the different environments he encountered at the university.

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Raised in a major metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest, Forest’s early cultural connection was nurtured through family relationships, urban intertribal community organizations, and Native youth programming. His father, who grew up on a rural reservation in southern Oregon, placed a “heavy emphasis on keeping me connected to medicines and culture,” teaching him to dance, pray, and bead, hand-making his regalia, and traveling with him to participate in powwows together. Forest also described intertribal activism as intertwined with his early cultural learning, recalling that attending Standing Rock with his father had a “really big impact on me” because “I really started paying attention to activism.” Forest’s cultural upbringing was further shaped through participation in urban intertribal youth programs and Title VI Indian education programming in public school settings. He described these heterogeneous Native spaces as places where he “had a lot of teachers” and “learned a lot,” developing an openness toward learning from diverse tribal communities and traditions. This intertribal fluency later shaped Forest’s positive orientation toward the broader Native community at PNWU: “I would consider myself as constantly learning and now I get to learn from so many more people.” At the same time, Forest described the urban Native experience as carrying its own forms of liminality and disconnection. “By the nature of being urban,” he explained, his family experienced a “weird disconnect” from reservation-based relations that left him feeling “not completely at home in a city or on my rez.” This tension persisted even as he remained deeply culturally grounded and connected to Native community.

Quantitatively, Forest reflected one of the strongest traditional cultural orientations within the student sample, characterized by high enculturation (AIES = 104), strong Native identification (AICI = 3.26), and low identification with majority culture (EACI = 1.75). He also reported elevated cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 131), frequent historical loss thinking (AHLS = 57), and strong emotional responses associated with historical loss (HLASS = 69), the highest within the student cohort. Together, these measures aligned with Forest's description of feeling deeply grounded in culture while simultaneously experiencing exhaustion navigating institutions and environments that marginalized Native presence.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** Forest described the transition to college as intensifying feelings of visibility, exhaustion, and responsibility that he attributed to having to “constantly carving out space” within the PWI environment. “It’s just like an overall feeling of like this wasn’t built for me,” he explained. In large lecture courses, Forest described the “dehumanizing” whiplash of feeling both invisible and hypervisible, moving between moments where Native people were discussed “as if there’s like, no way that a Native person could be in this room” and moments where faculty expected him “to educate people who I shouldn’t have to educate.” Encounters with stereotypes in coursework and repeated requests to explain Native life echoed earlier experiences in K-12 schooling and contributed to feelings of vigilance and fatigue (“I’m just too tired to deal with this right now”) furthering adding to the task demands of academic settings: “It makes me really sad that...that’s just something that still comes up for me, even after I feel like I’ve had so much practice being Indigenous in White spaces.”

As an officer and cultural chair within the Native student organization, Forest also occupied a central but demanding role within campus Native community. He coordinated events, taught dance classes, and co-chaired the student-led powwow, roles and responsibilities that

strengthened his sense of meaning and belonging while simultaneously increasing interpersonal and institutional tensions. Forest described conflict surrounding who was authorized to share cultural knowledge, including one particularly painful situation in which another student questioned whether he had “the right to teach” dance classes. Despite these frictions, Forest described the Native student center and American Indian Studies department as spaces where he could “breathe” and experience relational and cultural belonging. These environments stood in contrast to some of his environmental studies classes, which he described as “so white and so white-focused.” To cope, Forest adopted what he jokingly referred to his strategy of becoming “annoyingly Indigenous,” intentionally amplifying Native voices in his courses by trying to “take up so much space....and do all my assignments centered around Indigenous people somehow.” At the same time, he described struggling to balance activism, leadership, and advocacy work with emotional exhaustion and burnout: “I have a hard time sometimes just balancing it.”

**Resilience resources.** Forest’s resilience centered on maintaining balance through cultural practice, relational connection, teaching, and advocacy. He explained, “my resilience is very deeply tied to connecting to my culture...that’s one way that I can pretty reliably feel better.” Psychologically, Forest described adapting cultural and spiritual practices to everyday university life as a way of grounding himself during periods of stress and emotional overwhelm. He described deliberately “interacting with medicines” throughout the day by smudging, carrying a medicine bag, or improvising with “just the smallest things of grabbing a piece of sage and putting it in my pocket.” Smudging helped him “pause, take a breath, connect back to who I am” because “lowering stress levels lowers physical pain” to manage his chronic illness, while cultural teachings from family reinforced the importance of allowing himself to experience his

emotions rather than suppressing them. Forest described these practices as helping him “carry all the parts of myself with me” across the different spaces he navigated.

Socially, Forest relied heavily on close relationships with family, Native peers, and queer and neurodivergent friends who provided affirmation, guidance, and shared understanding. His father remained his strongest cultural mentor and source of grounding across contexts: “My dad has always made sure to keep me in culture.” Forest frequently turned to him for comfort and counsel during moments of conflict or self-doubt, including after being criticized for teaching dance classes. He also described his friendships with Native students who hold “the same foundational worldviews,” like Hope, and his circle of queer, trans, and neurodivergent roommates as relationships who reflect other aspects of his identity as providing mutual understanding and belonging: “we share a lot of values.” These relationships created spaces where authenticity and care replaced the pressure to perform, emphasizing “there’s nothing hiding behind their words.” Culturally, Forest found meaning and wellbeing through teaching, dancing, and sharing cultural knowledge with others. Leading dance and medicine workshops for Native students became both personally restorative and a way to strengthen community connection. “I didn’t know how much I loved sharing culture until I started teaching culture classes,” he reflected. Dancing remained one of the spaces where he felt “the most myself,” while teaching increasingly carried intergenerational meaning as he considered the future impact of his physical disability: “If I can’t do this forever, then maybe I can pass on these skills to someone else.” Through these forms of teaching, mentorship, and advocacy, Forest described finding ways to sustain both himself and the broader Native communities he cared for.

## *Hope*

Perhaps more than any other student, Hope shared herself through story, interlacing traditional teachings passed down through her family with vivid accounts of her experiences on and off campus. Her mirrored earrings flashed as she spoke with gentle confidence, subtle adornments she wears in academic settings to “deflect any bad medicine,” reflecting the ways she adapts her culture within the PWI environment. Hope introduced herself as an enrolled citizen of the Apsáalooke nation, tracing her clan and family relations in accordance with traditional protocol. Although she emphasized her “distinctive” Crow identity, Hope described her primary Native community as the one she built on campus because college life “really shortens the range of people that you can nurture relationships with.”

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Raised off reservation in a mid-sized coastal city by her Native father, Hope reflected on the distinctiveness of that upbringing: “I grew up in a Native home raised by a Native father but outside of community...that’s a pretty big distinction.” Her relationship with her White mother became distant during adolescence, leaving her father as both her primary parent and cultural anchor. “It’s hard to separate my identity from my father,” she shared, “just in terms of us being so close and inheriting a lot of...a lot of everything from him.” Hope described her early schooling as marked by repeated moves and interruptions that left “a lot of holes” in her education and contributed to “a lot of shame” and academic self-doubt, believing she was “a bad student” who “wasn’t cut out for the system.” Stability emerged during Running Start, a turning point she described as “literally the start of everything for me.” Participation in student “clubs that were based on Native identities” and advocacy spaces at her community college also deepened her engagement with urban intertribal community and sparked her passion for community building.

Throughout childhood, Hope's father maintained ties to Crow community by returning "home every year," though Hope described herself as "still integrating" into that community. During adolescence, she experienced what she described as a deepening awareness of her tribal identity: "I'm not just Native, I'm a Crow person." This reconnection intensified during the pandemic, when she began taking remote Crow language classes. In response, her father began sharing "so many stories...that I had never heard before," which Hope began recording and transcribing,, "just organically" becoming the family "knowledge keeper." At the same time, Hope described herself as navigating "multiple communities that all overlap" and "still learning what it means to be a Crow woman," balancing relationships to tribal community, urban intertribal spaces, and university life. Hope also described inheriting from her father both skepticism toward educational systems rooted in his experiences in Jesuit boarding schools and a strong belief in education as necessary for Native self-determination and survival. Reflecting on this tension, she explained, "It's been weird to go to school and know that this is both the solution and both the reason that there is an issue." While there had "always been a push to go to school" and "to not be a victim" because "when there's like lack of knowledge or education ...there's inequity," she also reflected that "these assimilationist policies of education, they never died. They were just reborn." These tensions formed an important backdrop to Hope's experiences as a Native student leader on campus.

**Mesosystem and microsystem.** Hope's transition to university heightened feelings of being caught between competing institutional, cultural, and community expectations. "I hadn't centered myself in community," she explained while reflecting on her first year on campus. In classrooms, she encountered many of the same microaggressions described by other students, including professors speaking about Native peoples in the past tense, asking her to teach on the

spot as “the expert on all things Native,” or dismissing Indigenous knowledge until validated through Western science. Institutional policies surrounding cultural practices further deepened her sense of disconnection. She recalled being disciplined for smudging in her dorm and how “one of the first emotions that comes up” when being told not to smudge is “the shame of us being Native” and the humiliation of being told “this thing that you're doing, it's so wrong that it's actually against our policies.”

As these experiences accumulated, Hope described turning to increasingly harmful coping strategies, including restrictive eating, binge drinking, and self-harm, culminating in inpatient care and a hardship withdrawal during her first year. “I had to leave campus in order to get that foundation,” she reflected, explaining that returning home helped her strengthen her cultural grounding and learn to use her culture as protection. This experience later shaped her commitment to supporting younger Native students: “I don't want other students to have to leave in order to strengthen their cultural identity.” Now as co-chair of the Native student organization, Hope described mediating tensions between university systems, Native student community, and tribal community expectations. She coordinated events, mentored younger students, and advocated for institutional support, balancing the demands of the university and the needs of Native students, who are often burdened with responsibilities that far exceed those of their peers: “The resources that we have weren't just given to us. We fought for them. Like we've fought to fund and build the Longhouse. We fought to build the CAIIS department.” Reflecting on the emotional toll of pursuing institutional change, she wearily asserted it's “too much, really, to even put on a student.”

Even within the Native student community, Hope navigated the challenges of leading a heterogeneous, intertribal group where “everybody has very different policies or protocols” and

“none of us are really on the same spectrum of when it comes to reconnecting.” Balancing “all those perspectives and all those needs,” she reflected, means “you’re never going to please everybody,” and that conflict and “growing pains” are part of being “a living community.” As an older student, she found that these complex intragroup dynamics often required her to “take on a lot of emotional labor for other people too to help them grow,” sometimes at the expense of her own mental health and wellbeing. At the same time, Hope described balancing expectations from both university and tribal community contexts: “there are certain ways that we’re supposed to act when we’re in academia...that clash with community values or community expectations.”

**Resilience resources.** Hope’s resilience centered on adapting cultural practices to preserve connection, grounding, and identity within the PWI environment. She described this adaptive form of resilience as something modeled across generations through the survivance of her ancestors, who preserved cultural practices despite colonial prohibition. Hope connected this inheritance to teachings from her father, who taught her to pray in ways that others “see it, they just don’t recognize it,” allowing her to embed “little ceremonies” into everyday life within the PWI setting. For Hope, resilience began internally through using culture as “medicines that I use daily” to process distress and reconnect with her values. Prayer, smudging, storytelling, beadwork, and connection to the natural world and spiritual helpers (e.g. hummingbirds) served as grounding practices that helped her turn suffering “into something beautiful,...helpful.” Hope also described work with a Native therapist as reinforcing her belief that Indigenous cultural knowledge already contained many of the healing practices utilized by Western psychology: “This is stuff that the Native people already knew...but research is just now confirming.”

Socially, Hope sustained what she described as a “very robust social system” through layered networks of kinship, mentorship, and Native community relationships. Her father

remained her primary cultural mentor and source of guidance. “Recalling a lot of the stories that my father shared with me,” she explained, helped her reconnect with herself and navigate healthy coping “because within those stories are value systems and I get sick when I act outside of my value system.” On campus, Hope’s kinship network extended through a “very concentrated Native community” rooted in the AIS department and Native student center. These relationships provided spaces to process frustration, affirm Indigenous perspectives, and channel anger into advocacy: “Any time you can pop in, you can talk with other Native students about how frustrating it is that we have to even ask permission to smudge...and then you sort of find this collective hope to do something about it.” As an older student and leader, Hope also described resilience as something carried outward through mentorship, advocacy, and community care, explaining that she did not want other Native students to have to “leave campus in order to get that foundation” as she once had. Culturally, Hope practiced resilience through Apsáalooke kinship values of generosity, adornment, and reciprocity. “Part of Apsáalooke kinship is you adorn your loved ones in the best of the best,” she explained. Beading, gifting, teaching workshops, and organizing community events became ways of affirming Native identity and extending kinship into the university setting. Reflecting on this work, Hope explained that the workshops and events she organized, “they’re all guided by that value of kinship, of dressing your loved ones, of equipping them.” Through these acts of care and cultural transmission, Hope described trying to create the cultural grounding and community support she once needed herself.

### ***Joy***

With an ambitious energy matched only by her exuberant warmth, Joy introduced herself as someone who “does a little bit of everything.” Now in her second year, she identified herself

as a descendant of two Northern Plains tribes, tracing the colonial disruptions to her family's history. As she framed, "I wasn't always really connected to my Native identity... I don't really know much, but I know what I do know and I'm trying to get back into it."

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Joy grew up in a semi-rural, predominantly White community in the Mountain West where her Native identity was understood more as family heritage than lived cultural experience. Her grandmother had been raised on her Northern Plains reservation until age 11, when the death of her mother led to her adoption by a White family prior to the passage of ICWA, severing ties to tribal community and relations. Joy understood this rupture as reverberating across generations, shaping both her mother's and her own relationship to culture. While her mother viewed their Indigeneity as something "in the past," Joy experienced this disconnection more acutely: "It touched me more than any of my other family members...it's part of who we are. I don't really want to just ignore it." Joy described her journey toward reconnection as largely "self-guided," built through conversations with her grandmother, family stories, and piecing together fragments of cultural history. "A lot of it was just asking my grandma directly," she explained, "it took like a while for me to figure out like the whole story." She emphasized how little remained to reconstruct from: "We don't have much to go off of... like little bits of moments that she remembers." At her urging, her family obtained formal tribal descendency recognition, an experience Joy described as restoring legitimacy and connection to tribal identity. She shared that growing up in a county that was "seventy or eighty percent White" left little opportunity to engage with Native culture or community: "It doesn't give you much opportunity to find out who you are or actually be in culture." At the same time, this absence intensified her desire to rebuild what had been disrupted through assimilation and family-level disconnection. Joy described an acute awareness that her grandmother's removal had not only

disrupted one life but continued to shape her own relationship to culture and belonging: "You never would have thought that it would, like, span until, like, my generation...But it really just... it does." College therefore represented an opportunity to move deliberately toward Native presence and cultural reconnection. Joy chose PNWU in part because it "you can see the presence" of Native people and programs on campus: "Some of that reasoning...was because I knew there was a lot more Native education here." Quantitatively, Joy reflected active cultural reconnection alongside ongoing cultural disconnection. She reported moderate enculturation (AIES = 77), middling Native cultural identification (AICI = 2.07), and somewhat stronger identification with majority culture (EACI = 2.13). Her moderate cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 65) reflected longing for greater connection rather than complete cultural estrangement. Joy also endorsed thoughts about historical losses (AHLS = 39) and associated emotional responses (HLASS = 37), reflecting the personal way historical disruptions shaped her understanding of identity, family, and belonging.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** Joy described arriving at PNWU as both exciting and intimidating because it offered opportunities for cultural reconnection while simultaneously placing her in Native spaces she feared she did not fully belong in. "I was really nervous," she explained. "I was reconnecting, so I was like, I don't know if this is for me." Entering Native student spaces often triggered worries about "doing it wrong" or not being "Native enough," particularly when comparing herself to peers who appeared more culturally grounded or knowledgeable. Seeing other students "in ribbon skirts and full regalia" intensified her uncertainty: "I don't really know what this is about or like who I am." Even after developing friendships and becoming involved in Native student spaces, Joy described persistent feelings of imposterism and self-questioning. Hearing peers discuss growing up in community or speaking

their tribal language often reminded her of what had been disrupted through her family's history of removal and assimilation. She also described stress associated with repeatedly explaining her identity and cultural background to both Native and non-Native peers: "You kind of just have to explain the context of like, hey, this is why...it's a normal thing in our community to be not as typically cultural as other people." Joy also described tension between the university's competitive academic culture and the relational values she associated with Native community. Faculty members sometimes failed to understand why Native student involvement mattered to her, questioning the amount of time and energy she devoted to cultural programming and community events. These experiences reinforced her feeling of living "in two different contexts," reflecting how these interactions amplified the tension she felt between her own competing values of academic achievement and individual success and cultural values centered on reciprocity and collective responsibility. Joy also described tension within her relationship with her mother as her cultural reconnection deepened. While Joy increasingly sought involvement in Native community and cultural learning, she felt frustrated by her mother's relative disengagement from these efforts: "I wish she'd had more passion when I was younger." Joy described feeling willing to do the difficult work of reconnection but wishing for more familial support as she navigated the process.

**Resilience resources.** Joy's resilience centered on actively rebuilding relationships to culture, community, and identity. Psychologically, she relied on curiosity, intentional self-talk, and behavioral coping strategies that pushed her toward her desire for reconnection even when she felt anxious or illegitimate. Reflecting on attending an early Native student gathering, she recalled asking herself, "Am I going to let my self-doubt win or am I going to let my curiosity in a potential future win?" For Joy, resilience often involved repeatedly choosing engagement over

withdrawal. Socially, Joy cultivated layered support systems through friendships with both Native and non-Native peers, though relationships with other students reconnecting with culture proved especially meaningful because they normalized uncertainty and reduced feelings of imposterism. The Native student center became central to Joy's wellbeing because it offered "a great place to be in community" through everyday forms of togetherness such as studying, eating meals, and spending time with others. Over time, Joy moved from seeking community to helping cultivate it for others through mentoring younger students and encouraging hesitant peers to become involved in Native student spaces. Cultural engagement also functioned as a major source of resilience. Joy described becoming involved in powwow planning, ribbon skirt and beading workshops, round dances, Native student programming, and American Indian Studies courses. These experiences provided opportunities for connection, joy, identity development, and relief from academic stress. Reflecting on attending a round dance during a particularly stressful period, she explained, "There was a smile on my face and it was just really healing in that moment." For Joy, resilience emerged through sustained participation in rebuilding connection to culture and community.

### *Lily*

Lily introduced herself with the quiet assurance of someone who has taken a nontraditional path to find their own. She identified herself as an enrolled member of an Alaska Native tribe "raised here" in the Pacific Northwest and while "not as much from my culture" happy to be "getting more involved now." Mapping herself within the unique shape of her polyamorous family, she explained, "I grew up in a very different environment and just like, I feel like I'm outside of the norm in so many different ways." But now as a second-year double

majoring in American Indian and environmental studies with a minor in education, she situates herself squarely in the center of activity on campus. “So I do a lot,” she summarized.

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Lily grew up in a suburban town bordering the reservation of a tribe that was not her own, a position she described as being close to Native community while still feeling outside of it. “I did kind of always feel a little bit other there,” she reflected. “You’re like Tulalip or you’re not, and I wasn’t.” Although a Native liaison at school invited her to powwows and cultural events, Lily never attended. “It was less of a lack of interest,” she explained, “more like, I don’t know if I belong.” She described how her family history mirrors the same tension of proximity and sustained distance: “knowing that I’m Native but also not having any connection there.” Lily traced this uncertainty to broader patterns of intergenerational cultural disconnection within her family. Her great-grandmother, “adamant about stepping away from my Native identity,” sent later generations to Catholic schools, weakening ties to their Alaskan Native community over time. “[Colonization] made being Indian bad, right?” Lily reflected, explaining “that’s probably why my grandma didn’t really do too much with it, so my dad doesn’t care about it.” While her father remained detached from Native identity, Lily experienced this distance more painfully and described feeling increasingly motivated to reconnect: “I’m like actively fighting the stuff I grew up with.” At the same time, small traces of continuity, including tribal enrollment cards and family stories, offered reassurance and legitimacy: “Having that little card gives me a little more security of knowing like, hey, I’m Native...I’m not just pretending.”

Quantitatively, Lily’s profile reflected early but active cultural reconnection. Her low to moderate enculturation score (AIES = 52) suggested she valued Native identity while still developing cultural knowledge, traditional practice, and community participation. Similarly, she

endorsed a nearly balanced Native and Euro-American identity integration (AICI = 2.26; EACI = 2.23), reflecting identification both cultural worlds. Her moderate to high historical loss thinking (AHLS = 37) and associated emotional responses (HLASS = 44) suggested her family's history of historical trauma and cultural disruption remained emotionally salient as she strove for reconnection, while elevated cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 96) suggested heightened distress surrounding authenticity, belonging, and community connection within PWI contexts.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** college marked Lily's shift from observation to participation within Native community spaces. At PNWU, she found herself surrounded by Native students from diverse tribal backgrounds and reconnecting experiences: "We've all come from all these different places, and we've all found this place together." Unlike her earlier experiences of standing adjacent to Native community, these intertribal spaces allowed Lily to experience belonging as something built through participation, relationships, and shared learning. "I'm not the only weirdo," she joked. At the same time, the small and interconnected nature of Native student spaces also created new pressures. Interpersonal tensions often extended across social, academic, and work environments because students shared overlapping relationships through the longhouse, student organizations, cultural programming, and powwow planning. Lily described how conflicts within these tight-knit spaces could feel difficult to escape: "If I have an issue with one of them, that issue just like leaches out." Questions surrounding authenticity and representation further intensified Lily's self-consciousness as a reconnecting Native student. Discussions about reconnecting students leading cultural activities, "Pretendians," colorism, and blood quantum often left her feeling emotionally implicated and uncertain about her place within community spaces. "I'm thinking about, like, well, who is she attacking? And it's maybe me," she reflected, describing moments when these conversations

made her “want to withdraw.” At times, Lily also struggled with guilt and self-questioning, worrying that some of her own thoughts reflected “a colonial mindset.” Like Joy, Lily also described tension within her relationship with her father as her cultural reconnection deepened. While she became increasingly immersed in Native community and cultural participation, conversations with her father became more strained because of his skepticism toward Indigenous identity and colonialism. “It just gets harder and harder to talk to him,” she conceded. Still, Lily reframed this growing distance as motivation to continue reconnecting: “I’m solving that gap a little bit...building a bridge back or something.”

**Resilience resources.** Lily’s resilience emerged through active participation in relationships, cultural practices, and Native community spaces that helped move her Native identity from the margins toward the center of her lived experience. Psychologically, she relied on cognitive flexibility and a “growth mindset” that helped her reframe moments of self-doubt or overwhelm as opportunities for learning rather than evidence she did not belong: “If I’m struggling right now, I know I can get through it.” Lily also drew strength from reframing her own experiences within broader histories of Indigenous survival and persistence. Reflecting on moments of discouragement, she explained, “They faced genocide, they faced erasure, they faced relocation...it helps me take a little step back just knowing where I came from.” Rather than processing stress in isolation, Lily described understanding herself through relationships and conversation: “When I go to my friends and I’m talking, it then clicks in.” Socially, Lily’s strongest resilience resources came through the overlapping kinship and friendship networks she developed within Native student spaces. Her older sister, a PNWU alumna, initially connected her to campus Native community and continued to serve as an important source of reassurance and belonging: “Sometimes I’m like, maybe I don’t belong...but I know my sister went here, so I

know I do.” Relationships with other Native students also helped normalize the uncertainty of reconnecting and affirmed that students could belong while existing at different points in their cultural journeys: “We’re all at different points in learning our culture...that really helped me find a place.” Cultural engagement also functioned as a major source of grounding and wellbeing. Lily described beading, dancing, sewing, smudging, powwow planning, and longhouse involvement as practices that helped her manage stress while strengthening connection to culture and community. “I can’t exactly take the university or community off my plate,” she reflected, “but I can look away from the plate for a minute and I can turn my eyes to my moccasins and work on those.” Powwow participation in particular provided moments of immersion, joy, and renewal: “I’m just immersed in it and it’s so rewarding. It’s the high I can ride for the rest of the quarter.” Through these ongoing acts of participation and relationship-building, Lily described gradually moving from community adjacency toward connection, belonging, and cultural integration.

### ***Grace***

Grace softly introduced herself as a mosaic of identities: her mother identifying as Indipino, a mix of Filipino and Alaska Native, and her father, White. Raised between two homes and cultural worlds, Grace described herself as “a very sort of in-between person.” She explained that participating in the project felt like “a small act of bravery,” requiring her to push past anxiety to ensure that voices like hers were represented.

**Chrono/macrosystem.** Grace’s story was shaped by movement between geographies, families, and cultures. Born in Michigan, she spent childhood shifting between a semi-suburban reservation community in Washington and a metropolitan area in Alaska, alternating between her mother’s city apartment and her father’s suburban home. Grace described this “back and forth”

upbringing as producing a longstanding sense of uncertainty about belonging: “I don’t even really know how to define...where would I come from?” Her years on the Suquamish reservation represented her period of greatest cultural immersion, though not within her own tribal community. Living in “a house full of Native people along with drums, paddles, and artwork,” she attended powwows and canoe journey events and grew up surrounded by Indigenous presence and community life. Still, Grace characterized her experience as one of exposure rather than full participation: “While I was not exactly an active participant, I was exposed to all these aspects of Native life.” She added, “I was like absorbing stuff...you’re immersed in it, you sort of don’t even need to think about it.” When her father later obtained primary custody, this immersion ended “abruptly,” leaving her feeling “so detached.” Grace described struggling afterward with a persistent sense of cultural distance and uncertainty about belonging. “I’ve never felt much of a right to belong to any cultural group,” she explained. As a mixed-race student with limited cultural knowledge, she admitted she “often felt I was ‘too White’” and worried that identifying as Native might resemble “those White folks who claim their great, great, great grandmother was a Cherokee princess.” At the same time, Native identity remained deeply tied to family history and relational connection. Stories about her Alaska Native great-grandmother, an Indigenous rights advocate who attended PNWU, served as an important source of continuity and belonging: “I feel that’s a part of me even if...I feel like not the most involved with my culture.”

Quantitatively, Grace’s profile reflected significant cultural disconnection alongside strong desire for reconnection. She reported low enculturation (AIES = 33) and somewhat stronger identification with Euro-American culture (EACI = 2.50) relative to Native identity (AICI = 1.87), consistent with limited direct participation in cultural practices and community

growing up. While her historical loss thinking (AHLS = 31) and emotional responses to this loss (HLASS = 34) fell within the low-moderate range, her elevated cultural detachment anxiety (CIDAQ = 79) reflected persistent distress surrounding cultural disconnection, belonging, and identity. Together, these measures aligned with Grace's description of feeling "untethered" from culture while simultaneously experiencing "an intense yearning" to reconnect.

**Mesosystem and Microsystems.** Grace described arriving at PNWU as both an opportunity for reconnection and an intensification of her sense of being "in-between." Her "yearning to come back" to the cultural community she lived in as a child and "being near" her Native family partly motivated her decision to attend the university, yet the transition to college also amplified feelings of isolation and anonymity. "That's been a struggle throughout my life," she explained, "but definitely being in a new place surrounded by a bunch of strangers has sort of elevated that." Large lecture courses, "one-sided" relationships with professors, and feeling "on my own for the most part" contributed to a sense of invisibility and disconnection: "You spend so much of your life absorbing what they teach, and they don't even know who you are."

This sense of separation extended into Native spaces on campus, where Grace described her desire for connection as intertwined with fears of "intruding" or "taking up space." She framed Native community as something just out of reach: "I sort of think of the Native community as like something I'm on the margins of and I'm trying to get in there." In Native programs and events, Grace often experienced what she described as a "mental block" because limited cultural knowledge made participation feel intimidating, telling herself: "You can be here and you can sit and observe, but like you don't have an authority." Reflecting on this tension, Grace explained, "There is an inherent vulnerability to connecting with your culture. Because you desire it very much, you know so little, and if you're like me, you're carrying around a hefty

amount of childhood baggage surrounding identity...Observing is easier in the moment, but in the long term it makes me feel more like an outsider.” Cultural imposterism further intensified these tensions. Grace worried about “barging into a community” as “this mixed race student who, like, has very little cultural knowledge,” questioning whether she had “a right” to claim Native identity or access Native-serving spaces and resources. As a result, Grace often felt caught between longing for connection and withdrawing from opportunities to participate more fully in Native community life.

Academically, Grace described a parallel imposterism within her STEM coursework. In competitive “weed-out” classes, she often felt like she was “surviving a class while other people are learning.” Devoting most of her time simply to “surviving” academically often came at the expense of self-care, social connection, and Native community involvement, all things she acknowledged she “starve[s] without.” Across these settings, Grace described carrying a persistent sense of uncertainty and instability: “You don’t have a default identity, culture, confidante, or home to fall back on.” Feelings of isolation, cultural imposterism, academic pressure, financial strain, and the responsibility to “make the most” of educational opportunities collectively shaped a demanding emotional environment during her first year at PNWU.

**Resilience resources.** Grace’s resilience emerged through gradual and deliberate movement toward family, culture, and community despite persistent anxiety and self-doubt. Psychologically, Grace described trying to respond to stress with patience and encouragement toward herself rather than criticism or avoidance. During moments of anxiety or overwhelm, she intentionally reminded herself, “You are doing good. You can just keep on going.” Rather than fighting difficult emotions, Grace described allowing them to “run [their] course” while continuing to move toward situations that felt meaningful but uncomfortable, including

participation in Native community spaces. Grace also drew strength from ancestral narratives and spiritual connection to family members, especially her great-grandmother. Reflecting on moments of overwhelm, she explained that she reminds herself, “It’s out of my hands, Grandma’s got it.” Thinking about the experiences of earlier generations helped her feel less alone and more grounded in a broader sense of continuity and purpose.

Socially, Grace’s strongest resilience resources came through reconnecting with maternal family members living on the nearby reservation. Visiting family every few weeks provided emotional comfort, affirmation, and relief from campus pressures. “My family has always been very, very affirming of my identity,” she reflected, “even if I do not feel that way.” Relationships with Native students on campus also helped normalize her reconnecting experience and reduced feelings of being alone in her uncertainty. Seeing other students “in a similar space of reconnecting with their identity and exploring” made it easier for Grace to imagine that her own “in-between” identity could still belong within Native community. Cultural engagement similarly functioned as a quiet but important source of grounding. Grace described keeping smudge sticks in her dorm, not necessarily to burn but to hold and smell as a calming sensory ritual that reminded her culture remained present in her daily life. She also found reassurance in visible Native presence across campus, including Lushootseed signage, Native artwork, longhouse spaces, and cultural events, which communicated that Native students belonged at the university. Although she often still felt hesitant or peripheral, Grace intentionally continued “putting myself out there time and again” through participation in Native student groups and cultural programming. For Grace, resilience involved slowly moving from observation toward participation through repeated acts of reconnection with family, culture, and Native community.

### **Shared Stressors and Resilience Resources Across Participants**

While the preceding ecological narratives highlighted the distinct and multilayered contexts shaping each student's mental health experiences, several sources of stress and resilience were broadly shared across the sample. These themes closely aligned with prior research on factors influencing AI/AN undergraduates' psychosocial adjustment, persistence, and belonging in PWI contexts as well as literature examining stress and resilience processes within AI/AN populations generally. Students' accounts extend this literature by foregrounding how these experiences shaped mental health and wellbeing within higher education contexts, outcomes less commonly emphasized than persistence and belonging in prior research. Because these themes are well established, they are summarized in Tables 2A/2B (Appendix D) rather than examined in depth before turning to the more nuanced tensions and themes that emerged across students' differing ecological contexts and relationships to Native culture and community.

### **Variation in Stress and Resilience by Relationships to Native Culture and Community**

Although all participants identified as AI/AN students attending the same PWI, students described markedly different relationships to Native culture and community shaped by variation in family environments, cultural exposure, tribal community connection, educational experiences, and life trajectories. These differing relationships reflected not only students' immediate ecological contexts, but also broader intergenerational and sociohistorical influences, including family histories of cultural continuity, disruption, disconnection, and reconnection. Across narratives, students described varying experiences of cultural continuity, community connection, and reconnection. Narratives included descriptions of longstanding cultural continuity within tribal communities, maintaining cultural connections across multiple Native and institutional settings, and experiences of cultural disruption followed by later reconnection.

These differing relationships to Native culture and community shaped how students experienced stress, belonging, resilience, and wellbeing within the PWI environment.

Comparative narrative patterning across participants' stories revealed several recurring ecological stress and resilience processes associated with variation in students' ecological experiences and relationships to Native culture and Native community (see Table 3 in Appendix F). These processes represented broader narrative patterns synthesized from multiple related stressors, resilience resources, and ecological experiences described across participants' stories. Rather than reflecting fixed student categories, they emerged as overlapping patterns through which students described and made meaning of stress and resilience within the PWI environment. Across narratives, stressors and resilience resources emerged across chrono/macrosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem contexts, illustrating how students' relationships to Native culture and community, as embedded within broader ecological experiences, shaped students' navigation of the university environment.

The following sections describe three recurring ecological contexts that emerged through comparative narrative patterning across participants' stories. These contexts reflect similarities in family and community environments, experiences of cultural continuity and disruption, and broader ecological experiences that shaped how students described their relationships to Native culture and community. They do not represent fixed student categories, but rather recurring narrative contexts through which students described and made meaning of stress, resilience, and wellbeing within the PWI environment. Within each context, particular stress and resilience processes emerged as especially prominent and central to students' mental health experiences. However, students' experiences were not mutually exclusive, and elements of these processes appeared across participants' narratives in varying ways and to differing degrees.

### *Ecological Context 1: Sustaining Relational Ties Across Geographic and Cultural Dislocation*

**Relationship to Native Culture and Community.** Virginia and Sylvia described relationships to Native culture and community rooted in geographically and relationally concentrated tribal communities in eastern Washington, where Native community, kinship, and culture were experienced as deeply interconnected parts of everyday life. Both students grew up in small, predominantly Native reservation and rural community contexts and identified strongly with their specific tribal identities while also describing broader understandings of culture, belonging, and identity as shaped through growing up surrounded by Native family, peers, cultural practices, spirituality, language, and shared community histories. Across both narratives, culture was not described as something separate from everyday living or community participation, but as embedded within relationships, collective responsibilities, shared ways of living, and ongoing proximity to family, homelands, and other Native people. As Virginia explained, “my community, which is a large part of my identity...especially for Native students, when community is such a big part of your culture.” Similarly, Sylvia described being “so used to being so connected to everyone around me and everyone’s like very culturally similar to me and everyone’s Native,” reflecting how cultural continuity was experienced through sustained relational closeness and shared community life. Sylvia further explained that culture was fundamentally relational, often transmitted not through “this big display of culture,” but through everyday interactions where “you just spend time with family and they’ll just tell you something offhand, like they’ll just do it themselves.”

