

## **Postsecondary Transitions among Navajo Indians**

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This study used interviews to examine the postsecondary transition experiences of 22 Navajo Indians. The interviews were transcribed and the interview texts analyzed using a synthesis of qualitative methods. The analysis showed that (1) family connections, (2) discrepancy between high school and college learning environments, (3) focus on faculty relationships, (4) vague educational and vocational constructs, and (5) connection to homeland and culture were prominent themes. Implications for interventions with Navajo Indians and suggestions for future research are discussed. In particular, the results of the study indicate a need for stable mentoring relationships with other American Indians who are involved and successful in college and related postsecondary experiences.

### **Introduction**

The Navajo Nation is the largest and one of the most populous reservations in the United States. Over 50% of all Navajos live on the reservation, which has a population of approximately 143,000 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). Those living on the reservation experience many of the educational and economic challenges common to reservation populations. The unemployment rate is about 30% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990) and 58% of the reservation population live below the poverty level (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993). Only 41% of the individuals over age 25 who live on the reservation have a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Commerce,

1993) and only five percent of Navajos have a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Clearly, the members of the Navajo Nation are not enjoying the benefits of higher education at levels consistent with either European Americans or even other people of color.

American Indian high school graduates entering college have low rates of persistence (Reddy, 1993). One longitudinal study of college persistence found that only 23% of a cohort of American Indian students continued through the second year of college (Benjamin, 1993). This same study found that only 16% of these students persisted to graduation. These data suggest that the transition during the first two years of college is critical to the success of American Indian students. The purpose of this study was to explicate the experiences of Navajo students in the transition from high school to college in order to better understand why so few Navajo students persist in postsecondary settings.

Several studies have investigated factors that may contribute to postsecondary persistence patterns among American Indians. Some studies have focused on internal personal factors. Lin, LaCounte, & Eder (1988) found that feelings of isolation and attitudes toward college among American Indian students were significant predictors of college GPA. West (1988) found that career maturity was associated with academic achievement in American Indian college students. Rindone (1988), studying American Indians who were college graduates, discovered that high levels of achievement motivation inspired by parents and family were reported as the primary reasons for their success.

Other studies have focused on external factors that may influence college

persistence. One survey of American Indian college students (Hoover & Jacobs, 1992) found that lack of career information and counseling may contribute to attrition. Another study (Benjamin, et al., 1993) that followed a cohort of students across six years of their college experience suggested that the failure of colleges to accommodate Navajo cultural factors might contribute to poor persistence. In short, existing studies of American Indians' postsecondary transitions have identified economic depression, social isolation, perceived hostility, family pressures, and cultural pressures as factors likely to influence the transition from high school to college or high school to career. These studies also suggest that GPA, high self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and positive interactions with faculty were predictors of college persistence among American Indians (Brown & Kurpius, 1997; Lin, 1990; Wells, 1989).

A limitation of most of these studies is the use of a priori conceptualizations in their investigations of these factors. That is, the researchers used existing models, instruments, and surveys that may have restricted the findings to a particular paradigm. In a recent study, Brown & Kurpius (1997) concluded that future research would benefit from exploring the transition experience directly by conducting qualitative interviews (cf. Benjamin, 1993). The qualitative approach implemented in this study sought to minimize such restrictions, and explore the phenomenological experience of Navajo Indians in the midst of their postsecondary transition.

The use of qualitative interviews was deemed appropriate given that:

1. Current understanding of postsecondary transitions among American

Indians has come from existing models of academic nonpersistence and career difficulty, which are based in European-American culture. American Indian culture is distinctly different from European-American culture, and tribal cultures are distinct from one another. Unique models of vocational and educational development need to be developed for American Indian populations (McCormick & Amundson, 1997).

2. Available instruments have been normed on populations other than American Indians (Herring, 1999).
3. Qualitative approaches allow the researcher to discover the unique cultural perspectives participants may have regarding the world of work and postsecondary education (Herring, 1999; Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999).

