Identifying and Understanding Indigenous Cultural and Spiritual Strengths in the Higher Education Experiences of Indigenous Women

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about how American Indians have the highest dropout rates at all educational levels and are the least represented population in higher education. Moreover, of those American Indian students who do graduate from high school and enroll in college, between 75 and 93 percent will leave college without completing their degree or education.1 Within the Native population itself, Indian women graduate from high school significantly less frequently than Indian men, and consequently may enroll at a much lower rate in most higher education institutions.2 However, there are American Indian women who do enroll and earn higher education degrees. What enables them to achieve “against the odds”? What cultural resources do they use to overcome personal challenges in their lives and immense barriers of historical trauma, cultural discontinuity, institution and societal racism, gender bias, and deplorable socioeconomic conditions?

Historically, the stories and experiences of Native women, especially in the realm of higher education, have been virtually invisible to the majority culture. Very little, if any, validity has been given to Indian women’s voices or contributions to the world. Similarly, in much
of the historical and educational literature and materials found in the majority culture, if Indian women are mentioned at all, they are usually misrepresented and their traditional roles are misunderstood.

This study seeks to increase the visibility of Native women in higher education by giving voice to those who have been silenced, misrepresented, or ignored. Contained in this article are the voices of eight Anishinabe, Lakota, and Mohawk women who tell their stories of their higher education experiences and describe the strengths found in their cultures and the spirituality that enabled them to “beat the odds of failure” and achieve their goals in the face of tremendous obstacles. Their voices and their stories answer the previous questions from an empowered perspective. These women and their community members explain how they succeeded and, most importantly, why.

**BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

As a Native researcher, I explored how Native women identify and understand the spiritual and cultural factors that enabled them to attain their higher education goals. I developed and utilized a Native research methodology for this study based on the Medicine Wheel, discussed below in the methodology section, which was constructed as an intrinsic Indigenous research paradigm and used as a process for identifying and understanding these spiritual and cultural factors.3

This study focuses on eight participants from tribes Indigenous to the north central region of the United States. At the time of the study, seven of the participants were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student. The participants and others who were involved in this study were chosen through traditional spiritual and cultural practices and methods. Due to the small sample size, the results of the study are not reflective of Indian Country as a whole, or of the tribal college and university systems. Because only a few members of the respective tribes participated in this study, the results are not reflective of other women tribal members.

**ASSUMPTION OF THE STUDY**

The assumption of this study is that internal resilient resources existing within Native women enable them to overcome the staggering “odds” confronting them in the higher educational system of the majority culture. These cultural and spiritual strengths have enabled Native peoples to survive genocide in its spiritual, cultural, social, emotional, mental, and physical manifestations. With these inherent cultural and spiritual strengths fostering resiliency, fortitude, and courage among Indian peoples in general, Native women in their quest for higher educational degrees have the ability to prevail when encountering cultural discontinuity, socioeconomic barriers, and other forms of adversity.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Terry Huffman’s “Resistance Theory and Transculturation Hypothesis” describes how some Native students in higher education succeed in achieving their goals of obtaining a degree within the dominant culture’s educational system. Huffman describes several stages that Native students experience in entering and coping with higher education systems in the majority culture. The first stage is the cultural discontinuity that is present in the higher education experience of Native students, resulting in emotional and physical alienation from the institution and its faculty. Some Native students in Huffman’s study terminated their pursuit of higher education (i.e., they dropped out), while others opted to “reach back” and draw upon their spiritual and cultural strengths to cope with the cultural discontinuity, continuing their education, and eventually graduating. In other words, these Native students found that using the spiritual and cultural strengths that have sustained Native Nations through genocide, psychological colonization, erosion of Native identity, and cultural invalidation are what sustained them in their higher education experience in the dominant culture. Drawing upon the conceptual framework from Huffman’s work, the purpose of this study is to understand and describe the truths about cultural and spiritual strengths that provide the foundation and resiliency factors necessary for American Indian women to enroll in a college or university and complete a higher education experience.