Although both students described strong continuity in their relationships to Native culture and community, their narratives also reflected differing experiences of cultural learning and identity development within these environments. Sylvia described culture as deeply woven into

everyday family life through “small ways of being” that were “just ingrained without even thinking about it,” while Virginia reflected more explicitly on periods of uncertainty connected to navigating mixed-race identity and reconnecting more intentionally with cultural practices and extended family relationships during adolescence. She described this process as becoming “realigned almost” through reconnecting with family, language, and culture, explaining that “if you don’t know yourself, you’re very lost.” Even while emphasizing this later reconnection process, Virginia framed these experiences within the broader continuity of growing up in a “predominantly Native area” where culture and community were “very directly tied to my upbringing.”

At the same time, both narratives reflected the ongoing impacts of colonial disruption alongside collective community efforts to sustain and restore cultural continuity. Sylvia described thinking frequently about historical and cultural losses while relearning cultural practices, explaining that “when you come back to the cultural, and you’re trying to bring back these traditions and ways of living it’s really hard not [to] think of why you don’t know these things or how you have to relearn them.” Similarly, Virginia reflected that disruptions in cultural transmission within her own family were “directly tied to colonialism” and “the erasure of Native people,” describing how cultural teachings “just didn’t get passed down.” Yet unlike narratives in which reconnection was described primarily as an individual or family-level process following cultural separation or disconnection, both students framed maintaining and restoring cultural continuity as a collective endeavor occurring within broader community contexts through relationships with family, elders, tribal community, and shared efforts to sustain, revitalize, and pass forward cultural knowledge and practices.

Within the PWI environment, these deeply rooted relationships to home communities contributed to a shared stress process of dislocation characterized by geographic separation, relational distance, and cultural isolation. At the same time, both students described actively sustaining ties to family, community, culture, and home as ways of maintaining continuity and grounding while navigating the separation and isolation they experienced on campus.

**Primary Stress Process: Dislocation.** Across Virginia and Sylvia's narratives, a pervasive sense of dislocation emerged as the primary stress process shaping their experiences within the PWI environment. Both students characterized the transition to a predominantly White university as a profound form of cultural displacement, requiring navigation of shifts in geography, cultural norms, and relational proximity, often in contexts where few others shared their specific tribal background or reservation upbringing. Both students described a sudden and disorienting separation from tightly woven networks of extended family, community engagement, and constant relational presence, narrating an abrupt transition from communities where they were deeply known and culturally understood to a campus where they frequently felt disconnected, culturally isolated, and unseen. This dislocation emerged across multiple interconnected ecological dimensions: acute cultural isolation from peers who shared their tribal backgrounds or cultural knowledge; tensions between home and campus values, including skepticism toward higher education rooted in histories of schooling as cultural erasure; classroom discussions that treated Native histories and experiences as abstract concepts, often disconnected from lived realities and at times retraumatizing; and campus Native spaces that, though intended to support Native students, often felt culturally distant, centered different perspectives, or pressured students to explain or represent their communities. Across these

experiences, dislocation reinforced the sense that there was no space on campus where they could fully bring the histories, relationships, and cultural worlds they carried from home.

***Dislocation in the Chrono/Macrosystem: Cultural isolation.*** Across both narratives, dislocation was experienced most acutely in the contrast between the relationally dense and culturally congruent environments they came from and the social and cultural isolation they encountered within the university setting. Raised in predominantly Native, rural, close-knit reservation communities, Sylvia and Virginia described the disorienting displacement they encountered when the cultural worlds that had structured their daily lives – tribal practices, familiar landscapes, kinship networks, and the everyday presence of people who shared their histories and ways of being—were largely absent on campus. Both experienced the transition to a predominantly White, urban university as a "culture shock" that felt geographically, socially, and culturally foreign, with Native people, values, and experiences often rendered invisible or marginal, an ongoing condition of dislocation rather than a temporary adjustment leaving them lonely, homesick, anxious, and disconnected.

Coming from Native-majority communities, the university felt instantly unfamiliar and alienating. Virginia conveyed this shock and disorientation vividly:

"I got here and I was like, this is all White people.... I came from a predominantly Native area, maybe like 70% Native kids at our school. And then we came here and I was like, where am I? Like, where am I in this place? You know what I mean? So it was just very isolating in that way where it's like immediately."

Her repeated question "where am I" captured both physical displacement and a broader loss of social and cultural orientation, the sudden shift from a Native-majority community to a predominantly White campus leaving her not only physically out of place but unsure of where

she fit. Sylvia described a similar shift, moving from a "very predominantly Native space" to a "very predominantly not Native space" that created "already an area of disconnect for me" because she was "so used to being so connected to everyone around me" where everyone is "very culturally similar to me." For both students, the move to campus involved an abrupt transition from environments where Native people, cultural norms, and tribal ways of life were central to spaces where they were largely absent. This dislocation was intensified by the loss of familiar land and natural space in the move from a rural community to an urban campus, which disrupted both daily routines and ways of coping with stress. Virginia explained:

"I knew certain ways of handling certain things before I got here, but...it can be really hard to adjust,...to kind of find a way to navigate that...Like I was so used to being able to, if I get overwhelmed, just like drive to the nearby park or lake and just like sit and just like enjoy. But here it's like, oh, everywhere I turn to it's a building, like, where do I go? So it was really hard."

Virginia's reflection suggests that the absence of familiar landscapes left her without access to the places and practices she relied on to "navigate" stress and feel connected to herself, her question "where do I go?" echoing her earlier sense of disorientation and highlighting how the transition disrupted not only place but access to grounding practices and emotional regulation. She described feeling "kind of lost" and reflected that she "almost forgot who I was... and why I'm here in the first place." Sylvia similarly emphasized the contrast between close connection to land and family at home and arriving on campus where "it's just me", a shift from living in close physical proximity to extended family to a setting defined by distance and unfamiliar surroundings that left her feeling "really out of place," contributing to anxiety, frequent tears, and feeling "pretty stuck and miserable."

Students described this isolation as extending beyond physical separation to the loss of a relational way of living. Reservation communities were deeply interwoven, reciprocal, and community-oriented, with relationships extending across generations and cultural norms shared implicitly rather than explained, as Sylvia illustrated: "even if you're not knowingly living out like some cultural experience, it's just so ingrained in everybody like that's the norm there", highlighting how connection was embedded in everyday life. By contrast, campus life felt more individualistic, distant, and fragmented. She described this shift directly:

"I mean there's community here, but it's so much less community orientated, I guess.

Because back home, especially on the rez, you know everybody, everybody knows you...

your entire family. Like you say one name and they're like, oh, I know this, this and this

and this and I remember you... and you come out here and it's like you don't know

anybody and they don't know anything about you. And it's like, just so less."

Sylvia contrasted reservation life, where "everybody knows you" and relationships were embedded in shared family and community histories, with a campus environment that felt anonymous and disconnected. She described this as a "loss of community," not simply the absence of familiar people, but the disruption of a way of relating in which individuals were known and situated within a broader network of relationships. She explained that leaving for college meant separation not only from family but from "your literally whole community, your whole culture," and at times "it feels like you're leaving everything." Campus felt "so much less community orientated" not because relationships were fewer, but because they lacked reciprocity and shared relational history. Even when she tried to explain her experiences, Sylvia described feeling that "almost no one gets it." Virginia similarly emphasized that she "was always trying to find it" but "couldn't because you can't replace it, but it's also like there's not much like it."

This cultural isolation also disrupted students' sense of identity, role, and purpose. Sylvia described how within her community people understood themselves through the roles they held, emphasizing "there's a place for you in your culture." On campus, she no longer felt she knew where she belonged or what she was meant to do, describing feeling "lost" and without direction. Virginia similarly reflected that she "almost forgot who I was" during her first year. Both students described this isolation as more than a temporary adjustment but an ongoing experience in college that intensified anxiety, loneliness, sadness, loss of motivation, and feeling "stuck."

***Dislocation in the Mesosystem: Tensions between home and school values.*** Across Sylvia and Virginia's narratives, dislocation also emerged through tensions between home and university values surrounding education. Both students described navigating conflicting messages about the purpose and value of higher education, with perspectives from home not always aligning with those promoted by the university. These tensions became especially salient within an environment that already felt culturally unfamiliar and "disconnected." Sylvia and Virginia described encountering narratives from home that framed college as unnecessary or "a scam", messages that were often expressed casually but reflected broader skepticism toward educational systems historically experienced as sites of cultural erasure. As students entered a university environment that already felt culturally unfamiliar and disconnected from home, these perspectives amplified doubts about whether they belonged and heightened the sense that college required separation from the communities and ways of life that had grounded them.

Sylvia described receiving these messages from friends and relatives, who sometimes questioned why she would "waste money" on college when people "back home" were "doing fine" without it. As she struggled with isolation and a sense of displacement on campus, these messages became more persuasive:

“I’m just so used to Native school, Native friends, Native family...then I like, come here and, you know, you hear people talk about college and like...you go back home and they’re like, ‘Why are you wasting all this money for to go to college? Like, look at us. We’re all here. We’re doing fine’...And so sometimes you’re like, oh, like, you know, maybe you’re right.”

Her reflection illustrates how community perspectives interacted with her campus experiences. The cultural distance of the university made it harder to dismiss these messages, deepening her sense of dislocation which she described as contributing to uncertainty, apathy, and feeling "stuck." Her admission that "maybe you're right" suggests these tensions became internalized as she struggled to locate purpose and belonging on campus. Sylvia also connected this skepticism about the value of college to intergenerational experiences of schooling as harmful, noting it was rooted in histories where institutions "treat[ed] us badly anyway" and raised the question of "why would we want to go to school?" She reflected that this history framed how she interpreted the institution in the present, making college feel not only unfamiliar but difficult to trust and uncertain in its relevance to her community and future. As she encountered spaces where Native knowledge and language were marginalized, she questioned whether the institution had anything meaningful to offer:

“Sometimes I do think [college is] a little bit of a sham just cause...they’re very disregarding toward Native knowledge...We had language teachers in school, but they had to go through so much so they could teach language in school without a college degree...what would a college teach about a language knowledge...that is not taught in schools, taught by an elder back home on the rez? Like what could college teach us about something that we already know? ...there’s like another disconnect there.”

Her reflection highlights a tension between community-based and institutional definitions of knowledge: the language, teachings, and practices she valued were learned through elders and relationships, yet the university positioned formal credentials as the primary marker of legitimacy. This contradiction deepened her sense that the institution was not only culturally distant from home but unable to recognize the knowledge systems that grounded her identity, making the "college is a scam" messages she heard at home feel more believable and contributing to discouragement, aimlessness, and "wasting time" within the university.

Virginia similarly described how community messages that "college is a scam" shaped her experience of navigating the university. Reflecting on these tensions, she explained:

"A lot of it kind of feeds into your own self-perception.... it's hard for me to hear outside opinions...because it's like every different opinion is going to shape how I view the world, almost because I don't have really a strong sense of self in this moment...So it's hard to navigate in a way that's like, oh, like 'college is a scam. You can get by without it.' Okay. Like you are a UPS driver, what are you telling me? But it's still feeding into that., like, 'okay, well, if it's a scam, why am I doing it?'"

Her comment that she did not have "a strong sense of self in this moment" suggests that community messages that "college is a scam" became especially influential during periods of isolation, shaping how she viewed her experiences on campus and making it harder to separate her own goals and beliefs from competing messages around her. Even when she could recognize that these perspectives did not fully make sense, they still "fed into" her doubts, adding to uncertainty about whether she belonged in college and whether her efforts had meaning or worth.

***Dislocation in the Microsystems: Abstraction in Classroom Contexts.*** Sylvia and Virginia also described experiencing dislocation within classroom environments, where topics

deeply personal and relational were often discussed in abstract ways. Both students recalled classroom conversations about history, trauma, violence, and family relationships, topics they knew intimately through their own lives and communities, often treated as detached concepts or points of debate. They described how watching their classmates engage in these discussions from a distance while they experienced them as immediate and emotionally charged left them feeling unseen and disconnected from their peers and classroom.

Sylvia described this in a large lecture course discussing the remains of a Native ancestor connected to her own community. While the class framed the issue as a question of research ethics, she experienced it directly and relationally, knowing people who had advocated for the ancestor's return and understanding the remains not as a scientific object but as "one of our relatives." She recalled the "surreal" and "demeaning" feeling of listening to classmates debate it from an "outside perspective." She reflected, "do people know there are other Native people...in the room?" and later summarized the uncomfortable dynamic of being in physical present yet invisible in the conversation where "they're talking about you but they're also kind of talking around you." Sitting silently in a "600-person lecture space" while others dissected something "so personal to you" made her feel profoundly alone and out of place, highlighting how class discussion rendered her community visible as a topic but not as a lived presence.

Virginia described a form of alienation surfacing in classroom discussions of violence and trauma. Unlike peers who approached these topics in abstract ways, she experienced them through her own family history and explained that navigating these conversations where "a lot of the people have never experienced these things" required balancing what felt right for her and her family with what seemed socially acceptable: "it's like this is a research paper for you. This is my day-to-day life." This disjuncture became most pronounced in a seminar on a novel about

childhood abuse and trauma where, expecting a typical literature course, Virginia found herself immersed in material mirroring her own life. She described how reading and discussing the book resurfaced emotions and memories she "was not ready to deal with" and had "never, ever addressed," such that "every single time I'd open the book, I'd just start crying." Virginia emphasized that the distress came not only from the book itself, but from "seeing other people interact with it." While classmates engaged the novel as material to analyze, Virginia experienced the discussion as inseparable from her own life and family history. In one class, she recalled listening as students debated whether a perpetrator "loved" the child he abused:

"I remember there was one class, we were actively discussing an assault that happened in the book to the character when he was a kid. And then like, we were debating whether the perpetrator loved him or not. ... it just was so difficult because I was like, these are like things we're debating that are real life scenarios, you know what I mean?...It just was affecting literally every single point of my life."

Virginia's reflection captures the dislocation produced when experiences connected to lived trauma were treated as abstract literary questions; rather than creating distance, the classroom intensified them, leaving her feeling increasingly separate from classmates who could debate these topics without having lived their consequences. While others approached the novel as a text to "actively pick apart," Virginia described feeling as though "my breath is taken from me" listening to these conversations, with the course becoming "so taxing" that it spilled beyond the seminar itself. She began isolating herself, skipping classes, struggling to complete assignments, and relying on "behaviors I'm not typically engaging in" to cope, ways of coping that left her feeling "terrible about myself because I have to stoop to these things" while intrusive thoughts followed her throughout the day. She explained that this experience reinforced a sense that

academic spaces were structured for people who had "never experienced this stuff," a divide made especially stark by the fact that classmates and even her professor could analyze and engage with the novel while Virginia inhabited what felt like an entirely different reality.

***Dislocation in the Microsystem: Native-Centered Spaces.*** In addition to feeling disconnected within mainstream campus spaces, both Virginia and Sylvia also described experiencing dislocation within Native-centered organizations and cultural programming. Although these spaces were intended to foster belonging, they often reflected different cultural experiences and ways of relating, leaving some students feeling unseen or out of place. As Sylvia explained, she began attending the Native student organization less frequently because she felt "more of like a disconnect from the club," describing a divide "between like people who grew up on the rez or in the city or people who grew up within their culture and like outside of their culture," which left her feeling "like the odd one out." For Sylvia, this separation reflected the limits of pan-Indigenous spaces to capture the specificity of reservation and tribe-based experiences: "I just feel like a lot of these things aren't very like pan-Indigenous, someone from one tribe probably isn't doing the same thing my tribe is." While there were "a few similarities here and there," she emphasized, "when it gets to like the base of it...it's different at the end of the day," leaving "that still kind of like disconnect there." Even when she appreciated Native programming, these spaces reminded her of what was missing rather than fostering connection, recalling how cultural events such as coastal jams would "make me miss home" because "it's all done in such a different way...it's not really yours." For her, Native spaces on campus were "nice spaces," but "it's just different from how we would do things at home." Rather than easing students' broader sense of dislocation, Native programming sometimes contributed to it by highlighting how far they felt from their own practices and ways of doing things, with students

locating points of alienation across three dimensions: a lack of representation of their cultural and community experiences, forms of othering and idealization within Native spaces, and mismatches in cultural protocols and expectations.

Students described feeling that their experiences growing up within tribal communities were underrepresented within Native organizations and programming. Within these spaces, they often did not see the realities of reservation life, their specific tribal traditions, or students with similar backgrounds reflected in leadership, programming, or the broader Native campus community. Virginia recalled arriving on campus hopeful that the Native student organization would be the place where she would finally find other students who shared her experience of growing up on a reservation:

“I was like, where are all the rural Natives? ...where are all of the rezzy Natives? ... I honestly did truly believe that everyone was going to [Native student organization]... So I was like, dude, rezzy people don't exist. I'm confused. So I really did try for a long time to be connected in that stuff.”

Virginia's conclusion that "rezzy people don't exist" underscores how dislocated she felt even within spaces designed to cultivate belonging; Instead of reducing isolation on campus, these spaces sometimes heightened it by making the absence of students like herself more visible. She described this lack of representation as "a lot more emotional" because she already felt "generally" unrepresented on the PWI campus, and when even Native spaces centered experiences different from her own, it deepened her sense of not fully belonging: "This doesn't represent me," she explained. She eventually stopped attending entirely, "I don't go to the meetings. I don't do anything...because I'm not represented there either." Sylvia echoed this experience, reflecting that "most of the people I know who grew up within their culture aren't in

[the Native student organization].” Although “there’s a lot of us here,” she explained they were not “all compiled,” leaving them less visible and with less of a voice in the spaces that were supposed to represent them. Like Virginia, Sylvia described a divide between students whose identities had developed within tribal community and those whose relationships to Indigeneity had developed in other ways; she felt her own experience had little place in conversations centered on discovering Native identity in college, describing this disconnect as “just different life experiences,” leaving her to “shift on things we can actually connect on” and feeling like important parts of herself remained unspoken or difficult to share. Students also described how this lack of representation extended into leadership and decision-making. Virginia recalled when a conflict over powwow leadership in which a student with powwow experience in her tribal community was challenged by organization leaders; when others who grew up in community organized to support her, leaders closed discussion and limited the vote to officers, reinforcing for Virginia the sense that students with backgrounds like her own were not fully represented in spaces where decisions were made.

Students also described feeling alienated when their cultural knowledge and upbringing were treated as unusual or exotic within Native spaces. Sylvia and Virginia described feeling put “under a microscope” by students who did not grow up on the reservation or within their culture, communicating that the ways they spoke, dressed, and related to culture and identity were outside what was considered normal within campus Native spaces. At times, this took the form of idealizing reservation life as something “mystical.” Sylvia described feeling “almost mystified” because she had grown up within her culture:

“There’s been times where they’re like, ‘oh, wow, like you just seem so magical.... And you almost feel like...objectified. And it’s just like, oh, you know how to speak your

language, like you should pray for us.... most of the time, it's very nice. But when it's like time after time, it's just like it almost is, like uncomfortable.”

Although these comments were often intended as compliments, repeated over time they became uncomfortable and objectifying. Rather than being recognized as an ordinary person whose cultural practices were part of everyday life, Sylvia felt that she was being positioned as someone special or representative of culture, which deepened her sense of separation and made Native spaces feel less like places she could just be herself. Virginia described a similar experience of being treated as “mystical” and feeling “like in a snow globe,” observed and admired from a distance rather than understood. She recalled that she had not expected to feel “too Native for certain spaces:”

“I got there expecting to feel kind of like accepted and supported, whereas, like, I kind of felt put on a pedestal and asked to do things that I wasn't either comfortable doing or I just didn't have the ability to.”

This idealization heightened Virginia's sense of distance, entering these spaces expecting connection but instead feeling removed and “put on a pedestal.” As she explained, “people see us as so different than how we view it and how we grew up with it.” Others often viewed reservation life as “awesome and mythical and epic,” leaving little room for the more complicated realities she lived with, including the violence, addiction, and conflict that shaped her relationship with her father. “When you don't come from a community,” she reflected, “it's really easy to say that because...you cannot imagine it,” leaving Virginia feeling excluded from discussions about her own community and support in these spaces feeling superficial because it depended on an idealized image of reservation life that did not feel true to her reality.

Both students also described more direct microaggressions tied to their cultural knowledge and experiences of reservation life. Virginia recalled a Native student who grew up on a reservation being described as "too loud" and "too much" by students who "did not grow up like we did," comments she understood as reflecting discomfort with a "rezzy" way of speaking and being, while noting that because she was more "academically spoken," others "felt more comfortable" making these statements around her, rendering her own connection to home less visible. She also recounted a moment when another student told her she had seemed "intimidating" because she "knew [her] culture so well" and was "all decked out", struck by the implication that introducing herself in Salish and wearing a ribbon skirt made her seem threatening: "I was intimidating because I knew my culture? That's crazy." These moments made Virginia feel that students who grew up within reservation communities were othered within Native spaces, whether idealized or judged for the cultural knowledge and community experiences they held. For Sylvia, experiences like these often led her to "tone down" her own background and avoid talking openly about reservation life. She described feeling hesitant to share ordinary aspects of her upbringing, "like having cars in your front yard," anticipating that others would see them as strange or shameful:

"Sometimes talking about growing up on the rez...even other like, city Natives have things to say about the rez. And so sometimes like I'll tone it down because it wasn't the best ...sometimes I just will sit and I'll just be like, maybe I won't say that out loud.... I almost feel embarrassed, but for myself...It's like, what do I have to be embarrassed about? That's how I live. That's how my family lives.... I just like automatically think, okay, no connection here"

These microaggressions did more than create momentary discomfort, they shaped what students felt able to share, subtly marking reservation life as something embarrassing or "not normal." Sylvia felt pressure to filter and downplay her experiences, admitting "you don't want to bring it up anymore," which left her with the sense that there was "no connection here" and that she had to choose between being fully herself and belonging within Native campus community. These interactions suggest that dislocation within Native-centered spaces was through the ways certain forms of Indigeneity were marked and made difficult to inhabit fully in these contexts.

These students also described feeling alienated when expectations within Native programming conflicted with the protocols they had been taught at home. Sylvia noted feeling uncomfortable when other students expected her to explain teachings or practices simply because she had grown up immersed in her culture. She explained:

"Sometimes you're kind of expected to share some things...and I'm like, I'm not comfortable being a teacher. Some of the things I know like... I'm not in the place to be the one to share this type of thing, like, that's not my teaching to give...when it comes down to, like, the teachings or like having speaking over food...sometimes I'm just less comfortable doing those sorts of things. And like, I just feel like a sort of disconnect.

Although Sylvia felt comfortable sharing activities such as beading or sewing, she drew a clear distinction between these and more sacred or relational forms of knowledge: language, teachings, or speaking over food. Because these expectations did not align with the cultural boundaries she had been taught, she shared they felt less like invitations into community and more like reminders that her ways of practicing culture didn't match campus Native space norms, contributing to her growing disconnection and withdrawal from Native student programming.

Virginia described a similar discomfort with the assumption that all Native students should be willing or qualified to lead cultural programming. She was particularly troubled by being asked to take on powwow leadership because she had grown up around powwow, despite not feeling she had the appropriate knowledge or authority to organize “something as big and cultural and spiritual as powwow.” As she explained:

“I do not feel comfortable with that because, while I've grown up around powwow, like I've been to powwow, I've participated in powwow, I've never run a powwow...I don't know what the protocol is...So I would never take a position where I did not have the knowledge to do that, because I do not want to disrespect anybody...because I'm representing my own community ...a lot of it was like entitlement to everybody's culture or everybody's knowledge, where it's like some things you don't share.”

For Virginia, respect for culture meant recognizing that knowledge is relational, situated, and accompanied by responsibility and protocol, emphasizing that students should approach culture “from a place of learning, not knowing.” What troubled her was not that others wanted to learn, but that they often did so in ways that overlooked the cultural responsibilities and limits surrounding what should be shared, by whom, and under what circumstances. These tensions became especially painful when Virginia recalled witnessing what she perceived as a violation of cultural respect and relational values when she watched other students laugh at and interrupt an elder who had come to speak on behalf of a student from his reservation community: “Even if an elder is saying things I do not agree with, I've never interrupted or laughed at them like that. Like that's just not something you do.” In response, Virginia withdrew not only from the Native student organization but also from other Native-centered programming, explaining that she no

longer had the "mental capacity" to continue to be spaces that, rather than providing "support and community and love," had become "very contentious," contributing to her sense of dislocation.

**Primary Resilience Process: Sustaining Ties to Home.** Although Virginia and Sylvia described profound dislocation on campus, they also identified resilience resources centered on actively creating and sustaining ties to home, threads of connection to family, community, culture, and ways of being that helped them feel less distant and more grounded. These ties functioned as partial and ongoing forms of repair to dislocation, helping students maintain a sense of self and relational and cultural continuity across home and campus. For Virginia, sustaining these ties meant maintaining what she called "alignment," staying connected to the people, values, and community that helped emotionally ground her and made her feel most like herself, while Sylvia described a similar process as "carrying yourself with you," creating continuity across contexts by continuing to live out the relationships, responsibilities, and cultural values she had learned at home.

These students described two primary ways of sustaining these ties. First, they built close relationships that allowed them to see home reflected on campus, emphasizing the importance of friendships with other Native students who had grown up in similar community contexts and with women of color from rural, close-knit communities who "got it;" these relationships created a "home away from home" that carved out spaces of cultural recognition and recreated familiar forms of kinship, reciprocity, and belonging within the PWI. Second, they maintained an emotional and symbolic tie to home by framing their education as something they were doing for their specific tribal communities, connecting academic goals to the wellbeing of home in ways that made college feel more meaningful and less disconnected from who they were. Rather than pursuing education for themselves alone, Sylvia and Virginia described college as a relational

and reciprocal project, a way of bringing something back, such that when the university felt alienating, this sense of purpose created another thread tying campus back to home.

***Psychological Resource: Grounding purpose through giving back to home.*** For Virginia and Sylvia, tying academic goals to the future of their own communities was one of the most important ways of sustaining ties to home. Rather than imagining college as an individual pathway away from home, Sylvia and Virginia framed it as a road that would ultimately bring them back with something useful to offer; they both described their education goals as inseparable from their relationships to family, tribe, and community, expressing a desire to “give back” as their motivation to persist through challenges and a sense of purpose and connection that emotionally grounded them when college felt alienating or disconnected. Sylvia described wanting to use her education to meet the needs of her community because “it’s hard finding specific people to fill specific positions for jobs when they don’t have these degrees,” while Virginia similarly framed her goals relationally: “I want to give back to my own community because I feel like their happiness is my happiness.” Rather than pursuing college for individual advancement, both students understood its value through their reciprocity and responsibility, a meaningful tie to the people and places they loved. When students questioned the value of higher education or felt that the university was irrelevant to their lives, they reoriented themselves toward what they hoped to bring back and transformed college from something distant and unfamiliar into something inextricably connected to home.

Virginia described this process as an intentional way of grounding herself when she felt displaced on campus: “It’s really easy to get lost, you know what I mean? So, it’s like, it kind of reminds me like, oh, I’m doing this for my community.” She further described this as a practice of grounding:

“It really is just being very intentional about what you're here for...Like I'm here for my community, my people, my family, my friends, my relationships...these are things that keep me going. So these are the things I want to give back to.”

Virginia's emphasis on being "intentional" suggests that giving back was not only a future aspiration but an active strategy for countering dislocation. When she felt "lost," reconnecting to her "people," "family," and "relationships" restored a sense of direction and continuity across contexts, anchoring herself in the relationships that connected her to home. This process was closely tied to the "alignment" she described as central to her wellbeing: feeling "the best" when "aligned with your culture and your identity" and "giving back to my community," suggesting that purpose and reciprocity lessened the stress of displacement by reminding her who she was and where she belonged. Sylvia described a similar process of reframing of the distance from home; while she identified "that loss of community" as "a really big stressor" that prompted fears of missing out on life at home, her desire to "get through college so you can bring that stuff back to your community" allowed her to reinterpret separation as purposeful, helping her feel more "confident about pushing through school" by viewing college as a way to "bring something valuable back home." Reframing her education as a way of strengthening, not distancing, her relationship to her community helped make the separation from home more tolerable, providing direction when she felt discouraged or overwhelmed. Both students also described how this orientation created hope and future possibility. Virginia imagined her education benefiting her community, explaining "the things I'm doing now are not for me...I'm doing these things for five years down the line for kids that I see at school." Sylvia described being motivated by younger relatives who, by looking up to her, made her "want to do more and keep doing more," her model already giving back to her community by offering a future for those she loved. These

relationships tied their educational goals to specific people and futures that allowed them to carry home with them even while physically away.

***Social/Cultural Resource: Relationships That Sustain Ties to Home.*** For Virginia and Sylvia, relationships with peers who shared key aspects of their background were a central resilience resource, creating spaces of recognition where experiences of reservation life, rural communities, close kinship networks, and the transition to a PWI campus were understood without requiring translation or explanation. Both students described three overlapping forms of relationships as especially important, with close friendships with peers from their same reservation providing the most direct connection to home. For Sylvia and Virginia, their friendship with one another allowed them to carry part of home into the university environment. Because they had "lived" many of the same experiences, their relationship required "no background needed/" Sylvia described an "instant click" in which she could reference a cultural teaching or belief and Virginia would immediately understand: "She'll just know it." Experiences that might otherwise intensify dislocation, such as being called "crazy" for thinking "dreams have messages," instead became moments of recognition and ease. Virginia echoed the buffering effects of this mutual understanding: "this person's lived your life with you," which created the safety that "she's going to understand exactly what I'm saying" and allowed each to feel fully known in a place where they often felt misunderstood or out of place. This shared understanding fostered continuity across environments. When Sylvia was stressed, homesick, or thinking about "something from home that I know nobody else will get," she could simply go to Virginia's room and say, "Hey you know what I miss?" without explanation. She described this relationship as one of the main ways she tried to "combat the feeling of loss from not being home," reminding herself, "I got her right there, that's a piece of home upstairs." As such, the importance

of this relationship was also tied to physical proximity in a way that differed from maintaining contact with people at home, which could heighten the awareness of distance. Knowing that Virginia was “nearby” made home feel more present:

“It's very comforting to know, like, she's nearby...because it's different from talking on the phone or like texting my sister...it's like, nice to have someone, like, so close from home who knows, who really knows everything. And like, even has those cultural similarities with me that we understand has been really nice.”

Her reflection suggests that home was no longer only something distant or remembered but something she could access within the university itself. Virginia similarly explained that when others asked how she copes with missing home, she jokes, “I got home at home,” emphasizing that being together maintained a living connection to the place and people they had left behind. Their friendship bridged two otherwise divided worlds, as each understood the community and family relationships the other came from in ways most campus peers could not, as well as the challenges of navigating college life in ways friends and family back home did not. As Sylvia explained, “I feel like I can tell her like anything college wise, like, back home wise...she knows it all.” Their friendship also helped sustain ongoing participation in life at home from afar, as they talked about community events and “Facebook drama” within their tribal community and sometimes traveled together for visits or events. Through one another, they remained engaged in the same community conversations, relationships, and concerns that would have surrounded them at home, extending a sense of home into the university environment.

Both students also described important relationships with other Native peers from similar rural, reservation-based contexts who, though from different tribal nations and regions, shared a common social and cultural world. Virginia described how having friends from another

reservation reminded her that others were navigating similar homesickness and displacement: "they get it too...we're all going through the same thing," and that talking together reminded her "you are not just stuck like alone." Sylvia similarly felt most drawn to students who had grown up on reservations because "they kind of like, get the whole like, oh, I'm so far from home," explaining that while "we have our differences...it's kind of the same on every rez." These relationships helped students process loss without explanation, as texting "now I'm sad I'm here" after a visit home was immediately met with recognition in their responses: "I wish I could go back to the rez." In this way, these relationships helped lessen isolation and made remaining at the university feel more possible. As Sylvia reflected, "I have those real connections. Like, I wouldn't actually just really want to drop everything and leave," suggesting these friendships extended kinship, community, and a sense of home into the university itself.

Finally, both students described meaningful relationships with women of color from rural Eastern Washington who, while not Native, understood experiences of growing up in small, close-knit communities and navigating predominantly White, urban institutions. Virginia explained that these friendships were grounded in "a lot of overlap" and "parallels" in experiences that stood in contrast to the broader student population: "you're from a small area, no one's from a small area," being "a minority at a big institution," feeling academically out of place from "a small school where you didn't get the best education...and now you're here and everyone knows more than you." These shared experiences of campus contrast offered another form of recognition and understanding. Sylvia similarly found comfort in friends who "know where you're coming from," discovering "cross connections" in the "way we grew up" and realizing experiences they once thought were unique were often "so similar." These friendships kept another dimension of home and rural Eastern Washington life present on campus, creating space

to positively “reminisce on the things back home” while reinforcing a shared sense of purpose to “do something and bring that back home.” After learning they grew up less than two hours apart, Sylvia wondered, “How have I never like seen you guys anywhere?,” as her roommates came to feel less like entirely new people and more like part of the broader world of home. These ties deepened as they visited each other’s homes over the summer “because they’re just right there.”

### ***Ecological Context 2: Holding the Middle Across Cultures and Communities***

**Relationship to Native Culture and Community.** Forest and Hope described relationships to Native culture and community shaped through movement across overlapping tribal, intertribal, urban, and institutional contexts. Both students identified strongly with their specific tribal identities while also describing relationships to Native community that extended across multiple interconnected spaces, including family networks, tribal communities, urban Native organizations, activism spaces, and campus-based Native communities. Although neither student grew up living full time within reservation-based tribal communities, both described remaining deeply connected to their tribal cultures through fathers who served as primary cultural mentors and intentionally maintained continuity through storytelling, ceremony, visits home, community relationships, and ongoing cultural engagement. Forest explained that culture was “not really something that I separate from myself,” reflecting a relationship to culture grounded through a father who placed a “heavy emphasis on keeping me connected to medicines and culture” for “basically my whole life.” Similarly, Hope described growing up in “a Native home raised by a Native father, but outside of community,” explaining that when she is away from Crow community she tries to maintain “a very distinctive Crow identity with the values that I’ve been taught.” Across both narratives, Native culture and community were experienced not

as fixed to a single place, but as relationships actively sustained across movement between multiple Native and non-Native environments.

At the same time, both students described tensions within these relationships rooted in family histories of relocation, urbanization, and colonial disruption that shaped their experiences of connection to tribal community. Hope explained that although she felt “very deeply embedded” within her family, clan, and culture, she was still “integrating” herself into the broader Crow community because she had grown up away from the reservation. Similarly, Forest reflected on the “weird disconnect between urban native people and people who live on the rez,” explaining that by the “nature of being urban” he often felt “not completely at home in a city or on my rez,” leaving him “constantly in a state of limbo.” Rather than describing cultural continuity as seamless, both students framed connection to culture and community as something requiring ongoing negotiation across multiple social and cultural worlds. Yet both also described learning from their fathers how to sustain relationships with tribal community while adapting cultural practices, values, and expressions to urban, intertribal, and predominantly non-Native environments.