### **Method**

The participants in the study were 22 members of the 1995 and 1996 graduating classes of a small high school on the Navajo Nation. This group represented about 25% of the total graduates. The participants were randomly selected from a list of graduates who had indicated their intent was to attend a postsecondary institution. The interviewed group included 10 men and 12 women. The average age for the group was 19.4 years. Forty-one percent of the participants reported that English was their primary language at home, 27% indicated that Navajo was their primary language at home, and 32% said that Navajo and English were used equally at home. All graduates were interviewed between one and two years after their graduation from high school. Most participants

were involved, or had been involved, in some college course work, and all were actively considering post-secondary training. Of the 22 participants interviewed, 13 were attending school full-time, three were attending part-time, three were working full-time and not attending school, and three were unemployed and not attending school.

The interviews took place at participants' homes or places of employment, or at various places on their college campuses in the Four Corners area of the Southwestern United States. The interviews followed a guided interview format (Patton, 1990) with the aim of addressing potentially relevant topics without restricting the discussion to those topics. A copy of the interviewer guide is found in the Appendix. Interviewers used active listening skills and encouragement to maximize the depth of participant responses. The interviewers were faculty members and graduate students from a counseling program at a large private university. The interviewers were trained in qualitative interviewing skills in order to maintain consistency and comprehensiveness in the interviews. Interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis by the research team. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 20 to 60 minutes each. Students were contacted and interviewed until the research team concluded that a point of redundancy or saturation (Polkinghorne, 1991) had been reached.

The data analysis followed a synthesis of interpretive approaches as described by Giorgi (1985), Packer (1985), and Polkinghorne (1984). The analysis process was as follows:

1. An unfocused overview of the text. This is an attempt to study the

transcribed interview text with as few presuppositions as possible and approximate the subjective meaning of the participants' responses. This process of illuminating the participants meaning is accomplished by means of empathy (Jackson, 1992).

2. Interpretations through successive readings of the material. This has been described as a spiral (Polkinghorne, 1984) or "reflexive" (Hoshmand, 1991) process in which the investigators seek to uncover progressively deeper levels of meaning in the text. Initial interpretations are questioned and either retained, rejected, or modified.
3. Finding language that accurately conveys the findings. Once valid interpretations have been made, the research team works to communicate the findings effectively (Kvale, 1987). Precise description of the meaningful themes of the analysis is the goal product.
4. Consultation with the participants. The results are shared with participants and those believed to have understanding of and insight into the phenomenon of interest. Participants are encouraged to raise questions and criticize the findings. Feedback from the participants is considered and incorporated into the results.

In this study, the final step of the process was accomplished by consulting with teachers and administrators who had considerable experience working with students in the postsecondary transition. Students were not contacted for feedback on the results because, (1) cultural mores made it unlikely that they would provide any critical

feedback, and (2) the researchers were unable to locate all the participants after the interview data had been analyzed. The teachers and administrators who reviewed the results reported them to be consistent with their observations and knowledge of Navajo students. Their critical feedback primarily focused on the relative importance or uniqueness of the themes. This feedback was incorporated into the results.

## **Results**

The analysis produced the following themes or essential meanings.

### Family Connections

The clearest theme that emerged from the interviews was the collective connections between the students and their families. These connections were evident in four areas: (1) family pressure, (2) family financial problems, (3) family conflicts, and (4) family encouragement.

[Note: The quotes included with each theme are intended to provide examples of aspects of the theme and they are not intended to wholly illustrate the theme. Some quotes provide better illustrations than others do. It should be remembered that all quotes were taken out of context-- accordingly, some questions may appear to be leading or tangential without the context of the entire interview.]

### Family pressure.

Participants felt considerable pressure from their families to either perform academically

or to stay close to home. For some students these were simultaneous pressures.

Participants seemed more hopeful if the pressure was unidirectional. They seemed less hopeful when they received a mixed message from their families. The following quotes illustrate these types of pressures:

Participant: I'm the oldest [in the family].