METHODOLOGY

Unlike most research models used in academia, the Medicine Wheel Culturally Intrinsic Research Paradigm Model is congruent with Native realities, worldviews, traditional value systems, and spiritual experiences. It is neither a quantitative nor a qualitative methodology. Rather, it is born out of Indigenous thought and perspectives and is culturally relevant for research involving Native peoples and issues. Traditional spiritual practices such as ceremony, consultation with Medicine people, and the offering of tobacco were included in the creation process of the paradigm model, and also utilized with its applied methodology.

I consulted with three spiritual leaders (two men and a woman), and a substantial number of community members to develop this model. My inspiration was the Medicine Wheel Model developed by Kibbe Conti, Lakota health professional, who consulted with a Medicine man for its spiritual foundation. Within this model, the east is associated with knowledge, the south with community, the west with experience, and the north with expression. The Medicine Wheel Model, structured within the sacred Four Directions, symbolizes the dynamic and
transforming experiences within ourselves and others in ways that are relevant to our Indigenous identity and sovereignty. This knowledge is transformed through its connection with the spiritual aspects of community into individual and group experiences. Through expression, our individual and combined gifts, knowledge, and experiences may be used for the benefit of the continued life of our Indigenous nations.

In this study, individual interviews, both written and oral, also were conducted in 2002–2003 with the participants. Peer and member checking of the information was used to validate the findings. The researcher assured all participants in the study that information about tribal groups, individual reservations, community locations, and individual colleges would not be released as some tribes have encountered stereotyping as a result of the release of survey data in other research projects.

DATA ANALYSIS AND COLLECTION PROCESS AS CONTEXT FOR RESULTS

In analyzing the data collected, within the context of the Medicine Wheel Model, four related clusters of information emerged. The information was neither linear nor compartmentalized, instead having more of a spiral shape encompassing individual women’s perspectives interwoven with stories and contributions by elders, a medicine man, and spiritual leaders.

In the data collection process, participants spent a considerable amount of time in reflection. During this process, I also spent much time reflecting on the information provided by the participants, which I found to be invaluable to the analysis process. As a result, I came to a better understanding and grew in my ability to interpret the subsequent responses provided by the participants. As in many Native cultures, time for reflection is often seen as a spiritual practice contributing to the development of understanding. Consequently, I came away viewing the data differently than I would have if I had taken it at “face value” and not spent considerable time employing my own spiritual practices in reflection to be able to “see” all facets of the information. In addition, member and peer checking was undertaken during the analysis incrementally as part of the reflection process, as well as a key component of a summative review at the completion of the analysis and interpretation process.

The various clusters of data that emerged as a result of the analysis process are not distinct or isolated from one another. Rather, each cluster overlaps and interconnects with other clusters. Frequently, such overlapping was considerable. For instance, cultural and spiritual strengths are not often differentiated, since Native cultures and spiritualities are fundamentally interconnected.
In addition, I found that interwoven within the clusters were themes that share a commonality within individual tribal values and perspectives. Each cluster is discussed in detail, and individual quotations are used to illustrate the interpretations of the researcher and to provide authentic voice here for the participants.

**IDENTIFIED CLUSTERS**

Four clusters of internally related themes were found through the data analysis process regarding the success of the participants in earning their degrees. Each cluster and its related themes are presented individually.

**Cluster 1: Spirituality as the Main Strength for Native Women Completing a Higher Education Experience**

Every participant identified spirituality as a main strength that contributed to their successful completion of a higher education experience; however, the identification and use of spirituality as a main strength was not limited to obtaining a college degree or completing educational goals. *Spirituality is an entire way of being: the way to experience reality and the world.* Within this reality, the higher education experience was seen as part of life’s journey—not the journey itself. Spirituality is the context for all of life, and all of life’s events and unfoldings. As the participant Native women seek to sustain themselves throughout their lives in every way, the practice of their spirituality permeates all that they do. As with other aspects of their lives, when faced with internal and external challenges during their higher education experiences, they relied upon their primary strength to overcome any difficulty or adversity.