Across both narratives, relationships with intertribal Native communities were also central to students’ experiences of culture and belonging. Both students described growing up engaged in Native community spaces outside of their specific tribal communities through advocacy work, urban Native organizations, Native youth programming, and intertribal community events. Hope reflected that she came from “multiple communities that all overlap,” while Forest described learning from “a lot of teachers” across diverse Native communities and approaching culture as a process of “constantly learning.” These experiences appeared to foster a kind of cultural and relational fluency across multiple Native and non-Native settings while also

requiring students to navigate differing expectations, protocols, and community needs. Both students described learning to sustain Native identity, cultural practice, and community connection across tribal, intertribal, urban, and predominantly non-Native environments long before arriving at the university, experiences that appeared to prepare them for negotiating the multiple communities and systems they encountered within the PWI context.

For both students, engagement with Native community on campus became another important expression of cultural continuity, identity development, and community responsibility. Both described the PNWU Native community not simply as a source of support, but as a community they actively helped organize, advocate for, and sustain through leadership, mentorship, cultural programming, and community building. For Hope, campus community also became her primary Native community during college because university life “really shortens the range of people that you can nurture relationships with,” concentrating her daily relationships within Native student spaces. Forest described becoming “annoyingly Indigenous” within classroom and campus spaces while also reflecting that involvement in Native community at PNWU allowed him to become recognized as his “own person” rather than simply “Sam’s kid.” Similarly, Hope described extending Apsáalooke kinship values into campus community-building efforts through organizing workshops, mentoring students, and “equipping” Native students with regalia, beadwork, and cultural knowledge. Across narratives, both students described sustaining connection to culture and community not through remaining within a single community context, but through adapting cultural practices, relationships, and responsibilities across multiple overlapping communities and institutional environments.

Within the PWI environment, these overlapping relationships to culture and community, combined with students’ movement across tribal, intertribal, urban, and institutional settings,

contributed to a shared stress process of holding the middle: navigating competing expectations, responsibilities, and ways of relating across cultures, communities, and institutional systems. At the same time, both students described resilience as rooted in maintaining balance across these worlds through cultural mentorship, adaptation of cultural practices, community building, and sustaining connections across the multiple communities they inhabited.

**Primary Stress Process: Holding the Middle.** Across Forest and Hope's narratives, holding the middle emerged as the primary stress process influencing their experiences within the PWI environment. As visible leaders within Native spaces on campus, Forest and Hope occupied complex in-between roles as cultural educators, advocates, community builders, and institutional intercessors, brokering the differing expectations of tribal communities, broader Native community, campus Native spaces, and the university itself. This stress of holding the middle surfaced across multiple ecological contexts: tensions within their cultural identities between feeling deeply connected to Native culture and community while feeling distant from homelands and certain aspects of tribal community life; the substantial pressure of acting as intermediaries between campus-based and broader Native communities and institutional systems, negotiating differing priorities and ways of relating across these spaces; and the emotional labor associated with their visibility and leadership within Native campus spaces, including expectations to teach, represent, organize, advocate, and care for others. Together, these layered pressures left Forest and Hope feeling "exhausted," pulled in multiple directions, and struggling to balance the needs of multiple communities while attending to their own wellbeing.

***Holding the Middle in the Chrono/Macrosystem: Insider/outsider tensions in tribal community.*** Forest and Hope both described existing in an "in-between" space rooted in intergenerational histories of movement that shaped how they understood belonging and

connection across Native and non-Native contexts. Although both students described feeling deeply connected to their tribal identities and communities, they also experienced uncertainty about where they fit within these spaces because they had grown up away from tribal homelands and reservation communities. In Native contexts, students worried that others viewed them as not fully "from" or "in" community because of their urban upbringing and distance from tribal homelands, while in non-Native spaces they often felt misunderstood, invisible, or reduced to stereotypes. This insider/outsider tension left students feeling caught between belonging and exclusion, contributing to an ongoing sense of uncertainty about their place that shaped how they moved through campus and related to others. Forest described this tension directly when reflecting on being raised in an urban Native community in the Pacific Northwest:

“By nature of being urban, there's a weird disconnect between urban Native people and people who live on the rez, which makes me feel not completely at home in a city or on my rez. And so, I feel like I'm constantly in a state of limbo. And that's a product of like, historical assimilation attempts.”

Forest's description of existing in “constant limbo” captured his sense of not fully belonging in either place. Although he described himself as “someone who's grown up immersed in my culture,” he still felt a “disconnect” from people on his reservation that left him questioning whether he was “Native enough” in tribal contexts while also feeling out of place in predominantly White spaces. He explained that this tension had sometimes led him to try to make himself less visible to cope: “I try to not be Native because I don't want to make White people uncomfortable.” Although he quickly added that “I don't do that anymore,” he then corrected himself: “I try not to do that anymore,” suggesting that the pressure to minimize or conceal parts of himself, what he named as “internalized racism,” remained difficult to escape.

This sense of being caught between identities became especially painful in academic settings where Forest felt his Native identity was already often misunderstood or flattened. He described writing an essay connecting critically endangered fish in his tribe's homelands to his own experience "as a mixed urban Native person... not quite sure where I belong." Relating his experience to the fish, his essay centered on the tension of knowing "I have a homeland" while questioning his place within it and included a story about feeling both uncertain and grounded dancing at a regional powwow: "I feel uncomfortable sometimes, but like powwow is where I know I belong." He shared the essay during peer review because he felt proud of how honestly it conveyed his lived experience, but a classmate responded by asking, "Can you explain what a powwow is?" Forest recalled thinking angrily, "I don't want to." This interaction shifted focus away from the vulnerability he had tried to express and turned it into another moment of having to explain his culture. Rather than feeling understood, he felt his essay's deeper question of his belonging had been overlooked, reinforcing his sense of being caught between communities and contributing to the exhaustion and isolation he already felt navigating the university.

Hope described a parallel tension rooted in being raised "in a Native home raised by a Native father but outside of community," which she framed as "a pretty big distinction." She described herself as "coming from multiple communities that all overlap" and how this multiplicity complicated her sense of belonging within her tribal community:

"There's, like, a difference between hearing stories and implementing those values in the stories into your everyday life versus being amongst Crow people and like, participating in, like, the clan system or living out those values within that community. When I'm away from my Crow community, I try to keep a very distinctive Crow identity with the values that I've been taught. So maybe I can classify it as, like, within my family I'm very

deeply embedded. But outside of our family and the larger community, I'm still integrating myself. And I probably, like, won't ever be able to fully integrate myself unless I live there for more than a summer or for more than a year."

Hope's reflection highlighted the distinction between carrying cultural teachings and living within community-based cultural practice. Although she felt deeply connected to Crow values and identity through her close family ties, she also felt there were aspects of belonging that could only come through sustained presence within community, leaving her feeling only partially recognized in tribal community. She described this tension as the "mindset you see with reservations sometimes," drawing on her father's experience: despite being "born and raised Crow, raised with the old ways," moving away from the reservation meant he became "technically considered an outsider" despite maintaining deep-rooted family and cultural connections. For Hope, belonging was tied not only to lineage but also to place, presence, and engagement. In response, Hope worked to maintain connection despite distance: "I work with what I have by going home every summer or flying to Billings when I can," while expressing a deep longing to return more permanently after graduation, reflecting the emotional weight of feeling deeply connected to her tribal culture but never fully able to live within it.

***Holding the Middle in the Mesosystem: Student leader as intercessor between Native communities and institution.*** One of the most taxing ways Forest and Hope described feeling caught in the middle was through their role as intermediaries between Native communities and the institution, and at times between different Native communities themselves. Through their leadership in Native student organizations and campus programming, Forest and Hope occupied visible roles representing Native students to the university and representing the university back to Native communities, tribal partners, elders, and other Native students. At times, they found

themselves mediating tensions between on-campus Native student groups and off-campus tribal communities. They continually negotiated differences in expectations, priorities, communication styles, and ways of relating, often explaining institutional policies and limitations to Native communities while communicating Native concerns, relational values, and cultural expectations to administrators. Much of this intercessory labor fell to students without clear authority, support, or institutional recognition, as they attempted to uphold relational accountability to Native communities while complying with institutional systems that often conflicted with Native values and ways of working, all while managing their own coursework, jobs, and mental health. Over time, these ongoing mediation efforts contributed to exhaustion, anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional withdrawal, with both students describing diminished joy and connection in relationships as the strain of holding multiple groups together increasingly depleted their emotional capacity.

Hope described feeling caught between how she was viewed by the university and how she was viewed by her community. She explained that attending a PWI placed Native students under simultaneous scrutiny: judged by the university as “not White enough” while also being perceived by their communities as extensions of “the institution” itself:

“When Native students go into that institution, they’re put under this like very narrow scope of scrutiny, both from the institution of being not White enough and not good enough to be here...and then scrutiny from the community of like, you’re now associated with the institution so you *are* the institution....you’re too good for us now, aren’t you?...there’s a lot of contradictions, a lot of hypocrisy...That’s definitely a big element of the distress of what causes the distress from being in school.”

Hope's reflection captured the double-sided pressure of trying to remain accountable to both community and institution while feeling fully accepted by neither. She explained that greater success within the university risked creating more distance from her community, while stepping back from the university limited her ability to be a "change maker" for Native students. What made this tension especially difficult was that she shared many of her community's criticisms of higher education, describing their mistrust of academia as "super valid" because "of what it's born from and still upholds." Yet, because she wanted to advocate for Native students, she felt compelled to remain inside those systems and work within them rather than allowing herself to reject the institution outright alongside her community. Being caught between these competing commitments contributed to emotional exhaustion, anger frustration, guilt, and overwhelming fatigue. Hope spoke to the weight of this intercessory responsibility directly: "I take on a lot of emotional responsibility for not just myself, but for other people... that extends to both the community and then the institution, which is insane for one student to shoulder."

Forest described the additional strain associated with occupying an intermediary role within campus Native spaces themselves, where questions of cultural authority and legitimacy sometimes emerged. As cultural chair, he and Hope organized dance classes intended to help more students participate in the PNWU powwow. Instead of bringing people together, however, the classes led to criticism from another Native student who questioned whether Forest had the right to teach cultural knowledge:

"I remember the first time that she came forward with those really awful views. I was just like crushed, especially when they were just like, 'who are you? Like, what right do you have? Like, how Native are you?' I can't convey the depth of the hardship that that was

for me. Like, especially because like I've said, like, still figuring out where I am, who I am as an Indigenous person. Like that was not the thing I needed to hear."

Forest's role as cultural chair placed him in a difficult middle position, responsible for organizing campus-based Native programming and representing the Native student organization, which made his actions more visible and subject to greater scrutiny than if he were participating simply as an individual community member. When challenged, he experienced the criticism as the student "questioning me as a Native person and as a cultural sharer of knowledge." especially painful because it intersected with the insider/outsider uncertainty he already experienced as someone "still figuring out" his Native identity across his different communities. In the fallout, he recalled feeling "genuinely unsafe and so afraid" and "constantly scrutinized," eventually withdrawing from spaces where he might encounter this peer to protect his mental health.

Hope described another layer of relational tension after conflict within the student organization regarding powwow leadership escalated and family members and tribal community members became involved. She recalled how she and the other student officers met "to vote [the student] off the position of powwow chair" because they felt the student was not fulfilling the organization's expectations for the role. In response, the student's family and tribal community members came to the closed meeting angry and accusing the organization of being disrespectful and "White-centered." Although Hope wanted to handle the conflict in a more open and relational dialogue, she and the other student leaders felt constrained by university policies and the student organization's constitution:

"I had thought...what would we do if we were in community together? And what would that look like? And it would have been a very open dialogue without structure. But because we were officers who made agreements to the club that we are part of, acting

outside of those agreements would have opened us up to like punishment...And so in that instance, the need to uphold the club's constitution outweighed the need to uphold maybe a community's expectation of how conflict would be handled. It was still guided by value systems that we have as Native people, but the cultural practice was different, you know.”

Hope's reflection illustrates how student leaders felt caught between institutional procedures and community expectations, wanting to respond in ways aligned with Indigenous relational values while also feeling responsible for protecting the organization's standing within the university. She explained that acting outside club constitutions risked institutional consequences even when those procedures conflicted with how conflict would have been addressed within community. As a result, Hope held the strain between multiple groups at once – the student organization, broader tribal community, and university – while student leaders, not the institution, were left to explain decisions, preserve relationships across the conflict, and absorb the frustration, criticism, and relational fallout from community members. This left Hope enforcing procedures she did not fully agree with while carrying responsibility for their emotional and relational consequences. As the conflict persisted, she explained the "stress [we've] been under from that family is so intense and so chronic that it's almost insane," contributing to disrupted sleep, "erratic" eating, social withdrawal, and "a depressive episode" that had her "not leaving my house unless I have to."

In addition to navigating criticism and expectations from Native communities, both students described pressure from the university to adapt their communication styles, relationships, and cultural practices to function within institutional systems. In their leadership roles, students were continually expected to balance institutional policies, timelines, hierarchy, and professional expectations with the relational values and cultural practices they carried from

their communities, a tension that reflected the broader pressure to communicate, organize, and practice culture in ways aligned with university norms and definitions of professionalism and success. Hope explained that this balancing process was especially difficult because she often felt she could not fully meet either the university's expectations or her community's:

“When you go to an institution like PNWU, in order to succeed there's certain accepted ways of doing things and behaving that don't fly on the rez or like at the dinner table with your cousins and that code switching that has to happen. But then also like when the communities that you come from don't understand the institution that you're in and the ways that you have to operate within that institution because like you can't really please anybody in that situation.... My value system comes from my cultural practices. But then there are times where I can't do my cultural practices in order to succeed. And so it's almost like requiring you to abandon such an important part of yourself.”

For Hope, this pressure emerged from her leadership role requiring her to work within the university while remaining accountable to her community, continually negotiating between institutional expectations and Indigenous relational ways of being without feeling she was abandoning an important part of herself. She believed it was sometimes possible to uphold Native values without following specific cultural protocol exactly but emphasized this balance was "a slippery slope" because she had "seen Native people, like, lose their integrity when they're in the system because that's how they became so successful." Rather than framing Native and institutional expectations as fully incompatible, Hope identified the distress as emerging from trying to remain accountable to both simultaneously while lacking the power to reshape the institutional systems she was expected to operate within. As she summarized, "when there's conflict between the institution and the community, that's where the distress comes from."

Forest described a similar challenge in his role as a student leader. Because he was responsible for organizing programs and working with university offices, he often felt pressure to set aside the more direct, flexible, and relationship-based ways of communicating that felt natural to him and instead follow institutional procedures, hierarchy, and documentation requirements. He explained:

“It feels like we're being limited in the relationships I can form because they have to be so professional and so institutional ways of like, going through like different pathways and like, you have to do this, you have to talk to this person or talk to this person rather than just finding out what's the easiest and most effective way to do this. Like there has to be a paper trail, stuff like that. Like that just gets exhausting”

Forest described these institutional expectations as exhausting because they constrained the relational and collaborative ways of engaging that felt most meaningful, feeling pressured to communicate and make decisions in ways aligned with the university. Although he expressed ambivalence about the phrase “walking in two worlds,” he described this as one of the ways “those quote unquote worlds can be less compatible” and filled with “all of these extra steps that we have to take.” Hope described similar pressures even within Native-centered spaces, explaining she had at times been told “not [to] practice certain cultural values” to “be successful” or “to get grants” and that others dismissed Native values and practices “even within your own community” and in “the only Native space on campus.” For both students, leadership meant continually negotiating accountability to Native communities while adapting to institutional expectations without losing integrity, relationships, or connection to culture.

***Holding the Middle in the Microsystem: Emotional labor of being an Indigenous advocate and organizer on campus.*** Another way Hope and Forest described feeling “caught in

the middle" was through the emotional labor of advocacy, organizing, and leadership within Native campus life. For both students, activism and community building were not extracurricular activities but central expressions of their Native identities. Both arrived at PNWU with prior experience in Native activism and continued that work through leadership roles in Native student organizations. Within the PWI environment, however, these commitments became significant sources of stress, as both students felt responsible for educating others, responding to racism, representing Native perspectives, mentoring younger students, creating community, and advocating for institutional change, responsibilities that frequently competed with their own emotional capacity, academic demands, and mental health needs. Over time, the ongoing pressure to advocate, organize, mentor, and care for others contributed to exhaustion, anxiety, emotional depletion, and diminished wellbeing. Both students described advocacy as a deeply personal, and often unavoidable, responsibility tied to their Native identities that, within the PWI setting, became less of a choice and more of an expectation. On campus, Hope described feeling that she was expected to become an advocate simply because she was Native:

"It's almost like that one thing where it's like, my identity is inherently political. So, we come in with all these cultural ways and these protected rights that aren't always supported at PNWU. And so on top of being students, we then have to be advocates and organizers and change makers, which is like a really good thing to be, but not when you're forced into that position just because you are Native. Yeah, I wish I knew what some more words for, like, anger and frustration."

For Hope, being Native on campus meant being stuck between her role as a student and the assumption that she would also serve as an advocate, educator, and organizer. When she described her identity as "inherently political," she emphasized that advocacy felt inevitable

rather than optional. Because Native "cultural ways" and "protected rights" were "not always supported at PNWU," simply existing as a Native woman on campus often required pushing back against university structures and advocating for Native students. Although she found purpose and meaning in being a "change maker," the role was emotionally taxing, requiring her to continually balance advocacy, coursework, leadership, and her own wellbeing. Her search for "more words for, like, anger and frustration" conveyed the cumulative emotional strain of occupying this in-between position.

Forest echoed the emotional weight of feeling expected to advocate just by the nature of "being in a marginalized group." Like Hope, he described "constantly carrying" the struggle to maintain equilibrium between his commitment to activism with his need for self-preservation:

"Being in a marginalized group...you're constantly carrying that with you...I have a hard time sometimes just balancing it, balancing my desire to change things for the better, my desire to engage in the activism work with also my need to not burn myself out. And I think especially when I have experiences that are unfair and based off of being Native, that decision is really hard for me to make because I can't always react to it. I can't always do something about it because I just don't have capacity to."

For Forest, repeated experiences of racism in campus life made this balance especially difficult, as each incident required an active decision about whether he had the emotional capacity to respond, advocate, or remain silent. At times, choosing not to respond felt just as difficult as speaking up because it came not from self-protection but from depletion. He explained that he woke up not only to academic pressure but to the anticipation of racism and the response required, already negotiating the tension between advocating for his community and preserving his own mental health: "I am so tired of like having to wake up and combat my anxiety, wake up

and combat racism in my classes...It's just so much." This tension became especially visible in classroom settings where Forest felt caught between his role as a student and his sense that as "the only Indigenous person in this room" he was responsible for representing Native perspectives. In these moments, he often responded by becoming more outspoken: "I'm going to be the most annoying Indigenous person in this room." He described this as "a very double-edged sword" because while speaking up helped him feel less invisible and ensured Native presence, it also became "really exhausting" and amplified the pressure of representation.

Hope described another form of emotional labor rooted in her commitment to supporting younger Native students. Drawing on her own experience of leaving school during a period of distress to reconnect with culture and community, she felt responsible for helping other students find that same foundation without having to leave campus. She explained that "showing up" for her community could sometimes lead to "self-martyring:"

"There is some sacrifice that's happening that shouldn't be happening...that is the difference in being community oriented...you feel such a deep responsibility for your community. I think too the way that it's impacted me mentally is I take on a lot of emotional labor for other people too to help them grow...I don't want you to have to leave campus in order to have your cultural foundations...so let's see if we can provide that here. And then what that means is that I take on extra responsibility for things that really aren't within my control."

For Hope, mentoring and supporting other Native students was deeply meaningful and closely connected to her understanding of being a "good relative," yet this commitment often left her emotionally stretched across multiple roles and obligations. She described feeling responsible not only for her own success but for helping younger Native students feel supported, connected, and

culturally grounded in ways the university often failed to provide. She described college as uniquely taxing because it required doing "community work, work, and classes" all "at the same time" while trying to "balance that as a new adult." Over time, the relational values that motivated her to support others increasingly competed with her own academic work and wellbeing: "I've definitely found myself focusing more on community than my own stuff."

A final layer of emotional labor emerged through repeated exposure to other people's experiences of racism and exclusion. Forest described how being recognized as an advocate and cultural leader on campus meant that he often became the person others, especially non-Native students, turned to when they witnessed racism or felt uncomfortable in the classroom. Rather than addressing these situations themselves, peers frequently came to him for guidance and direction, shifting the emotional and practical burden onto him:

"They kind of immediately bring it to me when someone's being weird or racist. And so my roommate had a professor that started talking about Kiowa people really awfully in class. And then they immediately brought it to me to be like, who can I go to about this?

And I'm like, yes, I want to help you, also this is so exhausting for me."

Although Forest wanted to support others, he described feeling overwhelmed by the expectation that he would carry not only his own experiences, but also the discomfort, frustration, and uncertainty of those around him. When non-Native peers brought these incidents to him rather than deciding themselves how to address the professor's comments or using their own positions to intervene, they placed him in the middle of the situation and made him responsible not only for managing the harm of racism, but also mediating others' responses to it. He described this dynamic as exhausting because it left him feeling caught between his desire to help others and feeling that the work of addressing racism had once again been shifted onto him, adding another

layer to the emotional labor he already carried as a Native student advocate and contributing to a growing sense that the work exceeded his capacity.

**Primary Resilience Process: Finding and Creating Balance.** Although Hope and Forest described significant stress associated with holding the middle, they also described actively finding and creating balance across the multiple communities, responsibilities, and institutional contexts they navigated. Rather than resolving the tensions they experienced by choosing one set of relationships, values, or commitments over another, both students described seeking ways to remain connected across these worlds while protecting their own wellbeing. Four primary resilience resources supported this process. First, Indigenized therapy, particularly counseling with Native providers, helped them process the emotional toll of leadership and advocacy while developing culturally aligned coping strategies. Second, mentors, including caregivers and Native faculty, modeled how to live within and between multiple communities while providing emotional support and cultural guidance for navigating in-between roles. Third, mentoring other Native students and sharing cultural knowledge transformed some of the strain of holding the middle into a sense of purpose, meaning, and relational connection. Fourth, adapting cultural practices to fit campus realities allowed students to carry culture with them and create Native space within the university rather than leaving important parts of themselves behind. Collectively, these resources helped both students maintain connection across the multiple communities they inhabited while cultivating greater balance, belonging, and wellbeing.

***Psychological Resilience Resource: Indigenized therapy and strategies for reframing and coping.*** Forest and Hope described working with the only Native therapist at the university as an important psychological resilience resource. For both students, this was their first experience receiving therapy that felt culturally grounded, rather than separating mental health

from their experiences navigating Native and institutional contexts, the campus-based Native therapist understood these different parts of their lives together, making therapy more immediately relevant and emotionally useful without requiring them to spend time explaining or translating their experiences. Therapy also helped students find balance between caring for themselves and remaining connected to community, developing culturally meaningful ways of reframing stress, processing emotional exhaustion, and thinking through how to stay engaged in their responsibilities in more sustainable ways. For both students, Indigenized therapy created steadiness, emotional balance, and relief from distress while helping them remain connected to their identities and relationships across the multiple roles and communities they navigated.

Hope spoke directly to relief of working with someone who already understood the cultural and emotional contexts shaping her distress, contrasting the constant cultural translation required in the wider campus environment with the experience of being understood in therapy:

“We have a native therapist, which is life changing...There's a difference in having a therapist who comes from your culture and who doesn't come from your culture...because we already have to constantly explain and translate our spirit from day to day. And so it's nice to have a mental health resource where that doesn't need to happen.”

For Hope, one of the most meaningful aspects of therapy with a Native provider was not having to explain or defend her internal experiences before receiving support — after spending much of her day making herself understandable within classrooms and campus spaces, therapy became one of the few places where she felt understood without effort. She described this as a relief from the constant need to “translate our spirit,” allowing her to focus on her own emotions and needs rather than first making her experiences legible to someone else, and helping her remain

grounded in both her mental health and her Native identity and community responsibilities.

Students also emphasized that culturally aligned therapy changed how coping strategies themselves were framed and understood. Hope described how her therapist adapted both practical support and coping advice to respond to Native students' lives and ways of understanding wellbeing, reframing them in culturally resonant language:

“Her advice is flexible, too. You know, like instead of somebody saying, ‘Well, oh, it sounds like you're really burnt out, you might need to take the weekend to rest, or maybe see if you can give yourself more of a break.’ She'll say, ‘you're starving and you need to feed your inner Indian and that will help you feel replenished.’”

Hope emphasized that the therapist's support felt different because it connected emotional wellbeing to culture and community. Rather than encouraging her to step away from the parts of her life that were important to her, therapy helped her think about burnout and recovery in ways that fit her experiences as a Native student and Crow woman. Advice such as “feed your inner Indian” reframed coping as reconnecting with culture, relationships, and practices that help her feel restored and emotionally grounded. In this way, therapy helped her find greater balance between caring for herself and remaining connected to the ways to people, responsibilities, and cultural values that mattered to her.

Like Hope, Forest described the campus-based Native therapist as someone who already understood the relationship between culture and wellbeing. Unlike previous counseling experiences with White therapists, he did not need to explain what a powwow or smudging was or why those practices mattered to him. Instead, he described the therapist as someone who actively “encourages that connection between wellbeing and culture and connection.” Because he didn't need to spend time justifying or decoding basic parts of his identity, therapy felt more

immediately useful and supportive. Rather than explaining himself, he could focus on processing the exhaustion, anxiety, and pressure he carried as a Native student leader.

Forest also described how therapy helped him reframe the exhaustion he experienced from advocacy and leadership. During one conversation, his therapist connected his resilience to a longer intergenerational continuity of Native strength and survival:

“She was like... ‘You being resilient right now is a legacy of people who have been strong and resilient before you and so they continued to make that choice for you. And so, like you are making this choice now for the people who are coming after you, even if they're not like your blood descendants’...I can pass down that resilience to them, that strength to them, that bravery to them. And so that's one thing that makes me feel better about, like being so exhausted about trying to just, like, live, you know.”

For Forest, this perspective helped him interpret his exhaustion differently, rather than viewing fatigue as personal failure or evidence of not doing enough, therapy helped him place it within a longer lineage of Native people who had endured hardship and continued to support those around them. Feeling connected to those who came before him and responsible to those who would come after, "even if they're not like your blood descendants," did not eliminate the strain he felt, but helped him make meaning of it and find a more sustainable balance between supporting others and caring for himself.

***Social Resilience Resource: Ongoing mentorship.*** Forest and Hope described ongoing mentorship from caregivers and Native faculty as an important social resilience resource. More than offering emotional support, these mentors modeled how to move across multiple cultural, relational, and institutional contexts while remaining grounded in Native identity, values, and community, with caregivers showing students how to carry culture into majority-culture spaces,

and Native faculty extending this into the academic environment by modeling how to navigate university politics, advocacy, and institutional expectations without losing connection to community or cultural integrity. Together, these mentoring relationships helped students imagine more sustainable ways of holding the middle across the overlapping communities and environments they navigated.

Both Forest and Hope described their fathers as their earliest and most enduring cultural mentors whose teachings they continued to shape how they navigated stress, leadership, and cultural identity on campus. Hope explained that her father taught her how to keep cultural practices present within majority-culture spaces through stories, example, and small everyday actions. He shared family stories about how their ancestors practiced traditions banned by BIA agents “right underneath their noses,” and Hope described how he continues to do the same by performing ceremonies in ways that are visible but others “just don’t recognize.” She reflected on following his example through “all these little ceremonies” that help her find ways to stay connected to culture within the PWI environment:

“This what he taught me, and this is what I do. But every morning ... he'll walk outside and he'll greet the sun facing east, and he'll turn counterclockwise, which is just to let the sun touch his full body. And then he's just praying and saying thank you for another day, another gift...And when he would smoke, he'd pray with that smoke or he would smoke a little bit and he'd take the cigarette and he'd break it up and he'd drop the tobacco and he'd pray with that. So, there's all these little ceremonies that I do because of him.”

For Hope, these “little ceremonies” gave her a set of portable and adaptable practices she could draw on within the routines of campus life “right underneath their noses.” Her father modeled how to maintain cultural continuity even in settings made to disrupt it, helping her find balance

between living in a predominantly non-Native environment and sustaining the cultural practices that supported her sense of identity, grounding, and wellbeing. Through this mentorship, Hope felt more able to keep culture present in spaces not designed to support Native ways of being.

Forest described mentorship from his father, who continued coaching him to draw on cultural practices for coping, clarity, and grounding on campus, reminding him to "go pray with your pipe" and "go to the water." Forest reflected that these practices were "already ingrained in me even before he tells me", describing his father's guidance as reinforcing that he did not need to separate his identity as a Native person from his identity as a student. His father also gifted him a pipe, which Forest described as "one of the most sacred things that you can have", affirming his growing role as a "medicine person" and cultural knowledge sharer within Native community on campus, and continuing to mentor him in how to carry these practices into urban, majority-culture settings by telling him to "take care of it" and "talk to it" when he felt overwhelmed or uncertain. This mentorship helped Forest remain grounded in cultural responsibility while navigating the pressures of leadership and campus life.

Caregiver mentorship was especially important during moments when these students felt uncertain about themselves or their place within Native community. After another Native student questioned his legitimacy as a cultural knowledge sharer, Forest called his father for support. Forest recalled that his father asked him to "look back at the things you've done for your community" and ask himself whether he thought his grandma and great grandma would be proud. Forest explained that this question "carried me through the rest" of the conflict and became something he continued to rely on:

"That right there is what carried me through the rest and is still carrying me through this situation...I think that's one guiding thing that follows me in terms of, like almost any

action that I do now is... Am I making my aunties, my grandmas proud? Would this be something that they would be happy about? And at this point, like almost all the time, it's yeah. And so that is something that I've leaned on."

His father's response helped Forest reconnect to a sense of purpose and belonging during a period of scrutiny and self-doubt. Asking whether his "grandma" and "great grandma" would be proud shifted how Forest thought about the conflict, helping him view his teaching and leadership as acts of responsibility to family and community rather than something he needed to defend, modeling how to navigate tensions within Native community while remaining grounded in cultural responsibility. Forest described this question as a strategy he continued to return to when he doubted himself, using it to maintain balance and a sense of purpose while carrying leadership responsibilities within the university environment.

While caregivers modeled how to carry culture across contexts, Native faculty extended this mentorship into the university. Forest described relying on his father for questions about cultural protocol, texting "Am I doing this the right way?" when guiding other students — while also turning to Native faculty for guidance navigating leadership, academics, advocacy, and institutional politics. He reflected that his cultural guidance came from "primarily my dad" growing up, whereas at PNWU "now I get to learn from so many more people," creating a broader mentorship network that helped him balance Native community responsibilities and university demands while remaining grounded in his culture.

Hope similarly described Native faculty as important mentors for navigating the social and institutional demands of academia, particularly during moments when tensions between community expectations and university structures felt most strained:

“I’ve found such an understanding in that from the [American Indian Studies] staff that I haven’t really found in other departments...because it also provides a lot of mentorship to us....for a lot of Native students, it’s sort of like our first foray into like how academia operates or social politics...and it’s so exceptional to have, like a person with experience who knows what that’s like, how to do it.”

For Hope, Native faculty helped make academic systems feel less isolating and more manageable. Just as her father modeled how to maintain cultural practices within predominantly non-Native spaces, these faculty members modeled how to move through the political, social, and institutional demands of a PWI while remaining grounded in Native values and commitments to community. Drawing on their own experiences, they showed Hope “how to do it”: how to navigate leadership, conflict, and institutional systems without feeling forced to abandon her relationships, responsibilities, values, or cultural identity. She described this guidance as especially important during periods when she felt most caught in the middle as a student leader. During one difficult conflict, a close faculty mentor helped her reframe these experiences as part of her growth:

“You know, Hope, I’ve really thought about why you keep getting these lessons because...if you were in a place of work and they put you through a training of let’s do like a crash course of how to navigate certain social situations, that would never be ethical. But for some reason, very early on in your life, you’re getting all these hard lessons really fast.”

Hope explained that this conversation helped her connect these experiences to the kind of community-building and organizing work she hoped to do in the future. She reflected that together they realized that “if I’m going to do the work that I want to do in my life... I have to

have these skills.” The mentor’s guidance did not remove the difficulty of those experiences, but it helped Hope make sense of them and view them as part of learning how to mediate the difficult relational and institutional realities connected to leadership and advocacy work. Through mentoring relationships with caregivers and faculty, both students described feeling more grounded, purposeful, and capable of managing the tensions of leadership, advocacy, and campus life without compromising their Native identities or commitments to community.

***Social/Cultural Resilience Resource: Cultural mentoring of other students.*** Forest and Hope described sharing cultural knowledge with other Native students as an important resilience resource that helped create balance within the university environment. Although leadership roles often left both students feeling caught in the middle, cultural mentoring, teaching dance, guiding younger students, sharing stories, and helping peers reconnect with cultural practices, transformed parts of those same roles into experiences of connection, purpose, and reciprocity that counterbalanced the emotional strain of advocacy and intercessory work. Through mentoring, Forest and Hope not only supported other Native students' connection to culture and community, but also strengthened their own sense of identity, belonging, and wellbeing.

During their interviews, both Forest and Hope became noticeably more animated when describing these experiences. They smiled, laughed, and spoke with more energy as they talked about watching other students learn, participate, and take pride in their identities. Their reflections suggest that mentoring other students brought them feelings of joy, accomplishment, connection, and purpose that contrasted with the exhaustion and strain they described elsewhere.

Forest described teaching dance as a powerful way to express his identity and support his own wellbeing, especially as his chronic illness increasingly limited his physical abilities. Dance remained “central to my identity and who I am as a person,” and teaching allowed him to stay

connected to that part of himself with others even as he faced the “disheartening and scary” reality that he might not “be able to do this forever;”

“For, forever, I feel like I am the most myself when I’m dancing. It’s something that has a really complicated relationship, especially as my disability becomes more prevalent in my life...that’s one of the reasons that we started dance classes is because it’s like, well, if I can’t do this forever, then maybe I can pass on these skills to someone else....I love dance classes. I love it. It makes me feel so, so good. And like, hearing people when they get it, I’m just like, ‘yes you got it. Good job!’”

For Forest, teaching dance created balance between the grief and fear of potentially losing this part of himself and the joy and purpose of passing it on to others, standing out as one part of his leadership role that felt energizing rather than draining, strengthening his own relationship to culture and community while instilling a sense of accomplishment, meaning, and connection. Forest also described cultural mentoring as a source of lasting joy and emotional reward. Recalling one of the first dance classes he taught with Hope, he became especially animated as he described a young child who attended with her mother:

“I have this really vivid memory of like, I was so nervous, but I was also really excited for the first jingle class...And then this person came in and brought her kid...she would, like, go dance with her mom, and then she’d come dance with me. And then when they were leaving...she goes, ‘thank you, teacher Forest.’ And I almost cried...that experience just like, I hold on to that...I love, love sharing things with people.”

