

# Building Native Nations through Native Students' Commitment to Their Communities

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Tiffany S. Lee

One aspect of building Native nations entails motivating American Indian/Alaska Native youth to become committed to their communities so as to sustain and move forward with the goals of American Indian/Alaska Native nations. This study determined the impact of one Native American Studies department on its Native students' life goals. Through its *Indigenized* approach to education, which included community-based partnerships, experiential methods in course activities, and critical, interdisciplinary perspectives in curriculum, students reported that Native American Studies provided a home away from home; it enlightened their perspectives on Indigenous issues; and it motivated their life goals in dedication to Native communities. These students' experiences help to realize a goal of Indigenous education, which aims to encourage Native youth to become contributing members of their communities. The politics of "going back" to serve in one's community is also addressed by the students and suggests further research questions in need of continued exploration.

A group of seven college students gathered one afternoon in the classroom of the Native American Studies (NAS) department at Southwest University (SU)<sup>1</sup> to have lunch and to have a discussion about their life's experiences and goals. The students were all American Indian,<sup>2</sup> mostly representing the Native communities of the region and the southwest. The students identified themselves as Diné, Jicarilla Apache, Mescalero Apache, White Mountain Apache, Kiowa, Isleta Pueblo, Jemez Pueblo, Lakota, Ojibwe, and San Felipe Pueblo. Southwest university had 24,082 students in the spring of 2008 with an enrollment of around 1488 American Indian students on the main campus (*Southwest University*, 2008). These students pursue a variety of degree programs, but many also take courses in NAS and pursue the minor or major degree in NAS. Approximately 200 to 300 students enroll each semester in NAS courses (NAS, 2008)

The students gathered that afternoon to participate in a focus group. The focus group was the first phase of a research project to learn about the educational

influences in Native college students' lives. In particular, the aim of the project was to understand the role of Native American Studies in shaping Native students' future goals toward serving or contributing back to their Native communities<sup>3</sup> in meaningful ways.

### **Purpose of the Research**

For Indigenous communities, the importance of education reaches farther than simply a mastery of academic content and critical thinking skills. For Indigenous people to continue to exercise their inherent sovereign rights, there is a need with each generation to inspire Indigenous children to protect, serve, and contribute toward Indigenous communities' social, cultural, and political interests. Cecilia Fire Thunder, former President of the Oglala Lakota Nation, stated this goal well when she said, "Before you can commit to your people, you have to love your people. But before you love your people, you have to love yourself" (2005). She was referring to the importance of helping Native youth to embrace their Indigeneity before they can embrace their communities and contribute to the well-being of their communities. Colonization has severely impacted our communities and our youth. Colonial oppression has forced many Native people to view themselves from the perspective of the colonizers (Garrouette, 2003; Nagel, 1996). In other words, some Native people may have internalized oppression by expressing their identity through a framework defined and controlled by hegemonic and oppressive entities. Graham Smith described this condition well when he said, "Hegemony is a way of thinking—it occurs when oppressed groups take on dominant group thinking and ideas uncritically and as 'common-sense', even though those ideas may in fact be contributing to forming their own oppression" (2003).

The broad purpose of this research study was to learn how to achieve the goal stated by Cecilia Fire Thunder, which involves inspiring Native youth to love themselves and to fulfill roles needed in our communities as defined by our people. The specific purpose of this study was to learn from Native students about their experiences in the field of Native American Studies, which began as a way to provide and validate Native perspectives in academia and for many programs, has expanded to become an Indigenous learning community committed to serving Native Nations (Champagne & Stauss, 2002; Cook-Lynn, 1997; Thornton, 1998). In particular, this study explored whether students' experiences in NAS influenced their lifelong goals to become contributing members of their communities. The continual impact of colonization has left our Native nations with the need for Native youth and members who are committed to protecting, maintaining, and revitalizing our land, language, culture, and people. Education that is rooted in Indigenous thought and practice is one way to strengthen our students' knowledge of and commitment to Native America (Benham & Cooper, 2000).