One theme that became visible in studying this cluster was the individualization of ways in which Native women experience their spirituality. Individual women’s ways of connecting with a power or powers greater than themselves varied, depending on their tribal and cultural affiliations, individual interpretations, and practices. Another theme found within this cluster was the consistent connection with spirituality as defined in context by relating to or having conscious awareness of connecting to a power or powers greater than oneself. This was evident in the women’s daily spiritual practices. When asked about their spirituality in relationship to their higher education experiences, the participant Native women responded in the following ways. According to an Anishinabe woman:

> As an Anishinabe (Ogiichidaakwe-warrior woman), I have been blessed with my spirituality as the backbone of my every move. There is nothing you cannot accomplish if you move forward with the Creator as your guide. I am an
Ogiichidaakwe on our Chi Diwegan (Big Drum).
I live each Day with the Creator's closeness and guidance.
I often refer to my life as the Path described to me on an
Eagle Feather. I was told that this Feather—that I was
blessed with through a dream—has my life on it. I pray
each day and give thanks to the Creator by offering my
tobacco and thanking him for yet another Day and my
health, strength, and life.6

A Lakota woman responded:

The first time I went to a ceremony I saw what it can do.
Every morning I give thanks; every evening I give thanks.
I am a Lakota Wiyan so I do it because I want to do it; no
one outside of me has me do it. Indian women use their
spirituality as strength for themselves. When I Sun Dance,
I receive help, and with the help I receive, I give thanks.7

Another Anishinabe Ogiichidaakwe stated:

I pray to the Creator when I am happy, when I am lonely,
when I am afraid, when things are stressful in my life. The
Creator is so close and hears my prayers. My Elders always
say, "Be careful for what you ask for." And by that they
mean you might get it and then realize that it really wasn't
what you wanted or needed. Be patient, listen to your
spirit helpers and they will guide you. I ask for help and
answers and I am never misled or steered down the wrong
path, because the Creator will guide me as long as I am
respectful, honest and living my life as a true Anishinabe
Ogiichidaakwe. I must accept the Creator's guidance and
always do what my heart tells me.8

Relative to the Medicine Wheel Model, the themes within this cluster
have an affinity with all aspects of the model. For example, the partici-
pants often cited that the knowledge they received came from spiri-
tual avenues, became "real" in terms of shaping itself into a vision, often
aided by human and nonhuman entities (community). Through this
process, validation of life directions through the aspect of community
was experienced and internalized to promote inner strength as a fac-
tor contributing to the success of Native women in higher education.
Expressing this perception, a Mohawk woman stated:

I was trained as a child that God loves me and delights in
giving me wisdom. Prayer got me through. I draw all my
strength from God, the Creator. My family members—those who have gone before me—came at my most difficult moments. I felt them in the room with me, my great aunt and my great-grandmother. I maintain my spiritual connection consistently. I cannot survive without it. It [getting a degree] is a spiritual battle, not about writing a paper. It is all on a spiritual level. It will bring out what you believe and who you are. I had many midwives as part of the process. Some foretold it that it was mine when I only had a vision.9

An Anishinabe woman put it this way:

As in higher education, as in every aspect of my life, when I have questions or problems I will ask a spiritual leader or utilize the Jiisikan (Shaking Tent Ceremony) to obtain guidance and answers. These answers come straight through the spirits to me.10

A Mohawk woman noted:

Without my spiritual way of being I would not have finished this degree because I knew it was not an intellectual challenge per se, even though it was quite vigorous, but a spiritual challenge/battle. The hope and support I received from those who stood in the gap for me enabled me to finish. Daily I drew on the strength that can only come from the inner place of one’s being.11

Cluster 2: The Higher Education Experience Is Perceived through Traditional Cultural Stories, Images, and Metaphors

Often perceiving their higher education experience within a spiritual context, the participants used various tribally based metaphors, images, and aspects of traditional stories as a cultural strength of inspiration and guidance. Although expressed in different ways, these metaphors are connected to tribal cultural traditions. These metaphors served as an anchor or “grounding point” that enabled them to access inner spiritual resources to retain identification with traditional Native ways of being. An example of this point is illustrated by the following responses of two women. A Lakota woman stated,

Growing up, it was instilled in me and I don’t know who told me but I always kept this phrase in my mind and it
sustained me and helped me with obstacles in my life. It was said that Sitting Bull said it, “When you are traveling down the white man’s road you will find good and bad things, pick up only the good things and leave the bad things alone.”