Interviewer: So you kind of have to set the path for everybody else? Is that a lot of pressure?

Response: That is a lot of pressure.

Interviewer: I'll bet. But you said that your mother has gone to college.

Response: My mother went. She didn't graduate, but she went for a year, and then she dropped. My father has never been to college. He graduated from high school, and so my parents don't really understand what goes on in college. My mother does, but my dad doesn't really know, so he doesn't really understand what kind of problems and pressure there is in college.

Interviewer: How does that affect you—that he doesn't understand those things? Does it affect you in your schoolwork, or does it affect you just in family relations?

Participant: Well, I was raised strictly under my dad's supervision, and he doesn't really want me to be away from him. There are so many things that other people talk about— that college is bad and things go on there. And it's like being here you have to trust and I have been doing that, but my father is totally, like, different. He has just been raised traditionally. I guess that's

why he doesn't understand. I'm trying to show my parents that I'm old enough. I'm growing up, trying to put a good example for my brothers. That's what I'm doing.

Another participant responded as follows:

Interviewer: How does your family feel about you being here at college?

Participant: They put a lot of trust in me to be on my own and they, my mom especially, since ...I'm the only daughter in my family so she'd rather have me go to a school that's closer to her. I wanted to go to [college], but my mom, she's like, "I want you to stay here."

Interviewer: So it's hard for them to have you this far away [45 miles]? To have you go to [college] in [city] would be too much.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Did your parents go to college?

Participant: No, just high school.

Interviewer: Do you have brothers?

Participant: I only have two little brothers.

Interviewer: So you are the first one to go to college. How do you deal with that?

Participant: It's pretty hard, because most of my little siblings and cousins and others look up to me and say, or my aunts and uncles say, "You are the first on in the family that is going to college. We want you to succeed, we want you to finish this, we want to be proud of you," and stuff like that.

### Family financial problems

Participants reported that family financial problems led to difficulties in starting or continuing in school. Family financial difficulties frequently led participants to become employed in unskilled labor to help resolve financial strain:

Participant: After I graduated from high school, I went to summer school at [college]. After a couple of months of summer school I went to [college] in [city]. I attended two quarters, and after my second quarter I didn't have any more money, and scholarships were hard to get because every time I applied, they would say that my income was too high. Mainly that was it. Other problems came up, like, "You're not going to school in our state, so we can't give you scholarship," but mainly with "Your income's too high." I couldn't afford to go to school and stay in [city] because the school didn't have dorms. You had to have an apartment to go to school and I didn't have money for both, so I came back down, and other problems came up.

Another participant:

Interviewer: What would be the biggest obstacle getting in the way [of you pursuing your career goals]?

Participant: One of the things probably would be—I don't know—school money, scholarships that I could receive to pay for my schooling to become that,

and my problems at home.

Interviewer: What about family support? Do you think you'll have some family support for school?

Participant: I don't know. No one has given me support yet.

Interviewer: Is that right? How do they feel about you being up here?

Participant: Well, financially they don't give me support, but you know, emotionally and as far as advice and compliments, they do give me support.

### Family conflicts

Family conflicts tended to revolve around issues such as alcoholism and divorce. These conflicts were often tied to financial problems; however, many participants reported conflicts that seemed unrelated to financial problems. At times, these conflicts were between participants and other family members:

Participant: I started fall quarter and went through fall, winter, and spring now, and I've been doing really good. Fall quarter my GPA was really good. It was like a two point— almost 3.0, and last quarter I kind of fell a little low because I had some family problems and a lot of problems I had to take care of.

Interviewer: What kinds of family problems? What happened?

Participant: Well my parents--my stepfather right now and my mother—I can't get along with my stepfather. I don't know. I guess it's just a thing everyone goes through, but I just can't get along with him, so I moved out and I was just on my own here and there.

Interviewer: You weren't living in a specific place?

Participant: I've just been staying here at the dorms, but I wasn't focusing on school right, so I fell...really low on my GPA.

Interviewer: What was your GPA after winter?