Forest described returning to a “really vivid memory” of teaching and connection during periods of stress and exhaustion, using it to reconnect with feelings of joy, belonging, and purpose when the strain of being caught in the middle felt overwhelming, offering a counterweight to the

loneliness, scrutiny, and emotional fatigue he often carried elsewhere on campus. He described a similar feeling when introducing students to medicinal knowledge and smudging practices, explaining that he felt "so deeply honored" when students trusted him to guide them through these experiences and that "I want people to feel the same way about these skills that I do", texting his father afterward to share what had happened and receive encouragement, linking him to the students he was supporting, the teachings he received growing up, and his ongoing relationship with his father. Passing this knowledge on created a sense of continuity, meaning, and connection that helped him remain grounded amid the competing pressures of the multiple roles and communities he navigated on campus.

Hope similarly described cultural mentoring as one of the primary ways she created meaning and connection within the university. Through workshops focused on beading, regalia-making, ribbon skirts, moccasins, and other cultural practices, she worked to help other Native students reconnect with culture and feel more supported within the university. She explained that this work allowed her to "translate Apsáalooke kinship into my community here" on campus by "equipping" other students with traditional skills and cultural knowledge and "physically adorning" them in tangible expressions of belonging:

"That's what I mean when I have a very distinct Apsáalooke identity... all these workshops that I'm hosting, all these events that I'm co collaborating on, they're all guided by that value of kinship, of dressing your loved ones, of equipping them."

For Hope, organizing these events created balance between the strain of feeling stretched across home, community, and the university and her desire to build something different on campus for other Native students, giving her a way to act in line with her values during periods of isolation and overwhelm, while strengthening her own sense of purpose, accomplishment, and connection

to communities on and off campus. The more she was able to help other students feel seen and supported, the more she felt connected to her own values and identity. In this way, “dressing your loved ones” and giving students “the best of the best” became one way Hope found moments of joy, meaning, and balance for herself as well. She also connected this mentoring work to her broader understanding of resilience and healing:

“I think about resilience in that way of how we process the negative and we transform it...I create a healthy community...I could easily weaponize culture, but I don't do that because I've processed that hurt and transformed it into what I want to co-create something. And so think about that process, too, in terms of smudging, where I'm taking this pain and hurt and I'm asking the natural world to process it and turn it into something beautiful, into something helpful.”

Hope's reflection suggests that mentoring younger students gave her a way to respond to painful experiences without reproducing that harm within community, not removing the anxiety, sadness, or exhaustion she described elsewhere, but allowing her to channel those experiences into acts of care and community-building. Her comparison of this process to the purpose of smudging, turning pain “into something beautiful,” captures how cultural mentoring became both a source of wellbeing and a way of interpreting difficult experiences in a more purposeful way.

***Cultural Resilience Resource: Adapting cultural practice to PWI context.*** Forest and Hope described adapting cultural practices to fit the realities of campus life as an important cultural resilience resource. Having earlier described feeling caught between Native community values and institutional contexts where cultural practices were often difficult to access or discouraged, both students described gradually learning, through experience, reflection, and support from caregivers, Native faculty, and the campus-based Native therapist, to adapt,

modify, and translate cultural practices to fit within PWI constraints. These flexible and portable adaptations allowed students to remain connected to both Native community and the university without feeling forced to choose between them, reducing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and disconnection while strengthening their sense of identity, belonging, and wellbeing.

Both students described an early period in which they knew cultural practices such as prayer, smudging, connecting with the land, or using medicines, but did not yet know how to use those practices in ways that felt supportive within the university environment. Hope explained that although she “knew how to pray” and “knew how to smudge,” those practices initially felt disconnected from the cultural foundation that gave them meaning and protective value:

“I knew how to pray. I knew how to smudge. I knew my stories, but I didn't know how to use them as, like protective factors...So one major contributing factor was that my cultural foundation wasn't as strong.”

Hope described how this sense of disconnection contributed to the distress she experienced during her first years at the university and ultimately to her decision to take leave and return home. While she came to campus as “a Crow person,” her ability to apply her cultural knowledge to protect her wellbeing on a PWI campus wasn't yet developed; in her words, “my resiliency muscle wasn't as strong.” She explained that time away allowed her to reconnect with stories, language, and family teachings and “understand more about myself,” reflecting that “having a stronger cultural foundation literally made a world of difference.” After returning, she no longer saw cultural practice as something that had to occur in formal or ceremonial settings. Instead, Hope learned to integrate prayer and smudging into ordinary moments on campus:

“But when I first started really getting into praying and smudging, it kind of felt like I was literally just blowing smoke around...It almost felt a little bit empty... I was like,

should it be more sacred? Like...I just woke up, I'm still in pajamas. Should I be in a ribbon skirt or something? But the more you pray, the stronger your prayers become... Like at 18, I prayed and smudged. But those prayers and smudging have only grown stronger over time...like that is part of my resiliency.”

Over time, Hope came to understand that cultural practices could still be meaningful in small, everyday forms, with prayer and smudging adapted to fit campus routines becoming important sources of steadiness and connection that reduced the isolation she had experienced when she first arrived. Hope also drew on family stories to understand adaptation itself as part of cultural continuity and resilience, recalling how her ancestors continued to hold ceremonies "right underneath [the] noses" of Indian agents after their religion was banned: "we still utilized what we had and we adjusted...like that's resilience." Her father extended this teaching by reinterpreting her grandmother's instruction that "you don't go on the dance floor until you're ready" to mean "you don't go out into the public arena until you're outfitted, until your medicines are ready to protect you", helping Hope see that she could adapt the form of cultural practice while remaining connected to its meaning, and shaping her return to campus by helping her carry more flexible forms of cultural practice so that she entered the "arena" with the medicines, teachings, and support she needed to feel protected.

Forest described a similar process of adapting cultural practice to fit the realities of campus life and chronic pain. As a freshman, he often walked long distances to connect with plants and the land, but later recognized that he was doing so in ways that were “almost punishing” because he pushed himself beyond what his body could manage and used the walks to isolate himself:

“Freshman year was definitely really difficult...I just get mad at myself for feeling [my emotions] in the first place and so I didn't really have the skills to work with that yet... I would go for like a two hour walk...to go look at the plants...now I'm recognizing that's like me connecting with the land that I'm on and the plants around me....but I would do it in a way that was like, almost punishing...And so I would say that my kind of strategies have changed to be more constructive, but they haven't changed in their foundation.”

For Forest, the foundation of the practice remained the same: staying connected to land, plants, and culture. What changed was the way he practiced it. Over time, he learned to modify the form these practices took so they better fit his physical needs and daily life as a student. He described taking shorter walks, listening to powwow music, dancing in his room, or watching videos of other people dancing when he did not have the energy to dance himself:

“Sometimes what I needed, I just put on my headphones, I listen to pop music, and I just, like, dance [traditional] in my room...if I don't have the energy to dance, I watch videos of other people dancing...I'm constantly engaging with it.”

These adjustments gave Forest more responsive and accessible ways to draw on his culture during difficult times on campus. They helped him feel less overwhelmed and allowed him to use cultural practices in ways that matched what he needed in the moment, whether that was comfort, energy, connection, or relief from stress. Forest also explained that thinking of cultural practice in smaller, more flexible ways made it easier to stay connected during stressful periods:

“If I don't have time to smudge, then I'll just take a bit of sage and keep it on me. If I don't have time to do that then I'll just take five seconds and just reconnect with my body and then pray a little bit. And so I think it's just like having steps.... like levels of coping

skills...like, this is a big thing that I can do, but if I don't have energy... here's a little thing that I can do. And that's something that's really, really helpful for me.”

Having these “levels of coping skills” helped Forest feel less overwhelmed and more capable of staying connected to culture even when time, energy, or pain made larger practices difficult. These smaller, more accessible practices allowed him to “bring all the parts” of himself into campus life. In this way, adapting cultural practice became one of the ways he created balance between his identities as a Native person and a student at a PWI.

Both students also described carrying medicines or objects with them as a way to remain physically connected to home and culture throughout the day and across campus spaces where full ceremony or access to land was not possible. Hope carried stones from her ancestors’ gravesite in her medicine bag, explaining that she drew “physical strength” from them during stressful meetings or unfamiliar situations:

“I carry those rocks with me in my medicine bag, in my backpack, everywhere I go. If I'm in a meeting or if I'm going somewhere new...I will take that medicine bag with me because I'm drawing physical strength from those rocks that are from my homelands, from my land.”

For Hope, carrying stones provided a tangible, portable connection to home, a tactile reminder of family, homeland, and cultural identity that helped her feel calmer and more protected during stressful moments on campus. Forest similarly described trying to “intentionally make contact with medicines” every day, “just grabbing a piece of sage,” with these objects providing culturally relevant grounding that helped reduce stress and allowed both students to bring important parts of themselves into campus spaces. For both students, adapting cultural practice in these ways helped create balance between life at a PWI and their need to remain connected to

home, culture, and spiritual protection. Beyond adapting practices, students also described adapting cultural values to the PWI context, translating them into forms that could guide action in the university environment even when protocols could not be enacted traditionally. Hope explained that “there are ways where you can still uphold your value system while not doing a specific cultural protocol or way that you’ve been taught.”

She described translating the Apsáalooke kinship value of “adorn[ing] your loved ones in the best of the best” into her mentoring and community-building work on campus:

“When I consider Apsáalooke kinship, I’m always beading things for people and gifting them because...I want you to feel proud about who you are. That you’re like a Native person, and you’re, like, very distinctly, unapologetically Native. This year I started thinking about Apsáalooke kinship in my own community here on campus.... how can I equip my community with the best of the best, and that means passing off those skills.”

Adapting cultural values and practices to the university context allowed Hope to remain connected to community and culture while living away from home, strengthening her sense of purpose, connection, pride, and belonging.

### ***Ecological Context 3: Reconnecting Following Cultural Disruption and Disconnection***

**Relationship to Native Culture and Community.** Lily, Joy, and Grace described relationships to Native culture and community shaped by experiences of cultural disruption, disconnection, and efforts toward reconnection. Across all three narratives, students identified strongly with their Native identities while also describing limited, inconsistent, or uncertain access to tribal community, cultural knowledge, family networks, and culturally specific practices throughout much of their upbringing. Students traced these experiences to intergenerational and sociohistorical processes, including family histories of assimilation,

relocation, adoption, and disrupted cultural transmission that shaped opportunities for connection across generations. Lily reflected on how her great-grandmother had been “adamant about stepping away from my Native identity,” explaining that earlier generations were taught to view being Native as something “bad.” Similarly, Joy described her grandmother’s adoption and separation from community as creating family disruptions that reverberated across generations, explaining that “because it just got so aggressively cut off like the family ties, it’s hard to find that like bridge back in.” Although Grace reported greater exposure to Native people and community than Lily and Joy, she similarly described losing access to Native family and cultural networks following separation from her mother’s community, reflecting that she had “lost contact with a lot of that [my culture], just from not being in it.” Across narratives, students described relationships to culture and community shaped not only by what had been maintained, but also by what had been interrupted, fragmented, or made difficult to access. Although these disruptions took different forms across narratives, all three students described growing up with a sense that important connections to their Native culture, community, and family history had been weakened or lost.

At the same time, all three students described a persistent desire to reconnect with Native culture and community that long preceded their arrival at PNWU. Across narratives, students sought ways to build or restore connections through family stories, enrollment and descendency processes, genealogical research, strengthening relationships with Native relatives, and learning more about their tribal histories and cultures. Yet these efforts were often complicated by the very disruptions they were attempting to overcome. Lily described trying to learn about her Native heritage from relatives only to find that her grandmother “didn’t talk about it a lot,” reflecting broader patterns of disrupted cultural transmission within her family. Similarly, Joy

explained that despite efforts to learn from grandmother's connections to their extended family, "it just kind of started like dwindling down as people started passing away," leaving fewer relational pathways back to culture and community. Grace likewise described feeling "both physically and emotionally disconnected from my heritage" following separation from Native family and community life.

For all three students, reconnecting with Native culture and community was closely tied to understanding themselves and their identities. Lily reflected that reconnecting allowed her to feel she was "bridging that gap now" while "learning more about myself." Similarly, Joy described her relationship with culture as "a struggle" of acknowledging "I don't really know much, but I know what I do know and I'm trying to get back into it." Grace described carrying "this really intense yearning to be a part of [my] culture and to have that cultural knowledge," explaining that she felt there was "this immeasurably beautiful thing buried inside of me" that she had "a deep desire to unearth." Across narratives, students described actively and individually pursuing relationships to Native culture and community through learning, relationship-building, and "self-guided" efforts to uncover their histories, families, and identities.

For all three students, PNWU became an important site for developing relationships to Native culture and community. Prior to college, students described few opportunities for consistent engagement with Native culture, community, and identity despite longstanding desires for connection. Through Native student organizations, cultural programming, community events, and relationships with other Native students, participants described finding opportunities to engage more regularly with Native community and cultural learning. Although these experiences were often intertribal rather than specific to their own tribal traditions, students described them as important entry points for developing relationships to Native culture and community. For Joy

and Grace, attending PNWU also brought them into closer proximity with Native family members and communities. Joy described spending more time with her grandmother after moving closer geographically, while Grace reflected that reconnecting with Native family members and her mother's community was "kind of like healing a wound." Across narratives, students described relationships to Native culture and community as actively developing through efforts to create, strengthen, and restore connections that had been interrupted, lost, or difficult to access earlier in life.

Within the PWI environment, these evolving relationships to culture and community contributed to a shared stress process of cultural disconnection, as students navigated uncertainty, self-doubt, and persistent questions of belonging while seeking to reclaim aspects of culture, community, and family histories that had been disrupted or made difficult to access. At the same time, students described resilience as rooted in reconnection and restoration through cultural learning, relationship building, community engagement, and efforts to strengthen ties to family, culture, and Native community.

**Primary Stress Process: Disconnection.** Across all three narratives, a persistent sense of cultural disconnection emerged as the primary stress process that made belonging feel uncertain and difficult to attain. Students described carrying an ongoing awareness of cultural knowledge, family histories, community relationships, and experiences they felt disconnected from yet deeply wanted to understand, access, or reclaim. This experience surfaced across three ecological contexts: at the chrono/macrosystem level, students described an enduring sense of cultural detachment and grief over what they had not been taught or experienced; at the mesosystem level, tension within family relationships arose as their desire to reconnect sometimes clashed with caregivers who were themselves disconnected from Native identity or reluctant to revisit

family histories; and at the microsystem level, students frequently experienced imposter feelings and fears of not being "Native enough," particularly when comparing themselves to students who had grown up more connected to culture or community. Together, these experiences contributed to loneliness, uncertainty, self-doubt, and diminished wellbeing.

***Disconnection in the Chrono/Macrosystem: Loss of connection to culture, community, and relations.*** Across all three narratives, students described an ongoing sense of disconnection from tribal relations, cultural traditions, and Native community that shaped their mental health and wellbeing on campus, carrying a sense of distance and uncertainty about where they belonged, feeling "next to" or "on the margins" of their own culture, aware that something important was missing but unsure how to access it. For Lily, Joy, and Grace, this sense of loss often became more visible in college, as being surrounded by Native peers with strong community ties, participating in Native programs, and taking American Indian Studies courses surfaced grief over relationships, traditions, and cultural knowledge they had not been taught or been unable to access, while also deepening their understanding that these absences were rooted in broader histories of colonization and historical trauma.

Lily described how her disconnection from her Alaska Native roots had once remained "at the back of my mind, not the front of mind," something she thought about only occasionally. On campus, however, thoughts of these losses became more frequent and emotionally charged:

"I do feel the loss in like knowing that I'm Native but also not having any connection there... I don't know my specific clan and I don't know too much about being Alaskan. It affects me because I know that like they made being Indian bad, right. And that's probably why my great grandma didn't want us to be.... I think about it more, much more often than I used to growing up, being on this campus, being in this community."

For Lily, the loss was not about lacking formal tribal membership as someone enrolled, but about feeling disconnected from the relationships, stories, and knowledge that would have helped her feel more rooted in her identity. She came to understand this disconnection not as the result of personal or family choices, but as connected to the ways earlier generations had learned that "being Indian" was something to hide, asserting that "they made being Indian bad" linked her own sadness and uncertainty to a longer history of forced assimilation. As this awareness sharpened, she described thinking about it "much more often" and experiencing periods of sadness lasting "a day or two," suggesting that these broader historical disconnections were experienced as present emotional distress.

Joy described a similar increase in the emotional salience of disconnection in college, explaining that being part of Native community on campus was "a double-edged sword:" it helped her feel understood while also serving as a "reminder of...everything that my grandma went through and...why I'm not connected to my community." Hearing other students' stories of growing up connected to their culture and community made Joy more aware of the magnitude of that personal and family loss across generations.

"I feel like [the frustration] existed a little bit when I was younger. Not nearly as much...I think some of it has to do with me hearing other people's stories about them getting more connected or like them growing up on the reservation or stuff like that. That's probably sparked it more... I hear that, I'm like, hey, it's more than just paperwork or saying who we are. It's like an entire aspect of, like something we could have access to."

For Joy, these experiences highlighted that although her family had the "paperwork" to claim descendency, they had lacked access to the relationships, community, and cultural experiences she saw in other students' lives, making disconnection feel larger and more painful because it

extended across generations, reflecting not just what she currently missed but everything her family had been unable to hold and pass down. She described growing awareness of how cultural distance had shaped her grandmother's, mother's, and her own experiences, contributing to sadness, frustration, and isolation as she recognized how difficult it would be to rebuild that connection:

“It just makes me sad to think about the fact that it's like, you can do so much and you can try really hard to keep doing it, but it's something that's just not always going to be there.”

For Joy, college brought into focus that disconnection was not only individual, but a family experience shaped across generations, amplifying uncertainty and doubt about whether such a giant loss could ever be fully restored.

Grace similarly described carrying “this really intense yearning” for the culture and community she had been separated from. Unlike Joy and Lily, Grace attributed her disconnection to her own life experiences rather than broader family histories, having been exposed to Native community early in life before living primarily with her non-Native father, she felt she had once been closer to culture and then lost that connection over time. Even before college, this disconnection was felt emotionally, describing how she “teared up” when she heard a Native counselor speak her tribe's language, “there's just something very deep and emotional about the culture”, with her “intense” reaction reflecting how much she longed for a connection she had never fully experienced. On campus, opportunities for cultural engagement brought both connection and tension:

“I've never felt more connected to my culture since coming to Washington, but I still have all these feelings. Whenever I hear an Indigenous language, or a song, or see

dancing and drumming, I feel a deep joy, but I also find myself fixating on all the knowledge I lack.”

For Grace, engaging with Native spaces brought her closer to the culture she longed for while simultaneously heightening her awareness of what she had missed, a "mental boundary" between herself and the community she wanted to belong to that produced connection and disconnection at the same time, contributing to ongoing sadness, longing, anxiety, and uncertainty about her place within the community. Across narratives, students described this disconnection as an ongoing source of grief that was intensified rather than resolved in the college context, as being surrounded by Native community made visible the relationships, knowledge, and belonging they felt they had lost.

***Disconnection in the Mesosystem: Tensions with culturally disconnected parents.*** For Lily and Joy, reconnecting with Native community on campus often intensified a sense of disconnection within family relationships, particularly with parents whose own connections to tribe and culture remained limited or ambivalent. As students became more involved in Native spaces and centered their Native identity more strongly, the gap between their desires on campus and their parents' perspectives at home became more visible, with experiences that strengthened their sense of Native identity making the lack of shared understanding at home more apparent. Rather than feeling supported in reconnecting, students often felt alone in navigating this process, contributing to frustration, sadness, conflict, and strain in their family relationships.

Joy described that although this divide with her mother existed “a little bit” when she was younger and expressed interest in their heritage, it widened as she became more involved in Native community on campus. Hearing other students talk about “the different ways in which

people have grown up in community” or “within their tribe” led Joy to reflect more critically on her own family’s distance from community and her mother’s own choices about identity:

“What made you make the decisions to not care in some ways?...I’m the one that’s like bring it up or whatever, but how is this like a result of everything that’s happened leading up until now? And why is it me?...What’s the difference between my mom and I in terms of what matters and what doesn’t matter?”

As Joy became more aware of what had been missing, she also became more aware that her desire to reconnect was not shared in the same way by her mother, leaving her feeling sad, frustrated, and confused about why it mattered so much more to her than her mother. She described wanting support and shared engagement, but instead felt that she was carrying the work of reconnecting on her own, contributing to emotional distance and isolation:

“I love my mom, but I do have frustrations in the fact that she didn’t try like....it’s a lot to like figure it all out and I wish my mom had had more passion or more support when I was younger... But my mom’s just kind of the mindset of like... it’s a lot of work... I need the support. I need someone to back me up.”

For Joy, this difference in perspective was painful not only because they wanted different things, but because reconnecting felt like something she had to pursue alone when she had hoped to share the “work” and emotional experience with her mother. Her question, “why is it me?” reflects a deeper loneliness and responsibility as she struggled to understand why it fell on her to repair a disconnection that had shaped her family across generations, leaving her feeling more isolated and discouraged, deepening the sadness and frustration she already carried.

Lily described a similar pattern of frustration, sadness, and emotional distance in her relationship with her father, where efforts to discuss Native history and identity often became

strained, "I talked to him about like, colonization and stuff. And he has the craziest takes...He says stuff about how like, well, we weren't exactly colonized, like we just lost." These exchanges left her feeling misunderstood at a time she was trying to build a stronger connection to the culture and histories he was minimizing, with conflict escalating as reconnection became more central to her sense of self: "the more I try to fight back, the more he tries to like win and it just gets harder and harder to talk to him." At the same time, Lily felt conflicted because she could still "find the logic in a lot of what he says" and was "actively fighting the stuff I grew up with," leaving her feeling "not as secure in my foundations", contributing not only to distance within their relationship but also to self-doubt and a deeper sense of disconnection from the Native identity she was trying to build.

At other times, Lily described feeling sadness and confusion about her father's ambivalence towards their heritage:

"It makes me really sad to think about how my dad doesn't care about being Native, really. Or like he does.... He says I've always felt like I had a deeper connection to the world, to nature. And I'm like, okay, how much of that is stereotypical? Just thinking, because you're Native, you're going to like, speak to the trees, right?"

For Lily, these moments highlighted the emotional distance between herself and her father, wanting him to understand and share in the importance of reconnecting, but experiencing his engagement as inconsistent, moving between seeming not to care and expressing connection in ways that felt shaped by stereotypes rather than lived experience, leaving her feeling more alone in her efforts to reconnect.

***Disconnection in the Microsystem: Cultural imposterism.*** All three students described an ongoing sense of cultural imposterism that emerged within immediate campus contexts,

Native student spaces, classrooms, and cultural events, where identity felt most visible and consequential. Earlier experiences of disconnection from tribe, culture, and community resurfaced as self-doubt about their legitimacy and authenticity as Native people, with students questioning whether they had the "right" to participate in Native programming or represent their communities, often feeling "disingenuous" or "not Native enough" despite their ancestry and affiliation. These feelings were intensified through comparison with peers who had grown up more connected to culture and community, with many fearing that others would see them as inauthentic or undeserving of belonging triggered by both internal self-comparison and external cues such as subtle moments of judgment, exclusion, or hypervisibility. Over time, these experiences contributed to anxiety, rumination, guilt, emotional exhaustion, and diminished belonging and wellbeing, such that attempts to reconnect sometimes made disconnection more immediate and difficult to navigate rather than resolving it.

Grace described how Native spaces that offered opportunities for connection also brought up intense self-doubt about whether she belonged. She explained that entering these spaces of triggered a “nagging voice in your head being like, you don’t belong” where “one of the first thoughts is...this isn’t meant for me,” making participation “very stressful.” Instead of feeling welcomed or affirmed, these intrusive self-critical thoughts often left her feeling watched, uncertain, and afraid of overstepping:

“There’s always the fear of, like, oh, man here I am, this, like, you know, mixed race student who has very little cultural knowledge barging in here, taking all these resources delegated for Native students. And I’m, like, taking up space in the community. And I’m, like, asserting myself as, like, part of this community...that’s sort of like an underlying worry that you always have...They lead to me not engage as much, because in my head,

engaging would be intruding. If I do engage, I just worry a lot beforehand, during, and after. When you're always worrying, it makes it harder to form connections.”

For Grace, earlier experiences of disconnection made it difficult to trust that she belonged in Native community, even when she wanted connection. Fears of "taking up space" or "intruding" on resources she only partially felt entitled to led to constant self-monitoring before, during, and after interactions, making engagement feel emotionally risky and often leading her to withdraw and limit participation, which in turn increased her isolation and reinforced the distance she already felt. Although Grace experienced similar anxiety in other contexts, she emphasized that these experiences carried particular weight in relation to her culture, where a strong sense of responsibility and respect raised the "stakes" of cultural engagement, making fear of saying the wrong thing or overstepping a source of heightened caution and self-consciousness:

“When it comes to my culture, I feel like the stakes are higher. Like it would be a terrible disrespect to get anything wrong, or sometimes even to include myself. So, I just resort to watching and listening, which is...unhealthy in excess. I do it in excess.”

In response, Grace often defaulted to "watching and listening" rather than actively participating as a way of engaging carefully and respectfully — while she valued this as part of her reconnection process, she also recognized that holding herself back was "unhealthy in excess," making it harder to speak, ask questions, and build the relationships she sought. In this way, her anxious efforts to engage respectfully sometimes contributed to the very disconnection she was trying to overcome, with persistent worry, self-doubt, and cautious withdrawal increasing her stress and making it more difficult to feel comfortable and fully connected within Native spaces.

Joy described a similar pattern of feeling overwhelmed by self-questioning when entering Native spaces or comparing herself to more culturally connected peers, anxiously asking herself:

"Am I Native enough? Am I just like, lying? Am I like creating an identity that's not there?"

Early attempts to engage in Native programming led to what she described as an "overload in imposter syndrome," characterized by intrusive thoughts such as "I'm already doing it wrong" and heightened sensitivity to perceived scrutiny: "I bet you there's some people that just don't trust me to the extent of other people because I don't have their shared experiences or I'm not on the same page as them." Anticipating judgment made Native spaces feel stressful rather than supportive, with constant self-monitoring contributing to anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional strain that limited her sense of belonging and engagement.

Joy also described feeling pressure to explain and defend her Native identity in both Native and non-Native settings. She often found herself having to justify how someone could be Native while also being disconnected from culture:

"I guess one way in which I think is like mental stress is like different ways that I've had to explain my culture to different people...Native American culture is different because it's one of those ones where it's like, even if you're little, you're still part of the culture... it's a good thing to want to get involved... I think colonization really just kind of puts a different spin on the way our culture functions in comparison to others."

These interactions were emotionally exhausting because she often felt responsible for helping others understand how colonization and cultural disruption had shaped her family's experience. Having to repeatedly explain her family's disconnection and justify why she still identified as Native, despite growing up outside her tribe and community, often left Joy feeling frustrated and uncertain. When others failed to understand her experience, she described how "getting called out by other people" reactivated uncertainty about her identity and belonging and fueled the imposterism she was already carrying:

“I think it's hard because it does take you, it sends you backwards, like, okay, well, do I have a misconstrued view of my own culture or something like that?...And I think then that's like the anxiety or the self-doubt.”

For Joy, repeatedly having to explain and defend her identity intensified the imposter feelings she was already experiencing, requiring her to manage both the external work of educating others and the internal work of quieting self-critical thoughts about belonging. She described feeling that each time she had to justify her belonging, it "sent [her] backwards", renewing anxiety, self-doubt, and exhaustion rather than building confidence, and making it harder to feel secure in her identity and connected within Native community.

Lily described her experience of cultural imposterism as something that evolved as she became more involved in Native community on campus. As a freshman, she recalled feelings of uncertainty about whether she had the right to speak or participate in AIS class discussions, particularly when hearing peers discuss their family histories and community ties:

“It was kind of scary. It was fresh. I was just getting into it and I was like...I didn't grow up in community...It feels a little bit disingenuous to the people that are talking about how like their grandparents went to boarding schools.”

These moments made her more aware of what had been missing in her own experiences and reinforced her sense of being positioned “next to” rather than “within” her culture. While these spaces offered opportunities for connection, they also highlighted the gaps created by her earlier disconnection from tribe and community. Even though she knew she was Native, she worried that her lack of connection made her less legitimate or less deserving of speaking up in those spaces.

Although Lily described growing more confident over time, these doubts continued to return in moments where questions of authenticity, representation, or cultural authority arose in Native spaces. She recalled how a peer's public criticism about who should be allowed to share cultural knowledge brought those doubts "back in the front of my mind again:"

"It's back in the front of my mind again when I'm thinking about like, well, who is she attacking? And it's maybe me, the redhead sitting here, but I don't know. So it's like sometimes I'm like, maybe I don't belong as much as I do. And then it, like, makes me feel bad. It makes me want to withdraw."

Criticism about who counts as "really" Native sometimes made Lily question herself and want to pull away from the community she had worked hard to join, bringing back earlier feelings of uncertainty and disconnection and contributing to sadness, guilt, anxiety, and a desire to withdraw even in spaces where she otherwise felt accepted. She was especially sensitive to how others might see her as White-presenting, heightening self-consciousness in both Native and non-Native spaces, where she felt more cautious, insecure, and uncertain about when she had the "right" to speak up or correct misinformation, even as her own sense of belonging within Native community strengthened. When faced with stereotypical or inaccurate remarks, she felt both responsibility and hesitation, worrying about saying the wrong thing or overstepping:

"And just knowing that we're like a minority on campus is like, adds like another layer of, like hesitancy, especially as somebody that's like, not as much from my culture, then I feel bad correcting them because, like, I just learned this last year and now and I'm like, am I at that point of correcting you? Because what if I'm wrong? So, it's back on that. Like I'm a little cautious."

As Lily's cultural knowledge and role in Native programming expanded, her doubts shifted from questioning whether she belonged to whether she was qualified to represent or speak on behalf of others, feeling "not as secure in my foundations" and hesitant to assert opinions about complex issues within Native community. Reflecting on an earlier incident where another student questioned who should be allowed to share cultural knowledge, Lily felt guilty and self-conscious about her own right to hold opinions about cultural authenticity, because her connection to culture still felt unfinished and she was still "trying to build" her own cultural grounding. Using the metaphor of a tower, she explained that she did not yet feel secure enough in her "foundation" to "climb higher" into making judgments about difficult questions of legitimacy, monitoring not only what she said but even what she allowed herself to think, describing guilt, anxiety, and self-consciousness for having opinions she was not sure she had "earned" the right to hold. These doubts left her more cautious and less secure in her place within Native community and on campus.

**Primary Resilience Process: Reconnection and Restoration.** Although Joy, Lily, and Grace described significant stress related to cultural disconnection, they also identified important resilience resources rooted in rebuilding connection to culture, community, family history, and Native identity. Across narratives, students actively sought opportunities to build relationships, learn cultural knowledge, and better understand their histories and identities, transforming reconnection into a process of restoring pathways to culture and community that had previously felt difficult to access. First, reconnecting to culture and community functioned as a psychological resource by providing meaning, motivation, and a stronger sense of identity and purpose. Seeking out cultural knowledge, relationships, and family history helped students reframe feelings of absence and uncertainty into a more hopeful process of growth and

opportunity. Second, Native spaces where students encountered others with similarly complex or interrupted relationships to culture served as important social and cultural resources. Seeing themselves reflected in peers who were also navigating reconnection challenged more rigid ideas of authenticity and helped students feel less isolated or "not Native enough." Together, these experiences contributed to greater confidence, validation, hope, and belonging within the PWI.

***Psychological Resilience Resource: Reconnection as source of motivation.*** For Joy, Lily, and Grace, the desire to reconnect itself functioned as an important psychological resource, providing motivation, direction, purpose, and hope amid disconnection, uncertainty, and self-doubt. Across all three narratives, this longing helped students continue moving toward Native community even when participation felt emotionally difficult or anxiety-provoking, pushing them to keep showing up and engage with Native spaces they might otherwise have avoided. Over time, reconnecting helped these students make sense of the sadness and disconnection they carried, reframing these feelings not only as evidence of loss but as part of an ongoing process of growth and opening access to relationships, experiences, and cultural engagement that strengthened their sense of connection and wellbeing.

Grace's narrative was shaped by the "yearning" she repeatedly described for the family, culture, and community from which she had been separated. Although Native spaces often triggered intrusive self-doubt ("this isn't meant for me") and fears of not belonging, this longing continued to pull her toward connection and engagement, she described culture as "an immeasurably beautiful thing buried inside of me" and her desire "to unearth it," with this yearning functioning as an important source of motivation that helped her keep moving toward Native community even when she felt uncertain or afraid. This desire shaped her decision to attend PNWU, located near the reservation where her maternal family lives, with her "yearning

to come back to the region" described as "definitely the biggest deciding factor", pushing through anxiety and fear because her longing for connection "drove [her] forward."

On campus, this desire continued to motivate her to seek out opportunities for cultural connection and community participation: "I've felt so detached sometimes at life to my culture that... if there ever was an opportunity to amend that, it's here and now." Even when she felt anxious or unsure of herself, her longing for reconnection repeatedly encouraged her to move toward Native spaces and relationships she might otherwise have avoided. Grace explained that this "yearning" to be part of Native community often outweighed the fear and uncertainty she felt in those spaces, leading her to prioritize spaces even when she felt emotionally exhausted or wanted to withdraw:

"I guess just this very strong desire to, like, be a part of the Native community. There's sort of like a yearning that's stronger than, like, a different interest. And so, like, I prioritize that, like, if I have the energy to do one thing that's not a class or a test. It's [the Native student group meeting], you know? I sort of put that obligation onto myself."

Rather than remaining "on the sidelines," Grace continued showing up to Native student meetings and community events because those relationships mattered deeply to her, with continued participation giving her greater access to relationships, cultural experiences, and opportunities for reconnection that became increasingly meaningful. Being at PNWU "brought me closer to my family," giving her opportunities to spend time with relatives and "reawaken some of those ties," with one especially meaningful moment occurring during a community circle when her grandmother sang a song she unexpectedly recognized: "I realized, as I was going through the motions, that I knew it. I had forgotten that I knew it, but I'd heard her sing it many times before. It made me emotional." Although reconnecting did not eliminate the anxiety

and self-doubt she described elsewhere, experiences like this transformed reconnection from something imagined into something emotionally and relationally tangible, reducing some of the isolation and distance she had long carried while strengthening her sense of family connection, cultural belonging, and wellbeing.

Joy described a similar process, though her motivation centered less on restoring interrupted ties and more on building a connection to Native identity and community she had never fully experienced, choosing PNWU because its visible Native spaces and programs made her feel she would finally have an opportunity to learn, participate, and build the connection she had been missing. One of her first conversations with another Native student reassured her that reconnecting might actually be possible:

“I was like, okay, this is like a thing here, like, there's a presence here and it's something that I could get into because Alice was just really...understanding of the fact of, like, oh, that's cool. Like, that's cool that you're coming here for that.”

For Joy, being welcomed rather than judged reinforced her hope that she could belong in Native spaces despite growing up disconnected from tribe and community, strengthening her desire to reconnect and providing an important foundation for building relationships on campus. Yet self-doubt, anxiety, and feelings of imposterism still shaped her early attempts to enter Native spaces, as she often worried she did not belong or that other students would judge her. At times, these fears made her want to avoid Native spaces entirely:

“The [longhouse] seems scary right now because I don't know what I'm doing. And these people don't know me, and they probably think I look weird...I was like, okay, nothing's going to happen if you don't do anything...I'm glad I did because there were definitely

times where I was like, okay, well, would it just be easier for me to just not do anything?