Similarly, a Mohawk woman put it this way:

When you feel like you are getting weary from the process, just stand to your feet and dance for thanksgiving. As we celebrate and give thanks to God the battle is won. I often play music in my home pick up my shawl and dance and feel renewed. Sometimes I just sing or just dance.

Another theme that emerged within this cluster was the participants’ connection to Native perceptions of community. As reflected within the Medicine Wheel Model, their definition of community pertains not only to human beings, but also includes nonhuman entities such as spirits. The spirits appear in the forms of ancestors, the animal Nations, or other forms. Spiritual strengths identified by the participants were often grounded in tribal cultural traditions, images, and metaphors related to receiving assistance and support from the spirits.

One participant responded to an inquiry regarding the use of traditional cultural images in attaining her college degree by sending a drawing of an eagle feather. At the base of the eagle feather were colors, representing “the Spirits that are present in my life.” The base of the feather itself was described as her family, and the quill stemming from the base symbolized her journey or “road of sobriety.” The rough edges of the feather were denoted to signify troublesome times in her life and the smooth edges, the “good times.” A “break” in the feather’s layers meant that she had “strayed from the road and had made not so good or healthy a decision or choice. But they [the parts of the feather] come together and I get on the right road and it is smooth again.”

Responding to this aspect of the study by relating her educational and spiritual experience to what she would tell other women in pursuing a higher education goal, a spiritual leader declared:

Be who you are. Look, don’t quit. Look, don’t quit. Look around you. Look at alternatives. If you cannot go over it [an obstacle] can you go around it? When you encounter barriers and problems, pray and pray and you’ll get over it. There was a man who treated me bad at school. He was a teacher who gave all Indians a hard time. He condemned them. I prayed and prayed to Tunkasila [the Grandfathers]. I let it go and walked away [from the problem]. People
helped me when I was scared and hurting. I return that by helping others. Like at the Sun Dance. You go in with a pure mind. You are not supposed to push anyone away. My camp is a free camp. I forgive them others who come into the camp and want to show their richness. They were materialistic. Like in school, when I encountered problems, I said a silent prayer, I kept silent unless they asked me a question. I helped others make it through the day. Then, know that whatever will happen, will happen.15

Another woman shared several metaphors related to her sense of Native community as she went through graduate school and achieved a degree:

I considered the birds who are cared for by the Creator. Many times I considered the hawk that lives in the back of my home. There were many moments when I would see her flying or dream dreams about specific hawks. Strength would come. Peace would come. There were many times when I did not know as a single mother how I would fund yet another trip to the University of XXX from XXX or how I would pay tuition for yet another term. The money came, the trips were paid for and tuitions too. My Dad shared with me before he made his transition [passed away]. He told me to be more like a porcupine—stick them before they stick you. Mom gave me a porcupine necklace complete with beans. Lastly, turtles. Among my people we believe that the earth was founded on the back of a large turtle upon which Sky Woman descended to earth with the help of many. Turtles are hard on the outside and soft on the inside. They know how to take solace in their shells and at the same time support life. Porcupines are gentle until danger is near and the quills are presented.16

Responses also included drawing inspiration from Native Nations other than one’s own tribe. An Anishinabe participant found strength in her higher education experience by looking to the history of the Lakota Nation.