This study is an effort to understand the impact of one Native American Studies department in one university through its Indigenized educational approach. This approach includes an educational process that links a student's everyday life experiences and natural environment to their learning so that in the

end, the community benefits from their knowledge (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Kawagley, 1995). The success of higher education that realizes this goal is apparent in the enthusiasm of students to pursue degrees or jobs that will directly (and indirectly) benefit their Native community. To fully understand the impact of NAS, and in particular the impact of its Indigenized educational strategy, it is important to learn from the Native students enrolled in the program. Their points of view can demonstrate in what ways NAS has influenced their life goals and whether those life goals include service to community, an important goal of Indigenous education. Thus, the research questions that drove this study were: *What are Native students' perceptions and experiences in Native American Studies? Are they compelled to commit to community based on their experiences in Native American Studies?*

This paper will first conceptualize the purpose of Indigenous education in order to use it as a guiding theoretical lens from which to understand the research questions and problem. However, this theoretical lens is only a guide, and the students' narratives of their experiences will provide further elaboration for a more complete theoretical understanding of students' experiences in Native Studies and the impact of this Indigenous learning community on their life goals. Thus this theoretical conceptualization offers an initial perspective that is further grounded in and strengthened by the students' perspectives.

### **Research Conceptualization**

There is currently a movement among Indigenous scholars toward practicing and engaging in decolonization efforts in their scholarship, teaching, and through the programmatic goals of Native American Studies departments (Cook-Lynn, 2001; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Smith, 1999). Decolonization for these scholars is about empowerment. It is about becoming critically conscious of the roots of Indigenous people's oppression and the instances where we have internalized and supported colonialist beliefs and practices. bell hooks describes decolonization as "the unlearning of ingrained and unconscious attitudes of superiority (and inferiority) and the way in which dehumanizing views transform our being" (1990). For Indigenous peoples, Wilson argues that decolonization provides a way to unlearn our internalized attitudes reflecting inferiority, but it also provides a way to reject victimization and embrace our traditional philosophies, practices, and values that can positively energize our communities and restore our health and prosperity (2004). Similarly, Smith asserts that her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, which critically examines Western research practices and offers stories of her research experiences and examples of Indigenous research projects, is a book "written primarily to help ourselves" (p. 17). She is not only offering ways to decolonize the products of research, but also a way for Indigenous researchers to decolonize their research practices and scholarship.

Similarly, for Native students to develop a sense of meaning in their education requires that education have relevance to their lives. This means

creating and utilizing pedagogy that decolonizes educational practices and content by implementing what many are calling “Indigenized” or “Indigenizing education” (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Indigenizing education returns to traditional philosophies and approaches in education that were rooted in Native communities and used for transmitting culture and values. Indigenizing education also means prioritizing Native communities, Native people, Native beliefs, and Native experiences in the educational process thereby validating Indigenous knowledge. In addition, the connection to place is the essence of what it means to be Indigenous and what is transmitted through Indigenous education. To be Indigenous is to be connected to a place that is “natural and soulful” (Cajete, 1999, p. 189). Kawagley and Barnhardt (1999) also explained the importance of Indigenous education’s relationship to place when they said, “Indigenous education is based on a recognition that human interactions with places give rise to and define cultures and community (p. 131).” I argue that Native American Studies provides a place to help Native students define themselves within a Western academic institution. It helps students find another Indigenous community away from home and engages students in holistic development of their being. NAS is working to make higher education meaningful for Native students.

Native American Studies departments in higher educational institutions, which were initially created as a response to the neglect and misrepresentation of American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) by the intellectual traditions of studying them, are now moving toward this goal of decolonization (Champagne & Stauss, 2002; Thornton, 1998). The NAS program at SU is decolonizing by Indigenizing the vision and goals of the department. It is Indigenizing education by taking on a community-based approach in seeking to blend Native community values, knowledge, and interests into course curriculum, experiential activities, and research (NAS, 2004).

The critical aspect of these types of NAS programs and other community-based programs is that they are controlled by Native people. The problem in the past with service-learning initiatives has been the missionary ideology behind the approach. In mainstream educational scholarship and practice, the term service-learning is used to distinguish a project approach to learning that is community-based. Service-learning projects have often involved the service providers entering a community, performing a service without seeking the community members’ input, and then leaving, satisfied that they knew and did what was best for the community. However, the community members were rarely asked what benefit, if any, they felt became of the service performed (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000). Indigenizing education at the university level would require seeking community involvement, approval and benefit because contribution to community is an end goal of Indigenous education. Indigenous education also involves drawing on students’ current life experiences and knowledge. Kawagley and Barnhardt (1999) acknowledge that Indigenous people have traditionally acquired their knowledge through direct experience in the

natural environment. Understanding the interconnectedness of all beings in the natural world is of primary significance in Indigenous learning contexts. Thus, they assert that all learning should start with what the student and community know and are using in everyday life. They believe Indigenous students will become more motivated to learn because the topics of study are directly relevant and useful to the livelihood of their community.