Should I just, like, stop trying?

However, Joy's desire for reconnection changed how she responded to those fears, reminding herself that "nothing's going to happen if you don't do anything" helped her push back against the urge to withdraw and continue taking risks to participate in Native spaces even when anxious or unsure. As she kept engaging, she built relationships that reduced loneliness and uncertainty while increasing her sense of belonging, confidence, and hope.

***Social/Cultural Resilience Resource: Finding reflection and connection in heterogenous community.*** Joy, Lily, and Grace also described the heterogeneity of Native spaces at PNWU as an important resilience resource. Native spaces included students with varied tribal affiliations, family histories, levels of cultural knowledge, and experiences of connection and disconnection, with all three students repeatedly emphasizing that they were not the only ones who were mixed, disconnected, still learning, or trying to reconnect. Seeing others navigating similarly complex relationships to culture provided reflection, representation, and validation they had never previously experienced, helping reduce shame, self-doubt, and imposter feelings while expanding their understanding that Native identity was broader than they had believed and that there was no single "right" way to be Native. Through these experiences of recognition, these students felt more accepted, understood, and secure in their belonging, with heterogeneous Native spaces becoming important sites of restoration and reconnection.

Across their narratives, these students described the heterogeneity of the Native student organization on campus as one of the most important sources of support in their efforts to reconnect. Lily described how encountering students at different stages of reconnection helped

reduce her self-doubt and gave her a stronger sense of place within Native community, affirming that participation was possible even when cultural knowledge was still developing:

“The campus culture of everybody’s different and we’ve all come together definitely helped... We’re all different and we’re all learning. We’re all at different points in learning our culture... that really helped me like find a place... We’ve all come from all these different places, and we’ve all found this place together. And so it can be really, like, uplifting to be like, hey, I’m not the only weirdo, right?”

For Lily, being surrounded by students whose relationships to culture were also complex or still developing helped her feel less alone, seeing students “at different points” in rebuilding their cultural connections helped her realize that the process of learning, rather than prior knowledge, was common. This contrasted sharply with her upbringing near a reservation where she felt forced into a false dichotomy of being either “[their tribe] or White,” concluding “I guess I’m White then.” She described PNWU as “one of the first communities I’ve been in where we’re all Indigenous in a different way so I’m not the only one that’s different,” with this recognition allowing her to “flourish in community here.”

Joy echoed the relief she felt in finding Native community where “everybody’s different.” She explained that “hearing people talk about their experiences...relieves my stress” because it allows her to share “just like my experience” and know that other students will understand. These open discussions about experiences of disconnection and reconnection affirmed Joy’s sense of place within Native community. One especially meaningful relationship developed with a student leader who had also grown up disconnected from their culture:

“[She] was previous student lead at the [longhouse] and has some similar experiences to me in terms of like descendency... When you put all the academics aside and you just

kind of talk about who you are, like your life experience...it's validating. Yeah, it's very validating.”

For Joy, relationships like these helped lessen the uncertainty and imposter feelings she had previously carried into Native spaces. Instead of feeling that her disconnection made her different or less legitimate, she increasingly felt understood and validated. Grace similarly described finding “solidarity and acceptance” in a Native community made up of students “who are all at like different levels of sort of experiences and connections with their culture.” She emphasized that Native spaces felt “very open” and “very welcoming,” particularly because many events focused on teaching and learning together rather than assuming prior knowledge:

“There are quite a few people in, like, the [Native student] community who are also sort of like in a similar space of, like reconnecting with their identity and exploring that. And so, you know, a lot of the events hosted [the Native student group] are just like, educational and like workshops to teach you these things... It's a very accepting of like people at any stage, they're like inviting you to reconnect with that culture...Having a space where you can see people having many of the same experiences, thoughts, and feelings as you makes it easier to feel like there is a place for you.”

For Grace, the openness of these spaces helped counter the feeling that she was “taking up space” or did not belong, seeing other students reconnecting with their culture made it easier to participate without feeling she had to already know everything, reducing anxiety and self-consciousness while increasing comfort, confidence, and connection.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The present study was guided by three overarching aims. First, it sought to identify the multi-layered sources of stress AI/AN undergraduates perceive as influencing their mental health and wellbeing within a PWI context and to understand how these culturally specific stressors emerge across the ecological systems that shape AI/AN students' experiences in higher education. Second, it examined the psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources students draw upon to adapt, persevere, and thrive in the face of these stressors, as well as how these resources are developed, enacted, or adjusted in the university environment. Finally, it explored how students described their relationship to Native culture and community, how these relationships were informed by their unique ecological contexts, and how they contributed to variation in stress and resilience processes. Collectively, these aims reflect a commitment to centering AI/AN student voices within the broader discourse on mental health and resilience in higher education and informing more culturally relevant and contextually responsive models of institutional support. Using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) grounded in an ecological lens (Fish & Syed), students' stories were interpreted as holistic, relational accounts of lived experience. This approach preserved the integrity of individual narratives while also illuminating shared and divergent pathways of stress and resilience across participants' stories.

### **Summary and Interpretation of Findings**

Guided by Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model and Gloria and Rodriguez's (2000) psychosociocultural (PSC) framework, the findings highlight how AI/AN students' stress and resilience processes are deeply connected to their sociohistorical contexts and relationships to Native culture and community. Students' experiences were not monolithic. Although participants shared many common experiences within the PWI

environment, they described meaningful differences in how they related to Native culture and community, differences rooted in their unique ecological histories and circumstances. These differences influenced how students navigated, interpreted, and made meaning of university life, contributing to variation in experiences of stress, resilience, and wellbeing.

The first two research questions aimed to identify the shared sources of stress and resilience AI/AN undergraduates perceived as impacting their mental health and wellbeing within the PWI context, while also attending to how these processes were situated within students' broader ecological contexts. Findings revealed that many of the stressors and resilience resources described by students closely aligned with factors previously identified in research examining AI/AN undergraduates' psychosocial adjustment, persistence, and sense of belonging in higher education (Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine, 2015; Tachine et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2013), as well as broader literature examining stress and resilience within AI/AN populations more generally (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Walters et al., 2002). Although prior higher education literature has not typically framed these experiences explicitly through a mental health lens, the present findings suggest that many of the same factors shaping adjustment, persistence, and belonging within higher education also function as ecological stressors and resilience resources influencing AI/AN students' mental health and wellbeing.

Participants described many of the same challenges documented in prior studies of AI/AN students attending PWIs, including cultural incongruence, racism, epistemic erasure, historical loss thinking, and the devaluation of Indigenous knowledge systems, alongside psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources that mirror protective processes and coping resources identified within both higher education and community-based resilience literature. In many ways, these findings were also consistent with Fish and Syed's (2018)

ecological mapping of the shared factors shaping AI/AN students' experiences within higher education contexts.

Consequently, these findings were summarized rather than explored extensively within the present discussion because they largely reinforced existing literature, while extending it primarily by demonstrating the relevance of these stress and resilience processes for AI/AN students' mental health and wellbeing, in addition to outcomes such as persistence, adjustment, and belonging that have been more commonly emphasized in prior research. More novel, however, were the ways these shared stressors and resilience resources varied according to students' distinct ecological contexts and relationships to Native culture and community. Thus, the third research question focused more specifically on how students' sociohistorical contexts and relationships to Native culture and community shaped their experiences of stress, resilience, and wellbeing within the PWI environment.

Findings revealed that AI/AN students' experiences of stress, resilience, and mental health were deeply shaped by their sociohistorical contexts and relationships to Native culture and community. Three key findings emerged: (1) students' chrono- and macrosystemic experiences informed their relationships to Native culture and community, which in turn gave rise to distinct stress processes that influenced how they encountered and interpreted the PWI environment; (2) stress processes were ecologically patterned, with students experiencing distinct configurations of stressors across ecological system levels that reflected their relationships to Native culture and community; (3) resilience emerged through psychosociocultural integration, as students drew upon interconnected psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources grounded in their ecological contexts to sustain their mental health and promote their wellbeing.

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Commented [JJM28]: you said this in the last paragraph. Its redundant.

### ***Finding 1: Chrono/Macrosystems Shape Experiences of Stress and Resilience***

A central contribution of this study is the finding that students' chrono- and macrosystemic experiences shaped their relationships to Native culture and community, which in turn gave rise to distinct stress and resilience processes within the PWI environment. Although students shared exposure to many of the same institutional stressors and resilience resources, differences in cultural continuity, family and community relationships, geographic and relational proximity to tribal homelands and Native communities, and intergenerational experiences of colonization influenced how students encountered, interpreted, and responded to those stressors, as well as how they developed, accessed, and utilized resilience resources to navigate those experiences. These differences were reflected in recurring patterns of stress processes, including experiences of dislocation, holding the middle, and disconnection, as well as corresponding resilience processes centered on sustaining relational ties to home, finding and creating balance, and reconnection and restoration. Together, these processes were rooted in students' unique sociohistorical contexts and relationships to Native culture and community.

Aligned with Markstrom's (2010) multidimensional conceptualization of Native identity, students varied not only in how they identified as Native but in their connections to tribe, community, extended family, land, and cultural practices. These differences were rooted in broader sociohistorical and cultural contexts that shaped opportunities for cultural continuity, adaptation across multiple cultural systems, and experiences of cultural disruption or reconnection. The present findings build upon Markstrom's (2010) multidimensional conceptualization of Native identity by demonstrating how students' relationships to Native culture and community, themselves shaped by broader sociohistorical processes such as colonization, acculturation, and cultural value contradictions, become ecologically organized

within higher education contexts and contribute to distinct experiences of stress, resilience, mental health, and wellbeing within the PWI environment.

Consistent with Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological systems model, these findings illustrate that the chronosystem and macrosystem are not merely distal influences but organizing forces that structure students' higher education experiences across all levels of their ecology. Differences in cultural continuity, geographic and relational proximity to tribal and Native communities, and intergenerational experiences of cultural disruption produced qualitatively different ecologies of stress and resilience rather than simply varying in intensity. These differences shaped both the stress processes students experienced and the resilience processes through which they maintained wellbeing within the PWI environment. This extends Fish and Syed's (2018) model by demonstrating that although chrono- and macrosystemic experiences are broadly central to AI/AN students' development and wellbeing in PWI settings, substantial variation across students' chronosystemic experiences (e.g., life histories, intergenerational experiences, family and community exposure to colonization) and macrosystemic contexts (e.g., dominant cultural ideologies, institutional norms) fundamentally shape how students encounter stress and access resilience. These findings underscore that AI/AN students' present-day experiences in higher education cannot be understood without attending to the sociohistorical and cultural conditions that organize their lives and influence their engagement and wellbeing within the university environment. They further support longstanding calls within AI/AN scholarship to move beyond pan-Indigenous conceptualizations that obscure the heterogeneity of Native students' cultural pathways, community relationships, and lived experiences within higher education contexts (Shotton et al., 2013; Waterman, 2019).

**Commented [JJM29]:** Is this consistent or discrepant from any of the literature? This is where you need to integrate your findings with the literature.

Importantly, these differences can themselves be understood as products of varied colonial disruptions and adaptations across Native communities. The findings illustrate that colonial structures have reconfigured Native communities in diverse and complex ways, resulting in distinct developmental pathways and relationships to Native culture and community that shaped how stress and resilience were experienced within the PWI environment. For some students, this included deep cultural and community continuity within geographically and relationally concentrated tribal communities; for others, it involved sustaining cultural continuity across multiple Native, non-Native, and institutional environments through adaptation and negotiation; and for others, it reflected reconnecting and restoring cultural and community relationships that had been disrupted, lost, or limited by assimilation, relocation, or fragmented cultural transmission. These differences were not peripheral but foundational, shaping how students perceived their belonging, navigated institutional spaces, and experienced both stress and resilience. Attending to students' distinct chronosystemic and macrosystemic experiences provides critical insight into the specific ways colonial structures are lived, negotiated, and resisted within higher education, and how these processes influence AI/AN students' mental health and wellbeing.

### ***Finding 2: Stressors in the PWI Context are Ecologically Patterned***

Across narratives, stressors experienced within the PWI context appeared patterned in relation to students' relationships to Native culture and community and the ecological contexts in which those relationships were situated. Students did not simply experience different degrees of stress; rather, they described qualitatively different stress ecologies operating across chrono/macrosystemic, mesosystemic, and microsystemic levels. Although students shared exposure to common stressors associated with attending a predominantly White institution as

**Commented [JJM30]:** So is this consistent with the literature - this is where you expand and extrapolate your findings from "finding 1" and tell us what it means. What is the take home message?

**Commented [AM31R30]:** Tie this section back to the literature that aligns with the confirmation of this finding :)

**Commented [MF32R30]:** I tried to be more explicit above to tie back to theory since this is the extrapolation - the across chrono/macro experiences has variation which extends Fish & Syed that offered that broadly chrono/macro systems need to be central to understand AI/AN student experiences generally - I'm saying we need to attend to the differences between AI/AN students. Tried to link to the heterogeneity representation lit above. Let me know if I need to do more here. I will address more practically in implications.

AI/AN undergraduates, the findings revealed that the meaning, intensity, and psychological impact of these stressors varied according to students' unique ecological positioning and relationships to Native culture and community. Three prominent stress processes emerged through comparative narrative patterning: *dislocation*, *holding the middle*, and *disconnection*. Importantly, these processes did not reflect isolated stressors but ecologically patterned configurations of stress operating across multiple ecological system levels. Together, these findings suggest that culturally specific stressors within PWIs cannot be understood as uniform experiences but must instead be understood in relation to the ecological contexts through which they emerge and are experienced.

**Dislocation.** Among students whose narratives reflected cultural and community continuity within geographically and relationally concentrated tribal communities, dislocation emerged as a salient stress process shaping students' experiences within the PWI environment. Dislocation was experienced as a rupture across ecological systems rooted in chrono/macrosystemic transitions from culturally immersive home environments to cultural isolation within the PWI context. Students described entering an institutional environment in which Indigenous knowledge systems, tribe-specific cultural practices, and their own tribal identities were largely absent, devalued, or inaccessible. Their narratives emphasized an abrupt and disorienting severance from kinship networks, community, land, and the cultural routines that had previously organized daily life. Students often found few peers who shared the contours of their specific reservation and tribal contexts, producing a profound sense of cultural isolation that extended beyond demographic underrepresentation, reflecting a deeper disruption of relational and place-based identity. These findings are consistent with prior research documenting AI/AN students' experiences of cultural incongruence, isolation, and marginality

**Commented [JJM33]:** Great, so what does it mean? What can schools do to help?

**Commented [MF34R33]:** Please see implications for higher education professional section, will address there.

**Commented [AM35]:** This is another summary of the results. Consider including content that addresses how university systems need to change to support these students. How do we provide specific services to help these students? Consider adding in Tier 2&3 tiebacks here to incorporate the school psych perspective.

**Commented [MF36R35]:** Addressing in Implications can move here if Emma and Julia think is more appropriate

within PWIs (Huffman, 2001; Tachine et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2013), while further illustrating how movement from culturally immersive environments into predominantly White institutional settings can function as an ecological rupture affecting relationships, identity, meaning, and wellbeing simultaneously.

Consistent with Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological framing, this macrosystemic dislocation cascaded into students' microsystem experiences. Students described alienation within their immediate environments, including classrooms, peer relationships, and even pan-Indigenous campus spaces intended to function as sources of support. Within Native spaces, students frequently experienced invisibility, misunderstanding, and microaggressions related to their reservation identities. They described feeling "too rezzy," being treated as though their cultural knowledge was "magical," and feeling pressured to share teachings in ways that violated their cultural protocol. Although Native student organizations were often described as important sources of connection, students also experienced these spaces as culturally incongruent due to limited representation of reservation life and tribe-specific traditions. Rather than feeling fully seen, students often described a painful tension between wanting connection and feeling that even Native spaces on campus could not fully hold or reflect their lived experiences.

These findings complicate literature emphasizing Native-centered campus spaces as important sources of belonging and support for AI/AN students (e.g., Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017; Waterman, 2019) by demonstrating how differences in tribal, geographic, and cultural experience shape students' sense of recognition and belonging within Native-centered spaces themselves. In this way, the broader macrosystemic incongruence of the university reorganized students' everyday microsystem interactions, reinforcing feelings of

isolation, homesickness, and diminished belonging that contributed to significant distress and diminished wellbeing.

Dislocation within these proximal campus experiences was further intensified by mesosystemic tensions between family, community, and university values surrounding education. Students navigated conflicting messages about the purpose and value of higher education, as perspectives from home did not always align with those promoted within the university environment. Whereas the university emphasized individual achievement, academic degrees, and future professional success, students described family and community perspectives that sometimes framed college as unnecessary, culturally irrelevant, or disconnected from meaningful participation in Native community life and cultural responsibility. These tensions became especially salient as students attempted to make sense of experiences within a setting that already felt culturally unfamiliar and disconnected from home.

Importantly, these mesosystemic tensions were rooted in broader chronosystemic histories of boarding schools, forced assimilation, and the colonial use of education as a mechanism of cultural erasure. Across generations, these experiences formed enduring macrosystemic community narratives, including widely shared beliefs that “college is a scam,” which positioned higher education as potentially distancing students from Native life, family, community, and ways of knowing. Consistent with Mohatt and colleagues’ (2014) concept of the “public narrative” of historical trauma, which describes how broader community narratives emphasizing Native loss and suffering can become internalized and sustain present-day psychological distress, these social discourses operated as a diffuse but powerful source of stress shaping how students interpreted themselves, their futures, and their experiences within higher education. Consequently, students entered the university already anticipating mesosystemic

tension between academic success and remaining connected to home, community, and cultural responsibility. |

These broader community narratives, echoed by their friends, extended family, and community members, not only influenced students' expectations of higher education, but also actively structured how they interpreted and emotionally responded to experiences on campus. Consistent with prior research documenting tensions between higher education participation and maintaining connection to Native identity, family, and community life (Guillory, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003), moments of exclusion, cultural incongruence, or isolation within the PWI environment were often interpreted not as isolated incidents, but as confirmation that the university itself was incompatible with Native life. These findings suggest that dislocation was experienced not only through physical separation from home, but also through ongoing tensions between institutional and community understandings of education, belonging, and cultural responsibility. | As such, chronosystem histories and macrosystem messages reverberated through students' mesosystemic experiences and everyday microsystem interactions, complicating engagement with the institution and intensifying feelings of alienation, disillusionment, and diminished wellbeing on campus.

Together, these layered ecological stressors created a stress landscape characterized by both heightened psychological distress and chronic diminished wellbeing, with students experiencing not only anxiety, sadness, and emotional fatigue, but also persistent feelings of languishing produced by displacement from the people, places, and cultural practices that sustained them. Their narratives suggest that they fluctuated across the suboptimal quadrants of a dual-factor model of mental health, moving between periods of acute distress marked by episodes of anxiety or depression and sustained periods of diminished wellbeing (Suldo &

**Commented [AM37]:** Jim is looking for tie backs of your findings to the established literature here AND there are no tiebacks to make because this study is 1 of 1. I suspect this is a qual methods style of discussion presentation-- so we need Julia/Emma's feedback here.

**Commented [MF38R37]:** Will leave for Julia/Emma review

**Commented [AM39]:** Jim is asking for tiebacks to literature here, if possible. His words: (how does it compare to other studies? What is consistent with other studies and what is not?)

Shaffer, 2008). For example, Sylvia described feeling “stuck,” as though she were “running out of time” and “wasting” it at college when she could be home learning from elders and participating in community life, while Virginia reflected that there were times when she “just kind of forgot what I was doing here” and felt she was “not getting out what other people are.” Attending to both dimensions helps capture the full psychological impact of dislocation, including not only emotional distress but also erosion of purpose, belonging, and meaning. These experiences reflect more than homesickness; they capture persistent feelings of apathy, dissatisfaction, hopelessness, and aimlessness associated with languishing and illustrate the full psychological cost of ecological fragmentation. |

**Holding the middle.** For students whose relationships to Native culture and community spanned multiple Native, non-Native, and institutional settings, holding the middle emerged as an organizing stress process through which students interpreted and experienced the PWI environment. Rather than reflecting experiences of dislocation, holding the middle was characterized by the chronic strain of being caught between communities, responsibilities, and cultural expectations. This stress process emerged from relationships to Native culture and community that spanned multiple cultural systems and contexts. Yet this positioning also situated students as intermediaries within the university, responsible for brokering tensions between Native communities, campus Native organizations, and the institution itself. Consequently, the defining stressor was not simply navigating multiple communities, but the burden of holding them together. This stress process was primarily mesosystemic, emerging through the relationships between systems and the ongoing work of negotiating competing expectations, responsibilities, and ways of relating across them.

**Commented [AM40]:** This is good, can you talk more about how this is consistent or not consistent with what the dual factor model says, and how it could be that AI/AN populations look similar to other populations or they don't. Talk about how you have added perspective to the dual factor model.

**Commented [MF41R40]:** I'm not quite sure what this means. I added a sentence about how attending to both dimensions is important for this population - I can't find lit where dual factor model explicitly is used for AI/AN populations. I will address how this could be applied in implications as well.

**Commented [AM42]:** Instead of referencing a specific individual example here, can you talk more about the larger implications and/or make a tieback or align this story to larger implications for this support this population?-- Again here, I have a feeling this desire/approach is more aligned with quant methodology and we need feedback from Julia and Emma on the appropriateness related to qual methods.

**Commented [MF43R42]:** I will address in implications unless Julia/Emma tell me to move here.

One major source of this mesosystemic strain was students' role as cultural intercessors between Native communities and the institution. As leaders of Native student organizations and cultural events, students described carrying responsibility for representing Native students and tribal communities to the university while also representing the university back to Native communities, both on and off campus. Students translated institutional policies, procedures, and expectations to Native students, families, and tribal communities while simultaneously advocating to the institution on their behalf. They often occupied the middle ground between campus Native organizations and broader Native communities, particularly when tensions arose around cultural protocol, leadership, or authority to share cultural knowledge. In these moments, they were not just participating in multiple communities but responsible for holding them together and bearing the emotional and relational weight of the strain between them.

This intercessory role produced more than simple role conflict; it generated chronic moral and emotional strain rooted in the structural incompatibility of the systems students were asked to connect. As a mesosystemic stressor, this mediating work illustrates how tensions between students' multiple microsystems (e.g. Native student organizations, tribal communities, family networks, and the university) became concentrated within the mesosystem, where conflicting expectations and obligations across these settings had to be continually negotiated. Students often internalized these tensions, feeling personally responsible for protecting and representing multiple communities at once while navigating institutional constraints that often limited what was possible. They felt accountable to Native students, tribal communities, and family expectations while also expected to comply with university policies and timelines that stood at odds with Indigenous values and cultural protocols. Doing right by one system often risked disappointing or harming another.

Students explicitly linked this intercessory work to significant mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, self-doubt, and emotional “exhaustion.” Over time, the burden of navigating these systems strained relationships, diminished positive emotion, and threatened students’ sense of meaning when their commitments to Native communities became entangled in institutional barriers. Thus, the stress of mediation was not only interpersonal but structural: individuals experiencing this stress process often became the bridge between cultural worlds and institutional systems, engineering and finessing the gaps between them at considerable cost to their mental health and wellbeing. In this role, they did not just belong to multiple communities, they were expected to manage them and often do so without adequate support, recognition, or institutional accountability, generating chronic stress even as they remain deeply committed to their communities’ wellbeing. These findings align with prior scholarship documenting the disproportionate emotional labor and representational burden often placed on students from marginalized communities within PWIs (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013), while further illustrating how these burdens became ecologically concentrated within students occupying intermediary roles across Native and institutional systems.

These broader mesosystemic tensions also surfaced within students’ everyday campus interactions. At the microsystem level, the strain of intermediation manifested as the emotional labor of constant advocacy, organizing, and representation within campus life. Because these students had long occupied intermediary positions, they often felt responsible for carrying the work of making Native students visible within the institution. In classrooms, meetings, student organizations, and peer interactions, students described being “annoyingly Indigenous,” taking on educating peers and faculty, correcting stereotypes, advocating for resources and policy change, and organizing spaces of belonging and support for other Native students. Students

**Commented [AM44]:** Jim is asking for you to make more extrapolating statements about what this means and what universities should do about it. The highlighted yellow text is example of wording he wants you to consider.

**Commented [MF45R44]:** Moved this to Implications section where I will use explicitly.

**Commented [JJM46]:** good

framed this work as an ongoing “fight” or “combat” necessary to exist in a university “that’s not built for me,” emphasizing the adversarial stance they feel often felt compelled to take to secure basic recognition, resources, and respect for Native students. Unlike their broader role as mediating between institutional systems and communities, this stressor unfolded through direct interpersonal and campus interactions, where students were continually required to reconcile the tension between being students within the institution and advocates working to change it. Although advocacy aligned with their core values and provided meaning and purpose, it was also described as obligatory labor that “comes from just existing in these spaces.” Over time, the constant pressure to defend, explain, organize, and care for others, on top of the already demanding academic and relational obligations of being a student, contributed to burnout, heightened anxiety, disrupted academic focus, and reduced capacity for rest, joy, and connection.

Importantly, this intermediary role was rooted in earlier chronosystemic experiences. Growing up in intertribal and urban Native communities away from tribal homelands created a persistent insider/outsider tension that formed the backdrop for students’ later experiences in the PWI context. Although students described strong cultural grounding through family teachings and urban Native community centers, they also experienced a sense of “limbo:” not fully at home in their tribal communities because of geographic and relational distance yet not fully understood in non-Native settings because of their strong enculturation. Consistent with prior research describing the complex identity negotiations experienced by urban and intertribal AI/AN individuals navigating multiple cultural contexts (LaFromboise et al., 2010), this cultural in-betweenness instilled an enduring undercurrent of identity strain that shaped how these students moved through both Native and non-Native spaces on the PWI campus. In other words, their sense of “limbo” created a continuous background negotiation that influenced how comfortable

**Commented [AM47]:** Jim is looking for references back to the literature that talks about this. And how do you suggest we can address this situation?

**Commented [AM48R47]:** As I think more on this-- you wouldn't have literature to refer back to because this finding/description is specific to your study specific interviews. Leave what you have and then just think about adding direction for what institutions can do to address this.

they felt in Native spaces, how they interpreted academic interactions, and how they anticipated being judged by both Native and non-Native peers.

Within Native spaces, students often felt their upbringing marked them as not fully from, or what Hope framed as “in,” their tribal community, leaving them vulnerable to feeling seen as less authentic than students raised on the reservation. Within non-Native spaces, they encountered invisibility, tokenization, and pressure to speak on behalf of all Native people. As such, students’ chronosystemic histories heightened their sensitivity to subsequent stressors across other ecological levels. The insider/outsider tension they carried into college intensified later mesosystemic burdens of mediating between their multiple communities and roles while also amplifying microsystemic stressors such as advocacy fatigue, microaggressions, and epistemic erasure. Because students already felt uncertain about where they belonged, the work of representing Native communities, advocating within the institution, and maintaining ties to home often carried greater emotional weight.

In this way, insider/outsider positionality reflects how the enduring structures of colonialism continue to shape these students’ ecologies. Histories of relocation, urbanization, and fragmentation of tribal community did not just influence where students grew up; they also shaped the roles students assumed within the university and the meanings they attached to those roles. The chrono/macrosystemic conditions underlying this stress process often positioned students to enter the PW already highly attuned to differences across systems and already carrying responsibility for translating between them. Their chronosystemic histories therefore did not merely increase exposure to stressors; they organized the broader stress ecology by positioning students as intermediaries and making the burden of holding the middle especially salient and emotionally costly.

**Commented [AM49]:** Touch back to the literature on insider/outsider positionality here - and what does that mean for universities at the systems level and for school psychologists?

**Commented [MF50R49]:** Will address systems level in implications.

Through Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological framing, holding the middle can therefore be understood as a predominantly mesosystemic stress process rooted in the relationships between systems and in the burden of holding those systems together. Chronosystemic experiences of navigating multiple cultural contexts shaped not only the roles they assumed, but also the meanings they attributed to those roles and the psychological costs of carrying them. Consequently, this stress process often produced mental health experiences consistent with what the dual-factor model of mental health classifies as "symptomatic but content" (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Students described significant anxiety, emotional overwhelm, episodic depression, and, at times, histories of suicidality, self-harm, or disordered eating. Yet they also simultaneously described strong relationships, meaning, accomplishment, and purpose through their leadership, advocacy, and care for others (Seligman, 2011). Forest captured this tension when he explained that college had brought him both "some of the most meaningful relationships in my life" and "some of the highest amount of suicidality" he had ever experienced. Similarly, Hope described an "ever-present" anxiety rooted in the strain of shouldering intermediary responsibilities "not really asked for in this type of capacity from other students," yet she also described finding meaning and joy through advocacy, kinship, and "transforming" the negative into "something good" for herself and her peers. For these students, the cost of holding the middle was substantial, but so too was the meaning they derived from doing so; the same roles that produced exhaustion also sustained belonging, purpose, and wellbeing. As such, these stress ecologies suggest that wellbeing for these students was not contingent upon the absence of stress, but instead coexisted with sustained experiences of meaning, belonging, and purpose amid chronic intermediary strain.

**Commented [AM51]:** This is important-- (Jim asks how could we make interventions or in-roads at the mesosystem level to help these students. What types of intervention are out there? La Fromboise has entire curriculum for NA students)-- consider if this is a relevant addition here.

**Commented [MF52R51]:** Will address intervention/practice application in implications.

**Commented [AM53]:** Jim interprets this level of individual reference as belonging in the results not the discussion-- Can we get some clarity from Emma and Julia to understand if these specific examples need to stay or if they can go?

**Commented [MF54R53]:** I'm going to leave for now and see what Emma and Julia say.

**Disconnection.** Within narratives characterized by efforts to reconnect following disrupted or limited access to Native culture and community, disconnection emerged as a pervasive stress process shaping students' experiences of belonging and wellbeing within the PWI environment. Unlike dislocation, which reflected separation from an already-established cultural world, disconnection was rooted in a persistent sense important relationships to culture, community, family history, and identity had been interrupted, lost, or rendered difficult to access. This stress process was grounded in chronosystem-level experiences of disrupted cultural continuity, including limited exposure to tribal communities, fragmented intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and family histories shaped by assimilation, relocation, or silence surrounding Native identity. Through Fish and Syed's (2018) reconceptualized ecological framing, these developmental histories created a baseline sense of cultural absence and longing in the chrono- and macrosystems that shaped both internal and relational experiences within the PWI environment. Students often entered college not only seeking academic opportunity but also hoping to rebuild relationships to culture, community, and identity that had been disrupted across generations.

This chronosystemic disconnection manifested most acutely at the microsystem level as cultural imposterism, emerging in the close relational and communal contexts where identity is most visible and negotiated. Similar to broader conceptualizations of imposter phenomenon involving feelings of "intellectual phoniness" despite evidence of competence or achievement (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991), later expanded to include forms of "perceived fraudulence" related to race and culture among individuals of mixed race or cultural heritage (Donella, 2018), students experiencing disconnection described persistent fears of being "found out" or exposed as not truly Native despite their ancestry and

Commented [JJM55]: This is 50 years old - do we have anything more recently?

Commented [MF56R55]: Kept the original citation as they coined the idea, added recent metaanalysis

tribal affiliation. Within this stress process, these feelings were rooted not in academic competence but in belonging, legitimacy, and cultural authenticity. Students frequently described feeling “not Native enough,” particularly within Native campus spaces, and questioned whether they had the “right” to participate in Native programming, represent their communities, or claim a Native identity when they perceived gaps in their cultural knowledge, language, or lived experience. These doubts were reinforced both internally, through self-comparison and awareness of perceived deficiencies, and externally, through subtle cues of exclusion, judgment, or hypervisibility within Native and non-Native settings. These findings also align with emerging research identifying culturally specific identity-based stressors among AI/AN college students, including perceived racial misclassification and other experiences of invalidation tied to colonial constructions of Native identity (Fetter et al., 2026).

In this way, cultural imposterism reflects the interaction of chronosystemic histories of cultural disruption with macrosystemic colonial discourses that define who is “Native enough.” Students had internalized standards of authenticity shaped both by colonial structures and by intra-community expectations regarding cultural knowledge, participation, and legitimacy. Within the PWI environment, these broader forces became concentrated within students’ everyday microsystem experiences, transforming spaces of potential belonging into sites of anxiety, self-surveillance, and relational withdrawal.

Although Native student organizations and Native-centered spaces often served as important sites of reconnection, they also became locations where the stress of disconnection was most acutely experienced. Within these spaces, longings for belonging were often accompanied by fears of exclusion, invalidation, or being perceived as not fully “Native enough.” As a result, disconnection stemmed less from overt discrimination than from the internalized effects of

broader colonial disruptions and the uncertainty they created around belonging, legitimacy, and cultural authenticity. While these dynamics manifested somewhat differently across narratives, with some participants experiencing greater anxiety about legitimacy and others struggling more with uncertainty, guilt, or fears of overstepping cultural authority, all were negotiating the same underlying tension between a desire for connection and doubts about belonging. Participants were often highly aware that their disconnection was not a personal failing, but part of a larger historical process. Yet this awareness did not eliminate its emotional consequence, including grief, loneliness, shame, and uncertainty as students attempted to navigate Native spaces while continually questioning whether they had the right to be there.

Disconnection also extended into the mesosystem, where tensions emerged between students' growing engagement with Native identity within the campus microsystem and family systems that remained disconnected from Native culture. As students deepened their relationships with Native culture and community, they sometimes encountered confusion, discomfort, or lack of understanding from parents whose own relationships to culture remained limited, disrupted, or ambivalent, contributing to a growing sense of emotional distance. Thus, the very process of becoming more connected to Native identity created a new form of disconnection within the family. Students often understood that their parents' distance from Native identity reflected larger histories of colonization, assimilation, and disrupted cultural transmission across generations, consistent with broader scholarship describing the intergenerational and relational impacts of historical trauma within AI/AN communities (Evans-Campbell, 2008). However, this understanding did not lessen the emotional strain of feeling unable to share an increasingly important part of themselves with family. As a result, disconnection also involved negotiating two competing relational worlds: a campus environment

that encouraged cultural exploration and affirmed their Native identity, and family systems in which that exploration was often unacknowledged, misunderstood, or difficult to discuss. Rather than family serving as a buffer against the challenges of reconnecting, students described grief, frustration, loneliness, and guilt as they navigated cultural growth largely on their own. The absence of cultural reciprocity between these systems intensified feelings of isolation and reduced access to the relational support that might otherwise sustain wellbeing, compounding the broader stress of disconnection.