Although I am Ojibwe, I have always been strengthened by the Sioux people who have never signed a Treaty with the U.S. government and really never gave up the Black Hills, their “sacred ground.” I have always been strengthened by this knowledge that with all the power and force the U.S. government exerted over our people, these people held their sacred land as more valuable to them
than the almighty $. To me this says even the tiniest nation can stand strong and endure against all odds and in my education experiences I have faced many odds but I have always been strengthened by this historical fact and it motivated me in hard times.17

Cluster 3: Traditional Native Roles of Women as Definition of Identity and Cultural Strength

Another cluster that emerged during the analysis process was the participants’ identification of a cultural strength by the participants found in the traditional Native roles of women in their tribal cultures. The definitions of the roles varied by tribe, but almost all of the participants felt a tremendous sense of identity that was directly and completely linked to their Native sense of womanhood.

In the Ojibwe culture, Ogitchidawque (warrior women) were considered the decision makers in the community. I believe that since we have been forced to become a part of the dominant culture we must integrate the use of “their” tools to remain strong decision makers and that tool is “education.”18

An elder presented this information about the traditional roles of Native women, stating:

Our society is based on Unci. Grandmother is everything. Everything comes from Unci—knowledge, skills, abilities, experience. There is not a word in mainstream society that describes this. The closest would be the matriarch system. Our leadership comes from our Grandmothers. Our educational process was done by women. Our food, knowledge and skills come from Mother Earth. The one person in any extended family who is dominant in making decisions is the woman; the grandmothers. Leadership has been the historical role of women. During the Reorganization Act [the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934], the men took it over. It wasn’t their historical role in this way. Everything was done by the final consent of the women. Women ran the centers of the society. The men provided in other ways. Women were the ones that controlled, managed and budgeted the resources of the community.19
A Medicine man consulted as a part of my research explains other strengths found in the traditional roles of women:

As an Indian woman, you are strong for the People. People come to learn from you. People come to lean on you when they have problems. You educate them through wisdom—through storytelling. Indian women encourage everyone. They live by the Four Virtues. Generally, women are braver than men, they can stand more pain. They give life to the next generations. They can give health, help, wisdom, and encouragement in overcoming situations. As far as particular women things are concerned, you must talk to my wife. It is not my place. She knows about those things. It is her experience.20

Describing how a tribal college recognized the strengths in the traditional roles of Native women within the community and is starting to implement them into curriculum and programming within the higher education setting, an elder maintained:

We found a lot of women being involved with business management courses and human resource management programming. The correlation is there between the focus of these programs and the traditional roles of women. The integration of traditional leadership and business courses in XXX [reservation] is why the Masters courses are succeeding with Indian women. A lot of Indian women have taken this program at XXX College. We need to put a lot of thought into how to institute across the curriculum these traditional strengths of the women’s roles. A lot of Indian women are going into business now—this is going back to their traditional roles of resource management. This is a reason why Indian men don’t go to tribal colleges as much as the women—historically, women were the leaders in this way.21

Drawing on the strengths existing within their traditional roles as Native women, the participants expressed a powerful sense of purpose and commitment to achieve their higher education goals. They felt a deep, culturally based obligation to help others and to contribute to their communities by giving back for what they had received. In giving back to their Native communities and knowing that they had made a substantial contribution, these women achieved a greater sense of purpose.
Cluster 4: Family Loyalty

Another cluster, family loyalty, was the foundation for this powerful sense of purpose. Overwhelmingly, the participants voiced that the commitment to achieve a higher education degree was for the benefit of their family, and they tied this objective directly to the traditional roles of women as wives, mothers, grandmothers, and keepers of the Nation. Unlike some majority culture perspectives in which family devotion needs to be reduced in order for one to complete a college degree, the participants viewed their family devotion as a source of strength. On this matter, a Lakota female elder shared her views:

My children, and now, my grandchildren are the center of my life. All of my decisions are based on where that may take me and if it is away from my family I choose not to pursue that. In white society, they say number one is you. Your family should be number one. I [would] rather be me, in rags or riches as long as I am loved by my family. I set myself a goal. I went to college to be an example for my children and grandchildren.22