Participant: Fall was 3.0--no 2.7, winter was like a 1.7.

Interviewer: So you feel like during winter you got kind of depressed?

Participant: Yes I did. I really got depressed. I wasn't interested in school, you know. I felt like I wanted to withdraw and just go home and go back to somewhere where I can go home.

Interviewer: But that was kind of hard because it didn't feel like you could go back to your home?

Participant: Yes.

Participants felt pressure to help if conflicts arose in their families, even if it did not involve them directly. They often felt the need to return to their homes, even if the conflict arose in the middle of a quarter or semester and leaving meant academic failure:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what kinds of family problems happened that kept you from going back?

Participant: Mainly it was a death in the family, and my parents separated for a while. Those were the two main problems that happened my first year of school. The first quarter of college, what happened was that my parents had

separated. They separated for about a month and a half, so I would come back home and talk to my dad about what happened and stuff like that and what went wrong, and then I would go back. So I missed lots of school my first quarter, but I tried to make it up. My second quarter I had a death in the family. Problems came up with that where the family—where my uncle's family were disagreeing on things and stuff like that, so that's what brought up stuff. I discussed it with my professors at school, and they told me all I needed to do is bring a death certificate and other things like that, and my family wouldn't give that to me. If I had brought it up, I would have probably passed a class I had taken, but that was all the problems I had, separation with the family and death in the family...My grades were OK until I came home, and that's when the problems started. If I hadn't had to come home, my grades would have been pretty good, but I came home and they weren't so good afterwards because of the problems I had here [on the reservation].

Participants often reported the need to take an unscheduled break between quarters or semesters during the academic year from school due to family or financial problems or both. Participants were often delayed when returning from these breaks, and they subsequently finished few academic credits, as the following quote illustrates:

Interviewer: So you completed two full years at [college] and then didn't go back last year. Tell me about that a little bit.

Participant: The middle of last year I started having like family problems—it was like my family was completely dysfunctional. We had problems with alcoholism, infidelity, and it affected me financially because my parents were going through some hard times with divorce, and it affected my financial standing, and ultimately I couldn't pay for school, and that's what happened. I've been working and trying to get financial aid, but my parents are forever in limbo. They don't know whether to be apart or together and because they filed their income tax the same, they make so much money I can't get financial aid.

### Family encouragement

Participants expressed greater self-confidence, more assurance about career selection, and less ambiguity about schooling when they had a first- or second-degree relative who had graduated from college or who was successful in a particular career. This positive perspective was frequently tied to encouragement from fathers, and it appeared to have an effect throughout the entire family. Alternatively, when participants' relatives had not successfully attended college or experienced longevity in a career, participants were less sure about their own educational or occupational plans. The following three excerpts illustrate the effects of one family member having graduated from college:

Interviewer: Let's say that you do go into law enforcement. Would you like to be on the law enforcement around here, or do you think you would want to be

somewhere else?

Participant: Mostly work around here with the Navajo people, and the main goal I want to be in law enforcement is either U.S. marshal or FBI agent.

Interviewer: Have you ever checked into requirements or anything like that?

Participant: Yes I have. My uncle, he was working for the FBI and then he retired. I don't know if you know him, but his name is [name]. He told me a lot about the requirements and what you had to be certified in, and what my education was supposed to be and stuff like that.

Another participant stated:

My younger brother is still going to [high] school here. He's a junior and I have a sister who's planning to go on to be a doctor, so she's up in [city], too. She is going to school up there. She only has like six more credits to get her associate's degree.

Interviewer: What kind of work does your father do?

Participant: My father is a teacher. He teaches fifth grade.

Interviewer: How did your dad get into that?

Participant: Well, he got his associates degree from [college], and then he went up to [college] and received his bachelors.

And in a response from a different participant:

Interviewer: How come you were above average—did better than some of the other kids?

