The journey towards critical self-authorship for Native lacrosse athletes at NCAA division I institutions.

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THE JOURNEY TOWARDS CRITICAL SELF-AUTHORSHIP FOR NATIVE LACROSSE ATHLETES AT NCAA DIVISION I INSTITUTIONS

By

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M.S., University of Louisville, 2014

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ABSTRACT

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS CRITICAL SELF-AUTHORSHIP FOR NATIVE LACROSSE ATHLETES AT NCAA DIVISION I INSTITUTIONS

Brandon C. Joseph

December 7, 2021

This dissertation is an examination of contemporary collegiate lacrosse as a symptom of settler colonialism and the experiences of Native lacrosse athletes at NCAA Division I historically white institutions. It begins with a brief historical overview of Native lacrosse and Native education through a lens of settler colonial theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory. It uses Critical Indigenous Research Methods to examine the experiences of contemporary Native collegiate lacrosse players and their journey towards critical self-authorship.

The ultimate goal was to explore the extent to which Native lacrosse athletes felt they could show up as their authentic Native self in both their lacrosse programs and academic learning environments. Using the conversational method, participants shared stories about their experiences as collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. Findings addressed the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse players at NCAA Division I historically white institutions. Each participant shared stories introducing their unique journey to becoming a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete. Subsequently, themes emerged across participant stories as they shared about experiences in their collegiate lacrosse program and learning environment.
The stories and themes represent the journey towards critical self-authorship for these collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. The seven main themes are as follows, along with their subthemes: (1) The Transition – Transition to College; Transition to Lacrosse Program; (2) Support Systems – Support from Teammates; Support from Native Peers; Support from Coaches; (3) Engaging with Ignorance – Encountering Microaggressions; Explaining Native Identity; (4) Playing Native – Native Lacrosse; Empowered to Play Native; Disempowered to Play Native; Native Women’s Collegiate Lacrosse; (5) Learning Native – Early Academic Challenges; The Turnaround; Empowering Connections; Cultural Disconnect; (6) Relationship to Home – Going Home; Being a Role Model; Giving Back to Youth; and, (7) Future of Native Lacrosse – Feedback for Coaches.

Results from this study suggest the themes and subthemes that emerged through conversations have an impact on the journey towards critical self-authorship, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. The implications from this study are as follows: (1) colleges and universities must exemplify the four themes of critical self-authorship, (2) people in relationship with collegiate Native lacrosse athletes must act in ways that empower the journey towards critical self-authorship, and (3) collegiate lacrosse programs must fully embrace and appropriately elevate the cultural connection of Native identity and lacrosse.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................. iii

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1

Statement of the Problem ....................................................................................... 4

Purpose and Significance ......................................................................................... 5

Research Questions ................................................................................................. 6

Research Design ..................................................................................................... 7

Limitations ................................................................................................................. 8

Note on Terms ........................................................................................................ 8

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................. 11

Settler Colonialism ................................................................................................ 12

Assimilating “Educational” Structures of Settler Colonialism .................................. 14

An Exploration of Native Lacrosse ........................................................................ 16

Native Tradition Through Games and Sport ......................................................... 16

Lacrosse in Native Communities .......................................................................... 17

Native Lacrosse and Settler Colonialism ............................................................. 18

Sportization of Lacrosse ...................................................................................... 20
Playing Native.................................................................................................................. 162
Learning Native ............................................................................................................ 166
Relationship to Home ................................................................................................. 169
The Future of Collegiate Native Lacrosse ............................................................... 171
Implications for Practice ........................................................................................... 173
Directions for Future Research ................................................................................ 176
REFERENCES ................................................................................................................ 180

APPENDIX: DISSERTATION STUDY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ......................... 198

CURRICULUM VITA ...................................................................................................... 200
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Journey Towards Critical Self-Authorship for Native Lacrosse Athletes at NCAA Division I Institutions

People think lacrosse is a rich white sport. Somebody once asked me, “How did you end up playing?” What do you mean? These are my roots. You are able to play this game because of my people, my descendants, my ancestors. (Scanlan & Hamilton, 2019, April 3)

~ Shayla Scanlan, University of Louisville ~

Lacrosse is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States (US Lacrosse, 2017). The marquee competition for contemporary lacrosse players is at historically white institutions competing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I level (Gutierrez, 2019, May 7). Coincidentally, lacrosse is one of the least diverse sports in the United States with collegiate lacrosse made of approximately 85% white student-athletes (Liberman, 2019, April 22; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b). However, for various Native tribes, lacrosse is deeply rooted in their culture. For example, “to the Haudenosaunee, the game of lacrosse represents deep spiritual and political roots, from our Creation Story, to our medicines, to our governance structure— since time immemorial” (Iroquois Nationals, 2021). Native tribes have been playing lacrosse since before first contact. Yet, despite these cultural traditions, contemporary lacrosse is played at the highest level with little representation from Native athletes, as less than one percent of NCAA Division I lacrosse athletes identify a
American Indian/Alaska Native (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b).

Furthermore, collegiate Native lacrosse players are underrepresented in the classroom, as less than one percent of college students identify as Native American (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Thus, collegiate Native lacrosse athletes must navigate both their athletic and academic journeys with limited representation of their Native identity on college campuses.

While there is limited academic research focusing on collegiate Native lacrosse players, there are journal articles that address the Native roots of lacrosse and its evolution from a Native game to a contemporarily white sport (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2015; Downey & Neylan, 2015; Salter, 1995). Similarly, the ‘sportization’ of lacrosse more directly explores the tangible steps taken to fulfill the settler colonial project and make lacrosse less of a Native game and more of a sport by introducing rules, adopting ‘advanced’ equipment, and establishing governing bodies to monitor this shift (Delsahut, 2015). Additionally, Salter explored this notion of acculturation and Natives using their experiences in lacrosse to better prepare them for other life scenarios and interactions with the Western world (Salter, 1972, 1995). This research will build on the scarcity of academic research on Native lacrosse.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of books, articles, podcasts and documentaries that focus on the Native origins and cultural and spiritual traditions of Native lacrosse. *The Creator’s Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood* (Downey, 2018) is a primary reference for this research as it narrates the Haudenosaunee history of lacrosse from the 1860s to the 1990s. Using mostly a Canadian perspective, Downey (2018) explores the Haudenosaunee experience with residential boarding schools and how they
used lacrosse, “re-introduced” at the residential school, to reclaim notions of their Native identity and strengthen their tribal sovereignty. This research aims to focus on similar topics from the U.S. perspective.

Contemporarily, U.S. Lacrosse Magazine published a feature story titled “What It Means To Be Native In This Sport”, which illuminated the experiences of several past, present, and future collegiate Native lacrosse players (Hamilton & DaSilva, 2019, April 3). Collegiate Native lacrosse players shared stories of the importance of lacrosse to their Native identity, transitions to mainstream collegiate lacrosse, using sport for development, breaking gender barriers in Native lacrosse, experiences with racism. This story really highlights the opportunities lacrosse has provided Native athletes while discussing the challenges that come with playing a now predominantly white sport as a Native athlete.

Additionally, Thompson Brothers Lacrosse provides a wide variety of content that serves as a primary resource to this dissertation as they have several documentaries (and other content) sharing their personal stories of challenge and success in their journey towards playing collegiate lacrosse. More Than A Game (Korver, 2016) helps explain the cultural roots of the game for the Thompson brothers. The Medicine Game (Korver, 2013) explores the lives of the Thompson brothers, Hiana and Jeremy, as they experience life on the Onondaga Nation reservation and chase their dream of playing collegiate lacrosse. In continuation, The Medicine Game: Four Brothers, One Dream (Sneve, 2016, June 7) is a four part mini-series that tells the story of the younger Thompson brothers, Myles and Lyle, and their journey from the reservation to the University of Albany lacrosse program. While much of this content (and more) explores the Native roots of
lacrosse and the experience of Native lacrosse players chasing their dreams of playing elite lacrosse at the NCAA Division I level, there is an opportunity to further explore the journey of being a collegiate Native lacrosse player. Thus, this dissertation aims to explore the experiences of Native lacrosse athletes while they are in college and immersed in the day-to-day of NCAA Division I lacrosse to better understand the journey in being your authentic Native self in a predominantly white environment, both athletically and academically.

Thus, knowing the history of the game and its traditional Native roots, this study will look at contemporary collegiate lacrosse through a lens of settler colonial theory (specifically the U.S.) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). The literature review will explore lacrosse’s evolution from a traditionally Native game to a contemporary predominantly white sport, as well as the educational experiences of Native communities with settler colonial policies and procedures. Although the literature review does not fully explore the depth of settler colonialism, Native lacrosse, and Native education, it serves as a brief introduction to these complex intersections and the overall topic of collegiate Native lacrosse. Ultimately, I want to learn more about the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes and hear their stories about playing a sport with deep cultural roots in their Native identity at an NCAA Division I institution.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem is despite lacrosse being The Creator’s Game rooted in Native traditions and culture, the sport we see today played at the NCAA Division I level is overwhelmingly played by white athletes at elite historically white institutions. In exploring this topic, I kept asking myself how did the game get here? How did we go
from an exclusively Native game prior to first contact, to a sport mostly void of Native athletes (less than 1%) at the NCAA Division I level? I kept thinking about the experience of those Native athletes who do reach their dream of playing lacrosse at the highest collegiate level. Yet, they find themselves underrepresented in the locker room and on the field. Furthermore, in understanding the Native experience with settler colonialism and oppressive educational systems, I thought about Native athletes also being underrepresented in their coursework and overall campus experience. So, I want to explore these experiences of collegiate Native athletes in the classroom, on the field of competition, and in their extracurricular activities. I want to explore the extent to which they are able to be their authentic Native self in these spaces.

**Purpose and Significance**

In this study, I will research the intersections of Native identity, athletics, and academics to better understand the collegiate experiences of Native lacrosse athletes. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore the factors that influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship in their athletic and academic environments at NCAA Division I institutions.

This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to fill gaps in the research. Although the academic research in student affairs on the experiences of Native college students is limited in number, there are significant contributions from Native student affairs professionals (Brayboy, 2004; Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015; Faircloth & John W. Tippeconnic, 2010; J. D. Lopez, 2018; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016; Tachine, Cabrera, & Bird, 2017). Still, there is room for expansion in examining the experiences of collegiate Native
athletes. Similarly, while there is a growing library of lacrosse literature and information, there is limited academic research exploring the history of lacrosse and its cultural significance in various Native communities.

This research will add to the growing academic literature of collegiate Native athletes and the library of content on the cultural significance of Native lacrosse. By using TribalCrit and critical self-authorship as theoretical frameworks, this study has the potential to reveal unexamined issues in collegiate lacrosse and provide a richer understanding of the ways in which collegiate Native lacrosse athletes navigate toward their authentic Native self in college. A holistic approach may recognize the intersections of students’ experiences, which may better illustrate the complexity of their lives and highlight interconnected issues that influence their experiences in both their athletic and academic programming in college, and ultimately progress towards a degree. The findings may be used to increase understanding of the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. This increased understanding may help to develop programs that grow the game of lacrosse in Native communities and raise awareness of collegiate lacrosse experiences to pass along to the next generation of aspiring collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. Therefore, this research is significant as it offers a deeper understanding of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes’ experiences and a discussion that extends current theoretical frameworks.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersections of Native identity, higher education, and collegiate lacrosse to determine factors that influence the journey towards critical self-authorship for collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. I aimed to answer
the following questions for Native lacrosse athletes competing at NCAA Division I institutions:

1. What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their athletic program(s)?
2. What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their academic and co-curricular program(s)?

**Research Design**

Critical Indigenous Research Methods guided this research as it combines Tribal Critical Race Theory and decolonizing research methods in centering Native identity in academic research (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, & Solyom, 2012). As an Athabascan and Muscogee Creek, the researcher carried their own Native identity critical to decolonizing research methods as Native scholars must be conducting research in Native communities (L. T. Smith, 2013). CIRM establishes a framework for Native scholars to participate in the reclamation of research in Native communities by cultivating meaningful relationships, understanding responsibility, leading with respect, and making reciprocity a priority when determining how to appropriately tell participant stories (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012).

The conversational method was used to guide the one-on-one dialogue and listening to the stories of collegiate Native lacrosse players (Kovach, 2010a, 2010b). In learning about their journey towards critical self-authorship, I wanted to learn to what extent collegiate Native lacrosse players felt they are able to be their true and authentic Native self when interacting with their social environments of athletics, academics, and other extracurricular activities. The best approach for this topic was CIRM as it is
designed to provide a welcoming space for participants to share their truth. The conversational method further empowered participants to share as it takes a more informal approach to hosting discussions. There was room for improvisation and follow-up questions that may have emerged during the conversation, as opposed to a more formal interview setting and protocol that we often see in westernized research.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the revised research design necessary due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Initially, this study was designed for the researcher to travel to the communities of participants to establish a deeper relationship with one another, resulting in more open and authentic storytelling. However, the risks associated with travel and the global pandemic forced this research to shift to an online environment. While I believe this shift to online conversations may have helped with things like access to participants, the online environment presented limitations in demonstrating a true Indigenous methodological approach that calls for building authentic relationships through more intimate interaction with one another. There were other limitations within an online environment, such as internet access/strength or not being able to use non-verbal forms of communication to facilitate a dialogue. Nonetheless, I was able to create a welcoming online environment and facilitated the conversation in ways that made the participant more comfortable in sharing their stories. Finally, this dissertation focused on a small targeted population of collegiate Native lacrosse players competing at the NCAA Division I level. There is definitely room for further research on collegiate Native lacrosse players competing on a variety of levels.