Together, these findings illustrate how historical and intergenerational disruptions continue to shape contemporary experiences of belonging through the stress process of disconnection, highlighting the enduring influence of colonization across ecological systems. Cultural disconnection and loss within the chronosystem produced identity-related stress within the microsystem and relational strain within the mesosystem between their family and campus-based Native community microsystems, creating a layered stress ecology rooted in the erosion of cultural continuity. Accordingly, the mental health experiences associated with disconnection often reflected movement between the “vulnerable,” “symptomatic but content,” and, at times, “complete mental health” quadrants of the dual-factor model of mental health (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). This variation appeared to reflect both the stress of disconnection and the healing process of cultural reconnection on campus. Unlike the more acute psychological distress often associated with dislocation or holding the middle, disconnection was more commonly characterized by diminished wellbeing related to loneliness, perfectionism, uncertainty, and overextension.

Importantly, the form these stressors took appeared to evolve across the process of reconnection. For students earlier in this process, such as first-year Grace, stress was expressed

**Commented [JJM57]:** Great, correct - talk about this from the historical and intergenerational literature - what is being done, and what still needs to be done?

**Commented [MF58R57]:** I added a reference above about intergenerational literature rather than here in the summary of the cascade effects across ecological systems - I will try to address in implications in terms of cultural reconnection programming for students.

primarily through cultural imposterism, persistent self-doubt, and anxiety about belonging, placing her closer to the vulnerable and, at times, distressed quadrants as heightened anxiety and diminished wellbeing constrained her ability to fully engage in relationships and community. By contrast, for Joy and Lily, who were further along in their reconnection and more deeply involved in Native student spaces and leadership, these same underlying tensions shifted toward emotional exhaustion, fears of overstepping cultural authority, and increasing strain within family relationships. Joy's narrative reflected a "symptomatic but content" pattern in which ongoing stress and anxiety coexisted with strong meaning, engagement, and positive emotion (Seligman, 2011), whereas Lily appeared to move between complete mental health and vulnerability as the demands of sustaining connection became overwhelming. Therefore, as students became more embedded within Native community, the stress of disconnection did not disappear, but instead changed in form, continuing to shape their mental health and wellbeing across the process of reconnection.

### ***Finding 3: Resilience Emerges Through Psychosociocultural Integration***

Despite these stressors, students demonstrated a rich and dynamic array of resilience resources that supported their wellbeing within the PWI environment. Prior higher education research has emphasized the importance of family support, cultural engagement, Native community belonging, and culturally affirming support systems for AI/AN students' adjustment and persistence (Flynn et al., 2012; Lopez, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017; Waterman, 2012), and similarly, social and cultural resources remained foundational to students' resilience across narratives in the present study. However, the findings also revealed the substantial use of psychological resilience resources, including cognitive reframing, emotion-focused coping, personal motivation, and behavioral coping, many of which were themselves culturally informed

**Commented [JJM59]:** This is simply rehash of what you said in the result section - so what does it mean. Please broaden this beyond Grace, Joy and Lily

**Commented [MF60R59]:** I am not sure I am able to broaden or extend to other students as this is interpreting these particular students in this particular context's experiences. I will leave this comment to see how Emma and Julia think I can better address this.

through storytelling, spirituality, giving back, and community narratives. These findings extend emerging research suggesting that AI/AN college students actively rely on internal coping resources to navigate the PWI environment (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013) and demonstrate how psychological resilience processes previously documented within broader AI/AN populations operate within higher education contexts to sustain mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Shield, 2009; Walters et al., 2002). Together, these findings position psychological resilience as a robust but comparatively understudied dimension of AI/AN student wellbeing (John-Henderson et al., 2023).

Consistent with the psychosociocultural (PSC) model, resilience did not emerge through any single domain alone, but through the interplay of psychological, social, and cultural resources (Gloria & Robinson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2013). Students described weaving together coping strategies, relationships, and cultural connections in ways that supported emotional regulation, meaning-making, belonging, and wellbeing. While the PSC framework provided a useful structure for organizing resilience resources, students' narratives also reflected Indigenous conceptualizations of resilience that emphasize the interconnected nature of individual, relational, cultural, spiritual, and community processes (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Many resources derived their protective value not from functioning independently, but through their connections to relationships, cultural meaning systems, spirituality, collective identity, and community belonging. Extending prior PSC-oriented higher education research focused primarily on persistence and psychosocial adjustment, the present findings demonstrate how these interconnected resilience resources sustained AI/AN students' mental health and wellbeing within the PWI environment. Importantly, resilience processes, like stress processes, were ecologically patterned. The meaning, function, and expression of resilience resources varied

according to students' relationships to Native culture and community, giving rise to distinct resilience processes centered on sustaining relational ties to home, finding and creating balance, and reconnection and restoration. Thus, resilience emerged not through isolated psychological strategies or cultural involvement alone, but through the integration of psychological, social, and cultural resources that allowed students to navigate stress while sustaining connection, meaning, and wellbeing.

In response to dislocation, resilience emerged through **sustaining relational ties to home**. Because students' relationships to Native culture and community were characterized by deep cultural and community continuity within geographically and relationally concentrated tribal communities, resilience often involved maintaining continuity with the family, tribal, and community relationships that anchored their identities and sense of belonging despite the physical separation created by attending a PWI. Instead of seeking new sources of cultural connection, students drew upon existing relationships and actively worked to carry them across distance and contexts. This resilience process centered on maintaining connection to family, community, cultural practices, and reservation life in ways that stabilized belonging and affirmed continuity between home and the university environment. Although these efforts did not resolve dislocation, they functioned as relational, cultural, and psychological "tethers" that bridged ecological systems and reinforced continuity across contexts. In this way, resilience emerged not through preserving connection to the people, places, relationships, and cultural practices that grounded students' identities and wellbeing.

Socially and culturally, sustaining relational ties to home often involved seeking relationships and practices that reflected the values, rhythms, and experiences of home. Sylvia, for example, described her childhood best friend and roommate, Virginia, as her greatest source

of support because “sometimes home is literally upstairs.” Their friendship provided continuity across contexts; Virginia was someone who “knows the in’s and out’s of what I’m talking about,” both personally and culturally. Virginia similarly described Sylvia as an anchor to home, culture, and “all the versions” of herself, emphasizing the importance of relationships that carried continuity across contexts. More broadly, both students described being drawn to other “rez kids,” rural Native students, and even rural Latina peers whose backgrounds “parallel[ed]” their own. As Sylvia explained, “You’re so far from home... and like rez life, everywhere you come to kind of learn is pretty similar.” These shared reference points created what students perceived as “real connections,” relationships grounded in mutual understanding that validated feelings of isolation and supported wellbeing. These findings align with prior scholarship emphasizing the relational and culturally grounded nature of belonging among AI/AN students within PWI contexts, in which shared cultural understanding and connection to Native community validate students’ Indigenous identities and “peoplehood” while creating places that provide a “localized senses of belonging” within otherwise alienating institutional environments (Tachine et al., 2017; Waterman, 2012). While these relationships did not eliminate dislocation, they created relational bridges between home and the university that affirmed students’ sense of self by helping them locate familiar pieces of home, and themselves, within the university. Students also sustained connection through returning home for ceremonies, maintaining close ties with family and tribal communities, and continuing land-based and spiritual practices. Rather than adapting by leaving home behind, students practiced resilience by weaving home and school together so that neither felt entirely distant.

A central psychological dimension of this resilience process involved tethering educational goals to family and tribal community through a personal motivation to “give back”

**Commented [AM61]:** Similar to above comment about individual level and needing to understand if this is stylistic to qual methods or if the edit/adjust could be honored. Is the focus supposed to be primarily on the individuals in the study and their stories, and is there room for larger extrapolations for readers to make changes in their own practice/systems?

**Commented [MF62R61]:** I am not sure - I focused on individual/contextualized knowledge but tried to link to literature more to make those connections. I think I can't make broader extrapolations given my n=2 for most of these groups, but I can interpret meaning within context and then offer recommendations. I also try to link to bigger ideas in the conclusion of this finding. Hope that addresses some of the concerns!

to home. This sense of purpose helped counter chrono- and macrosystemic narratives that “college is a scam” by redefining higher education as meaningful when pursued in service of family, reservation community, and tribal nation. Students frequently described persisting in college not for individual advancement alone, but because education could eventually be used to support their people. Prior research similarly suggests that framing higher education through a commitment to “give back” strengthens Native students’ persistence intentions and adjustment to college (Brayboy et al., 2012; Drywater-Whitekiller; Salis Reyes, 2019). This motivation also reflects the culturally grounded concept of communal mastery, in which students experience efficacy not an individual accomplishment, but through remaining connected to and eventually contributing back to family and tribal community (John-Henderson et al., 2013). In this way, social and cultural ties to home became internalized as psychological strength, reducing the anxiety of “missing out” by reinforcing meaning, purpose, and hopefulness even amid ongoing dislocation. |

Commented [JJM63]: Better - more of this.

Collectively, these social, cultural, and psychological tethers mitigated the dislocation of the PWI environment by lacing strands of continuity across ecological systems and sustaining the cultural and community connections that anchored students' relationships to home. Although students often continued to experience anxiety, grief, and uncertainty, sustaining these ties appeared to strengthen key dimensions of wellbeing, particularly relationships and meaning. Within a dual-factor model of mental health perspective, these resources seemed to move students away from the most distressed and languishing states associated with isolation and disconnection by increasing students’ capacity to feel grounded, purposeful, and connected within the university environment.

To counter the mesosystemic stress of holding the middle, resilience emerged through **finding and creating balance** across multiple communities, responsibilities, and cultural contexts. Students described drawing upon psychological, social, and cultural resources that helped them navigate competing expectations and maintain connection across Native, non-Native, and institutional spaces. For students whose relationships to Native culture and community were characterized by sustaining cultural continuity across multiple communities, resilience often involved learning how to move between these worlds without feeling forced to abandon one for another. Balance was not described as a stable endpoint, but as an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and recalibration that allowed students to remain accountable to multiple communities while protecting their own wellbeing. Rather than resolving tensions between communities, students found and created balance by developing ways to live within those tensions while remaining grounded in Indigenous values, relationships, and ways of being.

Psychologically, finding and creating balance often involved utilizing Indigenized therapy on campus to process, reframe, and cope with the emotional strain of navigating multiple cultural systems and intermediary roles. Because students did not need to translate or defend the cultural, spiritual, and relational dimensions of their experiences, therapy facilitated meaning-making around exhaustion, advocacy burden, racism, and role strain within the PWI environment. Importantly, therapy did not function as a culturally separate mental health intervention, but as a space that validated Indigenous cultural values and practices as legitimate pathways to healing while helping students develop strategies for emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and restoring balance when competing demands became overwhelming. These findings also align with broader Indigenous mental health scholarship emphasizing the importance of culturally grounded and relational approaches to healing that validate Indigenous

knowledge, spirituality, and meaning-making processes rather than requiring separation from Native identity or community (Gone, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Similarly, research with urban AI/AN college students has demonstrated how integrating Indigenous and professional therapeutic approaches can support coping and emotional wellbeing within higher education contexts (Wendt, 2016). As Hope reflected, “This is stuff that Native people already knew,” but now affirmed in a context that helped her recalibrate when the strain of intermediation became overwhelming and better sustain equilibrium across the many worlds she inhabited. In this way, psychological resilience emerged not through distancing from Native identity or community responsibilities, but through integrating culturally grounded coping processes into students’ broader efforts to navigate and balance multiple systems.

Socially, finding and creating balance was supported by cultural mentors who modeled what it meant to hold the middle without losing connection to themselves or their communities. Caregivers and AI/AN faculty demonstrated how to navigate intersecting communities, responsibilities, and institutional demands while remaining grounded in Indigenous values, identity, and relational accountability. Forest described his father as the person who had “always made sure to keep me in culture,” providing guidance not only about cultural practices and protocol, but also about how to respond when others questioned his legitimacy or stirred feelings of doubt. When Forest struggled with these experiences, his father helped him reframe them through culturally grounded reminders and questions about whether his grandmother would be proud of how he was carrying himself. Native faculty extended this mentorship within the university. In this way, Forest’s father modeled how psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources could be braided together while navigating the strain of multiple systems.

**Commented [AM64]:** From Jim: This is a great finding - can you talk more about how this type of intervention/service could help our AI/AN students? Is there any other research out there that has looked at this strategy, and if so what have they found? And if they haven't found what you have, what a great thing to add to the literature.

**Commented [MF65R64]:** Tried to address this in implications as well as tie back to literature.

**Commented [JJM66]:** Again, this is at the individual level - I guess we need Emma and Julia to comment on this first.

Students described AI/AN faculty as essential because they understood both “how academia operates” and “what that’s like, how to do it,” offering forms of academic and relational guidance that most non-Native advisors could not. Faculty helped students negotiate academic systems, balance scholar, activist, and community roles, work through conflict within Native spaces, and connect to opportunities without feeling like they had to compromise their cultural values. Together, these relationships helped students imagine a version of success that did not require assimilation, but instead integrated Indigenous identity with institutional participation. These findings align with prior scholarship emphasizing the importance of Native mentorship and culturally grounded guidance in helping AI/AN students navigate higher education while maintaining connection to Indigenous identity and community responsibilities (Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017).

Culturally, resilience emerged through cultivating flexible forms of cultural continuity within the university environment. Guided by mentors, therapy, and their own experimentation, students learned to reshape cultural practices so they could continue to serve as sources of grounding, emotional regulation, and identity affirmation within everyday campus life. Hope described inheriting from her family a practice of sustaining culture “right underneath their noses” despite colonial restrictions. On campus, she carried this forward by embedding “little ceremonies” into her everyday life, learning to pray in ways that others “see it, they just don’t recognize it,” and translating Apsáalooke values into practices that could be enacted within the university. Forest similarly described finding small, accessible ways to “intentionally make contact with medicines” throughout the day. These practices allowed students to remain connected to culture without needing to recreate home exactly as it existed elsewhere.

Embodying Vizenor’s (1993) concept of “survivance,” students did not view this adaptation as a

departure from culture, but as culture itself: an active process of carrying Indigenous ways of being into an environment not designed for them. In this sense, cultural practices functioned as what Masten (2001) describes as “ordinary magic,” everyday routines and skills that helped students adapt, persevere, and maintain equilibrium in the face of ongoing stress.

Commented [JJM67]: good - more of this.

Socially and culturally, students also transformed the emotional labor of intermediation into a source of reciprocity, meaning, and collective care through teaching, mentoring, and creating spaces of belonging for other Native students. These acts of cultural mentorship allowed students not only to sustain their own balance within the institution, but also to help other Native students navigate the same tensions between Native and non-Native worlds. In this way, resilience extended beyond individual coping and became relational and community-centered, grounded in reciprocal responsibility and the transmission of cultural knowledge, values, and support. Consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of “giving back” as a motivating value of AI/AN students (Salis Reyes, 2019), students described supporting Native peers and future generations of AI/AN students as one of the most meaningful and sustaining sources of resilience. While sustaining relational ties to home often centered on maintaining connection to and eventually giving back to home communities, finding and creating balance frequently involved investing in and strengthening Native student communities within the university itself. Through these efforts, students transformed cultural continuity and reciprocity into practices of mentorship, advocacy, and community-building within the PWI environment.

Commented [AM68]: From Jim: can you talk more about this from a larger perspective - how do universities instill practices or events that offer "give back" opportunities. What have other researchers found? (If they have found anything, or if these research has even been addressed)

Commented [MF69R68]: I'm not quite sure how to do this - if I should do this here or in the implication?

Forest described teaching culture classes as transforming his intermediary role from a source of burden into one of purpose, enjoyment, and connection. Similarly, Hope described teaching beadwork and organizing Native community events as guided by Apsáalooke kinship values of “dressing your loved ones” and “equipping them,” allowing her to both express her

“distinct Apsáalooke identity” and “translate Apsáalooke kinship into my community here,” ensuring others do not have to “leave campus in order to get that foundation” as she once did.

Commented [JJM70]: all individual level

Through these reciprocal acts of teaching, mentoring, and creating spaces of belonging, urban Native students transformed the strain of being caught in the middle into opportunities for connection, cultural continuity, and collective care, forging balance for themselves and others. By helping other Native students feel more connected and supported within the institution, students also reduced their own sense of isolation and role strain. In alignment with Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing, this social/cultural resilience resource promoted students’ flourishing by cultivating positive emotions through pride and cultural connection, deep engagement through the flow-like experience of participating in and sharing traditions, relationships through reciprocity and kinship, meaning through contributing to present and future generations of Native students, and accomplishment through creating visible institutional change. In this way, cultural mentorship functioned simultaneously as a social and cultural resilience resource, allowing students not only to endure the tensions of intermediation, but to transform them into opportunities for collective flourishing.

When considered together, finding and creating balance functioned as a resilience process through which students transformed the same mesosystemic relationships that generated intercessory strain into sources of support, meaning, and wellbeing. Rather than relying on any single resource, students cultivated balance by weaving together psychological, social, and cultural resources that helped them navigate competing responsibilities while sustaining cultural continuity across their multiple communities they inhabited. From a dual-factor model perspective, these resilience resources appeared to increase wellbeing even as students continued to manage significant distress, helping them move toward the “symptomatic but content”

quadrant characterized by strong relationships, meaning, engagement, and cultural connection despite ongoing anxiety, exhaustion, or role strain (Seligman, 2011; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

In response to disconnection, resilience emerged through processes of **reconnection and restoration**. Because students' relationships to Native culture and community were shaped by disrupted, limited, or fragmented access to cultural knowledge, community relationships, and family histories across ecological systems, resilience often involved rebuilding pathways to culture, community, family history, and identity across these same systems. Within the psychosociocultural framework, the desire to reconnect itself functioned as a powerful psychological resource: an internalized belief that connection, belonging, and cultural restoration were both possible and worthwhile. This yearning provided direction, meaning, and hope, motivating students to move toward Native spaces and relationships even when they felt anxious, illegitimate, or "not Native enough."

In response to the stress of disconnection, resilience emerged through processes of **reconnection and restoration**. Because this stress process was rooted in experiences of cultural disconnection, resilience often involved restoring connection to Native culture, community, and identity. Within the psychosociocultural framework, the desire to reconnect itself functioned as a powerful psychological resource: an internalized belief that reconnection was both possible and worthwhile. Students described a deep longing to reclaim cultural ties disrupted by assimilation, adoption, fragmented family histories, or limited exposure to Native community. This yearning provided direction, meaning, and hope, motivating students to move toward Native spaces and relationships even when they felt anxious, illegitimate, or "not Native enough."

Psychologically, reconnection became a source of forward momentum that countered withdrawal and self-doubt. Rather than allowing feelings of cultural imposterism to lead to

avoidance, students reframed anxiety as part of a larger journey toward belonging. Joy, for example, described resilience as repeatedly choosing to step toward Native community even when she felt scared or unqualified, ultimately asking herself, “Am I going to let my self-doubt win or am I going to let my curiosity in a potential future win?” In this way, reconnecting students’ motivation to reconnect functioned not only as a source of meaning and purpose, but also as a psychological coping resource that facilitated cognitive reframing and approach-oriented coping in response to anxiety, uncertainty, and fears of rejection. Rather than becoming immobilized by self-doubt, students actively rescripted identity-related fears into opportunities for growth, learning, and future belonging. Emerging AI/AN resilience research similarly suggests that cognitive reappraisal and emotion regulation processes may function as important protective psychological resilience resources within Indigenous populations (John-Henderson et al., 2023; McCullen et al., 2022).

Similarly, Grace described carrying a “deep desire” to “unearth” the Native identity she felt had long been ignored. For Grace, this yearning transformed uncertainty and self-doubt into purpose and provided a sense of responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of Native community. In this way, reconnection and restoration were driven not only by longing for culture and community, but by active efforts to pursue them. Their motivation to reconnect encouraged them to attend cultural events, join Native organizations, pursue tribal enrollment, take AIS courses, and seek relationships with other Native students. Consistent with psychosociocultural applications within AI/AN populations, this internal drive functioned as a psychological resilience resource by fostering coping efficacy, motivation, self-beliefs, meaning, and purpose that helped students persist through distress and uncertainty (Thompson et al., 2013).

Culturally, reconnection and restoration were supported by Native spaces that reflected and validated their unique identities and experiences of reconnection. Because their primary stressor centered on disconnection from Native identity, resilience depended upon encountering campus spaces that expanded understandings of Native belonging. Students described how heterogeneous Native communities that included a mixture of reconnecting, urban, and more enculturated students helped reduce cultural imposterism by making visible that there are multiple ways of being Native. Grace described feeling sustained by being around peers who were also “in a similar space of reconnecting with their identity and exploring,” while Lily explained that “we’re all at different points in learning our culture.”

Seeing themselves represented within the broader Native landscape helped students move from feeling like outsiders looking in to imagining that their own “in-between” identities also had a place. In this way, representation itself functioned as a cultural resilience resource by making reconnecting pathways of Native identity visible and legitimate within the campus environment. These culturally congruent and socially affirming spaces also created greater alignment between reconnecting students’ identities and their university environment, a process associated with AI/AN students’ psychosocial adjustment (Gloria & Robinson, 2001). By validating reconnecting students’ belonging within Native community, these spaces allowed them to reconstruct identity in ways that felt authentic rather than deficient. In seeing their reconnecting identities reflected and affirmed within the broader Native community, students also appeared to develop a stronger sense of collective self-esteem, or a more positive psychological evaluation of themselves as members of the Native community (Thompson et al., 2013). Prior PSC-oriented research identified collective self-esteem as an important psychological factor associated with AI/AN college students’ persistence and psychosocial

adjustment (Thompson et al., 2013). The present findings extend this work by illustrating how culturally congruent and socially affirming Native spaces may foster collective self-esteem among individuals navigating reconnection specifically by transforming feelings of cultural inadequacy and imposterism into perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and value within Native community. In this way, psychological, social, and cultural resilience operated together and mutually reinforced one another.

These students also restored connection through active participation in cultural practices and Native community life on campus. Engagement in cultural practices was a common resilience resource across participants; however, within the resilience process of reconnection, cultural participation often occurred through more formal campus-sponsored opportunities such as the PNWU powwows, beading workshops, round dances, ribbon skirt making, Native student groups, and AIS courses. These activities provided more than opportunities to learn; they allowed students to experience culture as lived, relational, and accessible rather than distant. These findings align with broader research suggesting that participation in cultural practices, traditions, and Native community life can support identity development, belonging, and wellbeing among AI/AN individuals, particularly among urban Native populations navigating disrupted access to tribal community and cultural continuity (Kenyon et al., 2011; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Whitbeck et al., 2001). Lily described beading, dancing, and sewing in campus spaces as ways to “fall back onto that culture” and “be myself,” while Joy reflected that engaging in powwow planning, Native events, and cultural workshops helped her “get more confident in my identity and who I am.” Through participation, reconnecting students gradually transformed Native identity from something they longed for into something they could actively inhabit. These experiences strengthened belonging, reduced anxiety and imposterism, and fostered the positive

**Commented [AM71]:** Make sure the results or take aways from this study are discussed. Could you integrate this study more throughout the discussion section?

**Commented [MF72R71]:** I think I was able to do this for this finding (#3) - let me know if you think I should incorporate more.

emotions, relationships, meaning, and sense of accomplishment associated with wellbeing (Seligman, 2011).

Taken together, reconnection and restoration mirrored the structure of disconnection. Just as disrupted cultural and community continuity contributed to feelings of cultural absence, uncertainty, and imposterism, resilience emerged through efforts to rebuild connection across these same ecological systems. The desire to reconnect provided the psychological motivation to keep moving toward Native community, while culturally affirming spaces, practices, and relationships transformed that motivation into belonging. From a dual-factor model of mental health lens (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), these resilience resources appeared to shift students away from vulnerable or distressed states characterized by anxiety, self-doubt, and diminished belonging and toward greater wellbeing through enhanced confidence, connection, meaning, and positive identity development. In this way, this resilience process bridged disruptions of cultural continuity not by recovering a fixed or complete identity, but by creating new pathways of connection that supported movement from disconnection toward restoration and wellbeing.

Collectively, these findings suggest that resilience was not experienced as a collection of discrete psychological, social, or cultural resources, but as an integrated and culturally embedded process through which students sustained relationships, cultivated meaning, and strengthened cultural connections in ways that supported wellbeing within the PWI environment. Such findings resonate with Indigenous perspectives of resilience that emphasize the ways wellbeing is cultivated through connections to relationships, culture, community, identity, and systems of meaning (Kirmayer et al., 2011). This helps explain why resilience resources were often difficult to separate into discrete psychological, social, and cultural categories, as many derived their

protective value through the ways these domains operated together within students' broader ecological contexts.

### **Implications for Professional Practice**

The findings of this study have important implications for professionals seeking to support the mental health and wellbeing of AI/AN students in higher education. Because students' experiences of stress and resilience varied according to their relationships to Native culture and community and ecological contexts, effective support must be flexible, relational, and responsive to the full spectrum of AI/AN student experiences.

#### ***For Higher Education Professionals***

A central implication of this study is that the heterogeneity of AI/AN students reflects a parallel diversity of student stressors, mental health needs, and resilience resources and therefore requires a corresponding heterogeneity of supports on PWI campuses. Students described markedly different experiences of stress and resilience depending on their relationships with Native culture and community. Consequently, PWIs cannot assume that a single model of Native student support will meet all students' needs. Instead, higher education professionals should intentionally recognize the range of Indigenous identities within AI/AN student communities and ensure that campus spaces, programming, and leadership structures mirror this diversity.

One way to accomplish this is to increase representation of differing student experiences within Native student leadership and decision-making structures. Several students suggested that Native student organizations and campus advisory groups would benefit from more intentional representation of students from varying tribal, geographic, community, and cultural backgrounds, inclusive of the breadth of heterogeneous Native identities captured in this study. Although many student organizations currently rely on elected leadership models, students who grew up

**Commented [AM73]:** (this is from Alexa)-- you could potential collapse this section and integrate your content here throughout your above sections. This entire session is describe what Jim asks for throughout, which is 1) tie backs to any already established literature and 2) action steps for higher ed institutions to take based on the results you found.

**Commented [JJM74]:** good - this is well done and important to bring up. A one-size fits all model will not work.

immersed within reservation communities described feeling underrepresented in campus Native spaces and therefore less likely to engage consistently in these communities or pursue leadership roles. Intentionally broadening representation may be one means of reducing the alienation that these students described while helping campus Native spaces more fully reflect the range of Indigeneity within the AI/AN student community.

Commented [JJM75]: good suggestion

The findings further suggest that Native student spaces would benefit from structured opportunities for ongoing dialogue about heterogeneity, representation, and sources of community tension. Students consistently described the challenges related to differences in tribal affiliation, cultural knowledge and experiences, family and community relationships, and expressions of Indigeneity. These tensions surfaced differently across the stress processes identified in this study. Experiences of dislocation were associated with concerns about cultural knowledge stewardship, representation, and sharing cultural teachings within university settings. Experiences of disconnection were often accompanied by cultural imposterism and fears of not being "Native enough." Experiences of holding the middle were characterized by the strain of mediating between Native students, tribal communities, and institutional expectations. These tensions echo macrolevel social and cultural discourses related to authenticity, legitimacy, and cultural knowledge stewardship, raising fraught questions of who is recognized as Native, how cultural belonging is defined, and what constitutes appropriate ways of practicing, representing, and sharing cultural knowledge. Within campus spaces, students must negotiate these broader tensions while also making decisions about who should teach, learn, or access specific traditions, how reconnecting or mixed-heritage individuals should engage, and when cultural knowledge should be protected versus shared in this educational setting.

When left to be managed solely by students, these tensions amplified existing stress processes in different ways. For some students, they contributed to withdrawal from Native spaces; for others, they reinforced cultural imposterism and belonging uncertainty, impeding fully participation; and for others, they increased the strain associated with intermediary and advocacy roles. Institutions could facilitate regular dialogue within Native student organizations and Native campus spaces through talking or sharing circles led by trusted Native faculty, staff, or elders, which may help students collectively address issues of representation, community conflict, cultural protocol, and inclusion while reducing the burden on students to navigate these tensions alone.

The study also highlights the need for greater institutional support for the additional responsibilities placed on AI/AN college students. Native student organizations often function not merely as extracurricular clubs but as cultural communities responsible for organizing major events, representing Native students to the university, supporting identity development, and mediating relationships between the institution and tribal communities. These responsibilities frequently fall on a small number of students, particularly students in leadership roles, who described significant emotional fatigue associated with mediating across multiple systems. To reduce this burden, universities should consider expanding professional support roles dedicated to campus-based Native student communities, including additional advisors, grant writers, or staff positions to support large-scale events such as powwows, assist with fundraising and logistics, and broker relationships between universities and tribal communities.

Students described how invested AI/AN faculty, Native student center staff, and the campus Native therapist often take on responsibilities beyond their formal roles to fill these gaps. Although students viewed this support as invaluable, it may also create inequities by placing

disproportionate demands on a small number of AI/AN professionals. More intentional staffing may allow Native students to participate in leadership and community-building without carrying the full weight of these complex institutional and cultural responsibilities.

Relatedly, institutions should move beyond symbolic forms of inclusion toward more reciprocal and relational support for Native students and communities. Participants consistently described frustration with performative efforts they perceived as “virtue signaling,” including land acknowledgements, diversity campaigns, or inclusion statements that were not accompanied by visible action. These symbolic efforts were often paired with the perception that Native-centered programming and spaces were marginalized or “pushed aside” rather than integrated into the broader university life. Higher education professionals should therefore ensure institutional commitments to Native students are supported through meaningful investments, including increased funding for Native programs, partnerships with local AIAN organizations and tribal communities, expanded staffing, and long-term collaboration with AI/AN faculty, staff, and student leaders. For many students, reciprocity and relationship, not simply recognition, determined whether institutional efforts felt genuine and supportive.

The findings also suggest a need for more intentional transition supports for AI/AN students entering the university. Students experiencing the stress of dislocation described the transition to college not simply as an academic adjustment, but as a profound loss of proximity to family, tribal community, cultural practices, and familiar ways of life. Participants highlighted the importance of relationships with individuals who shared similar sociocultural and ecological backgrounds, suggesting that institutions should consider developing peer, faculty, and staff mentoring structures organized around students’ spectrum of relationships to Native culture and community. Students experiencing the stress of dislocation may benefit from mentors from

similar tribal, reservation, or rural backgrounds; students navigating intercessory tensions may benefit from mentors who understand the challenges of bicultural roles and negotiating multiple communities; and students experiencing the stress of cultural disconnection may benefit from relationships that support cultural learning and identity exploration in affirming ways.

The present findings also suggest that strengthening psychological resilience resources may represent one avenue for developing more flexible and contextually responsive approaches to supporting AI/AN student wellbeing within PWI settings. Existing higher education models and support programs for AI/AN undergraduates have primarily sought to strengthen students' social and cultural resources on campus through strategies such as building reciprocal relationships between universities and tribal communities, creating family-like support systems on campus, facilitating sustained connection to home communities, and expanding culturally grounded mentorship and peer support networks within the university environment (e.g., Guillory, 2009; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Waterman, 2012). Consistent with this literature, social and cultural resources remained foundational sources of resilience across the present study. Moreover, these findings also highlight the important role of psychological resilience resources, including cognitive reframing, positive self-beliefs, meaning-making, behavioral coping, and self-efficacy processes, which participants consistently relied upon to manage stress across all stress processes (dislocation, holding the middle, disconnection), regulate emotions, and sustain meaning within the PWI environment. These psychological resources did not operate independently from social and cultural supports but were repeatedly intertwined with them through culturally grounded coping practices, community relationships, mentorship, spirituality, and identity affirmation.

**Commented [JJM76]:** is it "did" or "do" - seems like you are talking about current or future tense - so I was expecting language to reflect that.

**Commented [MF77R76]:** I think because it is reflecting study findings I used past tense - I don't know if I can generalize beyond the 7 of them.

These findings may be especially relevant in light of evidence that AI/AN college students underutilize campus mental health services and often encounter barriers to accessing culturally relevant care (Lipson et al., 2022; Stiffman et al., 2003), a students experiencing dislocation described in the present study. Because all students across stress processes drew upon psychological resources in distinct but overlapping ways, a skills-based, prevention-focused resilience course may offer an accessible alternative pathway for supporting students' complete mental health. Embedding evidence-based emotional health skills into college coursework has been shown to be an effective strategy for strengthening undergraduates' psychological resilience and improving student wellbeing (Chugani et al., 2023). Existing prevention-focused interventions with AI/AN adolescents further suggest that culturally responsive skills-based approaches promoting emotion regulation, stress management, coping, communication, and problem-solving may strengthen wellbeing and reduce distress (Allen et al., 2018; LaFromboise et al., 1996; Muehlenkamp et al., 2009), and emerging research indicates such approaches may be culturally acceptable for Indigenous university students (Beshai et al., 2023).

Students across the present study frequently described culturally informed psychological coping processes, including tying personal motivation to Indigenous relational values of reciprocity and using storytelling, teachings, spirituality, and community narratives to reinterpret distressing experiences and sustain meaning. These findings suggest that prevention-focused coursework may be especially meaningful when emotional health content directly incorporates Indigenous knowledge, values, cultural practices, and spiritual traditions as legitimate and valuable approaches to wellbeing.

Taken together, these findings suggest that prevention-oriented approaches aimed at strengthening psychological resilience resources may complement existing social- and cultural-

Commented [JJM78]: Perfect!!! This is what I was looking for

focused models of AI/AN student support when integrated with culturally affirming and relational supports. At the same time, the present findings suggest that efforts to strengthen psychological resilience resources should occur alongside broader institutional efforts to cultivate Native campus environments that foster belonging, representation, mentorship, and cultural affirmation. Because students' coping processes were deeply embedded within these relational and cultural contexts, institutions must also attend to how Native campus spaces are structured, supported, and experienced by students across differing identity pathways and relationships to community.

A final important implication is the need to expand and Indigenize existing campus mental health supports for AI/AN undergraduates. Participants generally described Indigenized mental health services as among the most valuable supports available, yet access to these services was uneven, with students engaged in intercessory roles more likely to connect with the campus Native therapist through existing relationships stemming from their work organizing Native student programming. Students experiencing greater dislocation from both Native-centered spaces and the broader campus community expressed interest in such services but described difficulty accessing them due to limited availability, lack of knowledge about how to connect, or discomfort with unfamiliar systems. Higher education professionals should therefore expand the availability of Indigenous mental health providers and ensure services are delivered in culturally grounded ways that reflect Indigenous understandings of healing, relationality, and community, providing practitioners sufficient flexibility to practice in culturally congruent ways rather than requiring them to adapt Indigenous approaches within rigid Western service structures. Participants specifically suggested the need for more equitable access, longer-term care, and stronger integration of mental health services within Native student spaces and

programming. Expanding these services beyond students already very connected to Native campus spaces may be especially important for reaching students who are more isolated or less likely to access existing forms of support.

### ***For School Psychologists***

The findings of this study also have important implications for school psychologists and mental health professionals working with AI/AN students. A central implication is that understanding AI/AN students' mental health requires attention to the broader ecological, sociocultural, and historical contexts shaping their lived experiences, acknowledging the significant heterogeneity within the AI/AN student population. Students described distress as emerging not from individual challenges alone, but from the interaction of multiple systems, including campus climate, institutional policies, peer relationships, cultural identity, family expectations, and broader histories of colonialism and marginalization. Thus, approaching AI/AN students as a singular demographic category risks flattening the diverse pathways through which students experience both vulnerability and resilience.