Participant: Well the way I think about it is my dad pushed me through school. He was always pushing me. But the thing is, the way I see it, a lot of these parents around here don't really force their children. Only some of them do their schoolwork. The thing about it is you know which people are being more motivated by their parents and who are not. You can tell by appearances and how they act under stress. You know which one really does.

Another participant:

Interviewer: Are there things you think would have been helpful for you in high school that would have prepared you for college?

Participant: Well, from where I'm coming from, it's been totally different. My parents have been supporting me. My aunts went to college, and they always talked to me about how college life was going to be.

### Discrepancy between High School and College Learning Environments

Participants reported a dramatic shift between the learning environments of high school and college. (This theme may have been peculiar to the group interviewed because they all attended the same high school. However, the researchers' conversations with teachers and students from other schools on the reservation argued

for the inclusion of this theme.) One student described the difference as that between a nurturing mother and a demanding father:

Participant: In high school, you just go over there and your parents tell you to go to school--college, that's different. Your parents won't be there saying, "Get up!" You're in college and you have to do it on your own. You have to learn...Well, a mother, she's loving, caring. She doesn't slap or spank you. She's in the house, a caring, loving feeling. College is like a dad, kind of-- you know how a dad is-- strict, spansks you. He is doing the man's job. College is probably closer to him.

Another participant responded as follows.

Interviewer: How has it been different to be in college now?

Participant: College—that's more like your own responsibility. You're on your own.

Interviewer: How so?

Participant: It's not like—well, from high school it was like you stayed with your parents, you went to school from home, you had to attend class. You were always being watched in high school, but in college it's basically on your own. You go if you want a good grade; if you want to achieve whatever you are majoring in, you have to be responsible and go to class.

And another participant:

Interviewer: What's the toughest challenge or obstacle you have to deal with as you go to college?

Participant: Let's see. The class—like the work they give us—because some of the instructors don't fully explain it. You have to go back and ask questions, and that's what some of the students have problems with.

Interviewer: Did you have the same problem in high school? Did you find that there were teachers that didn't explain things?

Participant: No.

Another student summed up his experience in the following way:

Participant: I would say in general I think colleges and universities are really daunting institutions for people from here. You know, high school doesn't really prepare you for college. It doesn't really prepare you to deal with deadlines. I mean, right now, the competency system allows you to do work at your own pace, and it is completely different at college.

Many participants were surprised by the difficulty of college after having performed well in high school. Those with confidence to overcome the deficit saw themselves as exceptional. The most confused students were those who saw themselves as honor students in high school and then had to take remedial courses in college:

Interviewer: Sounds like it was pretty crushing to go from being kind of the smart kid in school, valedictorian, and having to take some remedial courses [in college].

Participant: Uh-huh. When I left high school I was really happy to get into college. I was happy to start off taking all the tough classes.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you had a lot of confidence in yourself in high school, and a lot of confidence that you would be able to succeed in universities and college. Then when you started doing things like the ACT and applying for colleges, that confidence was kind of broken and now it is still kind of wavering.

Participant: Like right now I'm taking biology 101; the instructor is saying, "You should have learned that in high school." It doesn't really seem like a science class that I've taken.

### Focus on Faculty Relationships

Participants reported positive and negative experiences in terms of their relationships with faculty. This was true for descriptions of both high school and college experiences. These descriptions focused on how well faculty knew the participants, how personable the faculty were, and size of classes:

Interviewer: How were your relationships with your teachers in high school?

Participant: They were pretty cool. I like them all. They helped me through a lot of

things. They were always there for me. They did a good job.

Interviewer: Did you have a teacher at [the high school] that you liked?

Participant: Uh-huh, yeah, some of them moved though. I think my favorite teacher was [name]. She teaches life science . . . She also taught human relations. I like the teacher because of the way she explained things. I learned a lot of different things, like in that human relations class about self-esteem and stuff like that. She was really encouraging. She was really nice and supportive of stuff like that. After a while, we got to know each other, and she really started coming over to get to know my family and stuff like that. She was really a sweet lady. I ended up calling her Mom.