**Note on Terms**
Throughout the literature, various terms referring to Native peoples are used. In this dissertation, I reflect some of these applications by using some terms interchangeably and others to refer to specific subpopulations. My choice of terms is mostly a personal decision based on my own upbringing, experiences, and learnings as an Athabascan and Muscogee Creek scholar. For example, when amongst other tribal communities, I introduce myself by my specific tribal identities, as I have found most other Native people to be informed about other (not all) tribal communities. However, in non-Native spaces I commonly identify as simply Alaska Native, Native American, and/or American Indian because it is easier to move along the conversation. For me, while I understand the importance of language use, there is no preferred hierarchy of terminology, as I believe these terms are interchangeable when used appropriately. In addition, Indigenous methodology promotes a more informal approach to research than used in westernized scholarship, so I ended up using various terms interchangeably in my writing.

In this dissertation, I will generally use the term “Native” to describe participants and their tribal communities. To me, Native is an effective umbrella term for tribal nations within the contemporary United States and Canada. It should be noted that the term “First Nations” is often used to identify Indigenous peoples of Canada (Indigenous Foundations, 2021). This distinction is critical to this dissertation as many of the potential participants identify as First Nations although they are enrolled at U.S. institutions and play lacrosse under a U.S. governing body, which is a main reason I chose to use “Native” as the umbrella term. It should also be noted that the NCAA demographics database uses the term “American Indian/Alaska Native” to identify, “a person having
origins from North America and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition” (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b).

In other areas, I will use the term “Indigenous” to refer to peoples across the globe who identify as first peoples in their traditional homelands. Further, I may use “Native American” or “American Indian” to refer to Native peoples, whether federally recognized or not, who hail from the United States. If citing specific literature, I will use their terminology. For example, Native people were referred to as “Indians” in certain literature, so I use that term to connect to those specific moments in time. In addition, I will refer to specific tribal names as they apply. I will also capitalize “Native” and “Indigenous” in an effort to recognize Native peoples as political entities (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012; Lee, 2006, 2009). Conversely, as is common in CRT literature, I will use the lowercase term “white” to decenter whiteness in the discussion (Writer, 2008).

The literature review will mention some traditional Native words for “lacrosse” as specific tribes have words for the game in their own language, such as Baggataway, or Anetso (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2012; Salter, 1995; Zogry, 2010). However, the term “lacrosse” is used throughout to refer to the contemporary sport played at the NCAA Division I level.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Native Americans have a long and storied history in the United States that includes resistance to and survival of genocidal tactics at the hands of white European settlers and the U.S. government. Despite these atrocities, Native cultures and traditions still thrive in contemporary U.S. society with the existence of 573 federally recognized tribes, 63 state recognized tribes, and approximately 245 tribes not recognized at the state or federal level (National Congress of American Indians, 2017). However, there are also aspects of Native culture that have diminished over time as the ultimate goal of settler colonialism was to eliminate the culture, identity, and overall existence of Native people (Adams, 1995; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Hoxiw, 2008; K Tsianina Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Morgensen, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wexler, 2014; Wolfe, 2006). As Native resistance made total elimination impossible, the stripping of Native identity became the goal. U.S. governmental policy and practices played an integral role in making this happen and will be covered in the following review of the literature. The individualistic approach was designed to remove Native people from the communal values of Native tribes and dispossess them of all things Native as a means to assimilate Native youth to mainstream white society (K Tsianina Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

A specific example and traditional aspect of Native culture that was lost in some tribes is their connection to the game that is known in present day as lacrosse. Similar to other aspects of Native culture, lacrosse has also been largely colonized since first contact
and is now played most prominently by predominantly white people at elite historically white institutions in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Therefore, this discussion will take an interdisciplinary approach to examine present day lacrosse as a function of settler colonialism as well as the experiences of current collegiate Native lacrosse student-athletes participating in Division I of the NCAA.

**Settler Colonialism**

In order to fully understand the experiences of Native lacrosse student-athletes in the NCAA, we must first explore the relationship and experiences of Native peoples with the United States. This experience of settler colonialism can be defined as outside settlers seeking domination over “new” land, through the displacement of Indigenous populations and elimination of their sovereignty, culture, and identity, with the ultimate goal of erecting a new settler society on those same Indigenous lands (Veracini, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). More specifically, settler colonialism consists of both external and internal forces (Tuck & Yang, 2012). External colonialism is the stealing of Indigenous land and possessions by an outside force to benefit the colonizers and their goal of establishing wealth and privilege in a new settler society. Internal colonialism are the systematic structures put in place that are used to manage and manipulate the Indigenous peoples who have been colonized, such as the reservation system and residential boarding schools (Hoxiw, 2008; M. Smith, 2001; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Within settler colonialism, settlers arrive on occupied land with the intention of making a new home; as mentioned before, settlers strive for the dismissal of Indigenous peoples and Native societies, and consequently, settlers erect a new colonial society on the stolen land (Wolfe, 2006).
External and internal colonial methods are used collectively and simultaneously to ensure the completion of the settler colonial project (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Wolfe (2006) explores his logic of elimination as the relationship between genocide and the settler-colonial desire to take over Indigenous land. The principle motive is to obtain access to territory held by Indigenous people and to secure that territory to erect and preserve a new settler colonial society (Wolfe, 2006). While elimination is the organizing principle, assimilation becomes the goal when Indigenous societies resist. Wolfe (2006) describes this process as, “encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of Native title into alienable individual freeholds, Native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations” (p. 388).

Similarly, Alfred notes (1999), “…What is the legacy of colonialism? Dispossession, disempowerment, and disease inflicted by the white man…Yet the enemy is in plain view: residential schools, racism, expropriation, extinguishment, wardship, welfare”. Therefore, settler colonialism is not a one-time event, but a permanent structure that uses governmental policies and practices to restrict the identity of Native peoples in a variety of ways.

Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest that settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism because of the desire to not only supplant an existing society from their own lands, but to rule supreme over the colonized land and society. In addition, the settler colonial project in the United States is strongly entangled with white supremacy. Furthermore, white supremacy provides the justification for the settler colonial project, as white settlers determined themselves to be more superior to the existence of Native
peoples. Ultimately, settler colonialism aims to destroy Indigenous peoples and displace communities through brutal force or law and policy because Indigenous peoples must be completely erased to access and extract the full benefits of the land as it serves as the economic foundation and supportive structure of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Veracini, 2013). In addition, a turn to the unpaid and objectified Black chattel slave accelerates the foundation building for a settler state (A. Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The results are the political and economic empire of the United States benefiting white settlers yet built on Native land using the free and forced labor of Black slaves (Veracini, 2013; Wolfe, 2006). Thus, the destruction and dissipation of Native peoples from their land, the enslavement of Black people as free labor, and the ethnocentric “othering” of Native and Black folks through legislation and sometimes brutal force are crucial to the sustainability of settler colonialism and white supremacy in the United States.

Thus, forced assimilation occurred through federal law and policy responsible for the introduction of assimilating structures of settler colonialism. Some examples of assimilating policies and procedures will be discussed to compare similar tactics used in the colonization of lacrosse.

**Assimilating “Educational” Structures of Settler Colonialism**

There are several examples of how settler colonialism aims to conquer Indigenous society and eliminate Native culture through assimilating practices. Exploring federal Indian law brings to the surface many United States policies and practices in opposition to Native existence and tribal sovereignty. These laws and policies were developed with the goals of breaking up the tribal family and community. In contrast, white families did
not experience the same form of political oppression, as the goal was to assimilate the Native “savage” to the Anglo-American model. This notion of ‘savagery’ has been associated with Native Americans throughout history and is a parallel to the settler colonial motto of ‘kill the Indian but save the man’ (Adams, 1995; Churchill, 2004; Jaimes, 1994; Kelsey, 2013; Lacey, 1986; K Tsianina Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Peterson, 2013).

One way to implement this motto was the development of residential boarding schools. Often embedded in Christianity, these schools were designed to be more effective in separating American Indian children from their families, communities, and cultural livelihood (Adams, 1995; Kelsey, 2013). The practice of separating children from their tribal roots became standard in assimilating them to white society (Kelsey, 2013; K. Tsianina Lomawaima, 1999; Wolfe, 2006). The goal was to penetrate the tribal surface of each child. Native schoolchildren were forced to cut their hair, forced to wear uniforms, and were punished for using their Native language or practicing their traditional ceremonies or spiritual beliefs (Adams, 1995; Kelsey, 2013; Peterson, 2013; Satterlee, 2002; M. Smith, 2001). This forced individualism further mobilized the settler colonial ideology of assimilation and elimination. These educational policies are important to explore because their history helps establish the foundation for the experiences of contemporary Native student-athletes. Since the colonization of lacrosse occurred in a similar way, it is important to understand that Native college lacrosse players are engaging with multiple symptoms of settler colonialism; education and lacrosse.
An Exploration of Native Lacrosse

Native Tradition Through Games and Sport

Games and sport have always been a prominent component of Native culture (Oxendine, 1988). However, the rich diversity amongst Native tribes makes it impossible to paint one homogenous picture of Native sports traditions and their importance to Native identity as games and sport varied by tribal region (Bloom, 2000). Traditional Native games were played at ceremonies and communal events to reinforce tribal pride, reflect cultural teachings, exhibit moral ethics, promote spirituality, and maintain socio-political relations. The holistic approach of Native games are designed to test the skill, strength, and endurance of participants, as well as the social, emotional, and mental challenges of sport (Downey & Neylan, 2015; Macfarlan & Macfarlan, 1958; Oxendine, 1988).

A unique aspect of Native sports history is the role of sport in residential boarding schools. Early schools did not always provide time for play, as this was seen as frivolous leisure by “Indians” (Bloom, 2000; Oxendine, 1988). But, as the system stymied traditional Native games because of their “savage” nature, Native youth were eventually introduced to traditionally non-Native sports like basketball, football, baseball, and boxing (Bloom, 2000; Downey & Neylan, 2015; Oxendine, 1988). Downey’s book The Creator’s Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood (2018) discusses from a First Nations perspective the complexity of the “re-introduction” of lacrosse to Native youth in boarding schools. Interestingly, the game was packaged as a Canadian identity rather than a Native one (Downey, 2018). Lacrosse would be used as a “civilizing project” to illustrate white ideals (Downey & Neylan, 2015; Paraschak, 1998). However,
Native students were more than happy to play the game rooted in their cultural identity and used recreation and sport as a means to manage their boarding school experience (Downey, 2018). In turn, lacrosse would be “re-invigorated” in many Native communities.

**Lacrosse in Native Communities**

There are several creation stories of lacrosse depending on tribe and region. This review is not meant to be an extensive exploration of the history of lacrosse. It is most important to understand, in a broad sense, lacrosse as a gift from the Creator to Native people (Downey, 2018; Robidoux, 2002; Salter, 1995; Vennum, 2007). The game was to be played as entertainment for the Spirit World, for healing purposes, and to settle disputes between tribal communities (Childs, 2015; Coulson & DesJarlait, 2013; Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2015, 2018; Fisher, 2002; Oxendine, 1988; Salter, 1995; Vennum, 2007; Zogry, 2010). Ultimately, the game was played across a variety of tribal nations and lands with different equipment and styles of play from region to region. Since contemporary Native college lacrosse players come from various tribal communities, it is crucial to acknowledge various creation stories of the game.

In lacrosse history from the Great Lakes region, where the game is played prominently by the Oneida, Dakota, Lakota, Anishinaabe, and others, Natives traveled through the “Cradle of Lacrosse” in the St. Lawrence River area near upper New York and Canada, where they most likely helped to create and learned to play the game of lacrosse, which the Anishinaabe called *baaga’dowe* (Childs, 2015).

The Cherokee called the game *Anetso*, meaning “they are playing it”, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians have continued playing the ball game as a significant
cultural component (Zogry, 2010). The “Great Game” in which the birds defeated the land animals is deeply rooted in Cherokee lacrosse culture (Venum, 2007; Zogry, 2010).

In Haudenosaunee culture, lacrosse is a game of men known as The Medicine Game because it was played to strengthen the medicine when someone fell sick (Downey, 2015; Venum, 2007). In addition, men were buried with their stick upon death so they could play when they reached the side of The Creator (Downey, 2015; Korver, 2013; Venum, 2007). This spirituality is engrained in the game as Native people invoked the spirits of swift and powerful animals to guide their play and the traditional wooden lacrosse stick comes from the earth and breathes life into the game (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2018; Venum, 2007).

These stories are important to Native lacrosse as they emphasize the skills and characteristics necessary for lacrosse competition. Traditionally, lacrosse was not constrained by a litany of rules and regulations. Games were played with countless participants across vast stretches of land with no time constraints. Lacrosse reflected the rich diversity witnessed among the many Native American nations, as each Native nation carried its own unique aspects of traditions and spirituality into a game.