To achieve this sort of approach in education requires Indigenous control in educational settings. Self-determination in education is an essential component to creating this type of meaningful education (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Southwest University's NAS Department is exercising control by engaging in experiential and service learning (or more appropriately named community-based education), which seeks to establish relationships between Native communities and the university in an effort to obtain input, involve communities, take direction from communities, and provide more meaningful education for NAS students. This occurs most often at the classroom level where faculty forges partnerships and elicits involvement from local Native communities in their courses and with their students.

Other scholars have also discussed the significance of developing meaning in a child's education by drawing on the child's current realities in their life experiences. Martinez (2003) addressed this issue in her dissertation in which Native students at one public school seemed to value their NAS courses more than their required courses because of the relevancy of the issues discussed in NAS to their lives. These youth recognized the politics of what counts as knowledge in their school, but they found meaning in the courses that related to their lives as Native people. Their constructions of an educated Native person wholly incorporated Indigenous knowledge. Cajete (1994) discussed similar definitions of what it means to be an educated Native person. Traditional Indigenous education is rooted in developing individuals who can contribute to the well-being of the community. Through this process, individuals learn what it means to become a complete man or woman and how one is interrelated with their natural world. One's natural environment and current realities become the basis of one's intellectual and personal development with the end goal of education in Native contexts being contribution to community life.

As previously mentioned, I argue that Native American Studies provides a Native community and home for Native students. It also validates Native students' life experiences by incorporating them into course curriculum as significant and as a tool for developing connections between concepts of study and the students' current realities. NAS also engages students with the local Native communities through its experiential approach and thus further broadens students' knowledge and stimulates students' interests in community service.

My theoretical conceptualization is informed and guided by scholars such as Cajete, Kawagley and Barnhardt, and Deloria and Wildcat, but ultimately, it is based on a constructivist paradigm so that my understanding of the impact of NAS is rooted in the knowledge gained from the study's participants. This study

intended to develop this initial theoretical framework using the knowledge, perceptions, and ideas of the Native participants involved. I am grounding the theoretical conceptualization through students' perspectives that they conveyed through interviews, through shared experiences in the NAS department and in organized events, through participant observations of students' interactions with each other and with faculty and staff, and through students evaluations of the impact of NAS courses.

The broader role of my research is in the interest of the continuity of Indigenous heritage and protection of sovereign rights of Indigenous people. I believe this research project is a critical pedagogical project to rearticulate what motivates students to attend college. In the end, it is my hope to understand the role of education as a means for creating stewards of our Native nations.

### **Research Methodology**

In order for AI/AN college students to feel comfortable to honestly express their views concerning their own lives and the lives of other American Indian people, it was important there was an established relationship of trust between myself as the researcher and the students. I am Diné and Lakota and knew each of the participants prior to any research I conducted with them. I had spoken informally and to different extents with each student about my motivation for this research. My personal motivation for this research lies in my interest and passion for quality education for Native people. Based on my personal experience as a college student, as a college administrator, and as a college instructor, my belief is that many Native students are not attending college for the same reasons the average non-Native attends college. American Indian/Alaska Native people's history and life experiences are unique in this country, and those experiences shape their motivations for college or are stimulated once they attend college. I feel contribution or commitment to community often is an outcome of their experience in college. Personally, I have had educational experiences that have sparked my interest in contributing back to Native communities through education. I wanted to document this type of experience that I know occurs with other students as well. Additionally, my position is that education should serve the needs of Native people in ways that are relevant to them. I am hoping this research project can contribute to that understanding. The students understood this about me through our informal conversations. Their interest in participating in the research study was an indication to me that they were similarly motivated.

I utilized an ethnographic research approach, which included focus groups, individual interviews, questionnaires, students' reflection papers, participant observations and field notes. The analysis for this paper includes the data from the focus groups, the individual interviews, participant observations, and field notes. I followed the guiding principles of ethnographic research (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), which convey that ethnographic research is guided by and generates theory, is both qualitative and quantitative, is conducted locally, and is applied. The purpose of ethnographic research is to learn about the parts

of a culture and their relationships as conceptualized by the participants in the research (Spradley, 1979). My methodological approach has also been largely influenced by Linda Smith's work on decolonizing research (1999) and Mary Hermes' work on research as a situated response (1999). My main objective with the participants in my research was to first build relationships based on trust. I did not want the participants to feel as though I was soliciting their perspectives for only my benefit. I developed close relationships with the students involved in my research and was confident of their trust in me. I also ensured that the research process was one based on reciprocity so that the participants felt they received some benefit for their involvement. I wanted them to be willing to participate for the greater goal of contributing to scholarship and knowledge on students' perspectives of their educational experiences. For example, I made clear that their opinions and perspectives would be shared with the faculty and staff of the department and with other Native American Studies departments to inform our knowledge of students' perspectives and to influence the goals and vision of Native Studies overall.