### Vague Educational and Vocational Constructs

Participants demonstrated limited understanding of postsecondary education and its relationship to specific careers. A few participants had clear educational paths they wanted to follow. However, most either did not have a clear understanding of what it would take to reach a career goal or did not have a career goal. This was shown in four ways: (1) misunderstanding the relationship of postsecondary training to careers, (2) vague postsecondary plans, (3) anxiety about taking educational and vocational risks, and (4) misunderstanding the relationship of careers to each other.

Misunderstanding the relationship of postsecondary training to careers. For many participants, the relationship of a post secondary degree to specific careers was uncertain. They had an idea that they needed a degree to pursue a career, but not which degree they needed nor

the effort required for the degree:

Interviewer: Do you know what you want to study yet, or are you just doing the general education?

Participant: Well, general education. I want to go into business. Kind of like a business manager. That's what I really want to go into, some kind of business.

Interviewer: Can you do that? What kind of degree do you have to have? Do you need a master's?

Participant: I think like your bachelor's is a master's.

Another participant responded as follows:

Interviewer: So what do you want to do with college? You finish your associate's here, and then what?

Participant: Probably go to a bigger university and get more education.

Interviewer: Do you have one in mind?

Participant: Right now I just have some choices, but no major one that I have in mind.

Interviewer: So let's say you are able to go to the college you want to go to and all that, and you finish your college degree. What would your college degree be in, or do you know? Have you made a choice yet?

Participant: No, I haven't made a choice now, and probably later on as time goes by I'll make a choice.

Interviewer: Do you see yourself in a particular occupation?

Participant: Not right now, no.

Vague postsecondary plans. Many participants tended to have vague plans for careers or postsecondary education. While they demonstrated an interest in getting a degree, their knowledge of how to earn the degree was unclear:

Interviewer: Have you thought of maybe like going to [college]?

Participant: Yeah, I've thought about—I just—to tell you the truth, I'm really undecided. I may just even go here part-time and work down here, you know, so that I can get some of it [schooling] done down here. It's just right here. You have to take advantage of it just being right here.

Another participant responded as follows:

Interviewer: What do you see in the future that is going to happen in your life?

Participant: I intend to get my associate's at [college], transfer up to [college] or [college] and use some of the general classes that you need . . . to finish those up here pretty soon so that they will transfer . . . I decided not to take anything this quarter so I didn't wear myself out again.

### Anxiety about taking educational/vocational risks

Participants reported anxiety about the prospect of taking vocational or educational risks because of a fear of failure:

Interviewer: Do you have fears about school or about career or anything like that?

Participant: Well, yeah, sometimes I'm afraid I can't do it, and I could just fail or something like that, but I just try my best at it.

Interviewer: So let's say you did fail; you weren't able to do what you wanted to do. What would be so bad about that? What would make that a bad thing?

Participant: Um, I don't know. Fear that I would just be out of college, probably.

Misunderstanding the relationship of careers to each other. Participants tended to define their vocational paths in terms of obvious careers that had little relationship to one another:

Participant: Well, going back to become a physician's assistant; first, I'm just going to get a mechanics degree, along with an associates of applied science and work for however long it takes for me to get through school and do it with that. Then, at the same time, I will be going to school for the physician's assistant, and that should be my long-term occupation.

Another participant responded as follows:

Interviewer: What are you thinking about now [for a career]? Do you think you still want to do daycare, or do you think you want to do something different?

Participant: Something different.

Interviewer: What kinds of things have you thought about? Have you thought about any other careers or something?

Participant: Yeah, just one. Trying for a dental assistant.

Interviewer: What made you decide on being a dental assistant? Did you watch a dental assistant work one time, or have you seen that before?

Participant: I got one in the mail from that place [that trains dental assistants].

Evident in these responses was a fear of failure and an unclear understanding of the value of experience and education regardless of the completion of a degree.

Definitions of failure and success were polarized and somewhat vague. Success was defined as getting a degree. Failure was defined as not graduating. Many participants did not appear to understand the value of educational experiences and work experiences in vocational development.