Native Lacrosse and Settler Colonialism

The first contact by settlers came in the 1630s when French Jesuit missionaries witnessed Native people playing lacrosse (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2018). The game was initially met with opposition because of its “violent” and “savage” nature. French settlers still remained interested as they took the game back to their home country and began organizing games (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2012, 2018; Salter, 1972, 1995). In 1836, the Caughnawaga team was brought by merchants to Montreal to play an
exhibition game and from then on the colonial interest in lacrosse increased (Delsahut, 2015; Morrow, 1989; Robidoux, 2002). The interest in lacrosse grew in Canada, as the first non-Native lacrosse club was formed in 1856 as the Montreal Lacrosse Club (Delsahut, 2015; Korver, 2013; Morrow, 1989; Vennum, 2007). In 1867, the Canadian nationalist William George Beers attempted to have lacrosse recognized as Canada’s national sport. The National Lacrosse Association of Canada was formed that same year, bearing the slogan ‘Our Country and Our Game’. In his quest to standardize and popularize the Native game, Beers published *Lacrosse: The National Game of Canada* in 1869, part of the effort to make the sport ‘a bit less savage’ (Delsahut, 2015; Robidoux, 2002; Salter, 1972; Vennum, 2007). Ostensibly, Beers emulated this practice as he aimed to kill the remnants of Indian culture within the game, without destroying the game completely.

Meanwhile, Canada continued to embrace the game but would eventually ban Native players participating in their games and leagues (Delsahut, 2015; Korver, 2013). In 1880, Native people were considered professional lacrosse players, stripping their amateur status and forbidding Native teams from playing in the world championships (Delsahut, 2015; Salter, 1972). Consequently, Canada won the Olympic Gold Medal in lacrosse in 1904 and 1908, the only times lacrosse has been a medal-earning sport at the Olympics (Camara, n.d.; Delsahut, 2015; Korver, 2013; Salter, 1972). However, non-Native teams would still recruit Native “ringers” to help them win. Teams would agree ahead of time on the use of a limited number of Native players allowed to play and where on the field they were allowed to roam (Delsahut, 2015; Korver, 2013). The more experienced Native Americans were better players than the settlers, resulting in the
implementation of rules and changes to the game to close the gap in talent to benefit the settlers and improve their in-game success. This move to exclude Native lacrosse players from “elite” competitions mirrors the goals of the settler colonial project in removing Native identity from white society. Furthermore, allowing certain Native lacrosse players to participate in these competitions speaks to the logic of white supremacy and interest convergence, where settlers possess the ability to pick and choose certain characteristics of other cultures only when convenient for white society (Bell Jr, 1980).

**Sportization of Lacrosse**

With the implementation of various rules and regulations, lacrosse shifted to a regulated sport as white European settlers introduced their colonial mindset in the sportization of lacrosse (Delsahut, 2015). According to Delsahut (2015), sportization is the result of the process by which an athletic recreational activity acquires the status of a sport. The four dimensions of sportization are athletic action, system of rules, competition, and institutionalization (Delsahut, 2015). These dimensions will be discussed as they pertain to the colonization of the Native peoples’ game of lacrosse.

The novice Canadian lacrosse players could not compete with the Native players so rules and regulations were created to limit the ‘athletic action’ of the superior Native players. Where lacrosse was once played across large stretches of land, boundaries were introduced to confine the space of the game. A time limit was imposed to control the length of the game as it was said the Native players would continually outlast the Canadian players’ stamina. Players could no longer roam freely throughout the game as limitations were placed on the traditional roles and positions of players, restricting players to either offense or defense at any given time. Again, this ‘system of rules’ was to
benefit the settler society and impede the progression of Native lacrosse players (Delsahut, 2015; Korver, 2013; Salter, 1972; Vennum, 2007).

The equipment has also changed significantly over time, as traditional wooden sticks are prohibited and titanium sticks are now the norm. The lacrosse ball, which was once made from a variety of materials appropriate to each tribe, is now a standardized rubber ball. Players began to play with helmets, pads and other accessories. Wolfe (2006) discussed renaming as an integral piece to settler colonialism. Although the origin of the name lacrosse is highly debated, some believe the name is associated with a stick and ball game played in France, called ‘la crosse’, which resembled the game played by Native Americans (Delsahut, 2015; Robidoux, 2002; Salter, 1972, 1995). There is no evidence to suggest the Natives tribes referred to the game as lacrosse. Various names existed for the game based on the exclusive linguistics of each tribe or region (Delsahut, 2015; Salter, 1972; Vennum, 2007). Another glaring dimension of sportization came as William George Beers used the game to promote Imperial Canadianism. Beers would organize games and tours across Canada, America and Europe, while using Native American lacrosse players to promote interest in the game and the nation. According to Salter (1972, 1995), “the colorfulness of the Native and the uniqueness of his game were deliberately used to promote the Dominion abroad and to foster nationalism at home”. Furthermore, William George Beers stated, “Just as we claim as Canadian the rivers and lakes and land once owned exclusively by Indians, so we now claim their field game as the national field game of our Dominion” (Delsahut, 2015, p. 927). This codification and commodification of the game over time has estranged some of the Native American community further from the game and its traditional culture.
Contemporary Native Lacrosse

Connections between Native lacrosse and U.S. educational institutions occurred by the 1900s, as strong Native athletics programs emerged at the Indian Training School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas (Bloom, 2000; Oxendine, 1988; Sheinkin, 2017). Carlisle school founder Richard Henry Pratt was committed to building athletic programs for entertainment, name recognition, and positive public relations (Bloom, 2000). It was also an opportunity for Pratt to showcase the “civilized” violence of Native men through sports like football (Bloom, 2000; Oxendine, 1988). Interestingly, a lacrosse program was introduced at Carlisle in 1910 in response to their “baseball problem” that emerged as talented Native baseball players were being courted by professional leagues (Fisher, 2002). Pratt chose to suspend the baseball program to “protect students from the worst elements of white society – vice, greed, and ungentlemanly conduct” (Fisher, 2002, p. 111). The Carlisle lacrosse team would be competitive until 1918 when the school was converted to a military hospital (Fisher, 2002).

Now, lacrosse is the fastest growing sport in the United States according to an annual report by U.S. Lacrosse (2017). Yet, the demographic makeup of those participating in present day lacrosse is evidence of the sports’ experience with settler colonialism. Native peoples, formally identified in the NCAA demographic database as American Indian/Alaska Native, have overwhelmingly been displaced over time as the major participants in the sport, representing approximately 0.6% of men (22 athletes) and 0.5% of women (19 athletes) in NCAA Division I lacrosse (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b). Of the 71 men’s and 115 women’s teams, consisting of 3,165
men’s players and 3,615 women’s players, 84.4% of men and 84.2% of women identified as white in 2018. The second most represented racial demographic is Black, with 3.4% men and 2.8% women of Division I lacrosse players identifying as Black (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). It is quite possible that those student-athletes who identify in the database as Two or More Races or Unknown could have some Native ancestry, but for the purposes of this study we will focus on those student-athletes who identify explicitly as American Indian/Alaska Native in the NCAA demographic database.

Furthermore, NCAA lacrosse at the Division I level is played at elite historically white institutions (HWIs), as past national champions since 1971 only include, Yale, Maryland, North Carolina, Denver, Duke, Loyola (Maryland), Virginia, Syracuse, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Cornell, James Madison, Northwestern, Harvard, Penn State, Temple, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Massachusetts (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). Thus, lacrosse is a sport that is currently dominated numerically by white student-athletes at elite HWIs and is virtually devoid of much Native American representation. Moreover, in many ways lacrosse has come to represent economic privilege, exclusivity and elitism, in mostly white spaces (Cook, 2016, February 14; Dougherty, 2017, April 18).

Contemporary lacrosse generally acknowledges the Native origins of the sport. However, Native acceptance in lacrosse from non-Native competitors is not always the case. There are several recent examples of racism towards Natives in lacrosse that illustrate some of the challenges Native lacrosse players endure, despite playing a game that is rooted in their history and culture. In January 2019, Lyle Thompson, who now
plays for the Georgia Swarm of the National Lacrosse League, was playing a game against the Philadelphia Wings in Philadelphia. As Thompson carried the ball on offense the Wing’s public address announcer said “let’s snip the ponytail” over the loudspeaker, in reference to Thompson’s braided ponytail, a significant cultural component of Native male identity that was stripped in some boarding school experiences. Thompson also claimed that two fans sitting behind the bench made references to “scalping” (MacAdam, 2019, January 19). The announcer’s attempt to rile up the home Philadelphia crowd was later condemned for its racist tone by the NLL and both organizations (Paynter, 2019, June 25). The announcer would eventually be fired and the NLL has since partnered with US Lacrosse in a commitment “to push awareness of our great history that the Indigenous People have given us through our sport” (2019, June 25).

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, US Lacrosse Magazine (Hamilton & DaSilva, 2019, April 3) explored “What It Means to be Native in this Sport”, in several in-depth interviews with Native lacrosse players from the past and present. In addition to overt racism, players mentioned having to educate others on the Native roots of lacrosse, the difficulty of connecting with non-Native teammates who do not play the game with a cultural connection, playing to give back to their people in a more family oriented approach to the game, and using lacrosse as motivation to succeed (Hamilton & DaSilva, 2019, April 3). Ron Patterson, a stick maker from the Oneida Nation who lived near the Seneca Indian Reservation, summed up this experience:

The public at large is not educated on our customs and beliefs and the origins of the historic game…Those rituals and spirituality have never left the game, which is prominent when you see the Thompson Brothers playing. They continue to
wear their hair long because of the honorable traditions of long ago. When somebody sees that and they mock and disrespect it, they not only disrespect the individuals, but they’re also looking at the countless faces of the Indigenous people…a lot of the non-Indigenous teams that we would play against would…say derogatory statements toward you — about whether our hair was long or the color of our skin or just who we were. There were a lot of different things they would say to us. It’s not just the players. I coached from 1993-2009 and I’ve played in Canada and the U.S. On our way to provincials, a lot of even the coaches would say derogatory stuff — not only to our kids but to our parents in the audience. You get that a lot. It’s just from ignorance and not understanding…We can get out and educate this lacrosse world of the origins of the game. Even when the guys went to Australia [for the 2002 FIL World Championship], they were mocking some of them because they were doing a small ritual outside the arena. They don’t understand that the game stems from the Indigenous people. They are only following their own traditions. Even when they give out the Tewaaraton Award. When the Thompson brothers both received the award, they went up there with their traditional regalia on. Some of the people in the back were mocking what they were wearing. That’s our identity and that’s who we are. We need to have a better understanding of these things. (Hamilton & DaSilva, 2019, April 3)

Other examples include the expulsion of three predominantly Native American youth lacrosse teams from the Dakota Premier Lacrosse League (DPLL), the only lacrosse league in the Dakotas (Nicholson, 2018, May 22; Waltman, 2018, April 4).
Coaches from the 7 Flames, Susbeca, and Lightning Stick Society programs say they’re teams have experienced racial abuse from opposing players, coaches, and parents, as well as in-game officials (Schilling, 2018, May 21; Waltman, 2018, April 4). The teams brought these claims to the league organizer, but nothing was ever done to address the situations (Hill, 2018, Apr 10; Waltman, 2018, May 10). Instead, the league expelled the three teams citing “unreliable attendance” (Nicholson, 2018, May 22). Yet, reports indicate the league purposely avoided conversations about racial abuse and decided to expel the teams because the DPLL “couldn’t do anything about it” (Waltman, 2018, April 4, para. 5). U.S. Lacrosse investigated the allegations, but the teams were not reinstated (Nicholson, 2018, May 20; Waltman, 2018, May 10). Corey Mitchell, the league commissioner at the time, has since resigned (Rao, 2018, May 21). Consequently, the 7 Flames program traveled to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to play their local Native teams in the Lakota-Oklahoma Medicine Games (Garry, 2018, May 11). This was a significant act of solidarity and support for the continued existence of Native youth lacrosse.

Finally, consider the Tewaaraton Award. This award is presented annually to the best male and female lacrosse players in the NCAA. Tewaaraton is the Mohawk name of the game and one of the Iroquoian originators of the game we see represented in present day lacrosse. Since the award first began in 2001, Miles and Lyle Thompson, members of the Onondaga Nation and the University of Albany lacrosse program, became the first Native American recipients of the Tewaaraton Award in 2014 (Timanus, 2014, May 29). Although the Thompson brothers are considered by some to be the most formidable offensive attack duo in NCAA lacrosse history, perhaps nothing typifies the erasure of the Native American influence on lacrosse, a game they conceived, more than the fact
that the sport’s most prestigious individual trophy has been awarded to Native American student-athletes in only two years (ESPN, 2014, May 11; Inside Lacrosse, 2014, May 29; Suxa, 2015, May 2015).

Lacrosse and Masculinity

Another unique component of traditional and contemporary Native lacrosse is its intersection with gender. There are some accounts of Native women playing lacrosse among the Ho-Chunk, Dakota, Shawnee, Ojibwe, Cherokee, and Creek (Downey, 2012). Games sometimes occurred as men versus women and other times with the boys and girls on the same team (Vennen, 2007). But, in Haudenosaunee culture, lacrosse was only to be played by men, as ‘traditionalism’ upheld the women’s roles in Native lacrosse as the nurturing support system and fans of the men (Downey, 2012). Prior to settler colonialism, there was a healthy balance to the roles of men and women and their contributions to the tribe. Horn-Miller (2005) explains:

…but the separate but conjoined roles of men and women ensure peace through the balance of power and mutual respect for our particular responsibilities within the nation. Neither gender is considered ‘the weaker sex’ and each is complementary to the other. Women are generally seen as the central anchor upon which the survival of Haudenosaunee society is dependent…The heart of the family is the mother, because life comes from her…It is, therefore, the duty of the men to protect the power of the nation: the women (p. 58-59).