Accordingly, school psychologists should adopt an ecological approach to case conceptualization that attends to both stressors and resilience resources across multiple levels of students' environments, moving beyond deficit-oriented understandings and recognizing how students' wellbeing is shaped by the interaction of psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources within their unique ecological contexts. The psychosociocultural (PSC) framework is particularly useful for identifying the fuller spectrum of protective factors students draw upon, including emotional and cognitive coping skills, peer and family support, connection to and representation within Native community, cultural identity, spirituality, and engagement in traditional practices. Importantly, this framework highlights that cultural relevance is not limited

to participation in cultural practices; students' cultural identities and ecological positions also shape the social and psychological resources they use to cope. Understanding these connections provides greater direction for how evidence-based practices may be culturally enhanced to better fit AI/AN students' lived experiences and guide more meaningful intervention.

The study further suggests that culturally responsive assessment practices are essential when working with AI/AN students. Participants' stories demonstrated that the same mental health concerns may carry different meanings depending on students' cultural identities, histories, and relationships to community. Assessment therefore needs to extend beyond standard psychological measures or symptom-based approaches to include qualitative interviewing, collaborative discussion, and culturally relevant measures that illuminate students' broader sociocultural contexts. The validated measures used in this study related to enculturation, cultural identity, historical loss, and acculturation stress complemented students' narratives and provided additional contextual insight, offering useful additions to school psychologists' assessment practices when used alongside culturally responsive conversations.

The findings additionally underscore the importance of integrating cultural strengths into intervention. Participants consistently emphasized Indigenous cultural practices, relationships, values, and worldviews as critical sources of resilience across psychological, social, and cultural dimensions, suggesting interventions are likely to be more acceptable and effective when they explicitly incorporate these strengths rather than treat culture as peripheral.

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School psychologists should consider how existing approaches can be flexibly modified to best align with AI/AN students' lived experiences and cultural frameworks. For example, emotion management skills, cognitive restructuring, or mindfulness practices may be strengthened by directly connecting them to students' cultural teachings, storytelling traditions,

spirituality, relationships with family and community, or tribal understandings of wellbeing in ways that reflect students' differing relationships to Native culture and community. Importantly, this goes beyond “Indigenous-coded” content, in which students are left to infer connections between evidence-based practices and their own cultural knowledge. Rather, the findings suggest the importance of making these links explicit and direct, as exemplified by Honoring Children, Mending the Circle which overtly integrates Indigenous understandings of healing and wellbeing with trauma-focused cognitive behavioral strategies (BigFoot & Schmidt, 2010).

Finally, the findings support an expanded role for school psychologists within higher education, particularly in helping institutions shift from primarily reactionary models of mental health care toward layered systems that include prevention and early intervention. By incorporating a dual-factor model of mental health, the present study was able to capture not only the presence or absence of psychological distress, but also students’ experiences of wellbeing and languishing across ecological contexts, an approach that prior research suggests provides a more comprehensive understanding of college student functioning than symptom-focused models alone (Eklund et al., 2011).

Importantly, students’ narratives suggested that the impact of ecological stressors was often broader than what may be identified through traditional assessment focused primarily on symptoms of psychopathology. For example, students experiencing the stress of dislocation frequently described persistent feelings of disconnection, loss, reduced motivation, and diminished meaning even when they were not experiencing acute episodes of depression or anxiety. Similarly, students experiencing all three stress processes appeared to move between differing dual-factor mental health profiles over time, suggesting that periods of languishing and diminished wellbeing may precede or coexist alongside more severe psychological distress.

These findings underscore the importance of prevention, early identification, and intervention efforts aimed not only at reducing psychopathology, but also at strengthening wellbeing, belonging, meaning, and connectedness before distress escalates. Consistent with the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework widely used in primary and secondary school settings, higher education institutions may benefit from a broader continuum of care that includes universal prevention, targeted interventions for students at elevated risk, and more intensive services for students experiencing significant distress (Bruns et al., 2016). School psychologists are uniquely positioned to support this shift given their expertise in prevention science, social-emotional learning, MTSS, and systems-level intervention. In collaboration with Native faculty, staff, and student organizations, they may play an important role in designing, implementing, and evaluating culturally responsive prevention efforts that are accessible, relational, and culturally meaningful for AI/AN students.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings highlight several important directions for future research that extend both the theoretical and applied implications for understanding AI/AN student mental health in higher education. These directions underscore the need for continued inquiry that is ecologically informed, culturally grounded, and attentive to the heterogeneity of Native student experiences.

The findings raise critical questions about campus-based Native student spaces and organizations, which are often assumed to be uniformly supportive but were described by participants as sites of both resilience and stress. Several participants reported experiencing underrepresentation, microaggressions, cultural misunderstandings, and discomfort related to the sharing of cultural knowledge outside of tribe-specific protocols within these spaces. More broadly, participants described navigating tensions related to the differing relationships to Native

culture and community, including differences in tribal affiliation, enculturation, relationships to tribal communities, and cultural identity, that can create subtle hierarchies or feelings of exclusion when certain forms of Indigeneity are perceived as more visible or valued than others across contexts (e.g. being “not Native enough” or “too Native”). Interpersonal conflict sometimes arose over who gets to lead or represent the group and how cultural protocols should be upheld, contributing to identity strain, relational fatigue, and disengagement from spaces intended to foster belonging. Future research should examine these intra-community dynamics, including how colonial constructs such as authenticity, representation, and knowledge ownership shape interactions within Native student spaces. Such work is critical for developing strategies to support more inclusive, responsive, and culturally grounded campus environments that reflect the diversity of Native student identities.

The findings also point to the need for research that more fully captures the heterogeneity of AI/AN student experiences, particularly among students who are not engaged in Native student organizations or campus-based cultural spaces. Because participants were recruited through Native campus communities, the perspectives of students who are more socially isolated, less engaged in programming, or less likely to seek support remain underexplored. These students may experience distinct stress and resilience processes and rely on alternative sources of support, including off-campus or community-based supports. Future research should intentionally include these populations to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape of AI/AN students in higher education and to identify strategies for reaching and supporting students who may be at increased risk of distress.

An important direction for future research involves expanding access to culturally grounded mental health services within university settings. Several participants identified

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engagement with a campus-based Native therapist as a key source of psychological resilience, particularly when relationships were established through non-clinical interactions prior to formal therapy, highlighting the importance of relationality in facilitating help-seeking behaviors and suggesting that culturally grounded mental health services may be more accessible when embedded within existing Native student spaces and programming. Other students described challenges accessing these same services due to limited availability and uncertainty about how to initiate culturally centered care, indicating inequities in access to critical resources. Future research should explore how Indigenized mental health services can be expanded and sustained to ensure broader accessibility, including examining models for integrating clinical services with community-based engagement in ways that align with Indigenous relational frameworks.

Future research should examine AI/AN students' perceptions of prevention-focused, skills-based resilience interventions as a pathway for protecting and promoting AI/AN student mental health within PWI contexts. Students in this study described extensive use of psychological resilience resources, including cognitive and behavioral coping strategies, emotion-focused coping, and intentional self-regulation, suggesting that many AI/AN students are already actively developing and applying internal resilience skills in response to the demands on PWI campuses. Prior research has shown that integrating emotional health skills from evidence-based treatment modalities into academic coursework can improve mental health outcomes and sense of belonging (Akeman et al., 2020; Chugani et al., 2023; Liao, 2022), suggesting future studies should explore AI/AN students' perceptions of the relevance, accessibility, and cultural congruence of for-credit resilience courses designed to build socioemotional learning competencies, as well as how such courses may be effectively designed, implemented, and evaluated within PWI settings.

Given the substantial variation in stress experiences and resilience processes identified across students, skills-based prevention coursework may provide flexible emotional health strategies that students can adapt to their own cultural identities and lived contexts. This work must remain attentive to the risk of placing responsibility on AI/AN students to individually manage distress produced by structurally oppressive institutional environments. Accordingly, prevention-focused resilience interventions should be examined not as substitutes for institutional change, but as one potential component of broader, multilevel efforts to support AI/AN student wellbeing within higher education.

Taken together, these directions underscore the importance of advancing research that not only documents AI/AN students' experiences but also actively contributes to the development of culturally grounded, contextually responsive, and community-engaged approaches to supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

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### **Limitations**

Several limitations provide important context for interpreting the findings. First, the researcher's positionality as a non-Native scholar represents an important methodological limitation. The researcher neither identifies as Native nor is embedded within the AI/AN student community at PNWU. Because this study asked participants to share personal and emotionally vulnerable experiences related to stress, belonging, and mental health, authentic relationships and trust are essential to the depth and authenticity of the stories shared. As an outsider to this community, the researcher could not draw upon these relationships organically, which may have constrained the richness of students' stories or influenced what students felt comfortable sharing.

Recognizing this limitation, the study design intentionally scaffolded opportunities to build relationship and rapport prior to formal data collection through prolonged engagement with

the student cohort, informal meetings during recruitment, and collaboration with AI/AN student organizations and faculty. Sharing circles were also co-facilitated by an AI/AN psychologist whose lived experience and cultural knowledge supported culturally grounded facilitation and helped cultivate trust with participants. While these strategies strengthened relational accountability within the research process, the researcher's positionality remains an important factor shaping both the research relationships and the interpretation of students' stories.

A second limitation relates to the scope and composition of the participant sample. The study included seven AI/AN undergraduate participants, a sample size appropriate for narrative inquiry but limited in representing the full diversity of AI/AN student experiences across tribes, regions, and cultural identities. The cohort was predominantly female, with one participant identifying as a trans man and no cisgender men represented, meaning the findings may not fully capture Native male students' perspectives or how gender intersects with stress and resilience processes in the PWI context. Additionally, two students were from the same reservation and had known one another since childhood, which may have shaped how students described their experiences and influenced the themes that emerged during analysis.

Relatedly, participants were recruited primarily through AI/AN student organizations and campus programming, and all students were familiar with one another prior to the study. While this familiarity contributed to the relational foundation necessary for sharing circles, it may also have influenced the collective narratives generated during group discussions. Themes identified in the analysis may reflect the dynamics and perspectives of this particular network of Native students. Because participants were already engaged in Native campus spaces, they may have had access to community support not available to more socially isolated AI/AN students or those

less connected to Native student programming. As a result, the lived experiences of students who are further removed from these campus networks may not be fully represented in the findings.

The geographic and institutional context also limits transferability. Participants were primarily from tribes and communities within the Pacific Northwest, including Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Alaska. Findings may not reflect the experiences of AI/AN students at institutions in other regions or those from significantly different tribal and cultural contexts. The study was conducted at a single large, predominantly White public research university in a metropolitan area, and institutional characteristics such as campus climate, Indigenous student spaces, and regional Native representation may shape students' experiences in ways that differ from other higher education contexts.

The recruitment process introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as participants volunteered for a study focused on Native student mental health and resilience, potentially indicating greater comfort discussing these topics or stronger campus engagement. Students experiencing more severe distress, those less connected to Native campus spaces and resources, or those less comfortable sharing personal experiences may have been less likely to participate.

The interpretive nature of narrative analysis represents an additional limitation, as interpretation is inherently shaped by the researcher's analytic lens and theoretical frameworks (Riessman, 2008). Although credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, member checking, collaborative analysis, and peer debriefing, the interpretations presented represent one possible reading of participants' stories rather than definitive representations of their experiences.

Taken together, these limitations highlight the contextual nature of the findings. Rather than offering generalizable conclusions about all AI/AN college students, this study provides a

focused exploration of the narratives of a specific group of Native students attending a predominantly White university in the Pacific Northwest. Consistent with Indigenous and qualitative research approaches that emphasize contextual and relational knowledge, these findings should be understood as situated insights emerging from the relationships and stories shared within this particular community, contributing to a growing body of scholarship aimed at strengthening understanding and support for AI/AN student mental health and wellbeing in higher education.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that AI/AN undergraduates' experiences of stress, resilience, mental health, and wellbeing within a PWI are deeply shaped by their relationships to Native culture and community, sociohistorical contexts, and ecological environments. Students encountered distinct constellations of stressors and drew upon varied psychological, social, and cultural resilience resources in response, underscoring the importance of moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches toward supports responsive to the heterogeneity of AI/AN student experiences. Ultimately, protecting and promoting AI/AN student wellbeing in higher education requires not only expanding access to campus-based mental health supports, but also creating university environments that honor all Native identities, sustain connection to culture and community, and foster conditions in which students can move beyond surviving toward thriving.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### Greeting

- Project facilitator/researcher will re-introduce herself (as this will not be the first-time meeting), re-identify her role as a mental health professional, UW Resilience Lab seed grant project-facilitator, and student researcher, and share her connection to AI/AN communities as well as the current project
- Project facilitator/researcher will express gratitude for the individual's participation in the current project and associated study as well as review the overarching purpose of the study to better understand the unique risk and protective factors shaping the mental health of AI/AN undergraduates and improve campus-based mental health services
- Project facilitator/researcher will review participating AI/AN student's informed consent for having their project interview be used in the proposed study and remind the individual that they are able to leave at any point they no longer wish to continue with the educational project and associated study

1. I'd like to start by learning more about your story. Tell me about yourself as a person. For instance, where do you come from and how would you describe your background? How do you identify yourself?

**Probes as needed:** *Where are you from? Where did you grow up? What tribe are you? Tell me more about your community – how would you describe it (i.e. urban, suburban, rural, on or off reservation)? How were you involved with your community? How did you engage with your culture in your community? Tell me more about your family. Who do you hold as your family? How would you describe your relationship with your family. Tell me more about your culture – how important is it to you and your family? How do you practice or engage with your AI/AN culture? How important is your culture to your family? How would you describe your spiritual beliefs and practices? How important are these beliefs and practices to you?*

2. To begin, how would you describe your overall experience as an American Indian/Alaska Native student at PNWU? [Listen for: overall tone of description, is it positive? Negative? What emotions does the student express in the telling?]

**Probes as needed:** *What made you want to attend PNWU? What are you studying and/or planning to major in? What has college been like so far for you? What has the transition been like? In what ways has your experience at PNWU met your expectations? In what ways has it not? How have you been involved in campus activities and student groups at PNWU? Who would you say is your community on campus? Tell me about your friends at PNWU. What has been rewarding about attending PNWU? How did you feel during and after that experience? What have been some of the challenges of attending PNWU? How did you feel during and after that experience? How do you see your identity as an American Indian/Alaska Native student shaping your experience on campus?*

3. I'd like to learn more about what "resilience" means to you. Tell me about a time you practiced or demonstrated resilience as a student on this campus. [Listen: How does the

informant define “resilience” or exemplify “resilient” i.e. do they describe it as trait? state of being? actions, practices, or skills?]

**Probes as needed:** What qualities or actions do you believe contributed to your “resilience” in that moment? (i.e. actions, practices, skills, attributes, etc) How do you see your own meaning of “resilience” as connected to your culture? Relationships? Community? Prior experiences? Personal skills, strengths, and beliefs?

4. One definition of resilience is the ability to adapt, persevere, and thrive in the face of challenges and views resilience as a set of resources (i.e. skills, strategies, routines, practices, relationships, etc.) that can be strengthened and developed. How do you relate to this definition, if at all?

**Probes as needed:** What resilience resources initially come to mind as important to you?

5. I’m wondering about some of the resources you use to cope with challenges or adversity. What personal beliefs, strategies, or practices do you use to help yourself cope with setbacks or stressful situations?

**Probes as needed:** How do you perceive your ability to cope with adversity overall? What coping strategies do you use to cope with stressful situations? What personal values or beliefs give you a sense of strength or guidance during times of difficulty or distress? How do these beliefs, strategies, practices, or values help manage stress and unwanted heavy emotions (like anxiety, sadness, grief, anger, frustration, guilt, or shame) in difficult situations? How do they increase your sense of well-being? How did you develop these beliefs, strategies, practices, or values? Where did they come from? How are these beliefs, strategies, practices, or values connected to your cultural identity? To your spiritual identity? To your family or community?

6. I’m also wondering about some of the social supports you use to navigate difficult situations. In what ways do you think your relationships and connections with others help you cope with stressful situations?

**Probes as needed:** Who do you reach out to when you’re having a difficult time? How do they meaningfully support you manage stress or cope with difficulties? What does their help or support look and feel like? How does their support help the way you think, feel, and act in the face of stress? In what ways do these connections improve your wellbeing? Please share any examples of times you turned to friends, family, school personnel, community members, or elders when you were struggling with a stressful situation or heavy emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, or grief. How is your use of social support for navigated challenges connected to your cultural identity?

7. Indigenous communities have identified culture as a profound source of their resilience. Describe how you draw upon your culture (be it traditions, practices, routines, knowledge, beliefs, or ways of being, etc.) to cope with stressful or emotionally distressing situations you experience. [Alternatives ways of asking: Please give me a few examples of how you might

draw upon your culture to foster resilience when you are experiencing adversities? **or** Please share examples of how you have relied on your culture to cope when you have experienced unwanted negative emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, grief, shame, or embarrassment?]

**Probes as needed:** How does engaging in these cultural practices reduce your stress or distress in difficult situations? How does engaging in these cultural practices increase your sense of wellbeing? How did you learn to use cultural knowledge, practices, routines, etc. to cope with stressful situations? Where did they come from and how do you continue to develop them? How are these practices, routines, and teachings connected to your spiritual identity? To your family or community?

8. I'd like to learn more about what mental health means to you. What comes to mind when you hear the words "mental health" and "wellbeing"? What does it mean to you to be mentally healthy?

**Probes as needed:** Where did this perception of mental health come from? What influenced your understanding?

9. College is a challenging time for many students and a growing number of college students report struggling with mental health problems. How would you describe your overall mental health on this campus?

**Probes as needed:** What do you see as contributing to [insert students' description of their perceived mental health]? Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health disorder (e.g. depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.)? What symptoms related to [insert students' description of any distress] trouble you most often? Do you ever have periods where you feel down, depressed, or hopeless? Share with me what that looks like (assess frequency, duration, intensity). Do you ever struggle with managing feelings of anxiety or worry? Share with me what that looks like (assess frequency, duration, intensity of symptoms). How does your mental health impact your daily life and functioning socially, academically, and personally? Have you ever had thoughts of suicide or self-harm? [assess frequency, intensity, duration, intent to die, specificity of plan, access to means; be prepared to refer to services] Have you ever used counseling services on or off campus? How was that experience?

10. How do you foster a sense of wellbeing and belonging as a student on this campus? [Listen for: cultural, spiritual, social, familial, psychological resources, who is involved in supporting well-being]

**Probe as needed:** How do you promote and protect your mental health on this campus? What practices, routines, self-care habits, skills, resources do you use to stay healthy or balanced, feel good, or foster meaningful connection as a student at PNWU? How might these practices/skills/habits/routines [modify noun based on informant's responses] connect to your culture?

11. In what ways has the university environment supported your mental health and wellbeing on campus? In what ways has it contributed to any distress that you feel or mental health challenges that you have experienced? [*Listen for: psychological, social, cultural, environmental factors*]

**Probe as needed:** *In what ways have the university's systems or structures been supportive? In what ways have the institutional systems and/or structures contributed to stress or distress you experience? In what ways has the campus climate or culture been supportive? In what ways has the campus climate or culture contributed to stress or distress you experience? In what ways have faculty at PNWU have been supportive or involved in your college experience? In what ways have faculty contributed to stress or distress that you feel? In what ways have peers been supportive? In what ways have peers contributed to stress or distress that you feel? What kind of thoughts or emotions do these experiences evoke?*

12. I'd like to talk about some of the specific sources of stress you experience on this campus as an AI/AN student on a predominantly white campus. Can you describe some of the typical situations that lead you to experience emotional distress or discomfort as an AI/AN student on the PNWU campus? [*Listen for: affective and behavioral responses to stressors*]

**Probe as needed:** *Can you describe some of the typical situations that lead you to experience unwanted negative emotions (such as anger, frustration, sadness, grief, shame, anxiety, etc.) as a PNWU student? Can you describe some of the typical situations that lead you to experience unwanted negative thinking (such as "I'm a failure," "I don't belong," or thoughts of suicide, etc.) as a PNWU student? Assess the frequency, intensity, and duration of stressors and associated negative thoughts and emotions. How do these difficult situations impact your mental health and wellbeing? How do these sources of stress impact your sense of connection and belonging at PNWU?*

13. How would you compare your experience at PNWU with the experiences of non-Native students at PNWU? Tell me about a time you felt you were treated differently on campus because of your identity as an AI/AN student. [*Listen for: affective (i.e. fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, sadness, etc.) and behavioral responses (frequency, intensity, duration) and key descriptors: discrimination, microaggression, invalidation, victimization, bullying; follow up with questions to clarify who was involved (faculty, peers, community members, etc.), what happened, and any follow up*]

**Probe as needed:** *How do these experiences impact your mental health and wellbeing? How do these experiences impact your sense of belonging at UW? How would you describe your interactions with faculty and staff at PNWU? How would you describe your interactions with other students at PNWU? How do these interactions impact you and your mental health?*

14. In what ways, if any, does the university environment and campus culture make you feel like you belong at PNWU as an AI/AN student? In what ways does the university environment and campus culture make you feel like you and/or AI/AN students don't belong at PNWU?

**Probe as needed:** How does the PNWU campus climate support or encourage your cultural identity and engagement in your cultural practices? In what ways does it make it harder to? How do these different experiences impact your mental health and wellbeing? What messages do you hear about AI/AN communities and/or AI/AN college students at PNWU? How or where do you hear them (e.g. curriculum, classes, student groups, interactions with faculty and/or peers, etc.)? How do those messages affect you?

15. How does attending PNWU impact your relationships beyond the PNWU campus? In what ways has going to PNWU affected your interactions with your family, friends at home, and tribal community?

**Probes as needed:** Please describe the ways in which your family has been part of your college experience. How does their involvement impact your mental health and wellbeing? Please describe any difficulties you've faced in your family relationships while attending PNWU. How do these challenges impact your mental health and wellbeing? Please describe the ways in which your friends at home have been part of your college experience. How does their involvement impact your mental health and wellbeing? Please describe any difficulties you've faced within your relationships with friends at home while attending PNWU. How do these challenges impact your mental health and wellbeing? What about your tribal community, how have you maintained relationships with your community while at college? How do these relationships impact your mental health and wellbeing? What challenges to staying connected have you faced? How do these challenges impact your mental health and wellbeing?

16. There are some sources of stress that have roots in the past but continue to be felt as daily lived experiences. I'd like to better understand your experiences of historical and cultural losses and ongoing threats to tribal sovereignty. What experiences of historical losses has your family or community experienced or continue to experience? How do these past experiences impact you today?

**Probe as needed:** How often do you think about historical or cultural losses – land, language, elders/family to boarding school, etc. – experienced by AI/AN communities? How do these thoughts and feelings impact your mental wellbeing? Your sense of belonging at PNWU?

17. There is a body of research that has highlighted the disproportionate challenges that AI/AN communities are facing as a result of ongoing colonization and systemic inequities. These challenges include higher rates of poverty, mental and physical health, violence and victimization, substance misuse, death, etc. Have you and/or your relations have encountered any of these challenges? How have they impacted you, your family, friends, and your community?

**Probe as needed:** How do these experiences impact your mental health and wellbeing? How do these experiences impact feelings of connection with other PNWU students and belonging on the PNWU campus?

18. You shared a great deal about some of your sources of resilience and how you use these resources to overcome challenges and protect your mental health. Walk me through how you might use the cultural traditions, practices, routines, knowledge, and beliefs you mentioned previously to cope with some of the specific stressful or distressing situations you face at PNWU.

***Probe as needed:*** *What resilience practices do you use to cope with these stressors on campus? How often do you use these? What negative or unhelpful coping strategies do you find yourself using*

19. Over the course of our conversation, we've talked about some of the ways in which you feel the university has established and maintained systems that negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of its AI/AN students. In what ways do you believe the university can better support the mental health needs of its AI/AN students?

***Probe as needed:*** *What campus-based mental health resources have you utilized (e.g. counseling center workshops/programs, campus-based counseling, therapy at the health service center, peer counseling, etc.) What broader campus-based student support programming have you used (e.g. AI/AN student support groups, academic advising programming, first generation support programming, minority student programming, etc.)? If you had a mental health concern, where would you seek support? Who would you seek it from?*

20. What do you think of a for-credit "resilience" course aimed to teach skills to manage stress and enhance well-being?

***Probe as needed:*** *Have you or someone you know taken (partially or to completion) EDUC 215? If so, what was your (or their) experience? Do you think a skills-based curriculum might be a helpful way of supporting students' mental health and wellbeing on campus? Why or why not? What about for supporting AI/AN students' mental health? Why or why not?*

## Appendix B: Background Survey

**Contact information** (*email, phone number, social media handle, or other way to contact*):

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Which of the following ethnic/cultural identities do you most identify with:**

- a. White/Caucasian ethnicity
- b. American Indian/Alaska Native
- c. Black American/African American
- d. Asian American
- e. Latino/a/x
- f. Biracial or Multiracial (please list: \_\_\_\_\_)
- g. Other (please list \_\_\_\_\_)

**Are you an enrolled citizen of a tribal nation?**

- ☐ Yes → Please indicate which tribe: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ No, but I identify as having ancestry with this tribe: \_\_\_\_\_

**Where were you born?**

- ☐ Reservation, American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Rural area, American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Urban area, American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Urban or rural area, near American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Urban or rural area, away from American Indian/Alaska Native community

**Which of the following BEST describes the contact you have had with American Indian/Alaska Native communities?**

- ☐ Raised for 1 year or more on the reservation
- ☐ Raised for 1 year or more in other American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Raised for less than 1 year on the reservation
- ☐ Raised for less than 1 year in other American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Frequent visits to the reservation or other American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Occasional visits to the reservation or other American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ Occasional communications with people on the reservation or other American Indian/Alaska Native community
- ☐ No exposure or communications with people on the reservation or American Indian/Alaska Native community

**What is your current standing at the University of Washington?**

- ☐ Freshman  
☐ Sophomore  
☐ Junior  
☐ Senior

**Are you a transfer student?**

- ☐ Yes → from a tribal college or university (TCU)
- ☐ Yes → from another predominantly white college or university
- ☐ No

*Please rate how often you engage in the activities at the University of Washington listed below. Check the box that best represents the frequency of your participation for each item.*

|    | How often do you engage in the following activities at the <u>University of Washington</u> : | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Once a Quarter | Once a Year |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|----------------|-------------|
| a. | Attend a Native student organization meeting                                                 |       |        |         |                |             |
| b. | Attend an event organized by a Native student organization                                   |       |        |         |                |             |
| c. | Meet with an academic advisor for Native students                                            |       |        |         |                |             |
| d. | Meet with a Native faculty member                                                            |       |        |         |                |             |
| e. | Receive support at the Intellectual House                                                    |       |        |         |                |             |
| f. | Participate in the Pow-Wow at UW                                                             |       |        |         |                |             |
| g. | Attend the Pow-wow at UW                                                                     |       |        |         |                |             |
| h. | Attend an event organized by a Native student organization                                   |       |        |         |                |             |

*Please answer each item as accurately as you can about your thoughts, feelings, and participation in some important Native and non-Native aspects of life. There are no right or wrong answers, please share your some of your honest opinions and experiences. Adapted from the American Indian Biculturalism Inventory – Northern Plains Version (McDonald, Ross, & Rose, 2015).*

1. In general, how comfortable are you around White people?

1                      2                      3                      4  
(No Comfort)                      (Complete Comfort)

2. How comfortable are you in encouraging your (or related) children to learn and practice American Indian ways?

|              |   |   |                    |
|--------------|---|---|--------------------|
| 1            | 2 | 3 | 4                  |
| (No Comfort) |   |   | (Complete Comfort) |

3. How strongly do you identify with American Indian culture?

- |                     |   |   |                    |
|---------------------|---|---|--------------------|
| 1                   | 2 | 3 | 4                  |
| (No Identification) |   |   | (Greatly Identify) |
4. How strongly do you identify with White culture?
- |                     |   |   |                    |
|---------------------|---|---|--------------------|
| 1                   | 2 | 3 | 4                  |
| (No Identification) |   |   | (Greatly Identify) |
5. How often do you think in an American Indian language?
- |                                                    |   |   |                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                  | 2 | 3 | 4                                                     |
| (I rarely or never<br>think in an Indian language) |   |   | (Very often or always think in<br>an Indian language) |
6. How confident are you in White/Western medicine (doctors in hospitals)?
- |                                                     |   |   |                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                   | 2 | 3 | 4                                                              |
| (No confidence in<br>White/Western medical doctors) |   |   | (Have complete confidence in<br>White/Western medical doctors) |
7. How confident are you in traditional Native/American Indian medicine and ceremonies?
- |                                       |   |   |                                                |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                     | 2 | 3 | 4                                              |
| (No confidence in<br>Native medicine) |   |   | (Have very strong faith in<br>Native medicine) |
8. How much is your way of thinking of “family” American Indian (cousins same as brothers and sisters, aunts/uncles as parents, everyone is related)?
- |                                                                                            |   |   |                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                                                          | 2 | 3 | 4                                                                      |
| (My idea of “family” is<br>mostly “White,” my relatives/friends<br>are just what they are) |   |   | (My idea of “family” is very strongly<br>Indian: we are ALL relatives) |
9. How often do you attend traditional American Indian ceremonies (i.e Canoe Journeys, Sweat lodge, Pipe Ceremonies, Sundance, Shaky Tent, Vision Quest)?
- |                                       |   |   |                                            |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------|
| 1                                     | 2 | 3 | 4                                          |
| (I never attend<br>Indian ceremonies) |   |   | (I attend Indian<br>ceremonies frequently) |
10. How often do you attend more White, Christian religious ceremonies (Christenings, Baptisms, Church services)?
- |                           |   |   |                                |
|---------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| 1                         | 2 | 3 | 4                              |
| (I never attend Christian |   |   | (I attend Christian ceremonies |

ceremonies)

frequently)

11. How often do you participate in Indian dancing (Grass, Fancy, Jingle-Dress, Round, etc.)?

|                                        |   |   |                                             |
|----------------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------------------|
| 1                                      | 2 | 3 | 4                                           |
| (I never participate in Indian dances) |   |   | (I participate in Indian dances frequently) |

12. To how many social organizations do you belong where most of the members are Indian?

|                                       |   |   |                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                     | 2 | 3 | 4                                                                |
| (I belong to no Indian organizations) |   |   | (Most of the organizations I belong to are Indian organizations) |

13. How often do you attend White celebrations (i.e. White ethnic festivals, parades, etc.)?

|                                     |   |   |                                          |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|------------------------------------------|
| 1                                   | 2 | 3 | 4                                        |
| (I never attend White celebrations) |   |   | (I attend White celebrations frequently) |

14. How often do you attend Indian celebrations (i.e. Pow-Wows, Potlatch, Bone Games, Wacipis, Hand-games)?

|                                      |   |                                           |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------------|---|
| 1                                    | 2 | 3                                         | 4 |
| (I never attend Indian celebrations) |   | (I attend Indian celebrations frequently) |   |

15. How many of your family speak an American Indian language?

|                                  |   |   |                                  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| 1                                | 2 | 3 | 4                                |
| (None of my family speak Indian) |   |   | (Most of my family speak Indian) |

16. How much do you speak an American Indian language?

|                                  |   |   |                                  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| 1                                | 2 | 3 | 4                                |
| (I rarely or never speak Indian) |   |   | (I often or always speak Indian) |

17. To what extent do members of your family have Indian first or last names (like “Wambli” or “Kills-in-Water”)?

|                             |   |   |                                 |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| 1                           | 2 | 3 | 4                               |
| (None of have Indian names) |   |   | (Most or all have Indian names) |

18. How often do you talk about White news and culture in your daily conversation?

|                                                                           |   |   |                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4                                                                              |
| (I never engage in topics of conversation about Whites and their culture) |   |   | (I engage in topics of conversation about Whites and their culture frequently) |

19. How often do you talk about Indian topics, news and culture in your daily conversations?

|                                                  |   |   |                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                | 2 | 3 | 4                                                |
| (I never discuss Indian news or cultural issues) |   |   | (I discuss Indian news or cultural issues daily) |

20. How much do you believe in any Indian Creation Stories (how Earth/People/Animals were made?)

|                                           |   |   |                                            |
|-------------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------|
| 1                                         | 2 | 3 | 4                                          |
| (I don't believe in any of those stories) |   |   | (I very strongly believe in those stories) |

21. How much do you believe in any non-Indian Creation Stories (Adam/Eve, Garden of Eden, etc?)

|                                           |   |   |                                            |
|-------------------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------------|
| 1                                         | 2 | 3 | 4                                          |
| (I don't believe in any of those stories) |   |   | (I very strongly believe in those stories) |

22. In general, much do you believe “*Success*” best means when an **individual** wins or achieves something?

|                                                             |   |   |                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                           | 2 | 3 | 4                                                                                       |
| (I totally believe success is best achieved by individuals) |   |   | (I totally believe success is best achieved by groups ( <i>i.e. families, tribes</i> )) |

23. How important is your European or White American heritage and history to you?

|                        |   |   |                  |
|------------------------|---|---|------------------|
| 1                      | 2 | 3 | 4                |
| (Not at all important) |   |   | (Very important) |

In general, how much do you participate in the following activities: circle the number that best represents your participation for each item. Adapted from the American Indian Enculturation Scale (Winderowd et al., 2008).

|                                                  |            |   |   |              |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------|---|---|--------------|---|---|---|---|
| ANSWERS:                                         | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|                                                  | Not at all |   |   | a great deal |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Attend Indian church                          | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. Attend Indian ceremony                        | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. Choose Indian activity before others          | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. Socialize with Indians or have Indian friends | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. Use Indian medicine                           | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. Seek help from Elders                         | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. Attend pow-wows                               | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. Sing Indian songs                             | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. Participate in Indian prayers                 | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. Write Indian stories                         | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. Eat or cook Indian food                      | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. Do Indian art                                | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 13. Use or know the Indian language              | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 14. Attend Indian dances                         | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 15. Know or participate in tribal politics       | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 16. Know or share Indian history                 | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 17. Work in Indian communities/population        | 0          | 1 | 2 | 3            | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

The items below reflect historical and cultural losses that tribal communities have experienced as a result of colonization. Please answer how often you think about the following losses. Check the box that best represents your experience. Questions comprise the Historical Loss Scale (Whitbeck et al., 2002).

|    | How often do you <u>think</u> about the following losses:            | Several times a day | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Yearly or only at special times | Never | Don't Know |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------|--------|---------|---------------------------------|-------|------------|
| a. | The loss of our land                                                 |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| b. | The loss of our language                                             |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| c. | Losing our traditional spiritual ways                                |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| d. | The loss of our family ties because of boarding schools              |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| e. | The loss of families from the reservation to government relocation   |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| f. | The loss of self respect from poor treatment by government officials |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| g. | The loss of trust in whites from broken treaties                     |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| h. | Losing our culture                                                   |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |
| i. | The losses from the effects of alcoholism on our people              |                     |       |        |         |                                 |       |            |

|    |                                                              |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| j. | Loss of respect by our children and grandchildren for elders |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| k. | Loss of our people through early death                       |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| l. | Loss of respect by our children for traditional ways         |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Historical Loss Scale (Whitbeck et al., 2002)