My role in the department was not exclusively as a "researcher" but I was also a committed instructor and member of the staff. This was important so the participants did not view my work and interest in the department as only for the purpose of research. I demonstrated my excitement and belief in the goals and vision of the department and to the field of Native American Studies in general. The context of the situation also influenced the manner in which I conducted the research. My methods were amended to follow the cultural protocol and what I deemed to be most appropriate for the situation. Hermes refers to this as a situated response, in which the Native researcher draws on their own cultural understandings of appropriate and respectful behavior when engaging Indigenous people as participants in their research.

I conducted the focus group, formal and informal interviews, and participant observations with recorded field notes over a period of two years. I conducted the focus group and interviews following the guidelines of Spradley (1979) while also employing situated responses that were appropriate for the context. Spradley suggests creating ethnographic questions that are descriptive (to learn the language of the informant), structural (to learn how informants organize their knowledge), and contrasting (to learn what an informant means by the various terms he or she utilizes). In both the focus groups and the individual interviews, I employed these various types of questions along with what Spradley calls "grand tour questions" (to elicit broad descriptions), "mini-tour questions" (to elicit descriptions of smaller aspects of an experience), "example questions" (to elicit explanations of experiences or terms used by the students), "experience questions" (to elicit stories of specific educational experiences), and "native-language questions" (to learn and understand commonly used terms and phrases of the students) (pp. 85-91).

## Analysis and Results

I transcribed the focus group and individual interview narratives and have kept a written journal based on my participant observations. The three types of narrative data provided the cross checks necessary in a triangulation process I utilized to ensure the validity and authenticity of the data patterns and resulting conclusions I drew from the data. I compared the narratives from the three sources of data with one another to check for patterns of experiences, consistency, and contradictions. I then categorized the data into common patterns of perspectives and experiences. I categorized the data by listing the observations, phrases, and terms that were similar and repeated throughout the data. Based on the theoretical framework I used to guide the research, I looked for observations, phrases, and terms that fell in line with concepts related to decolonization (Cook-Lynn, 2001; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004; Smith, 1999), connection to place (Cajete, 1999; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999), contribution to community (Cajete, 1994), and other references alluding to an Indigenized approach to education (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). I then looked for other observations, phrases, or terms that did not fit the theoretical concepts well. I categorized this data under the headings of “awareness,” “enlightenment,” and “motivation.” This type of coding system is based on the work of LeCompte & Schensul (1999), who demonstrate that the emergence of patterns from ethnographic data can occur when “the researcher is engaged in a systematic inductive thought process that clumps together individual items at the specific level into more abstract statements about the general characteristics of those items as a group” (p. 68). The categories, and then patterns, emerged from the data based on the frequency of the observations, phrases, and terms that were related to one another.

I found that the patterns of students’ experiences can be used to make three conclusions about the impact of NAS. These three areas show from the students’ point of view how NAS is influencing their educational experiences and life goals. The three conclusions are: **1) NAS is a home away from home.** NAS embodies home-like qualities and provides a way to learn more about home and family. It is a place where students can be comfortable and be themselves within the university environment. It provides the students with opportunities to be around other peers like themselves with common life experiences. It also provides a way for students to stay connected to a university Native community and indirectly to their own home communities. NAS helps students to connect the issues of study in their courses to their own experiences and realities of their home communities; **2) NAS broadens and enlightens students’ perspectives on Indigenous issues.** For many of the students, when they enrolled in NAS courses, it was the first time they learned in depth about the history and the current issues of their own nation and of other Native nations across the country. They learned about the similarities and complexities of colonization and its impact across Native communities. They were able to share insights, experiences, and opinions with one another on topics that most had not learned about in high school or in



other university courses; **3) NAS motivates students to pursue life goals dedicated to Indigenous issues, people, and communities.** The relevancy of the topics and issues to the students' lives helped to strengthen their connection (or reconnect for some) to Native communities. NAS strengthened their Native identity and sense of duty because of the importance of doing something positive for their own people, whether it is for their own Nation or for Indigenous people in general.

These three areas of impact all lend themselves to the promotion of commitment to community. The data reveals that NAS is providing a place for Native students to strengthen their connection to their self-defined Native community. Their experiences also motivate them to pursue goals dedicated to Indigenous issues, people, and communities. It appears that NAS has Indigenized education in the sense that the outcome of their experience in NAS, which the students express as their motivation to serve their communities, is a goal of Indigenous education as discussed by Cajete and Kawagley.