### Connection to Homeland and Culture

Many participants reported a strong connection to their homeland. They felt some uneasiness when away from home, even when in the company of their friends or family.

They felt confused about the conflicting messages to (a) leave the reservation and be successful, and (b) maintain their traditional connection to the tribe, land, and culture:

Interviewer: You want to learn about the culture and stuff, and you've talked about maybe some college too. Are those separate things? Can those happen together, or is one more important, or how does that all fit together?

Participant: Well, I would say both of them are mostly important. The culture—there are a lot of things that go with the culture: stories, a lot of songs, things that go with the culture. College is probably most similar to your [the Anglo interviewer's] culture.

Strong ties to the reservation led participants to limit the types of careers they believed they could do. They also appeared to restrict the level of vocations participants believed they could access if they were successful in pursuing their educational goals:

Interviewer: Do you see yourself in any particular occupation?

Participant: Not right now, no.

Interviewer: Haven't really made that choice. When you get done, would you like to go back? Where are you from? Are you from [city]?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Would you like to go back to [city], or would you like to go somewhere else? What are your hopes?

Participant: I'd probably go back down to my community and help out. If I was going back to the reservation, I would more likely go into teaching.

Interviewer: What would you like to teach, or do you know?

Participant: No, not right now.

Another participant responded as follows:

Interviewer: What do you see yourself doing, say, if you graduated from law school? Where do you think you would go to practice law, or what do you think you'd do, exactly?

Participant: That would depend if I became a corporate lawyer or a criminal justice lawyer. Where I would go for corporate lawyer is probably in Texas, where all those oil fields are.

Interviewer: How would it be for you to leave here and leave home and family to go out to a bigger place?

Participant: That, I didn't think about. So I'd rather be here if I had a choice; I would rather be here and help out with the family.

Interviewer: Do you think that maybe you could do something like that if you worked as a prosecuting attorney or criminal justice lawyer. Do you think you could do some of that around here?

Participant: Yeah, I talked about that with my aunt before. She said if I decided to be a criminal justice lawyer, I could stay around here and be the lawyer here and help the people out here and stuff.

Interviewer: What do you think about that possibility?

Participant: That I thought about a lot. I think that would help also with the people around here. Mainly that's just what I was thinking about when I was in high school— helping out with the people here with the American Indians and stuff.

## Discussion

This study used a qualitative design to explore Navajo individuals' experiences in the transition from high school to postsecondary education and work experiences. The limitations of the study are inherent in the design. While the qualitative interviews allowed for rich descriptions of experience that were not determined by a priori assumptions, they are subject to questions of generalizability. Similarly, the validity of this study depends on the trustworthiness of the interviewers and their interpretations, rather than the reliability and validity of specific instruments. Also, the accessibility of participants may have limited the findings. Some identified potential participants could not be located. The inclusion of those participants may have provided additional meaningful data. Finally, the study was limited to participants from one area. Students from other areas or other reservations may report different experiences. Preliminary results of the study were shared with educators, students, and counselors, both on the Navajo Nation and in other forums, in an effort to evaluate the study's validity. In general, these members of the culture and community have confirmed our findings.

This research supports previous studies that have noted the importance of faculty relationships in postsecondary adjustment of American Indian students. Our finding that family members' postsecondary experiences are influential in students' postsecondary attitudes and experiences suggests that more attention needs to be paid to relationships with potential mentors. Navajo students would likely benefit from greater access to individuals from their own culture who have had, or are having, positive experiences in college and related postsecondary experiences.

Previous research has not focused on the relationship of family dynamics to postsecondary adjustment. This study suggests that family support, family problems, and family financial concerns are strongly related to postsecondary persistence. Participants in this study who reported support from both parents and extended family members expressed greater confidence in their career and postsecondary aspirations. There is some evidence in the present study that strong support from the father was especially helpful to participant's self-confidence with regard to pursuit of careers or post secondary opportunities. This may be due to the father's traditional association with careers, or it may be related to the Navajo cultural tendency to ascribe gender to things and experiences. College may be seen as a male/father type of experience and therefore require his blessing and support for success. The exploration of students' perceptions of what their parents and culture expect of them is an important focus for future research. Further study is warranted to determine the effects of parental support on career and academic self-efficacy for Navajo Indians.