This cultural strength provided a resiliency factor when making difficult decisions relating to their academic experience. In addition, the theme of family loyalty was illustrated in the context of decision making regarding difficult choices in academic experience. Some of the participants expressed that, if put into a position where one had to choose between the higher education requirements and devotion to family, family always came first. This was another powerful way in which Native women contributed to their families and communities while in college. A courageous example of this theme of selfless contribution is illustrated in a story told by a woman who was completing her doctoral degree while facing a difficult challenge, stating:

My dad [passed away] during a time when I was told by my committee, “Complete the dissertation by December. You will not have another extension.” My contract said no PhD, no job. I had to place my family responsibilities first. I learned that family truly has to come first and it did. My dad did not forget me and came to me in a dream. Long story short, at that critical moment I learned I am truly not my position or my degrees. I am XXX, the person the Creator intended me to be. I will continue with or without these things and life will be good. The more I let go the more I receive. There is a doctor in the house—as my Mother likes to share with folks who think that hope is not
alive and we [Indian women] are not able to do anything but keep their children and clean their homes, and I remind her the best is yet to come. It has been good to relive this knowing that it might in some way help another.23

Within the majority culture, family loyalty is often not seen as a strength to utilize in promoting efforts of recruiting and retaining Native students. Sometimes family loyalty is misunderstood and seen as a “barrier” for Native women to “overcome” in pursuing a higher education goal. Tribal college leaders, however, are looking at this cultural strength of using one’s own gifts, talents, and strength to contribute to one’s family and community as a support in retention efforts. Expressing this view, a tribal college leader declared:

Since we are a small university, we really know our students. We try to help them with their disadvantages, and it is not always money. A lot of the time it is their home life—addiction there. Mostly it is single parents that come [to college] because they want a better life for their children, and they see education can do that. One strength that we are trying to use and develop for our university is that of family loyalty. It is very strong among people here. Whatever situation a family member is in, the other family members help. We are trying to use family loyalty by getting one through school, and then others will follow.24

Cumulative Experience of “Self-Discovery” Within a Spiritual Perspective

Throughout the analysis process, I discovered that some of the participants came to a sense of self-discovery about their abilities and capacities with regard to completing a higher education experience. This phenomenon was congruent in some degree with the self-discovery of one’s Native identity as described by Huffman.25 Although Huffman’s study was not gender specific, and the participants did not say that they had experienced the stages outlined by Huffman, certain aspects of the self-discovery experience were similar. The similarities included the solidification of accessing one’s inner resources as a “stronghold” for endurance and security, and a profound awareness that one did not have to assimilate to complete a higher education goal. For the participants, the process of self-discovery was “gentler” in a tribal college setting. Elements in the tribal college setting inherently supported the
attachment to Native identity and values as sources of inner strength and security for Native women and others. In turn, Native women contributed their strengths and inner gifts to the tribal college community and their Nations. One of the participants shared that she learned about her culture, spirituality, and strengths as a Native woman for the first time in a tribal college, as this type of culturally relevant education was not available to her or her parents as she grew up:

I should also add that a benefit of attending this tribal college is that I finally learned extensively about my history, culture and language. This was never taught in my early education, not from the boarding schools I resisted, not even from my family who was educated through the same process as me. Now that we are all adults, I am also learning my own family history—from my family too. Now I feel I have some positive tools to face my future. Just knowing where I came from, and knowing the path and the sacrifices my ancestors made so we may live. I feel I [have] a purpose in life and need to give back to my culture. So I am directing my career in that area.26

The most striking aspect of this phenomenon was the experience of the participants in relying on a sense of community as a cultural strength in the self-discovery process. Receiving support from other Native people, the spirits, ancestors, and other Native students provided additional validation and security for the participants to move forward in their higher education experiences. Only the participants in tribal colleges shared that faculty were part of this community that they used in their self-discovery process. Often, faculty who were Native, teaching Native students, or in tribal colleges provided the role modeling necessary for the participants to have the courage to discover their own inner strengths and security in their Native identity. However, even for the participants who did not have these role models through faculty, other Native community members provided support. One woman shared how the process of self-discovery was like “giving birth” to herself in a new way, and how community members helped her. This self-discovery was linked to traditional cultural aspects of womanhood within Native spirituality.