It was settler colonialism that aimed to destroy the central anchor of tribal nations and elevate male superiority by impeding the physical health of Haudenosaunee women,
using the church for influence, and implementing administrative policies of settler
governments (Horn-Miller, 2005).

The boarding school system reinforced these gender roles as girls were not
allowed to play games like lacrosse, but boys were encouraged to play because the
physical competition was believed to develop one’s manhood (Bloom, 2000). It was this
same physicality that turned some Native ‘traditionalists’ away from allowing women to
play lacrosse. For some, lacrosse put women at unnecessary risk of damaging themselves
and jeopardizing their ability to create life and pass on Native traditions (Bloom, 2000;
Downey, 2012, 2018). However, lacrosse remained important to the identity of Native
women even as their exclusion from the game reinforced the masculine ideals of the
game.

The complexity of gender roles in lacrosse exists contemporarily, as described by
Jade Haumann, a former college lacrosse player of the Seneca Nation. She shared
(DaSilva, 2019, April 11):

“Being a Native American woman, especially a Haudenosaunee woman, we’re
technically not supposed to play lacrosse. It’s supposed to be a men’s game. It
was difficult to commit myself to that knowing what the outcome would be, what
other people would think and say. But my desire and passion for the game
overcame that… It’s complicated to explain. For the men’s game, it’s solely the
Creator’s Game. It’s meant to play for the Creator and please him. To this day, I
don’t feel comfortable touching any men’s stick, even my little nephew’s. Being
in college, playing around with the guys’ team, my teammates would trade sticks
with them. I never felt comfortable with that. It took me a while to feel
comfortable enough just playing catch. For me personally, it’s better to keep a boundary between the men’s game and the sport I play.

The documentary *Keepers of the Game* (2016) takes an in-depth look at an all-Native girls lacrosse team from Salmon River High in New York and the resistance they faced from their own communities as they chased a league championship.

This acknowledgement of the complex intersections of gender and tradition in Native lacrosse culture is important to the exploration of the experiences of Native women college lacrosse players, who may be facing significant challenges different from their male peers (Downey, 2012, 2018). Overall, contemporary lacrosse exists in the white masculine spaces of elite NCAA colleges and universities. As mentioned earlier, these institutions of higher learning were not traditionally built with the betterment of Native students in mind. Thus, Native lacrosse players must navigate the white masculine spaces of both their sport and their institution. This further emphasizes the complexity of lacrosse as a function of settler colonialism, particularly for Native women, as Native lacrosse players are expected to conform to the white social norms in both education and lacrosse, despite their ownership of the game.

**College Experiences of Native Students**

The scars of boarding schools may negatively affect the experiences of Native students, as many of today’s young Native people are only one or two generations removed from the Native boarding school experience (K. Tsianina Lomawaima, 1995; Ramirez & Hammack, 2014; M. Smith, 2001; Wexler, 2014). Native elders remember their educational experiences, sometimes resulting in a lack of trust within the Native community for colonized educational systems that uphold the same settler colonial ideals.
of the past (Grandbois, 2009). Overall, Native students are behind their peers in academic performance at all levels according to a report on the status of Native education (The Education Trust, 2013). For example, Native students have, on average, lower standardized test scores and lower high school graduation rates than their peers from other racial/ethnic backgrounds, meaning they are often entering higher education underprepared. About 52% of Native high school graduates enrolled in college immediately after high school, compared to 74% of white students. Of those Native students who enrolled in four-year institutions, only 39% completed a bachelor’s degree within six years (The Education Trust, 2013).

Despite an overall increase in Native student enrollment in higher education over the last 30 years, they are still often the most underrepresented racial/ethnic group on historically white campuses. This includes commonly being the only Native person in campus spaces. Students must then make meaning of this tokenization and evaluate the validity of performance expectations that come with being the only Native person in the room (Brayboy et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2004). In addition, Native student perspectives that do not align with social norms can be silenced (Brayboy, 2004). Research indicates that Native college students at historically white institutions experience overt and covert racism, invalidation of work by peers and faculty, have their voices silenced in discussions, and feel invisible on campuses that do not value their culture (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Shotton et al., 2013; Tachine et al., 2017; The Education Trust, 2013). This may result in feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and a sense of not belonging (Brayboy et al., 2015).
One common reason Native students pursue higher education is to better serve their families and communities (Brayboy et al., 2015; Faircloth & John W. Tippeconnic, 2010; Guillory, 2009; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013; Shotton et al., 2013; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). However, there may be a struggle in transition to college for Native students coming from rural communities or reservations (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Waterman (2012) discusses the importance of “home going” for the sustained success of Native college students, as students who went home frequently were able to remain “culturally centered” during their time away from home. Urban Natives may also miss their Native communities, as they become a member of one of the most underrepresented racial/ethnic groups on their campus, still forcing them to code switch in a variety of settings as a survival tactic (Brayboy, 2004). For example, Native students may prefer to identify as Native American in larger populations to not have to explain the meaning of their specific tribal affiliations considering many non-Natives are unfamiliar with the hundreds of diverse tribal nations in the United States. Yet, when around other Native students, it is common to identify oneself based on those tribal affiliations because other Native students understand the complexity of tribal enrollment and identity (Brayboy, 2004).

Therefore, student affairs professionals and educators should be cognizant of the colonial history of Native students and its impact on their contemporary experiences so they can better support Native students in their navigation of these institutions. Validating students with oppressed identities as knowers explores how mainstream society often devalues the experiences, stories, and perspectives of marginalized communities as a way to justify the oppressive actions of the dominant culture (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).
mentioned by Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2015), institutions fail to recognize how the values and perspectives of Native students differ from common institutional values and perspectives. This cultural disconnect can lead to problematic experiences for Native students in college and frustrations in the academic approach to course readings, assignments, expectations, and classroom discussions, which may ultimately negatively impact their ability to build authentic relationships with others in the academy (Brayboy et al., 2015).

Exploring these experiences of Native college students is foundational to this study and understanding how Native college lacrosse players interact with historically white institutions through their athletics participation and educational journey. This study will explore these experiences using the following frameworks: Tribal Critical Race Theory and Critical Self-Authorship.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Critical Race Theory**

While this study will not be using Critical Race Theory (CRT) directly, elements of CRT intertwine with systems of settler colonialism, education, and contemporary lacrosse, as well as concepts of self-authorship. Thus, Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) will be briefly explored.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) looks at systematic structures of power, privilege, and oppression in society. Originating in legal studies, CRT initially addressed how the legal system upholds racial injustices against Black communities in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The basic tenet of CRT states that racism is a normal part of everyday society that elevates whiteness over people of color by providing certain
privileges to white people that Black and brown people do not always have access to (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996). Consequently, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied CRT to educational research and proposed how the intersection of race and property provides a foundation for analyzing social inequity, and ultimately, educational inequity.

Another theme of CRT is the social construction of race, which theorizes race as an invention of “social thought and relations” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7) and allows for the (mis)treatment of certain racial groups at the convenience and benefit to white society. In addition, society determines differential treatment for various racial groups in response to the shifting needs of mainstream society. Derrick Bell used Brown v. Board of Education to illustrate how civil rights gains for Blacks were often tied to changing economic conditions and the self-interest of white society. Bell determined that the continued mistreatment of Blacks and other minority groups would elicit a dis-favorable worldview of the U.S., thus it was more beneficial to the U.S. moving forward if they were to eliminate their discriminatory policies (Bell, 1992). This also illustrates the concept of “interest convergence”, which states that beneficial treatment of historically marginalized groups only happens when that treatment is also beneficial to white mainstream society (Bell Jr, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Finally, CRT holds that Black and brown people have unique experiences because of the historical oppression their communities have endured and that white people do not have the ability to fully understand these experiences. Thus, it is important that we illuminate these voices and value their stories as data in addressing experiences of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).
Tribal Critical Race Theory

CRT has since branched out to include scholarship from other marginalized communities, such as LatCrit focusing on the experiences of Latinxs, AsianCrit focusing on the experiences of Asian Americans, and/or DisCrit focusing on the experiences of those with disabilities (Chang, 1993; Goodley, 2013; I. F. H. Lopez, 1997; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Museus & Iftikar, 2013; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is another form of CRT which looks at how power, privilege, and oppression impact Native American communities. Introduced by Brayboy (2005), TribalCrit includes the following nine tenets (p. 429-430):

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

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

TribalCrit represents the lens through which this research will be conducted. The nine tenets address some of the lived experiences of Native college students and their interactions with the world. For example, how Native students navigate their educational experiences must be different than other racial/ethnic groups because of the historical context of Native education previously explained. As Brayboy (2005) states, “There must be recognition that the ways of knowing for American Indians are vital to our self-education and self-determination” (p. 438). In addition, TribalCrit strongly opposes assimilation for Native American students in education. Yet, a colonized educational system often void of Native perspective continues to act as a contemporary settler colonial force that erases Native histories, which may result in the dispossession of an already complex Native identity (Adams, 1995; Corntassel, 2012; K. Tsianina Lomawaima, 1995; K Tsianina Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Also, TribalCrit values stories as legitimate sources of data, which will be discussed further in the methods section. These are just a few examples of how TribalCrit is present throughout this study.

**Critical Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda (2008) defines self-authorship as “the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” with the three elements being trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments (p. 269). This is in support of Robert Kegan’s concept of self-authorship that looked at the
necessity for adults to be self-starters and self-guided by their own visions and responsible for their own experiences as a means to fulfill daily expectations at work, home, and school (Magolda, 2007). Thus, educators should value the lifelong pursuit of knowledge and engage students in transformational learning for the purposes of seeking out “intercultural maturity” (Magolda, 2007). Self-authorship is critical to this discussion because intercultural maturity includes the ability to negotiate our inherited values and beliefs in pursuit of our own ideals and belief systems to be comfortable with our self in interactions with diverse peoples and free of anxieties that may stem from the disapproval by others (Magolda, 2007, 2008). People who have experienced various forms of oppression are more prepared to attain intercultural maturity, which supports more authentic relationships with diverse populations. Native college lacrosse players are constantly navigating their cultural values and identity in contrast to their athletic and educational experiences at HWIs. Thus, self-authorship theory should take a critical approach to address the experiences of Native college students.

While there is limited to no research directly addressing self-authorship in Native American student groups, Abes and Hernandez (2016) present a critical and post-structural perspective to examine how systems of oppression interact with one’s development towards self-authorship. Specifically, Abes and Hernandez (2016) discussed social environments where racism, sexism, and heteronormativity exist. Looking at these systems of oppression moves the conversation away from the individual and more towards how students make meaning of their experiences within oppressive contexts. Students with oppressed identities are first forced to resist that oppression in order to fully seek authentic relationships with their self and others (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). In
addition, students who are unable to complete this additional task of resistance may be seen as less developed than their privileged peers. In shifting the focus from the individual to social systems, Hernandez (2016) introduced CRT to self-authorship by studying the experiences of Latinx students and how their social environments impacts their development.

More specifically, Abes and Hernandez (2016) suggest how “an inclusive reconceptualization of self-authorship would center experiences as knowing, making it the norm rather than an obstacle to overcome” (p. 101), and present four themes in their critical and post-structural perspective on self-authorship. The four themes are: 1) validating students with oppressed identities as knowers; 2) valuing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self; 3) acknowledging the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity; and 4) recognizing the performativity of identity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). The first and second themes speak to emphasizing and valuing the inherent knowledge people possess, which was previously explored in TribalCrit. Themes three and four will be explored further to emphasize their importance in understanding how Native students are able to find their identity and be themselves on a college campus.

Recognizing the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity examines the challenges for students from historically marginalized communities to be themselves at HWIs that often uphold the systematic oppression these students are seeking to escape through education (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). Agency refers to one’s ability to separate themselves from others and gain control and independence in their relationships for the sake of building intercultural maturity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).
Authenticity refers to one’s ability to strengthen their intrapersonal development, necessitating a strong sense of self that encourages a person to live life to their own core values and belief systems regardless of how it makes others feel (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). Yet, seeking agency and authenticity may be challenging for Native college students because their oppressed identities don’t allow for them to control narratives from the mainstream about themselves and their people. These narratives and the inability of HWIs to value Native perspective in conversations may hinder agency in relationships and authenticity in their navigation of the educational system (Brayboy et al., 2015).

Recognizing the performativity of identity addresses how HWIs often place expectations on students from oppressed identities to perform in a way that must strengthen the narrative about their existence in college (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). For Native students, this often means answering silly questions about Native identity and existence, combatting myths about free education, and reversing stereotypes about Native communities. Thus, Native students are encouraged to create their own identities through their everyday actions (Brayboy et al., 2015; Corntassel, 2012).