The statements below are common emotional responses that AI/AN individuals may experience when thinking about the historical losses listed above. Please read each statement and consider your personal experiences. Indicate how often you experience the following emotional responses when thinking about these historical losses. For each item, please check the box that best describes your experience. Questions are from the Historical Loss and Associated Symptoms Scale (Whitebeck et al., 2002).

|    | When you think about historical losses, how often you experience the following emotional responses? | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|
| a. | Sadness or depression                                                                               |       |        |           |       |        |
| b. | Anger                                                                                               |       |        |           |       |        |
| c. | Like you are remembering these losses when you don't want to                                        |       |        |           |       |        |
| d. | Anxiety or nervousness                                                                              |       |        |           |       |        |
| e. | Uncomfortable around white people when you think of these losses                                    |       |        |           |       |        |
| f. | Shame when you think of these losses                                                                |       |        |           |       |        |
| g. | A sense of weakness or helplessness                                                                 |       |        |           |       |        |
| h. | A loss of concentration                                                                             |       |        |           |       |        |
| i. | Bad dreams or nightmares                                                                            |       |        |           |       |        |
| j. | Feel isolated or distant from other people when you think of these losses                           |       |        |           |       |        |
| k. | A loss of sleep                                                                                     |       |        |           |       |        |
| l. | Feel the need to drink or take drugs when you think of these losses                                 |       |        |           |       |        |
| m. | Rage                                                                                                |       |        |           |       |        |
| n. | Fearful or distrustful of the intentions of white people                                            |       |        |           |       |        |
| o. | There is no point in thinking about the future                                                      |       |        |           |       |        |
| p. | Like it is happening again                                                                          |       |        |           |       |        |
| q. | Like avoiding places or people that remind you of these losses                                      |       |        |           |       |        |

Historical Loss Associated Symptoms Scale (Whitbeck et al. 2002)

The statements below are issues concerning involvement in your tribal or Native community and in the majority (white) culture. Some people experience worry or anxiety about the following issues. Please read each statement and consider your personal feelings. For each statement, select one number on the scale printed below that best reflects the degree to which you experience

I experience worry or anxiety about:

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## Appendix C: Sharing Circles Protocol

### *First Sharing Circle: Seeking to “Hear” Students’ Stories of Stress and Resilience*

#### *Greeting*

- *Each co-facilitator will introduce themselves, identify their role as mental health professionals, project facilitators, and researchers, and share their connection to AI/AN communities as well as the UW Resilience Lab seed grant project and associated study*
- *Co-facilitators will express gratitude for students’ participation in the current project as well as review the overarching purpose of the study to better understand the unique risk and protective factors shaping the mental health of AI/AN undergraduates and improve campus-based mental health services*
- *Co-facilitators will invite participants to introduce themselves in a manner of students’ choosing (e.g. in English and/or their traditional language, by sharing their tribe and relations, by sharing their reason for participating in this project, by sharing their hopes for the project, etc.)*

#### *Sharing Circle Process*

- *Co-facilitators will review participating AI/AN students’ informed consent and remind students that they are able to leave at any point they no longer wish to continue with the educational project and associated study*
- *Co-facilitators will orient the 7 participating students to the sharing circle process, letting them know that the circle will likely run for 2-3 hours but will go longer if at students’ request or interest to ensure that students have the time and space to share the fullness of their experiences*
- *Co-facilitators will briefly provide an overview of the purpose of sharing circles as a space that promotes the mutual sharing of ideas and honors the values of equality, respect of one another and each other’s stories, non-judgmental listening, and building connection*
- *Co-facilitators will share that it is common that a sacred object is passed from speaker to speaker and will offer the use of a hand-carved canoe paddle rattle that was gifted to the one of the co-facilitators by the Quileute tribe as a symbol of the journey students are participating in in the sharing circle*
- *Student participants will be reminded that when a speaker is holding the paddle, the speaker is not to be interrupted and the group must listen silently and nonjudgmentally until the speaker has finished*
- *Co-facilitators will remind student participants that the stories they share in the circle will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that they will be invited to review the transcriptions for accuracy*

#### *Circle Ceremony*

- *AI/AN co-facilitator will offer smudge to student participants to help center and prepare participants for the conversations and stories to be shared*
- *Co-facilitators will then offer a small gift to each student participant as a representation of respect, gratitude, and reciprocity for students and their stories*
- *Following, co-facilitators will then join the circle*

### Guiding Questions

1. How would you describe your overall mental health and wellbeing as a college student on this campus?
  - a. **Probes:** Describe what it looks and feels like when you see your mental health as flourishing or balanced. Describe what it looks and feels like when you believe your mental health is struggling. How often do you experience positive emotions and/or a sense of satisfaction about your life? Why do you think that is? How often do you feel overwhelmed by uncomfortable emotions (e.g. anxiety, worry, anger, sadness, loneliness, shame, etc.) or heavy thoughts? Why do you think that is? How do you think your mental health experiences connect to the experiences of other AI/AN college students on this campus? In what ways – positive and/or negative - would you say your mental health and wellbeing has changed since beginning college at PNWU? Why?
2. Describe the ways you promote your wellbeing and mental health on the PNWU campus.
  - a. **Probes:** What personal practices, self-care habits, positive routines, or strategies do you use to feel good or a sense of wellbeing? How do you engage with your relations or use your social support to feel good or promote your wellbeing? In what ways do you draw upon your culture to feel good or promote your mental wellness? In what ways do you drawn upon your spiritual or traditional ways to promote your mental health? Where did you learn about these different practices or resources (i.e skills, strategies, practices, routines, connections, spaces, etc.) and how did you develop them over time?
3. Share about the sources of stress and distress you experience on and beyond this campus and describe how these stressors are influenced by your identity as an AI/AN student on a predominantly white campus.
  - a. **Probes:** What are the most challenging, stressful, or hurtful aspects of being an AI/AN college student at PNWU? How are these challenges connected to your campus environment? To your interactions with peers and faculty at PNWU? To your relationships with friends and family? To your community? To your cultural identity? To historical losses and sources of stress AI/AN people have endured? Some research has described AI/AN students as having to “walk in two worlds.” How does this relate to your experience? How do your experiences of these sources of stress impact your mental health and sense of belonging on this campus? How have the sources of stress you experience changed since beginning at PNWU? How have they changed over the course of your time at PNWU?
4. Describe how you practice resilience on the PNWU campus, in other words, how you cope with these stressors to care for and protect your mental health.
  - a. **Probes:** How do you alleviate distress related to these sources of stress? What coping strategies do you use to manage stress and intense emotions? How do you rely on your relationships and social supports to cope with stress and heavy thoughts and emotions related to these sources of stress? In what ways do you draw upon your cultural knowledge, practices, or traditions to manage and its impact on your mental health?? In what ways do you draw upon your spiritual beliefs and practices to manage stress and its impact on your mental health?

5. Describe how the university currently supports student mental health and wellbeing and how it could improve these support services for AI/AN undergraduates.
  - a. **Probe:** *What spaces or programs on campus support your mental health and wellbeing? How do you engage with those spaces or programs? What AI/AN-specific programs, spaces, groups, or services do you engage with on campus? How do these support your mental health and wellbeing? What campus-based mental health services (e.g. counseling center workshops, groups, or programs, individual therapy at Hall Health or the counseling center, etc.) have you used, if any? How would you describe your experience with those services? What do you see as the barriers to or gaps in services for students struggling with mental health at PNWU? How do these services support AI/AN college students and where do they miss the mark?*

#### *Closing*

- Co-facilitators will invite student participants to share final reflections on the stories they shared and hear during the circle
- Co-facilitators will express gratitude for student participants' time and story contributions and will offer students additional opportunities to check in with facilitators as needed
- Additional mental health resources will be shared with students in a handout

#### **Second Sharing Circle:**

##### *Greeting*

- Co-facilitators will welcome back student participants
- Co-facilitators will express gratitude for students' continued participation in the current project as well as review the overall purpose of the study as well as the specific focus of exploring their perspective of the value of a wellness and resilience course as a pathway to supporting AI/AN student mental health
- Co-facilitators will invite participants to reconnect with their cohort of student participants in a manner of students' choosing (e.g. identifying how they're feeling today/this week, sharing something they've been thinking about since the previous circle, etc. )

##### *Sharing Circle Process*

- Facilitators will again review participating AI/AN students' informed consent and remind students that they are able to leave at any point they no longer wish to continue with the educational project and associated study
- Co-facilitators will reorient participating students to the sharing circle process, reminding them that the circle will likely run for 2 hours but will go longer at students' request
- Co-facilitators will briefly review the purpose of sharing circles as a space that promotes the mutual sharing of ideas and honors the values of equality, respect of one another and each other's stories, non-judgmental listening, and building connection
- Co-facilitators will again offer the use of a hand-carved canoe paddle rattle gifted to the one of the co-facilitators by the Quileute tribe as the sacred object for speaking in the sharing circle

- *Co-facilitators will remind student participants that the stories they share in the circle will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that they will be invited to review the transcriptions for accuracy*

#### *Circle Ceremony*

- *Smudge will be offered to student participants to help center and prepare participants for the conversations and stories to be shared*
- *A small gift will also be offered to each student participant as a representation of respect, gratitude, and reciprocity for students and their stories*

#### *Follow Up:*

- *Students will be oriented to the questions the previous sharing circle left off on and students will be invited to share their stories and reflections that had been cut short due to time constraints*

#### *Additional Guiding Questions:*

1. PNWU offers a resilience and wellness course that teaches skills for emotional health to support students' in developing a "resilience toolkit." The course includes skills from therapy treatments that target improving focus, coping with stress and adversity, managing intense emotions, and building and maintaining healthy relationships. What are your initial thoughts about a course focused on teaching emotional health skills to build resilience and promote wellbeing?
  - ***Probe:*** *Would you enroll in a skill-based wellness and resilience course designed to teach you skills for coping with stress and adversity, managing emotions, and building healthy relationships offered at PNWU? Why or why not? What aspects of a skills-based resilience course pique your curiosity or interest? What do you like or dislike about learning skills for emotional health in a for-credit course format?*
2. In what ways, if any, do you think a skills-based resilience course could be useful to you and/or other AI/AN students?
  - ***Probes as needed:*** *What skills, concepts, or strategies would you hope to learn from this type of course? What comes to mind as some of the potential benefits of a skills-based resilience course offered for credit? What might be some of the potential drawbacks?*
3. In our previous sharing circle, you shared stories of the unique sources of stress AI/AN college students experience on the PNWU campus and how these challenges impact student mental health. In what ways, if any, do you think a skills-based resilience class could support students in navigating these particular sources of stress?
  - ***Probe as needed:*** *How might a skills-based resilience course strengthen or add to some of the resilience resources you already use to address these challenges? How might a skills-based resilience course complement the mental health services*

*and AI/AN student programming already available on campus? How might this course address the gaps in supports and services you've previously discussed?*

4. What potential barriers or concerns, if any, might prevent you from enrolling in or fully participating in a for-credit skills-based resilience class?
  - **Probe as needed:** *Describe any aspects of a skills-based course that you think might not work for you and/or other AI/AN college students. What potential challenges do you foresee? What concerns, if any, do you have about how a skills-based resilience course might be taught on a predominantly white campus? What do you envision as potential limitations or drawbacks to a skills-based resilience course offered on campus?*
5. What would be your key recommendations to ensure a skills-based resilience course is most effective and useful for American Indian/Alaska Native students?
  - **Probes as needed:** *What considerations should be made to make this course more relevant and meaningful for AI/AN students? How important is it for the course to include culturally relevant practices within its curriculum? What would make you feel comfortable or supported in participating in such a course?*

#### *Closing*

- *Co-facilitators will invite student participants to share final reflections on the stories they shared and heard during the circle as well as any hopes they have for the outcomes of their story sharing*

Appendix D: Table 2A. Shared Stressors Across Study Cohort

| Shared Stressors                                                                | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Ecological System   | Established Research Base                                               |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Historical loss and cultural disruptions</b>                                 | Enduring impacts of intergenerational trauma, cultural loss, and disrupted knowledge transmission; students' reflections on loss, grief, and cultural discontinuity shaping present experiences                                              | <i>Chronosystem</i> | Fetter & Thompson, 2023; Tucker et al., 2016                            |
| <b>Continuity of colonial aims of higher education</b>                          | Experiences of existing in institutions “not built for m navigating environments perceived as reproducing colonial ideologies, assimilationist goals, and epistemi hierarchies                                                               |                     | Brayboy, 2004; Fish & Syed, 2018; Shotton et al., 2013                  |
| <b>Cultural incongruity and devaluation of Indigenous knowledge systems</b>     | Students described university norms and expectations as centered on Western, individualistic ways of learning and succeeding, often conflicting with Indigenous relational values and ways of knowing                                        | <i>Macrosystem</i>  | Brayboy, 2004; Fish & Syed, 2018; Thompson et al, 2013                  |
| <b>Epistemic Erasure</b>                                                        | Students described classroom content and discussions as often overlooking, misrepresenting, or treating Indigenous knowledge and peoples as historical or less valid, which contributed to feeling invisible or less than in academic spaces |                     | Brayboy, 2004; Grande, 2004; Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017 |
| <b>Deficit-based community narratives about Native communities and students</b> | Exposure to deficit-oriented narratives (e.g. negative statistics, stereotypes, and critiques of diversity initiatives) that students described as shaping their sense of belonging, self-perception, and expectations for the future        |                     | Fish & Syed, 2018; Mohatt et al., 2014                                  |
| <b>Native identity and authenticity discourse</b>                               | Exposure to ongoing debates about Indigenous identity, legitimacy, and knowledge (in community, on campus, and in academic spaces) that students describe as shaping how they understand their identity and sense of belonging               |                     | Garrouette, 2003; Lawrence, 2004                                        |

| Shared Stressors                                                                  | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Ecological System  | Established Research Base                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lack of authentic relationships with peers and faculty</b>                     | Students described difficulty forming meaningful, trusting relationships with peers and faculty, often feeling disconnected or misunderstood in everyday interactions                                                                                                   | <i>Microsystem</i> | Jackson et al., 2003; Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017                 |
| <b>Microaggressions</b>                                                           | Students described experiencing subtle but repeated comments, questions, or classroom dynamics that made them feel stereotyped, tokenized or invisible                                                                                                                  |                    | Cech et al., 2019; O’Keefe & Greenfield, 2019; Perry, 2002; Tachine et al., 2017 |
| <b>Academic pressure</b>                                                          | Students described stress related to workload, grades, and performance expectations, including feeling overwhelmed, burned out, or constantly needing to keep up                                                                                                        |                    | Beiter et al., 2015                                                              |
| <b>Academic Imposterism</b>                                                       | Students described questioning whether they belonged in academic spaces, worrying about being seen as a “diversity hire,” and feeling pressure to prove themselves academically                                                                                         |                    | Chakraverty, 2022                                                                |
| <b>Additional community and campus responsibilities placed on Native students</b> | Students described taking on additional roles within Native campus spaces (e.g. organizing events, mentoring peers, supporting programs) alongside academic demands                                                                                                     |                    | Padilla, 1994; Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017                        |
| <b>Competitive institutional structures</b>                                       | Students described grading systems, course policies, and competitive major admissions processes as emphasizing individual performance, scarcity, and competition that felt misaligned with their values                                                                 | <i>Exosystem</i>   | Brayboy, 2004; Shotton et al., 2013                                              |
| <b>Performative institutional support</b>                                         | Students described diversity efforts (e.g. land acknowledgements and campus programming) as “just saying words” or “virtue signaling,” and noted that Native-focused initiatives were often expected to represent the institution without consistent funding or support |                    | Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017                                       |

**Table 2A. Shared Resilience Resources Across Study Cohort**

| Shared Resilience Resource                          | Description                                                                                    | Psychosociocultural Dimension | Established Research Base                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>“Giving back” as motivation</b>                  | Purpose-driven coping rooted in contributing to Native communities                             | <i>Psychological</i>          | Brayboy et al., 2015; Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Salis Reyes, 2019       |
| <b>Cognitive coping strategies</b>                  |                                                                                                |                               |                                                                           |
| <i>Cognitive/meaning-making coping</i>              | Reframing, perspective-taking, and positive self-talk to manage stress                         |                               | John-Henderson et al., 2023; Wadsworth et al., 2004; Gone, 2013           |
| <i>Storytelling/narrative meaning making</i>        | Using stories to interpret experiences and support meaning-making                              |                               | Brave Heart 2003; Gone, 2013; Wexler, 2014                                |
| <i>Narratives of resilience and survivance</i>      | Reframing historical and ongoing adversity as strength, survival, and continuity               |                               | Kirmayer et al., 2011; 2014                                               |
| <i>Prayer/spiritual coping</i>                      | Personal spiritual practices for meaning-making, reframing, guidance, and emotional regulation | <i>Social</i>                 | Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; Shield, 2009    |
| <b>Emotion-focused coping strategies</b>            | Emotional awareness, acceptance, and nonjudgmental processing of distress                      |                               | Walters et al., 2002; Wexler, 2009; Allen et al., 2014                    |
| <b>Behavioral coping strategies</b>                 | Active coping strategies such as engagement in activities, persistence, and help-seeking       |                               | Walters et al., 2002; LaFromboise et al., 2006                            |
| <b>Supportive relationships with Native faculty</b> | Mentorship, validation, and culturally affirming guidance                                      |                               | Thomson et al., 2013; Shotton et al., 2013                                |
| <b>Supportive Native peer relationships</b>         | Shared identity-based emotional and social support from Native peers                           | <i>Social</i>                 | Flynn et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2003; Tachine et al., 2017            |
| <b>Campus-based kinship networks</b>                | Actively building relational networks grounded in Indigenous values                            |                               | Tachine et al., 2017                                                      |
| <b>Family support and encouragement</b>             | Emotional, cultural, and motivational support from family members                              |                               | Flynn et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2018; Thompson et al., 2013 |

| Shared Resilience Resource                                  | Description                                                                                                      | Psychosociocultural Dimension | Established Research Base                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Homegoing and connection to home communities</b>         | Returning home for cultural grounding, support, and restoration                                                  |                               | Waterman, 2012                                                                                                  |
| <b>Traditional cultural practices (e.g. arts, language)</b> | Engagement in cultural activities that affirm identity and promote wellbeing                                     |                               | Kading et al., 2015; Kenyon et al., 2011; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Shotton et al., 2013; Whitbeck et al., 2002 |
| <b>Traditional spiritual practices</b>                      | Ceremony, medicines, and relational spiritual practices supporting healing and balance                           |                               | HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; Gone, 2013; Walters et al., 2002                                                  |
| <b>Land-based practices/connecting to the natural world</b> | Engagement with land and nature as sources of grounding, identity, and healing                                   |                               | Allen et al., 2014; Gone, 2013, Redvers et al., 2020                                                            |
| <b>Indigenized spaces on campus:</b>                        |                                                                                                                  | <i>Cultural</i>               |                                                                                                                 |
| <i>Native cultural center on campus</i>                     | Campus-based Indigenous space fostering connection, refuge, and wellbeing                                        |                               | Tachine et al., 2017                                                                                            |
| <i>American Indian Studies (AIS) department</i>             | Academic space supporting identity, meaning, and culturally grounded learning                                    |                               | Huffman, 2011; Shotton et al., 2013                                                                             |
| <i>Campus-based Native cultural events</i>                  | Cultural gatherings that promote belonging, pride, representation, and community connection (e.g. campus powwow) |                               | Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017                                                                      |

**Appendix E: Table 1. Student Participants Ecological Context and Psychometric Measure Results**

| <b>Participants</b> | <b>Ecological Context</b><br>( <i>Chrono/macrosystems</i> )                                                                     | <b>Enculturation</b> ( <i>AIES</i> ) | <b>Cultural Orientation</b><br>( <i>AIBI-NP</i> )                                                                               | <b>Cultural Stress</b><br>( <i>CIDAQ</i> ) | <b>Historical Loss</b><br>( <i>AHLS/HCLASS</i> ) |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Sylvia</i>       | Raised on reservation embedded within family and cultural context that she described as “ingrained”                             | 100 – <i>High</i>                    | <i>Traditional</i> – moderately high Native identification, moderately low Euro-American identification (AICI 3.0 / EACI 1.6)   | 89 - <i>Moderate</i>                       | 31/40 - <i>Moderate</i>                          |
| <i>Virginia</i>     | Raised on reservation; strong family ties and increasing cultural connection through language, community, and family engagement | 77 – <i>Moderate</i>                 | <i>Traditional</i> - moderate Native identification, very low Euro-American identification (AICI 2.67 / EACI 1.5)               | 116 - <i>High</i>                          | 50/82 – <i>Very High/Extremely High</i>          |
| <i>Forest</i>       | Urban upbringing with relational ties to tribal community; engagement in urban Native community                                 | 104 – <i>High</i>                    | <i>Traditional</i> – moderately high Native identification, moderately low Euro-American Identification (AICI 3.26 / EACI 1.75) | 131 - <i>High</i>                          | 57/69 – <i>Very High/High</i>                    |
| <i>Hope</i>         | Urban upbringing with engagement in intertribal community; enculturated father and relational ties to tribal community          | NA                                   | <i>Traditional</i> – identified qualitatively through narrative, survey declined                                                | NA                                         | NA                                               |
| <i>Grace</i>        | Raised mostly away from Native community and family; described early stages of connecting to campus programs                    | 33 – <i>Low</i>                      | <i>Early Reconnecting</i> - moderately low Native identification, moderate Euro-American identification (AICI 1.87 / EACI 2.5)  | 79 - <i>Moderate</i>                       | 31/34 - <i>Moderate</i>                          |
| <i>Joy</i>          | Raised in predominantly White suburban setting with limited cultural access; Reconnecting through campus-based programs         | 53 – <i>Low–Moderate</i>             | <i>Reconnecting</i> - balanced identification, increasing Native identity (AICI 2.07 / EACI 2.13)                               | 65 – <i>Low/Moderate</i>                   | 39/37 – <i>Moderate</i>                          |
| <i>Lily</i>         | Raised in suburban setting near another reservation with limited cultural access; Reconnecting through campus-based program     | 52 – <i>Low–Moderate</i>             | <i>Reconnecting</i> - balanced identification, increasing Native identity (AICI 2.26 / EACI 2.23)                               | 96 – <i>Upper moderate</i>                 | 37/44 – <i>Moderate/High</i>                     |

**Appendix F: Table 3. Cross-Narrative Ecological Stress and Resilience Processes**

| <b>Ecological Relationship to Native Culture and Community</b>                                                | <b>Primary Stress Process</b>            | <b>Ecological Manifestations of Stressors</b>                                                                           | <b>Mental Health and Wellbeing Impacts</b>                                                                    | <b>Primary Resilience Process</b>  | <b>Resilience Resources</b><br>(Psychological, Social, Cultural)                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deep cultural and community continuity within geographically and relationally concentrated tribal communities | Dislocation                              | <i>Dislocation in the Chrono/Macrosystem:</i> Transition from cultural immersion to isolation                           | <i>Psychological Distress:</i><br>Experiences of depression, anxiety, panic, and stress-related responses     | Sustaining Relational Ties to Home | <i>Psychological:</i><br>Sense of motivation grounded in giving back to home community                                     |
|                                                                                                               |                                          | <i>Dislocation in the Mesosystem:</i><br>Tensions between home and campus values and expectations                       |                                                                                                               |                                    |                                                                                                                            |
|                                                                                                               |                                          | <i>Dislocation in the Microsystems:</i><br>Experiences of alienation in the classroom and Pan-Indigenous student spaces | <i>Diminished Wellbeing:</i><br>Feelings of being “stuck,” loss of direction or purpose                       |                                    | <i>Social/Cultural:</i><br>Building and maintaining friendships with peers who share similar home and cultural backgrounds |
| Sustaining cultural continuity across multiple Native and institutional communities                           | Holding the Middle/Intercessory tensions | <i>Holding the Middle in the Chrono/Macrosystem:</i><br>Insider/outsider tensions across cultural settings              | <i>Psychological Distress:</i><br>Experiences of depression, panic, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation | Finding and Creating Balance       | <i>Psychological:</i><br>Indigenized therapy and strategies for reframing and coping                                       |
|                                                                                                               |                                          | <i>Holding the Middle in the Mesosystem:</i><br>Intercessory roles bridging Native communities and the institution      |                                                                                                               |                                    | <i>Social:</i><br>Mentorship relationships that support balance                                                            |
|                                                                                                               |                                          | <i>Holding the Middle in the Microsystems:</i><br>Emotional labor associated with advocacy and representation           | <i>Diminished Wellbeing:</i><br>Exhaustion, burnout, emotional depletion                                      |                                    | <i>Cultural:</i><br>Cultural mentoring and adapting cultural practices to PWI contexts                                     |

| Ecological Relationship to Native Culture and Community                   | Primary Stress Process | Ecological Manifestations of Stressors                                                                                            | Mental Health and Wellbeing Impacts                                                              | Primary Resilience Process   | Resilience Resources (Psychological, Social, Cultural)                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reconnecting following disrupted or limited cultural and community access | Cultural Disconnection | <i>Cultural Disconnection in the Chrono/Macrosystem:</i> Disrupted or limited access to culture, community, and tribal connection | <i>Psychological Distress:</i> Social anxiety, negative self-talk, self-doubt, overwhelm         | Reconnection and Restoration | <i>Psychological:</i> Reconnection as a source of motivation and meaning            |
|                                                                           |                        | <i>Cultural Disconnection in the Mesosystem:</i> Tensions within family relationships related to culturally disconnection         | <i>Diminished Wellbeing:</i> Withdrawal, diminished belonging, loss of motivation and confidence |                              | <i>Social/Cultural:</i> Finding reflection and connection in heterogenous community |
|                                                                           |                        | <i>Cultural Disconnection in the Microsystems:</i> Experiences of cultural uncertainty and imposterism                            |                                                                                                  |                              |                                                                                     |

## Appendix G: Participant Consent Form

**Study Title:** Stories of Rez-ilience: Exploring American Indian/Alaska Native Undergraduates' Perspectives of Culturally Relevant Sources of Stress and Resilience and Pathways for Protecting and Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing at a Predominantly White Institution

**Principal Researcher:** Meaghan Ferrick | [mef07@uw.edu](mailto:mef07@uw.edu) | (914) 806-5741

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Jim Mazza | [mazza@uw.edu](mailto:mazza@uw.edu)

### RESEARCHER'S STATEMENT

I am inviting you to be in a research study that I am completing as part of my doctoral coursework at the University of Washington. The University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed the purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks of this study outlined below. The Institutional Review Board has approved this study.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research study participant, you can call the Institutional Review Board at (206) 543-0098 and/or review the [IRB Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\) webpage](#).

**Potential participants:** This is a consent form. It provides a summary of the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. If you decide that you would like to take part in this research study, you will sign this form to confirm your decision. I will provide you a copy of this form for your records.

- Please read the form carefully.
- You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I will ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.
- When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not.
- If you say 'Yes' now, you can still change your mind later.
- You can quit the study at anytime.
- You will not be penalized if you decide not to take part in the study or to quit the study later.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand the unique sources of stress American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) undergraduate students experience on a predominantly white college campus and how they perceive these stressors as impacting their mental health over the course of their college experience. This study also aims to understand the culturally-specific sources of resilience AI/AN undergraduates draw upon to protect and promote their mental health and well-being and how they build and develop these resources in the higher education setting. Finally, this study seeks to examine how AI/AN students perceive a skills-based prevention-focused curriculum as a potential pathway to fortify their psychological resilience resources to strengthen their ability to manage these stressors, reduce psychological distress, and cultivate well-being.

and belonging on campus. Through this study, I hope to elevate American Indian/Alaska Native students' voices, stories, and narratives in the national conversation about the mental health crisis in higher education and the scholarship informing university-based prevention and intervention efforts. I am interested in identifying new routes for supporting the development of AI/AN students' ability to thrive, not only as students while they are within the bounds of the academic institution, but also as graduates in their communities.

## PROCEDURES

As part of your participation in the UW Resilience Lab Seed Grant project titled "Co-Constructing a Culturally-Centered Resilience Curriculum for Indigenous Students," you will be asked to participate in an interview and two sharing circles. These activities are existing components of the project you are taking part in and are outlined in greater detail below. The current study is seeking your consent to use the transcripts of your interview and sharing circles for the purpose of the study outlined above.

The interview is expected to last 1.5 hours. For your convenience, privacy, and safety, I will ask you to suggest places that you are comfortable meeting in person on campus (e.g., Intellectual House meeting room, student lounge, library meeting room, etc.).

Each sharing circle will be comprised of the cohort of 7 American Indian/Alaska Native college students participating in the seed grant project, the project facilitator who is also the researcher, and an American Indian/Alaska Native psychologist who will serve as a co-facilitator guiding cultural protocol. Sharing circles are expected to run 2-3 hours but can be extended at the request of the project cohort students to ensure that participants' feel their stories have been fully shared. The location of the sharing circle will be collectively decided upon by the project cohort to ensure privacy, safety, and sense of comfort.

The interview will include questions asking you about the ways in which you cultivate resilience in the face of adversity and stress on campus. The interview will also include questions about the particular sources of stress you experience as an American Indian/Alaska Native undergraduate on a predominantly white campus and how you see these sources of stress impacting your mental health and well-being. Some of the questions I make ask you include:

- *How would you describe your overall mental health on this campus?*
- *In what ways has the university environment supported your mental health and wellbeing on campus? In what ways has it contributed to any distress that you feel or mental health challenges that you have experienced?*
- *Indigenous communities have identified culture as a profound source of their resilience. Describe how you draw upon your culture (be it traditions, practices, routines, knowledge, beliefs, or ways of being, etc.) to cope with stressful or emotionally distressing situations you experience.*

The first sharing circle will facilitate group discussion about the topics covered in the interview. The sharing circle will have an open conversational format that will flow around five guiding questions similar to those you were asked in the interview. The second sharing circle will facilitate group discussion in the same format as the first sharing circle after you and your cohort complete the 2-4 selected lessons from the skills-based wellness and resilience curriculum. This group discussion will also be guided by five open-ended prompts or questions that will ask you

and your cohort members about your experience and perspective of the curriculum you just experienced. Example questions you may be asked include: *How would you describe your overall experience of the wellness and resilience curriculum? What suggestions do you have for improving the wellness and resilience curriculum for AI/AN college students at UW?*

With your permission, I would like to audio tape your interview and contributions to the sharing circles so that I can have an accurate record of our conversations and group discussions. I will transcribe these recordings without identifiable information and destroy the recordings after the study is over. Only I will have access to the recording, which will be kept in a secure location. If you would like a copy of the transcript of the interview and your contributions to the sharing circles, I will gladly provide you with one.

**Activities to be done as part of the project and corresponding study:**

- **Phase 1:**
  - After receiving consent, I will ask you to complete a brief background survey with some basic information about yourself, your cultural identity, and your experiences as an American Indian/Alaska Native student at UW.
  - Consistent with the parameters of the seed grant project, I will reach out to schedule the in-person interview.
  - Following your interview, I will communicate via email with the project cohort of students to schedule our initial cohort meeting and the first sharing circle.
  - The first sharing circle will be conducted at a time and location of the cohort's choosing as outlined by the seed grant project.
- **Phase 2:**
  - Based on the responses of the project cohort during their interviews and the first sharing circles, 2-4 lessons will be pulled from an existing wellness and resilience curriculum offered as a for-credit course at the university (EDUC 215: Wellness and Resilience for College and Beyond) and shared with students in a weekly workshop as outlined by the seed grant project.
  - Paper copies of the weekly diary cards and skills practice reflections you complete as part of each lesson will be collected weekly during the workshop series.
  - At the end of the last lesson of the workshop series, I will schedule our second sharing circle, consistent with the parameters of the seed grant project.
  - The second sharing circle will be conducted at a time and location of the cohort's choosing.
  - The project facilitator will outline and schedule the next steps of the seed grant project program, which will not be included as part of the current study.

**Participants eligible for this study are:**

- Undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Washington who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native and have completed at least one term at the Seattle campus.
- Undergraduates currently participating in the UW Resilience Lab Seed Grant project titled "Co-Constructing a Culturally-Centered Resilience Curriculum for Indigenous Students"

### **RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT**

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. I have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below. Some people feel self-conscious when notes are taken or interviews are recorded. For some, mental health can be a difficult topic to discuss and might bring up concerns and/or feelings of emotional discomfort or distress. Others may find the interview questions useful in expressing their feelings regarding their past and current experiences of stress and/or mental health issues. If at any time, you wish to withdraw from participation, you will not be penalized in any way. If concerns arise, I will provide support in finding appropriate resources to help you or any others that are impacted. Additionally, if you feel distressed by any questions, either during or following your interview, you are encouraged to contact Meaghan Ferrick at 914-806-5741 or reach out to a local mental health organization. On the University of Washington campus, you can contact the Counseling Center at 206-543-1240 to schedule an appointment with a counselor or reach out to the Crisis Clinic at 866-427-4747 if you need immediate support. Alternatively, you can contact The National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1.800.273.TALK, or you may visit MentalHealth.gov to find additional resources.

### **BENEFITS OF THE STUDY**

You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study. One benefit of this study is the opportunity to raise the voices of American Indian/Alaska Native students on campus to direct the development of culturally responsive mental health services at the University of Washington. Findings from this study may help mental health professional and campus-based programming in supporting American Indian/Alaska Native students and understanding their unique needs and cultural backgrounds. Participants will have the opportunity to participate in a collaborative analysis of the data generated and will be acknowledged as co-researchers in presentations of the findings if they are interested. The cohort of AI/AN undergraduates will be paid a stipend of \$525 (based on the Seattle minimum wage rate for ~25 hours of work) for their time and work contributions to the seed grant project.

### **OTHER INFORMATION**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Information about you is confidential. I will assign you a pseudonym and code the study information. I will keep the link between your name and the pseudonym code in a separate, secured location until the study is complete. Then I will destroy the information linking your information to the pseudonym. In publications and presentations of this study, I will not use your name, or any other identifying information.

I may want to re-contact you for future related studies. Please indicate below whether you give me permission to re-contact you. Giving me permission to re-contact you does not obligate you in any way.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Meaghan Ferrick at (914) 806-5741 or [mef07@uw.edu](mailto:mef07@uw.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact either of my advisor overseeing this project: Dr. Jim Mazza | [mazza@uw.edu](mailto:mazza@uw.edu).

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Signature of investigator

Printed Name

Date

### **PARTICIPANT'S STATEMENT**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later on about the research, I can ask the investigator listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the researcher, advisor, or the Institutional Review Board. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview and contributions to the sharing circles.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give my permission for the researcher to audiotape my interview and contributions to the sharing circles.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do NOT give permission for the researcher to re-contact me to clarify information.

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Signature of participant

Printed Name

Date

Contact information:

Copies to: Investigators' file & Participant