In the next section, I describe the students who were involved in the research followed by a discussion of the evidence from the data to demonstrate how the students revealed these three areas of impact. I primarily use quotes from the interview data to demonstrate this evidence, but I also use descriptions from my field notes. The quotes come from the focus groups and the individual interviews.

### Student Profiles

There were five females and two male students who participated in the focus group. There were also nine individual interviews with six females and three males. Their ages ranged from 19 to 29, with the exception of one participant who was 52. Most of the students attended college fulltime. Their academic majors were varied across disciplines and colleges in the university. Some of the degrees the students were pursuing were in political science, environmental science, nursing, business administration, pharmacy, communications, and history. The students held a common interest in NAS. Each of the students was working to earn a minor in NAS, which was the highest degree one could earn in NAS at the time of the focus group and interviews. However, once the Bachelor's degree in NAS was approved in December of 2004, five of the students planned to double major with an NAS degree as well.

The students grew up in very diverse ways as well. Several of the students were raised on the reservation of their home community and went to school there until college. Several other students were raised both on and off the reservation, going to school for their elementary and mid-school years on the reservation and then in urban cities for high school. A few students were raised entirely in urban cities.

### NAS is a Home Away From Home

The NAS department is located in one of the oldest buildings on Southwest University's campus. It has a lobby area, a classroom that accommodates 18

students, a small library, and three offices adjacent to the lobby. Down the hall outside the lobby are five more offices for faculty, adjunct instructors and program staff. Even in this limited space, NAS has become a central location for Native students and non-Native students in NAS to meet, study, take courses, and eat. The department staff and faculty began hosting several pot-luck feasts throughout the year for various holidays or special occasions. Over the last two years, student activity in the departmental offices has greatly increased, in large part due to the pot-luck meals. The feasts have served to unite students, staff, and faculty across the university and have renewed a communal spirit among those involved and interested in NAS. The students have reacted positively by taking initiative and ownership over the feasts. By spring of 2004, student groups organized the majority of the feasts. They planned, announced, and invited the Native community at the university to their feasts and continued to do so through the 2005-2006 academic year. This is indication of their desire to continue creating community and a home-like atmosphere at NAS.

Students have discussed this quality of atmosphere they perceive at NAS in their interviews and in their public comments. At a meeting initiated by the university to learn about Native student experiences and concerns, four students publicly stated that they enjoy spending time at NAS and taking NAS courses because the environment is comfortable for them. One student said she initially took an NAS course to meet other Native students. She continued to take further courses because of the great rapport between the professors and students. She felt NAS treated students respectfully in culturally appropriate ways. In other words, NAS validated her home-based values in the university setting.

During the interviews, a few students also referred more specifically to the home-like quality of NAS that nurtured their own growth. Frank,<sup>4</sup> a senior at SU who initially was pursuing (but also questioning) an electrical engineering degree, spoke about how the NAS courses' topics piqued his interest because of their relevancy to his life. He said, "The topics hit home. They were close to my heart and to home . . . NAS enriched and enticed my knowledge I learned from my dad. At the time I was questioning my place in the university, and I wanted to meet more Native people. The first NAS class I took was like going home. I enjoyed going there." His references to NAS being like home were numerous during his interview from the times he spoke of the course topics, to his father's teachings, to the connection of the content to his life.

Another student, a junior named Matt, experienced his first NAS class at this university during a summer program for which he worked as a residential assistant. He began reading the books assigned to the students in the program and found the classroom interactions especially riveting and home-like because of the nature of his relationship with the students. He said, "I really enjoyed how they (*the students*) talked about it and how they immersed themselves in it. I really enjoyed being among peers, who are younger, too." He felt he could relate and respect their perspectives and so he began to take more courses in NAS when the school year began. When I asked what his involvement in NAS had meant to him

personally, he said, “I feel like a whole new world has opened up to me. I have really embraced it. It’s a part of us.” The environment provided him and the other students a place to be themselves. NAS became a home away from home for Matt as he left the military and entered college. It reconnected him to other Native students and to a Native community on campus.

### NAS Broadens and Enlightens Students’ Perspectives on Native Issues

For many of the students I interviewed, the NAS courses they took at SU were the first time they felt they gained a critical perspective and broader awareness of the history of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Indigenous peoples from around the world. The courses and their experiences in NAS allowed them to view their own communities with this perspective and awareness. They came to a better understanding of the reasons behind the current realities of their communities and thus, came to appreciate and respect the resistance and resiliency of Native peoples. It enabled their own critical consciousness. The following quotes give examples of this broadening and enlightening of their perspectives.