The implementation of CRT to self-authorship theory enables a shift from a more individualistic approach to one that focused on how the social systems of an institution impacts the experiences of students from historically marginalized communities and their development “in relation to her (their) political, racialized, environment” (Hernandez, 2016, p. 172). Whereas Baxter Magolda asked, ‘How do I know?’, ‘Who am I?’, and ‘What relationships do I want with others?’ to determine the development of the three elements of self-authorship (cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal), Hernandez asked, ‘How do I make meaning of my social world?’, ‘How does my social world shape my
sense of self as a racialized being?’, and ‘What relationship do I want with others for the benefit of my social world?’ (Hernandez, 2016). Ultimately, Hernandez (2016) looked at the influence of social forces on the lived experience and meaning making of Mexican American women activists. The goal was to be “intentional in including an examination of racism, power, and privilege in student development research so as to more fully capture the complexity of development” (p. 48).

This study aims to replicate this shift by using principles of TribalCrit in combination with critical self-authorship. Upon understanding the Native roots of traditional lacrosse and the underwhelming representation of Native collegiate lacrosse players in NCAA Division I, there are gaps in the reviewed literature in understanding how contemporary collegiate Native lacrosse players can be their authentic Native self (critical self-authorship) within their athletic and academic programs. Thus, this study will explore to what extent Native collegiate lacrosse players are able to be themselves in college. Gaining a better understanding of these experiences will help future generations of collegiate Native lacrosse players navigate these systems.
CHAPTER III: METHODS

Lacrosse has become one of the fastest growing sports, yet there is a significant lack of racial diversity in college lacrosse, as approximately 86% of NCAA lacrosse players are white. Although a traditional Native game, Native lacrosse players represent less than 1% of the NCAA student-athlete population. Furthermore, college lacrosse is often played at “elite” historically white institutions that were not built for the existence of Native folks. This means that those Native lacrosse players who reach NCAA Division I collegiate lacrosse, may often find themselves underrepresented in their locker rooms, their classrooms, and the larger campus communities. With lacrosse being a traditional Native game, this research was designed to learn the meanings of playing contemporary collegiate lacrosse amongst its symptoms of settler colonialism for collegiate Native athletes. The study also explored the academic experiences of these Native lacrosse athletes as they navigate the historically white institution.

Using a Critical Indigenous Research Methodology (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012), the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of collegiate Native athletes and factors that influence one’s journey towards critical self-authorship in their athletic and academic programs at NCAA Division I HWIs. This social constructivist approach, which acknowledges the power of social systems and their relationship to individuals and the way they make meaning of their experiences, used the conversational method to host discussions guided by the following research questions.
Research Questions

For Native lacrosse athletes competing at NCAA Division I institutions:

1. What factors influence their journey towards critical self-authorship within their athletic program(s)?

2. What factors influence their journey towards critical self-authorship within their academic and co-curricular program(s)?

Research Framework

Critical Indigenous Research Methodology

In thinking about the most appropriate approach to this research, Linda T. Smith’s book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2013) was a guiding piece of literature. Even as a Native person, I had not thought intentionally about conducting research within Native communities until I started my doctoral program. While there are plenty of other options in Native literature, Smith’s book set the foundation for my personal understanding of conducting academic research through an Indigenous lens by valuing the lived experiences of Native people and understanding their stories and perspectives as valid data (Archibald, 2008a; Chilisa, 2019; Deloria, 1991; Kovach, 2010b, 2015, 2016, 2017; Martin, 2017; Wilson, 2001b, 2003, 2008). As discussed in chapter two, both Tribal Critical Race Theory and critical self-authorship centered racial and/or cultural identity in exploring the experiences of Native students and their social environments in athletics and academics (Brayboy, 2005; Dunbar, 2008). Therefore, a framework of Critical Indigenous Research Methods (CIRM) was chosen to guide this research because CIRM combines the critical components of TribalCrit, critical self-authorship, and decolonizing research methodologies in centering Native identity and effectively telling stories.
This section will provide a brief summary of CIRM principles and Native ways of knowing and researching.

Critical Indigenous Research Methodology is guided by four R’s; relationships, responsibility, respect, and reciprocity (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012). Relationships are a core component of Native identity. Researchers of Native peoples must understand relationships in the Native world, where traditions possess significant relationships with many aspects of life, such as, land, water, animals, the spirit world, traditional ways of gathering, traditional ways of celebrating life, the importance of tribal communities, and the proper way for outsiders to approach Native communities (Archibald, 2008a; Chilisa, 2019; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Kovach, 2010b, 2015; Wilson, 2001a, 2008). These ways of knowing have always guided research frameworks in Native communities.

However, settler colonialism interrupted this way of life for Natives and research from outsiders would lack the perspective to understand Native relationships and ways of knowing (Deloria, 1991). Western research methods can make Native participants the “object” of researchers and their investigations, which sometimes view Natives as inferior to justify their settler colonial actions (L. T. Smith, 2013). As Smith (2013) argues, “problematizing the Indigenous is a Western obsession” (p. 91). This has led to mistrust of research in many Native communities as their stories have been misinterpreted by white researchers and their histories told through a series of lies and omissions that help to establish settler colonial policies and practices (Archibald, 2008a, 2008b; Deloria, 2010; Journell, 2009; Kovach, 2010b). Hence, the call for the reclamation of Native research in Native communities by Native people through Indigenous methodology (Archibald, 2008a, 2008b; Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012;
Deloria, 1991; Kovach, 2015, 2016; L. T. Smith, 2013). Many Native scholars have contributed to this reclamation process and paved the way for this research. This study aimed to strengthen this relationship of Native scholars and research.

There is a natural connection between relationships and responsibility in conducting Native research using CIRM. As with relationships, it is imperative researchers of Native communities understand the responsibility that comes with the gathering of stories and sharing of Native knowledge (Archibald, 2008a; Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; Chilisa, 2019; Deloria, 1991; Kovach, 2010b; Wilson, 2001b, 2008). Critical Indigenous Research Methods are anticolonial, so the research and its outcomes must focus on the needs of Native communities and positively impacting change in those communities. In addition, Native researchers should understand their relationship and responsibility as both outsiders and insiders of this research, as they take on the simultaneous role(s) of conducting the research and being a part of the larger Native community (L. T. Smith, 2013). However, there are still significant differences amongst the 500-plus Native tribes in the United States that may present unfamiliar territory between Native researcher and community, depending on the tribal affiliation and cultural traditions of each person involved. Therefore, understanding our relationship to the Native community we intend to research helps guide our responsibility of uplifting these communities through our research.

For example, Smith (2013) suggests researchers in Indigenous communities ask the following questions before proceeding:

1. Whose research is this?
2. Who owns it?
3. Whose interests does it serve?
4. Who will benefit from it?
5. Who has designed its questions and framed its scope?
6. Who will carry it out?
7. Who will write it up?
8. How will the results be disseminated?

Answers to these questions help guide the research through the appropriate Indigenous research agenda that includes components of healing, mobilization, transformation, and decolonization (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; Kovach, 2010b; L. T. Smith, 2013). Survival, recovery, and development should be considered as well, all in response to the historical injustices of settler colonialism experienced by Native peoples (Porsanger, 2004; L. T. Smith, 2013). Ultimately, research on Native populations by Native people should work towards self-determination for Native peoples (Corntassel, 2012).

The third R of CIRM is respect. We must conduct research with respect for Native culture, identity, and ways of knowing. Researchers of Native communities must establish rapport with participants and build relationships of mutual respect (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; Kovach, 2017). Relationships built on mutual respect help establish trust between researcher and participant, which ultimately enables healthy dialogue and trustful conversations that enhance findings and outcomes (Archibald, 2008a; Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; L. T. Smith, 2013). Furthermore, respectful relationships with participants and their community help ignite the responsibility aspect of CIRM. If we as researchers understand the importance of respecting the communities we research, then
we are more likely to understand the responsibility we carry in conducting critical research in Native communities.

Lastly, reciprocity emerges from relationship, responsibility, and respect. In CIRM, reciprocity goes “beyond a ‘quid pro quo’ line of thinking in research and relationships to one that reflects more of a ‘pay it forward’ notion” (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012, p. 439). As researchers who take from Native communities through our practice, we must be intentional in giving back and providing to others in our communities. Reciprocity is the action piece that materializes as we understand the importance of our relationships, the responsibility we carry in doing research, and our respectful approach to the research process in Native communities. This further emphasizes how things come back around to one another as we approach our work in the appropriate way and are accountable to the communities with whom we have relations.

In this study, CIRM was used to explore the perspectives and experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse players to empower them to share their stories while conducting this research in an ethical, respectful, and culturally appropriate manner that benefits Native peoples and their communities (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; Kovach, 2010b, 2017; Porsanger, 2004). As an Athabascan and Muscogee Creek person there is an inherent relationship with the larger Native community. However, this positionality only helped address some, and not all, of the Native experience of the participants. It was crucial to establish a trusting relationship with participants by being transparent about my Native identity and its intersections as both an insider to Native identity but an outsider to the collegiate Native lacrosse experience.
I also understood my responsibility as a Native researcher. This research was driven by providing a space for Native collegiate lacrosse players to tell their stories. As noted in the literature, Indigenous erasure has long been the goal in educational settings. Thus, the inherently anticolonial CIRM framework was used to bring awareness to the challenges faced by Native lacrosse players and also highlighted the opportunities their experience has provided each athlete. The stories told may also help non-Natives understand the experiences of their Native teammates and/or peers. Overall, illuminating these stories will serve the future generation(s) of Native lacrosse athletes by helping to understand the nuance of achieving the dream of NCAA Division I lacrosse.

As for respect, I was raised to always lead with respect for our Native people (specifically Native elders) and our relationship with the land and our ways of knowing. I intentionally approached each potential participant with this same respect. I respect any decisions by potential participants to not engage in this research. For example, I engaged in email conversations with some potential participants, but then did not hear back for a confirmation. So I did not prod much more. While I believe in this research, I completely understood if others did not have the time or energy and wanted to validate any feelings of mistrust or disinterest.

Finally, reciprocity is at the forefront when sharing the results of this research. The goal is always to be practical with our findings. I believe this research can help grow the game in some Native communities where lacrosse may not be as prominent contemporarily. There may be an opportunity for some Native communities to reconnect with their traditional past and strengthen their relationship to lacrosse. As mentioned above, I believe this research can positively impact the experiences of future generations
through program development and assessment. This research will help establish a foundation for my broad research interests of understanding the intersection of athletics and academics in Native communities, specifically lacrosse and collegiate athletics in this study. There are other practical ideas that can come from our findings that we may not be aware of now. But we learned so much through our conversations and will be intentional in exploring all options upon completion of this study. The four R’s of CIRM will be revisited throughout the remainder of this chapter to help illustrate the application of this theoretical research framework.

**Positionality**

Since Indigenous methodologies are being used, it is important that I introduce myself and the positionality I bring to the conversation as a Native researcher with their own experiences that may impact my role as both an “insider” and “outsider” of Native communities. I share these stories to establish similarities and differences in the Native identities of myself and participants and to acknowledge the struggles and privileges I experienced that align with some Native college student development theory.

My name is Brandon Clifford Joseph and I am from Fairbanks, Alaska. My father is Clifford Joseph, an Athabascan from Tanana, Alaska and my mother is Georgianna Tiger of the Muscogee Creek Nation from Okemah, Oklahoma. I was born in Bellflower, California in 1982, the youngest of four children. We eventually moved to Alaska when I was less than a year old. I grew up in Athabascan territory, but my mother certainly brought her own Creek cultures to our home. This early experience helped develop my mixed nations identity.
However, my enculturation to Creek ways took a significant hit in 1993 with the passing of my mother from leukemia when I was 11 years old. Thus, during my youth, I lost some physical and emotional connection to my Creek culture because my mother was no longer around and our trips back to visit our Creek relatives in California and Oklahoma decreased. This is significant to this study because the Muscogee Creek people play stickball; which, although different, is connected to contemporary lacrosse (Coser Jr., 2012; Giles & Hamilton, 2019; Welch, Siegele, Smith, & Hardin, 2019). So, despite growing up in a household and area surrounded by Athabascan culture, mostly unaware of lacrosse, there is a cultural connection to lacrosse in my blood.

Thoughts of this project started in 2010 during my senior internship in the athletics department at the University of Denver. One of my duties was game operations for men’s and women’s lacrosse which introduced me to a lot of competitive college lacrosse. I had some knowledge on the Native roots of the game but began to explore deeper as I spent more time around the sport. I continue to learn about the game’s history and show up to this study as an outsider of lacrosse. I fully acknowledge that my Athabascan and Creek identity may differ from other Native identities in this study. There have been times throughout this process where I have questioned whether I am the one to conduct this research, since I have not always had a personal or cultural connection to lacrosse. I needed to ensure my relationship with this research is rooted in the respect, responsibility, and reciprocation foundation of CIRM. I worked through that internal conflict and feel good about my positionality as the Native researcher to engage with this topic. I also deeply respect how this research will contribute to my own cultural identity development as I continue to learn and experience the game.
My experience as a Native college student also informs this study. I am the only person in my immediate family to graduate from college. My belief in education started at a young age as performing well in school made me happy. I was a good student in high school but was ill equipped socially and emotionally to attend college. Thus, my initial college experience mirrored some of the struggles mentioned in the Native college student development literature. However, I have also persevered and experienced many successes. During my academic journey, I did not always know why I was going to school, but I always remembered the stability that education had provided to my life. I was not a college athlete, but I do have an unconditional love for sport and believe in the bridge from sport to academic opportunity. Ultimately, these experiences as a Native college student at several historically white institutions impact my positionality in this study. I plan to use this to my advantage in being able to understand certain scenarios and ask important questions.