I had many midwives as part of this process. Some held my hand. Some sang to me. Some talked tough love and responsibility for the gift. Some reminded me to laugh. Some let me cry my heart. Some hurt me. Some smiled. Some screamed “Push!”27
CONCLUSION

Interwoven through the results of this study was one universal principle that evidenced itself repeatedly through all communications and participation endeavors by the participants. As viewed through the prism of the Medicine Wheel Model, it permeated all aspects of knowledge acquisition, vision, experience, expression, connection with community, and interpretation of the journey in higher education by the participants. This universal principle was love.

Love was defined within the cultural context of giving of oneself to others, connecting with others, and being part of a larger whole. This larger whole took the shape of a Nation, of a tribe. In all cases, the participants consented to participate in this study because of one motivating factor: that their experiences could help other Native peoples, especially Native women. This love was not defined by majority culture views, but was culturally grounded in Native traditions. It was simple and powerful in form. The participants voiced that in loving, one became more of oneself in the purpose of serving others. They saw their education and educational goals as a part of loving others, in that it could provide help to other Native people, especially their children and other family members. Only by connecting with a power or powers greater than themselves, relying on community, and understanding their own inner resources—founded upon traditional Native roles and strengths of womanhood—could one truly give to others. This was also a means for the Native women to give themselves validity, importance, and significance and to contribute to their communities. In these acts of loving both themselves and others, they defied the spiritual, cultural, social, emotional, mental, and physical genocide which has affected them as members of Native Nations.

A woman discussed the universal motivating principle of love found throughout the clusters and themes in the following way:

If you love a life of service and charity you will be led. If you live selfishly and choose not to be of service you won’t be led because there isn’t a connection to God in that way—you’ve cut off that connection and you are lost. If you look at our culture, it is all about service. People who love like this are blessed by God and their words are given wisdom. You will be given more if you are genuine, if you serve others. If you don’t, what you have will be taken from you. We’re given choices all the time about good and bad. If you are on the Red Road, the responsibility for choosing service becomes greater. I knew that I could serve the People better with greater education.28
The essential quality of love as a cultural and spiritual strength is also found in the words of Geswanouth Slahoot (Chief Dan George), a chief of the Tsleil-Waututh, a Salish First Nations People:

Love is something you and I must have. We must have it because our spirit feeds upon it. We must have it because without it we become weak and faint. Without love our self-esteem weakens. Without it our courage fails. Without love we can no longer look confidently at the world. We turn inward and begin to feed upon our own personalities, and little by little we destroy it ourselves. With it we are creative. With it we march tirelessly. With it, and with it alone, we are able to sacrifice for others.29

In summary, the results of this study showed that the cultural and spiritual strengths of Native women completing a higher education experience were grounded in their sense of reliance on a power or powers greater than themselves. These strengths manifested themselves in forms that were tribally congruent with Native value systems and definitions of reality. Utilization of these strengths was the core and primary means whereby the participants achieved their goals. Congruent with Huffman’s theory, this sense of “Indianness” was not transferred into them by external sources, but was a result of self-discovery within a Native cultural context. Throughout the process of completing a higher education experience, the participant’s sense of purpose was a commitment to their Nations, their people, and their families. This sense of love for their people and for their families enabled them to move beyond the “odds” and make the impossible possible.

NOTES

2 Ibid., 4. The assumption that Indian women may enroll at a lower rate in most higher education institutions because of lower high school graduation rates is mine.
3 The Medicine Wheel Culturally Intrinsic Research Paradigm Model was developed in 2002.
5 Ibid.
6 Anishinabe woman 1, personal interview and correspondence (Spring 2003).
7 Lakota female elder and spiritual leader, personal conversation (Spring 2003).
8 Anishinabe woman 2, personal conversation and correspondence (Spring 2003).
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<td>25 Terry Huffman, “Resistance Theory.”</td>
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<td>26 Lakota woman 1, personal interview (Spring 2003).</td>
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<td>28 Ibid.</td>
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