In this first quote from a student named Kylie, she described her reasoning for taking NAS courses and for coming to college in general. She wanted to improve her own understanding of society, but it was also a way to combat the ignorance she viewed in mainstream society with regard to Indigenous people and issues.

For me and my tribe and growing up on the reservation, I don’t want to say Native people are disadvantaged because I don’t believe that, culturally I think we are really fortunate, but as far as the dominant society, there’s a lot of injustice there and there’s a lot things that I did for myself and that I acknowledge because I felt like I was in a way ignorant of a lot things and issues facing Native Americans and specifically my tribe and it just frustrates me right now like when you talk to someone and they don’t know anything. They just totally disrespect your life and are totally disrespectful of your history. I think that’s wrong, but for me I guess coming to school was in a way an effort to help my own ignorance, allowed me to gain knowledge and learn about the way of society so I can understand it better and how it affects us and how its going to affect my son and how it affects me now because I definitely do feel it everyday...but ultimately I didn’t come here to make money ...it’s not my goal, its more for my own knowledge and to eventually come back to my community and do something meaningful.

She acknowledged her own ignorance, along with the ignorance of the general society, to issues of Native people, and she wanted to use her education to grow and to contribute intellectually.

For another student, Neva, her participation in NAS improved her understanding of her own family, in ways that removed blame for what she saw as their faults. Instead, she was able to place her family’s experiences in the broader context of Native history and colonization.

My family (*referring to extended family*) has a lot of psychological problems and I used to, not look down on them, but I didn’t understand why...I didn’t

grow up with my family and I just used to look at them and feel “What’s wrong with them?” I didn’t understand why they acted the way they did. And I used to come back here every summer, and I used to blame them like they were crazy, or horrible. Once I came to college, I came to understand why they are that way, even my own parents, my mom and grandparents. I always loved them but I used to get really angry with them and wonder why they did what they did. It really took until my freshman year and coming here to understand why they are the way they are... When you’re here (*in NAS*) is when you start to understand colonization and the effects of being a second class citizen. How they (*the problems associated with colonization and 2nd class citizenry*) would keep coming back up generation after generation, it’s really hard to get rid of. Like how our parents, not that they don’t have control, but they’re kind of inhibited by their experiences I guess, at least for my mom. Coming here really helped me at that level, too, like in understanding my own family.

Neva’s enlightenment occurred when she realized how her college education in NAS has not only helped her understand the consequences of colonization, but how it directly affected her own family.

Frank made similar comments when he spoke about the affirmation he felt from his NAS courses in acknowledging the true sources of social and economic problems on reservations. He did not learn about the sources of these problems in high school and was enlightened when he took NAS courses.

I think it’s important, too, to understand that the problems that Native people deal with on reservations aren’t necessarily our fault. We were put in that situation by programs by the government so we could be that way. The poverty and everything that plague the reservation was put there on us and the thing is that dealing with self-esteem and all kinds of issues that Native Americans have to deal with on the reservation, I mean just to become aware of those things is really important because I didn’t become aware of those things until I got into higher education because going to high school there’s a lot of things out there they’re (*meaning high school*) not aware of.

Survival as Native people in Western society requires an understanding of the effects of colonization and improving awareness of oppression and injustice upon Native people. NAS is helping its students improve their knowledge of these issues from a Native and critical perspective.

### NAS Motivates Students to Pursue Life Goals Dedicated to American Indian/Alaska Native Issues, People, and Communities

Probably the most important finding for the future of Native nations is that NAS is inspiring students to pursue life goals and careers that will contribute to Native communities. Many Native students come to college with intentions to return and give back to their Native communities. The students referred to the importance of community in their lives, meaning the importance of the experiences they had in places they grew up or places that have meaning for them. They expressed that their identity was associated with those places, ranging from the students who grew up in one reservation community to those who grew up in urban areas. They

each described a place they identify with and that identification is essential for fostering commitment to community. It gives them a place to apply their knowledge and a place to contribute to and serve. NAS reinforces those goals and often inspires those goals among students who are unsure whether and how to contribute to their communities.