Another reason I chose this study is because I believe in the healing ability of sport. As mentioned briefly in chapter two, games and sports in Native communities have always had a spiritual component (Coser Jr., 2012; Oxendine, 1988). Basketball was my sanctuary growing up as I navigated some childhood trauma, so I wanted to explore sports as sanctuary for other Native people. As I researched the Native roots of lacrosse, it was evident from the beginning how impactful lacrosse was to the healing of those Native communities who play the game. Therefore, I want to hear how lacrosse has served participants in a healing capacity as they navigate their college experience.

I feel it was important to acknowledge my positionality as a Native researcher in this study who will be an insider and outsider of the research. As an Athabascan and
Creek, my tribal identity is culturally rooted in lacrosse, yet my own personal upbringing in a mostly Athabascan household was mostly void of the game. My experience as a Native college student has presented many challenges, yet I have also earned many opportunities from my successes in college; which allows me to believe in the power of education. I have endured traumatic experiences like those impacting many of our Native communities. Sports is one tool that helps my healing process, so I wanted to explore this healing process for other Native athletes. Ultimately, my goal in this section is to establish an understanding of how my relationship(s) to the research carries a burden of responsibility and accountability to the Native lacrosse community. Therefore, I will respectfully carry the stories of those who choose to participate and will be proud to share their struggles and successes in the most appropriate manner.

**Qualitative Research Methods**

In combination with Critical Indigenous Research Methodology, the conversational method was used to guide dialogue with participants and narrative analysis and thematic analysis are used to tell their stories. This section will explain these approaches.

**Conversational Method**

Kovach (2010a) describes the conversational method as “a dialogic approach to gathering knowledge that is built upon an Indigenous relational tradition” (p. 129). It is important to establish rapport with study participants to build trust in our dialogue (Creswell, 2013; L. T. Smith, 2013). The conversational method utilizes a semi-structured interview process with open-ended questions that place value on stories as a way of transmitting data. The following characteristics make the conversational method
distinct from other western approaches when presented through Indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2010a, p. 128):

1. It is linked to a particular tribal epistemology (or knowledge) and situated within an Indigenous paradigm
2. It is relational
3. It is purposeful (most often involving a decolonizing aim)
4. It involves particular protocol as determined by the epistemology and/or place
5. It involves an informality and flexibility
6. It is collaborative and dialogic
7. It is reflexive

The conversational method is most appropriate as the researcher and participants are able to co-create knowledge by establishing a positive relationship, understanding the purpose of our research within an Indigenous paradigm, maintaining a desired level of informality and comfortability, and challenging the reality of our existence as Native peoples in a colonized educational setting.

The interview protocol (Appendix) guided the dialogue(s) but the conversational method allowed for the researcher to also guide the conversation. This is where my perspective as a Native researcher with an insider/outsider positionality strengthened the research as there were many moments in the conversation(s) where our Native identities presented an opportunity of understanding conversations and stories on another level from non-Native researchers. Furthermore, follow up questions from the Native perspective helped to explore experiences on a deeper level. This is a part of the
reclamation process and illustrates the burden of responsibility Native researchers have in exploring the truth to properly tell the stories of our Native communities.

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis works well with Indigenous methodology because it calls for individuals to share stories about who they are and how they wish to be known (Riessman, 2008). As mentioned above, acknowledging Native ways of knowing through storytelling is a crucial step in decolonizing research (L. T. Smith, 2013). As Tachine (2015) stated in her dissertation, “Narrative analysis provides a space where people can make sense of the past, engage others to the experiences of the storyteller, and mobilize others into action for progressive change” (p. 76). Thus, Narrative analysis is used in this study to generate storytelling and bring awareness to the experiences of Native college lacrosse athletes to promote positive change for their future experiences. This was done in a collaborative way between the researcher and participants, as each conversation was shared with participants to ensure accuracy and proper representation of their stories (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, each individual story carries its own value. But, collectively, stories may develop general “theoretical propositions, proposing that the gathering of individual stories creates a powerful unified voice” (Tachine, 2015, p. 76).

In addition, thematic analysis, another common qualitative approach, was used to build these individual narratives into the “powerful unified voice” where the participant stories overlap. This approach will be discussed further in the data collection and analysis section(s).
Data Collection and Analysis

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants due to the specificity of the study and the limited number of eligible participants, as only 22 men and 19 women identified as American Indian/Alaska Native for NCAA Division I lacrosse in 2020 (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b). The criteria for potential participants were their identity as American Indian/Alaska Native and their participation in NCAA Division I lacrosse during the period of 2019-2021. Although the NCAA does not use First Nations as an identifier in their demographics data, those athletes from Canada who do identify as First Nations were still eligible for the study. The 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 lacrosse seasons were chosen somewhat arbitrarily, but the decision was made because the development of this project started in 2019 and the study is being conducted during the 2021 lacrosse season.

Recruitment took an informal approach, as there is no official database identifying collegiate Native lacrosse players. Fortunately, the Iroquois Nationals compiled a list of 19 Native Division I men’s lacrosse players who were eligible to participate in NCAA competition for the 2018-2019 season. Although this list has not been updated, this publication served as a starting point to identify potential participants. General internet research skills were used to develop an excel database. I started with the Iroquois Nationals (men’s team) and Haudenosaunee Nationals (women’s team) to identify any college players mentioned on their website and/or social media. Through basic Google searches, I was able to identify players from the Nationals’ lists who were on NCAA Division I lacrosse rosters during the 2019-2021 seasons, which allowed me to assume
their enrollment in college. The university and athletics website(s) were used to identify potential communication channels for potential participants, including university email addresses, social media accounts (Twitter and Instagram), and sports information departments. This information was not available for all, but I wanted to begin building a database to organize ways of contacting potential participants.

After cross referencing the Iroquois Nationals list, I continued to build the database mostly through informal internet research methods. Also, I have been following Native lacrosse since my time at the University of Denver, so my own personal knowledge contributed to identifying potential participants. The Native lacrosse community is small and many stories overlap, which helped me build connections to other collegiate Native lacrosse players who I had not identified. For example, an internet search for someone on the original Iroquois Nationals list produced a story referencing a relative or teammate who was also eligible for the study. From there I was able to find magazine articles, websites, blogs, documentaries, and podcasts that helped identify potential participants. I manually searched Twitter and Instagram to find any social media accounts that may contribute to verifying information about possible participants.

The potential participant database I established had collegiate Native lacrosse athletes from many tribal identities. While I acknowledge the proper protocol in most instances is to seek out approval from tribal nations prior to talking with their communities, I decided after conversations with some Native mentors that it may be appropriate to reach out to potential participants first to determine if they felt comfortable with my research topic. If they did not feel comfortable or felt that I should contact their tribe prior to conducting this research, then I was more than happy to do so. This study
has been a long journey and my goal was to remove any further barriers to completion. I felt having to potentially contact numerous tribal nations before even reaching out to potential participants would have further inhibited the completion of this study. So, for this project I chose to believe in my understanding of Native knowledge systems and accept my responsibility in sharing the stories of the collegiate Native lacrosse players who agreed to participate. This decision was a bit unsettling, especially because of my belief in the principles of working with Native communities. I am aware that for future projects this may not follow the proper protocol in working with Native communities as established by CIRM. However, this project was not designed to engage with one specific tribal community, so I chose to seek approval on the individual level.

In an effort to strengthen the relational aspect of this study, I recorded a short video (about four minutes) to send to potential participants via email and/or social media. The video was designed to provide an audio and visual representation of myself and the project to create a more intimate connection with potential participants than just an email. The video provided a brief introduction of who I am and my reasons for developing and conducting this study. I discussed the importance of CIRM so participants were aware of the value of their participation and their voice to this topic. I then informed potential participants of their protection against any potential risks that come with their participation, such as being identified after sharing their story and alienation or retaliation from sharing any negative experiences within their programs. Confidentiality is imperative to protecting their identity after sharing their stories. Finally, I offered to answer any questions about the research and expressed gratitude for their willingness to watch my video. The video was edited/produced and uploaded to my private YouTube
channel to be shared only with potential participants. There was also a similar but separate message developed in text to be used via email.

There were a variety of methods that could have been used in recruiting potential participants, including university email addresses, personal social media accounts, sports information/media relations contacts within the athletics departments, and the Iroquois Nationals organization, where many of the potential participants compete. I found the most successful to be the personal social media accounts of potential participants. Rather than send out a message to every potential participant from the developed database, I identified those with social media accounts and used that as a starting point. I sent a direct message to certain potential participants containing a link to the video and a brief introductory message. Some people responded while others did not. Some people responded but then chose not to participate. But, those who did choose to participate seemed to respond excited about the research topic. For those who agreed to participate via direct message, we exchanged emails and I sent them the informed consent document. Once they returned the informed consent, we scheduled a video conference call. I then provided them with the interview protocol prior to our conversation.

In total, I contacted nine potential participants via social media, of which four chose to participate. Due to the small and unique nature of the potential participant pool, I chose not to disclose much of the demographic information for the participants. I felt that sharing certain specific identifiers may compromise the confidentiality of specific athletes and their stories. For example, if I were to disclose the tribal nation, gender and general location of the school a specific athlete is attending, I feel that the general public could make basic inferences about who the potential participant might be through some
simple internet research. However, I can disclose that the participant pool was comprised of three women and one man, all traditional aged college students (18-22 years-old) who compete in NCAA Division I lacrosse programs. All four participants are from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which is quite common in collegiate Native lacrosse due to the origins of the game. Yet, each participant comes from various tribal nations within the confederacy, and they all spent the majority of their childhood on the reservation. They were enrolled in various majors at their colleges.

**Data Collection**

I collected the data through interviews using the conversational method (Kovach, 2010a). The original plan was to travel to the communities and/or universities of each participant to establish a more authentic relationship and gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. However, due to COVID-19 this approach was no longer possible with travel restrictions in place and other restricting factors. Therefore, the conversations were held via video chat.

The interview protocol (Appendix) was developed based on the critical self-authorship work of Abes and Hernandez (2016). As outlined earlier, this work was designed to center the racial identity of participants in their college experience. Thus, for this study the questions were designed to center the Native identity of participants with their experience in their lacrosse program, their academic program, and other extracurricular activities. Specifically, I wanted to know how their Native identity impacted their view with the social world that is their lacrosse and academic programs, as well as their personal relationships with their teammates, classmates, peers, coaches, administrators, support staff, and others at the institution. Essentially I was seeking
stories to understand the extent to which these Native athletes can be their authentic Native self within their athletic and academic programs. The interviews were semi-structured; questions were organized to address the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of critical self-authorship discussed in chapter two. So, as a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete, ‘How do I make meaning of my social world?’; ‘How does my social world shape my sense of self as a racialized being (specifically a Native person)?’ and ‘What relationship(s) do I want with others for the benefit of my social world?’ (Hernandez, 2016). The conversational method allowed for me to ask follow up questions that emerged from the initial dialogue. The interview protocol was shared ahead of time so participants were able to reflect on the questions, formulate their thoughts and respond accordingly during the interview.

The conversations took place one-on-one and were recorded via video chat. Participants were reminded is that their participation was voluntary and they could refuse or withdraw at any time without consequence. Each conversation was conducted using Zoom Video Communications software, lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, and with participant consent was recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, all Zoom sessions were recorded using the transcription function. I initially cleaned the data by listening to the recording and revising the transcription for accuracy with goals of making the transcriptions as close to verbatim as possible. For example, there were many instances where I left out of the transcript natural communication words such as ‘like’ or ‘um’. This allowed the transcript to be more easily read and presented when using in text. I then reviewed each
conversation and transcription while listening back to the recorded audio/video and reading the cleaned transcription to ensure accuracy and gain an in-depth understanding of each participant’s experience. I sent the transcription to each participant in case they wanted to review and revise or omit any of their responses.

I then analyzed the data using a narrative analysis to tell the story of each individual participant and their experiences (Archibald, 2008a; Riessman, 2008). Using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), my coding consisted of multiple reviews of the transcripts to make meaning from participant ideas to begin sorting information in broad categories related to my research questions. I then aggregated the data in emerging categories; enabling me to organize participants’ experiences as they relate to my research questions (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, I listened to the audio and read the transcriptions to develop an introductory story of each individual participant. I then used an open coding method, allowing the emergence of themes from each participant’s stories instead of limiting my findings to predetermined categories influenced by my own biases and preconception (Creswell, 2013; Hartmann & Gone, 2012). I repeatedly examined the data to find these emerging themes and to narrow the categories and individual instances into more specific themes using multiple descriptors to connect findings with research questions (Creswell, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

**Validity**

In using Indigenous research methodology, I aimed to foster a safe environment for participants to share their stories and co-create knowledge with the researcher through informal conversation (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; L. T. Smith, 2013). Using CIRM to develop and implement the study design, I considered the unstable relationship between
Native communities and westernized research practices that have harmed Native peoples and misrepresented information about Native cultures (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012; Deloria, 1991; L. T. Smith, 2013). In response, this study is sensitive to the participants’ research experience and the data collection and analysis plan described above was used along with member checking to ensure validity and reliability (Creswell, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

**Member Checking**

In fulfilling my responsibility to uphold the principles of CIRM, I provided opportunities for all participants to share their athletic and academic experiences. I continued this approach in the data analysis of our conversations by sharing the results of my findings with all participants and allowing for feedback from their perspective. The transcriptions were sent to participants to be checked for accuracy and make sure they were comfortable with me using the content they shared (Creswell, 2013). This member checking validated their stories and themes as an accurate representation of participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2013). I was transparent with the data analysis and shared my initial findings with participants to consider their feedback in my interpretation of their shared experiences. I shared my final conclusions with participants to offer transparency and build positive research relationships by and for Native communities.