Research on the relationship of financial aid to persistence has offered mixed results. Wilson (1983) found that financial aid and family support were reported as primary positive factors in persistence at college among American Indian students. Other studies have identified the need for more financial assistance to increase persistence (Lunneborg & Lunneborg, 1985; Thomason, 1999). However, some studies have identified no relationship between financial aid and persistence (Foster, 1995). Our research identified two issues that deserve further attention:

1. Students from low-income households may struggle financially because of

the lack of a financial cushion. While they can find funding for tuition, room and board, books, etc., there is no source of money for emergencies, socializing, or incidentals. They cannot request a little more from their family, as their family may have nothing to offer. This lack of security may impede students at both practical and emotional levels.

2. Students from middle-class, or lower-middle-class households may not be entitled to funding because their family's income, while modest, exceeds the amount, under which, financial aid is available. These students may suffer from the lack of additional funding sources and the stereotypical perception that American Indian students all receive full funding for their education.

Participants in this study demonstrated strong ties to their homeland and culture. Because of this strong bond, it is important to consider the meaning of work and schooling in Navajo culture. Some attempts have been made to explore the ties between Navajo culture and education in general (Benally, 1994). Additionally, it would be well to explore the ties between Navajo culture and the pursuit of postsecondary education and careers.

This research suggests that greater efforts need to be made to help students make the transition from the high school environment to the college environment. Enriched curriculum, study-skills training, faculty mentors, culture support groups, and culture-specific transition courses have been suggested as interventions (Braithwaite, 1997). Our research supports interventions that focus on relationships, e.g., mentors,

support groups, transition courses. Additional research is needed to systematically evaluate such programs.

The vagueness with which participants described their current vocational situations and hopes for the future indicates a paucity of exposure to vocational options (Martin, 1991). Despite the ready accessibility of Internet and other media resources, participants seemed to have a restricted range of perceived vocational and educational options. As with other rural areas in the United States, it is difficult for an individual on the Navajo reservation to be exposed to persons in different career settings. Further study is needed to determine how Navajo Indians can be exposed to individuals in a variety of different careers, and how this might affect their perceptions. A larger issue is how high school and postsecondary Navajo Indians can be exposed to other Navajos in different careers and in higher educational settings (Herring, 1999). More research is needed to understand the relationship between access to a variety of tangible careers and vocational maturity.

Participants expressed low self-efficacy regarding career decisions. This appeared to be strongly related to participants' ties to the reservation. Navajo Indians maintain a strong tie to their reservation, which, unlike many reservations, includes most of their traditional homeland. Participants in this study appeared to feel restricted in what careers were available to them. If a career was not available on the reservation, participants were less likely to see it as an option. If the career was available on the reservation, perceptions of the range of possibilities within that career seemed restricted. Further studies are needed to explicate the relationship between career self-efficacy and Navajo Indians' experience on the reservation.

### Authors' Note

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## Appendix

### Qualitative Interview Outline

**We are working to find out about people's experiences when they leave high school.**

**When did you graduate from high school?**

**What was high school like for you?**

Follow-up to focus on academics, relationships w/teachers, social, career programs.

**How did you decide what to do after graduation?**

Follow-up to focus on family concerns, social concerns, career concerns, financial concerns.

**Tell me about what's happened from the time you graduated up until now.**

Follow-up to get as much depth in this area as possible. (reflective listening, tell me more about...)

**How are things now?**

Particular follow-up on career, education, family.

**What do you see in the near future?**

Particular focus on career, education, family.

Ask about and follow up on any perceived obstacles.

**What do you see yourself doing in the long term?**

Again, career, education, family.

Query about obstacles.