Through this reinforcement, NAS strengthened their identity by showing them ways to build on their relationships in their communities and to “feel” more Native. Marie, a sophomore, expressed this sentiment in her interview. She explained that she always wanted to contribute in some way to her community, but she felt she could not because she felt she was not strongly connected to her culture. NAS empowered her to feel like she can contribute. Marie said,

NAS introduced me to different aspects of ways I can feel like I’m Native American and I can do something for the communities. Not just for my tribe but for the whole Native American community. That’s what inspires me the most about NAS is that I can be involved in contemporary issues that affect us today.

Finding ways to become involved in Native communities was an outcome many students expressed in their interviews. One student I call Sara, who became very actively involved in NAS and student groups, spoke about her inspiration to give back to NAS because she appreciated that NAS provided her with opportunities to talk with other Native people about the complexity of being a Native person. She stated that there are so many facets involved in Native people’s lives. Because of that she said,

I want to be as careful and as prepared as I can be, and I feel like with this department, that’s what I’m ensuring, I’m constantly building, my life is like a building block and I’m brick laying. That inspires me to want to give back to the department. I want to give back and contribute for how much I’ve grown.

She further explained this personal growth when she said that NAS has helped her to decolonize and deprogram. In speaking about whether or not to capitalize the letter “I” in the word “Indigenous” on a poster, she said,

I’m capitalizing it because this is how I want to be recognized. I’m not using a lower case ‘i’. We’re asserting our Indigeneity. We’re decolonizing and reinventing ourselves. That’s what I’m doing at the university, I’m reinventing myself, I’m deprogramming everything that has been so well embedded in my brain.

Her experiences not only inspired her commitment to Native issues and communities, but it also strengthened her sense of self as a Native woman. Her life goals are to serve her Native nation in the field of law, particularly relating to issues surrounding natural resources.

The impact of NAS courses has also been apparent with first year students. In a summer program where first year students took NAS courses and specifically learned about building Native nations, several expressed their enlightenment with

the history and current needs of their own communities' and with Native America in general. A few of their comments demonstrate this impact:

- o This course made me want to give a second thought on coming back to work for my tribe, whereas before, working for my tribe had no interest to me. I now feel that if I put work into it, I can help my tribe in the long run.
- o The exciting part about Nation building is actually getting to experience first hand what our tribal government has to do and that my decisions may be instrumental in future decisions of other Native Nations.
- o The course has enhanced my understanding of Native Americans. I know now what is important and how we can help as far as politics, government, culture, and governing our tribe. I have a more better understanding and different views and aspects of Native Americans and events that take place in Indian Country...I have more motivation and inspiration to finish college and help out my tribe.

I have observed the influence of NAS on students' commitment to community. Over the last two years, the student groups that were formed out of NAS have increased their activism toward community concerns. They have participated in aiding Hurricane Katrina victims; they have become involved in a local issue to protect the Petroglyph National Monument (a sacred site among Native people in the area) from city road development; and they have demonstrated on behalf of the San Francisco Peaks (a sacred mountain for several Native nations) from a plan to use waste water for artificial snow for a ski resort. This sort of activism is not uncommon among student groups, but my observations are that at SU, it has increased significantly and coincided with the growth of the department and the Bachelor's degree program.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The focus group and individual interviews demonstrate that NAS can provide a means to provide a home away from home, enlighten one's perspective, define one's goals, and empower one with confidence to achieve their goals. The students each shared stories of their personal gain from educational experiences within NAS that motivated them to achieve academically and that inspired them to use their knowledge to benefit Native people. They also showed that a Native identity is not necessarily a predictor in developing one's desire to commit to their community, but instead, that relationship is more indirect and needs to be stimulated in the individual. In other words, to have a Native identity does not ensure one will develop commitment to community. At the same time, the students expressed how service to community is an inherent value among Native people when they discussed their own family's and community's encouragement for them to contribute back to their community in some way. The students asserted that they developed a foundation of their values from their family, community, and through their identification with a Native sense of self. But, it was their individual educational experiences that stimulated their personal value to lead a life that is committed

to community. They felt the first step in realizing their goals was to become educated at the college level.

The perpetuation of Native culture is of concern to the students and demonstrates their interest and motivation to use their college education as a way to help protect Native sovereignty, which includes protection of traditional culture. That interest in a positive quality of life for Native people is significant for inspiring students' to commit to community. Educators could direct students' concern for quality of life into positive action by encouraging them to take on life goals that demonstrate commitment to community and improve or sustain quality of life.

As the students described their experiences in NAS, this program made direct connections for the students between their personal lives, their community, and the curriculum. These sort of connections are not only important for fostering commitment to community, they are important for promoting Native self-determination in education and for Indigenizing education, as discussed by Deloria and Wildcat (2001). In addition, it provides an example of effective education for Native student populations.