**Research Design Strengths and Limitations**

**Strengths**

As with all research, there are strengths and limitations to the study design. My research framework centers Native identity and establishes cultural congruency between the structures of higher education and Native ways of knowing. As a Native researcher, I
have the advantage of gaining an in-depth understanding of participant experiences, which is essential to overcoming past traumas associated with education and research (Deloria, 1991; L. T. Smith, 2013). To investigate my research questions, I chose data collection and analysis techniques that complement the Indigenous methodology. The conversational method provided a space for participants to comfortably share their stories of struggle and triumph in the university setting (Archibald, 2008a; Kovach, 2010a). I designed the data collection to center the cultures and experiences of the Native participants and emphasize their stories as the focus of the study, while also drawing from valid and reliable qualitative research methods.

**Limitations**

This qualitative study design is meant to examine the unique experiences of a small number of participants in a particular context, NCAA Division I lacrosse. The findings are not meant to be generalized to greater populations or communities. Specifically, the stories and experiences shared by participants only validate their personal experience as collegiate Native lacrosse players and are not indicative of the experience of all collegiate Native lacrosse players and their communities. Another limitation is the depth of the study, as it only examines the stories of four collegiate Native lacrosse players across a two-year window of NCAA lacrosse in one division. There are other collegiate Native lacrosse players who play in other NCAA divisions or under other collegiate athletic governing bodies, like community college athletics or the NAIA.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Sharing Stories of Collegiate Native Lacrosse Athletes at NCAA Division I Historically White Institutions

In this chapter, I will share the stories of participants to answer the research questions that guided this dissertation study (a) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their athletic program(s)? (b) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their academic and co-curricular program(s)? First, I present an introduction to participants’ individual stories from my perspective, using their words. Some participants spoke more than others about their upbringing, so the introduction stories vary in length. But ultimately their introductions provide insight into their journey in becoming collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. Second, I used thematic analysis to identity themes that emerged from across the four participant stories. I share stories that factor into their journey towards critical self-authorship as collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. As described in the previous chapter, the narrative and themes identified for each research question derived primarily from the exact words used by each participant during our conversations. Although somewhat edited for clarity, by overwhelmingly maintaining their language, I wanted to more fully represent their experiences as collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. There was no better way than to use their own words. The subsequent sections present a narrative introduction to each individual participant, followed by a thematic analysis of participant stories addressing the research questions.
Introduction Stories

This is Jasmine

Jasmine is a Haudenosaunee woman who grew up on her tribal reservation in the United States region of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. She was raised by her mother and father along with three siblings. She grew up playing sports such as soccer, basketball, and gymnastics. She was eventually introduced to lacrosse in the fourth grade. It was the beginning of her journey to becoming a successful NCAA Division I collegiate Native lacrosse athlete. This is her introductory story from her youth lacrosse days to her college recruitment and eventual college selection.

I started playing when I was in fourth grade…It was foreign to us because girl’s lacrosse was introduced all at once. There was a woman who's a part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy…When she came here, she brought it all at once, and so it was new to all the parents, it was new to all the girls. A lot of us collectively were not the best. But we just wanted to play…

Playing lacrosse was an accomplishment in itself for Jasmine, as traditional Haudenosaunee culture did not allow women to play the Medicine Game. Rather, it was a gift from the Creator to men. Jasmine learned to understand the tradition of the Medicine Game, yet she also found value in her pursuit of learning to play lacrosse.

When it was first introduced to me, I didn't think it was the same game as the men's. I know now there's a big difference between the men's game and the women's game. And it's because our game is not the Medicine Game. But, there's things that connect to the men's game that can metaphorically be like medicine for
the woman. Because, like you said before, playing lacrosse and wanting to pursue your education, were just things that I like to do.

Learning to play the game was an empowering experience for her and a really important step for her community.

I think there was this shift and movement in seeing the way our community views women playing lacrosse. Obviously, women aren’t supposed to be playing lacrosse. It's not the Medicine game. It's not our traditional ways. However, the sort of mindset that it creates, the doors it opens, it’s really amazing to see. When I look back and look at what we went through…we went through a lot of adversity. We didn't really have a lot of support in our community, and I think that was really the hardest thing. And it definitely was a tough couple years. I don't think I could have done it without the girls I had in the community. It was so cool how all of us are all learning it at once. I feel like somehow it kind of healed me and healed my family.

She elaborates on the healing component of the game and how it helped her family become closer as she became more involved in playing lacrosse.

When I was younger, my dad, he was always out of the house. He missed out a little bit on our childhood. He didn't get to spend as much time as he could have because he was busy. And so, right when we started playing and he realized how much we actually loved lacrosse, girl’s lacrosse, he was like, you know, I want to try to figure out what it is exactly. So, he bought the magazines, he bought the CDs, he bought the books. Just figuring it out. I think that's where it was a turnaround for our whole family because it brought us together. Especially with
my dad and mom. And it's been such a big part of our lives that if it wasn't there, I don't really know the type of person that I would be or the way my family would be. But I feel like in that way it's a sense of healing and being together. At least that's what it did for me.

That's what helped her fall in love with the game of lacrosse. She also enjoyed the exciting style of Native lacrosse and the unique skillset of each player excelling on the field.

It was just one of the games where it felt very natural and very fun. I started to love the game when I started to realize how exciting it was. When I watch men’s lacrosse, I realize how fast they can move their sticks and how creative they can be. And how you could have the fastest player in the world, you could have the most skilled player in the world, but they're going to be on the field at the same time. And they don't have to be built a certain way or be a certain way because, that's what makes them great. They use the things they're good at to their advantage and not everyone can do that. I think that is so cool.

As Jasmine began to play lacrosse more regularly, her love for the game continued to blossom. She became closer to the game and dedicated more of her time towards lacrosse. She built an understanding of what girls’ lacrosse could become in her community and where she fit in the equation. Her game was growing simultaneously with the girl’s game of lacrosse.

The girls’ game, it made me really excited because there's not really a person where like - they hadn’t set the record for what girls’ lacrosse needed to be. And when I got into middle school and I started watching some of the best players,
that's when that love was more fired up. I was able to see a woman do a bunch of stick work that probably the men can't do. And it was so cool to see. I was growing up also as the game is growing up. And it was changing every single year. That's what made it really exciting and that's what really inspired me to love the game more. Because I’m like, okay, it's not where it needs to be right now. It's still growing. It's still continuously changing. With other sports, you have a standard. There wasn't really a standard to what you expect women’s lacrosse to look like. Or girl’s lacrosse. And I feel with other sports there was already that standard. And so, to see it change so much, that's where I felt I was growing with the game. And that's what really made me appreciate it and really love it and want to be part of it.

A natural result of her love and dedication to lacrosse was a growth in her talent level. Originally playing with an all-Native girls’ team from her home community, she began to be noticed by other club teams and their coaches. She was approached by a coach to try out for a club team in a larger city about three hours away from the reservation. These teams played all year, whereas the community team would only play in select tournaments. She would go from playing with all Native girls from her community to playing on a team with mostly non-Native, white girls. She eventually attended a tryout and made the team. This was an eye-opening experience in various ways, including the step up in talent. Jasmine used this experience as motivation to continue to work and grow her game.

We ended up trying out. We were by far the worst one’s on the field. Girls were playing year ‘round already – we were probably the slowest ones, less skilled
ones. Seeing so many girls, just like different styles, speed. I think what kept us there is a passion to want to play. That was the biggest thing to get us to the next level. We could have went in there and had the mentality like, ‘well we suck. We’re the worst ones.’ But, we just wanted to play because the top teams we’re trying out for play year-round. And we really wanted to play so we tried out for the team. And we made the team.

Joining the club team provided Jasmine with a new level of exposure. They would play in larger lacrosse tournaments with more teams and college coaches in attendance. Pushed by her family, she continued to put in the work on the lacrosse field and it started to pay off with inquiries from college coaches. While this was exciting, it was also an unfamiliar feeling for someone at such a young age. However, Jasmine began to realize that lacrosse could be a pathway to further her education.

My dad said, ‘if you want to be in that position, if you want to be above average or better, you have to put the work in’. So around sixth, seventh, eighth grade, we were training more. We started playing year ‘round. That started to open the door where college coaches wanted to look at me and my sister. Finally, we got our first email. It was like ‘whoa, that's cool!’ Now, I'm not really thinking about college because you're young. You’re seventh and eighth grade. You’re thinking about tests and other stuff. You're thinking about school or dances. You're not thinking about college yet. But, when those emails started to come in and those mailings started to come in, it opened that door. The possibility. It made my parents really happy because they're like, we didn't expect that. We invested our
time and gas and money into this, just so you guys could love it. We never really thought that it could be an outlet to college, be that ticket.

This newfound attention from college coaches created a new mindset for Jasmine. She began to establish expectations for herself in pursuit of earning a college lacrosse scholarship. This was a new experience for Jasmine and her family. As she ventured into high school she focused even more on her goals. But she was sure to enjoy the fun times and embrace the challenge. This was the beginning of her college recruitment process.

When that happened, our mindset needed to sort of shift. There obviously was more passion, but the mindset needed to shift, and we needed to set more of a standard. Like having good grades. Or being on our best behavior in school. Wanting to go to college. Setting the standard for ourselves. It wasn't like my parents were like, ‘Oh, well you got to do this, this, and this.’ We were all going through this at the same time, the recruiting process. Figuring out scores, grades. Figuring out where we want to go maybe. It was all so new. It was so fun. That's when we really locked in. Just like, okay, this is the standards that I’m setting. These are the people that I’m meeting when I’m going to these different places. I want to be the best representative for our people.

As she entered high school, the next step in the recruiting process was to continue to increase that exposure, beyond just the club team. So, Jasmine and her family made the decision for her to leave her tribal reservation and attend a college preparatory high school about five hours away. She spent her first two years at this boarding school before transferring to another academy for her junior and senior year. She had not ever thought
about leaving her reservation but realized this could be the extra boost she needed to help her collegiate lacrosse aspirations.

I grew up on the reservation my entire life until I went to boarding school. So, I grew up here with my family, my extended family’s from here on both sides, my dad side and my mother’s side. And I didn’t expect to leave home at such a young age, until I started playing lacrosse because lacrosse was that outlet. That ticket to wanting to pursue my education and play lacrosse in college. I think that’s what really pushed us, was leaving the reservation.

This was not a seamless transition for Jasmine. Amidst the opportunity to play elite level lacrosse came the struggles of being away from her home community for the first time in her life, while also navigating different educational systems.

When I went to boarding school, we didn’t know how to transition. I found out later in the long run that I have ADHD and a reading disability. That was one of the hardest journeys I had throughout high school with transferring schools and going different places. I struggled a lot. We didn’t have resources (back home) to get that type of support or get the diagnosis, to have the resources to be successful when I was growing up through my education. My parents decided it would be a good idea if I just reclassified. I would have just repeated a grade. So, the way I would transition to high school would be a little bit different and maybe I would do better if I had another year under my belt.

She found that during her first two years the boarding school placed more of an emphasis on academics. When she moved to a more athletics focused academy in the Southeast U.S. for her final two years of high school, the emphasis shifted from
academics to athletics. While this was good for her lacrosse ability, this educational experience may have had an impact on Jasmine’s eventual college decision.

Our first high school was more about academics than athletics. But when we went to the academy, it was athletics. It was flip flopped. And I didn't really notice if I was struggling or if anything was wrong because I feel like it wasn’t really a good balance. It was more valued at the academy. Like your athleticism. And so, for me, I didn't really focus more on school. I still was really hard on myself. But I didn't go to (retracted university) because of my SAT and ACT scores. I couldn't get them to a certain benchmark that they needed to be. They're like you need to work on this. And it got to a point in my senior year that I couldn't get there. So, I’m like, I don't want to wait so long, and be denied from there, that I’m just gonna decommit.

She found herself in her senior year with no official commitment to a collegiate lacrosse program.

I decommitted my senior year and I went through a really, really, really dark hole. I felt like my feet were in the mud. I’ve been moving forward for the last couple years and now I felt like I was stuck. And I felt like there was going to be no opportunity that came up because it was so late. I was so stressed out about that because I’m like, I don't know when next opportunity is going to come up.

Her love for lacrosse did not waver and her talent spoke for itself, as other opportunities did come around from coaches who had recruited her before her original commitment. This was another unfamiliar process as some of these schools were never
on the radar. They were either located far away from home or from conferences playing at a lower level of competition.