The students' descriptions of their own enlightenment and empowerment from their experience in NAS are also significant for realizing a goal of Indigenous education, as described by Cajete (1994). He discussed that goal as the development of men and women who understand their interrelation with the natural world and who contribute to the well-being of their community. Students who are committed to their communities are the next stewards of our Native Nations.

A question the students raised as to specifically how Native students can learn to contribute to and serve their communities is an important one. This point stimulates the need for further exploration and research to understand what sets apart those students who express goals of contribution from those who actually act out goals and pursue a life committed to their community. The politics involved in returning to one's Native community after college are complex and were not overlooked by the students in the study. Frank articulated this complexity well. He spoke about how it is difficult for both the tribal community and the Native student to "go back" to their community to be of service. He said,

With the injustices that happened, who wouldn't want to help out? You'd be heartless to not even think that you'd want to help out. It's just that a lot of people don't know how, there's not enough facilitation as far as how you can do that. And even tribes don't necessarily have the ability to use college students because they (*college students*) go back and you have no way of using your knowledge, because then people are jealous of your knowledge. Then they think you're trying to be somebody else or they call you an apple because you don't speak necessarily they way they do. I mean it's just real difficult in that sense because once you experience that growth; it's hard to go back. You want to but it's difficult because you've changed as far as the way you are.

Frank's comment alludes to the need for understanding the role of NAS as a means to pass on Indigenous knowledge. Can NAS uphold the integrity of Indigenous knowledge? A college degree in Native studies may validate that knowledge, but is it useful in our communities for addressing their needs? NAS at SU is trying to make that important connection between academic curriculum, Indigenous knowledge, and community need. But, the politics of what counts as knowledge in higher educational institutions in our country can interfere with that process. In other words, if the university system does not acknowledge and support Native studies as a rigorous, legitimate, and valid academic discipline with goals that include service to community, our students' aspirations for committing to their communities might be thwarted. Successfully promoting commitment to community through higher education necessitates the university's respect and support for those goals, and it may require structural reform where that respect and support does not exist. In any case, it is the duty of the University and respective NAS departments who intend to play a role in inspiring our students to become committed to their communities to play an active part in re-immersing our students back into their communities. We cannot expect them to traverse that terrain alone. As Frank noted, students and tribal communities have difficulty in understanding how to apply their expertise. The future of our Native Nations depends on not only inspiring Native students to commit to their communities and to Native America, but it also depends on creating competent, confident, and creative students who are aware of the difficulties involved in "going back" and are willing to challenge and overcome them.

**Tiffany S. Lee** (Diné/Lakota) is from Crystal, New Mexico, located on the Navajo Nation. She is Dibé {izhiní (Blacksheep) and born for Naa[aní (Lakota). She received her doctorate in Sociology of Education from Stanford University's School of Education. Her research focuses on Indigenous education and language socialization experiences. In particular, she studies *Indigenous Learning Communities* and their influences on Native students' life goals and commitment to their Native communities. She also investigates language socialization, language pedagogy, and the effects of competing language ideologies on Native students' commitment to (re)learning their heritage languages. She is currently an assistant professor in Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>A pseudonym for the university.

<sup>2</sup>JAIE's policy is to use the term *American Indian* instead of *Native American*, thus my paper primarily utilizes this term to refer to Indigenous peoples of the United States, not including Alaska or Hawaii. However, I use the term *Indigenous* to refer to the broader communities of Indigenous people worldwide and to speak to specifically Indigenous-based philosophies and practices in education that are not located in western academic institutions. I also capitalize the word *Native* and *Indigenous* as this falls in line with the United Nations' and many Native academics' usage of the terms. Referring to *Native* and



to *Indigenous* as proper nouns is a way to acknowledge and respect Indigenous peoples' existence as political entities with claims to ancestral homelands.

<sup>3</sup>I use the term *community* broadly to encompass tribal, reservation based communities, urban communities, or Native organizations. The term is also based on the student participants' usage of the term. It is grounded in students' definitions of what constitutes their community. In general, when students discussed *community* they were referring to two contexts for Native communities in which they can belong simultaneously: One being the place Native students call home, their particular tribal community, which may be a reservation, a smaller community within a reservation, or an urban community for urban Native students. The second way it is used is in relation to the larger Native American community across the country that Native students belong to as well. Thus, Native community is in relation to one's community of their heritage and place called home and the national Native American community.

<sup>4</sup>I use pseudonyms for each of the student's quoted in the article.

<sup>5</sup>All italics embedded in quotes from students are my words and used for clarification.

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