After I decommitted there was a coach that reached out. He actually saw me when I was like 13 years old, when I played for the U19 Haudenosaunee team. He was like, ‘Yeah, I saw you when you were younger. I wanted to reach out now. I noticed the type of schools that were talking to you originally. I knew the coaches that were talking to you. So, I didn’t want to reach out because I didn’t think that you would look at us.’ And I feel bad now because it's not like we had tunnel vision. It's not like, ‘Okay, we’re gonna go to this school’. We didn't have - we were just grateful that anyone was offering any attention to us. And so, I reached out to him, and we were talking for a little while and he was like I’m gonna come to your high school. So, he flew down and he watched us practice. We talked after, and he was talking about how they're really excited for their season and how they would want me a part of their class. I was unsure because I had no recollection of who their university was. It wasn't me trying to be mean or anything, I just didn't know them, at all. I never thought of going to school in that state at all.

Grateful to be recruited again and have options, Jasmine had to make a decision. It ultimately came down to money and the financial aid package available.

I waited a couple months, and I was looking at another university because I wanted to go to an in-state school and I love the coaching staff. I knew half the team there. It would only be like three and a half hours from me. But the thing it came down to was financial aid. And at the time the window is shutting. Like, I
gotta figure out what I want to do. So then by February I went on a visit, and I ended up committing.

This was a huge decision because she would be going further from home than originally anticipated and leaving behind her family and sisters, whom she is close to.

All throughout high school and all throughout when I started playing lacrosse, I would always have my flesh, my sister. And now we graduated from high school, and we started kind of like a goodbye. That was the hardest thing for me going into freshman year because I was 12 hours away from home. I was not in everyday conversation with my sister anymore. I was going to be a part of a new team that didn't know me.

Jasmine found herself in a completely new environment with her enrollment at the university. She would be the only Native woman on her collegiate lacrosse team and there were many unknowns about her upcoming experience as an athlete and a student at a Division I school. Would she be able to be her authentic Native self while at college? Her college experiences and stories about this journey towards critical self-authorship will be shared in the thematic analysis section.

This is Aurora

Aurora is a Haudenosaunee woman who grew up on her tribal reservation in the United States region of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. She lived on her reservation her entire life and continues to live there when she is not away at school. She doesn’t remember exactly when she fell in love with lacrosse, but just remembers growing up around the game as a young girl at the lacrosse games of her father and brother. Aurora and her sister are the first women in her family to play lacrosse. Breaking the gender
barrier is a prominent theme in Aurora’s story. This is her journey to becoming a NCAA Division I Native lacrosse athlete.

I don't know exactly remember when. Just because this game is something that my dad and my brother and my grandpa, everyone has played before me. Notice how I only said all the males. Which, me and my sister are the first females in my family to really play this game. My great grandmother went to the boarding school. So, she didn't get the chance to play this game. But I grew up going to my dad’s games, my brother’s games. I was the little girl trying to play with my brother’s lacrosse sticks at his tournaments with all his buddies. So, I always tell everybody that I don't remember falling in love with the game. It almost felt as if it was a habit. I don't remember just picking up the stick and being like, I love this. Because I was too young to even think that. It was just something that clicked with me and kind of stayed with me all the way up to 20 years later.

During her youth, Aurora played with an all-Native girls’ team from her reservation. She excelled in her time with the team.

One of the moms back at home, I give her a lot of props because her and another mom worked together to start it. They got together a group of Native American girls back at home on our Rez. And basically, we started playing against communities around us that were prominently white. So, I grew up playing lacrosse with Native girls. And then in order to reach the next level, I had to go almost two hours away to get recruited.

As others noticed Aurora’s skills and suggested she go play on a more competitive club lacrosse team, it was her father who helped make it happen. Aurora and her father began
to realize that lacrosse could become more than a game and open the door for other opportunities. So, they did their research and endured the sacrifice to make lacrosse their family priority.

I have an amazing father, so he would do anything, give up anything for us. So, when I decided to start playing lacrosse, me and my sister, he was all for it. It wasn't until we played our first game, and he was like, oh my daughters are actually really good. And other people were like, you should keep the stick in their hand. And after they realized that I kind of had a gift, or I just had a different skill set than the other girls, they told my dad about how this game can take me further. Colleges are starting to play now. They can get an education out of this. How it can get me off the Rez and stuff like that. And basically said, you should send her to a club team. The club coaches will help her get recruited for college. They’ll help her shape up as an athlete. So, my dad looked into it. Did a lot of research on colleges and everything and ended up driving me and my sister every Tuesdays and Thursdays to the city and back. So, we would leave like 30 minutes early from school and then get back home at like midnight, 12:30am. And then have to wake up at like 6am for school the next day to catch the bus. But I started playing with some of the best girls in the nation and being coached by college coaches and stuff like that.

Aurora and her family would start to make the two-plus hour drive to and from the city to play competitive lacrosse. Although Aurora had not begun to think about college, others could see her potential. It was then that they started to think more seriously about collegiate lacrosse becoming a reality.
I want to say it was middle school. Someone first mentioned it to my dad. And at the time, like I was still young. So, my dad was like, ‘oh, we got time to figure out college.’ So right before I’m going into high school - it's different now, but recruiting when I was in high school, you could commit when you're in like sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade. So, my dad is seeing posts of girls that are committing to all of these awesome schools. And he was like, well I want my daughter to get the best out of life. I want her to go to college. And when I was younger, I honestly was not thinking about college at all. That was when my dad finally was like, all right we're going. But he wanted to make sure to give me that experience, before going into high school, so that going into high school I had the materials and skill set that I needed. So that I had the right head on my shoulders. I wasn’t going to high school and thinking, ‘oh yeah, I’m gonna go and play lacrosse and that's it.’ His mindset was more so, you’re going to do good in school in order to play lacrosse.

However, this new experience of playing club lacrosse meant she went from an all-Native lacrosse team to being just one of a few Natives on the team. While in the long run this would ultimately help her transition to college, at the time it came with a few eye-opening experiences.

Me and a couple of other girls from my reservation, we used to drive all the way out to the city two times a week - which is a two hour drive - to play on a club team. And I’ll never forget, this is something I’ll never forget. One of the girls walked up to me and asked, ‘Do you guys still live in tipis?’ And I looked at her and I’m like, what is going on? But it’s something that I’ll never forget just
because it was so shocking. And I just was like, are you this sheltered? Do your parents not let you know about the outside world? Like it was just crazy. Luckily, I wasn't by myself at that point. I actually had a buddy with me from back home. We both kind of looked at each other and laughed in the girls face because - first of all, our nation, we never used tipis. So, we had to educate her on longhouses. Since I was younger, I guess I’ve had practice with dealing with people.

Ultimately, Aurora was there to better her situation and her opportunities for playing collegiate lacrosse. As she started being more seriously recruited, it would eventually be time to decide on a college. She went on a few college visits and realized her desire to remain somewhat close to home.

Originally, my school wasn't in the mix. But I went on another visit, and I took one airplane ride, and it was almost like seven hours long and I thought about this and I was like, I can't stay away from my family like this. There's no way. And then I want to say my sophomore year of high school, they (current school) actually came in, was talking to some of the parents and walked up to my dad and was like, ‘we’d love to have your daughter come and visit.’

A driving force in her decision was a desire to keep growing the game of lacrosse as a Native woman. While the game had a fair share of successful Native men at the time of her recruitment, there were not as many Native women who had experienced success at the Division I level. Aurora wanted to choose a school where she could make an impact both on and off the field. She wanted to choose a college where she could trailblaze her own path and be different. In the end, she chose the college where she felt most comfortable.
My dad told me he was all excited because it was a great lacrosse school. He's heard nothing but the best. But I was like, no, I want to be different. I want to go to a school where there's not much Native lacrosse players. I want to go be around other people so I can really educate everyone and not go to a school where there's already Natives. I want to be different. I came and visited and I actually ended up falling in love with the school. And the distance was good. It was an easy drive. I was away from home but not too far away. And when I came here and learned that there wasn't much Native American lacrosse, like Indigenous women on the team, I was like alright. I could probably make a change here. My original goal I can do here, but on the women's side of it. I mean the men’s side is pretty - they've had men show them, but why not have a woman now. Why not have a woman do the same thing that the men have, in a way. So that's kind of why the decision came down to my college.

Despite her success, the traditional origins of the Medicine Game sometimes served as a barrier in her journey to playing collegiate lacrosse. There was pushback from others in the community as Haudenosaunee girls began to play lacrosse. It was not enjoyable to hear these things, but it did not deter Aurora from playing the game she loved.

I don't want to say it was like a gender dispute. But I do remember some of my friends’ moms having a problem with the fact that their daughter's friend played lacrosse. And it kind of sucked. It did. Because when they would come over to my house and try to play with my sticks, I was like, am I going to get yelled at by
your mom? I don't want to cause anything. And sometimes it did. But my dad did a really good job of keeping me away from all the negativity of the community.

Fortunately, Aurora feels more support as she has gotten older. The women’s game is growing. People are beginning to understand the differences between the men’s and women’s games. Aurora is proud of her influence in that growth as a young woman who has reached the elite levels of contemporary lacrosse. As people begin to watch the women’s game more, their appreciation for the game will grow along with the game itself.

I feel like when I was younger it definitely was a bigger dispute than it is now. And that's how I look at it, is that when I was younger, yeah it was a big problem. But look at me now. I don’t want to say I’m doing things. But like, I kind of am. And I feel like the differences that we had back then definitely aren't as serious as we have now with the game of lacrosse. Only because they did realize that this game, the two games are two different (games). Whether it's from the stick, to the equipment, to the rules, to the field. The dimensions of the field are completely different. Just everything. I could go on and on about the differences between the men's and women's games. I watch the men's games and I’m like, why did that ref just blow that whistle? Or, how are they even cradling with those sticks? Just stuff like that. And people that feel like the game is so similar to the Medicine Game - if they actually took the time to watch women play this game you'd be like, ‘oh, this is nothing. It really is different. They're not just saying that. There's a big difference.'
In fulfilling her mission to be a trailblazer for women’s lacrosse and her community, Aurora will be the first Native woman to graduate from her college lacrosse program in its entire history. We will learn more about her experiences in the upcoming thematic analysis section.

This is Thomas

Thomas is a Haudenosaunee man who grew up on his First Nations reservation in Canada with his parents and two siblings. As is tradition in Haudenosaunee culture, he was given his first lacrosse stick at birth, placed next to him in his cradleboard. He grew watching his father play lacrosse and people noticed his love and talent at an early age. Some thought he would be the next great player. This was the beginning of his journey to becoming a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete.

Well, for us, truly we were given a stick as soon as we were born. Pretty much it’s in our cradle board. Where we’re literally at the hospital with our little lacrosse stick already. So that was given to me right away. And then I only started really playing when I was like four. But I always had a love for it. My dad was a really good lacrosse player. And people would always say that I’m the one. Like instead of all the other kids, they would be running around. Me, I would be the only one who was just watching my father all the time.

His natural connection to lacrosse and inherent love for the game showed in his dedication to being the best lacrosse player he could be. At some point he realized that lacrosse could be something bigger. He just didn’t always know what that could be.
I felt like I always had to try extra hard, because I wasn't as talented as the rest of the kids on my team. When I hit around 12, I realized how good I can be. I didn't know where I was going with it. Or what I was going to do with it. But I wanted to start using it and pave the way. I didn't know what was happening at the time. So, I just worked my ass off. I’ve just been in love with it ever since. I guess there was always something there. Once I realized how good I can be, I was like, ‘okay, I’m going to ramp it up and then keep going.’

Thomas was surrounded by talented lacrosse players in his community. However, not all of them realized their full potential. For Thomas, he knew he must continue to work hard if he was going to make it.

The kids my age, they were all just naturally gifted. There's so many kids who were so good. In my community at around that age, like 12, I still wasn’t one of the best players. There's so many good kids who live in our community who are so gifted. But it's either they just don't want to pursue it once they hit a certain age or they just kind of lose their love for it. I don't know what it is. But I was one of the ones who just continued to play.

Eventually, his aspirations to play collegiate lacrosse emerged. Although, the field lacrosse game he was watching at the college level was a different game than the box lacrosse he grew up playing in his community. But he was attracted to the high level of competition. However, playing in college seemed like just a dream at the time.

I wanted to play and wanted to go to college. It's funny because I was maybe, I want to say 10 or 11 (or) 12. I was watching Duke lacrosse playing on TV. I
didn’t even really know field lacrosse, at all. I just played box lacrosse. It's like indoors. I didn't really know as much about field lacrosse. But I remember being like, I want to go to Duke (laughing). That's the first thing I thought of because it looked like such a high level of lacrosse. And then my parents were just like, ‘Haha, okay that's cute.’ Like nobody really goes. Even in other Native communities, nobody ever really went to Duke. And it just so happens when I was 15, my first call was from Duke.

Thomas continued to enjoy playing box lacrosse for his home community. But, with his success came opportunity to play at a more competitive level.

In Canada we play box lacrosse. It's basically just a summer league. But it's the most competitive box lacrosse you can experience. There's like Junior B, Junior A. I was playing Junior B for my hometown. I wasn't trying to go anywhere because I’m a homebody. I just wanted to play for home. Then suddenly someone asked me to go to British Columbia. So I wound up going to BC. And this whole new world of lacrosse opened up – competitive lacrosse. And then I moved out there to go play Junior A.

As he left his home community to play more elite levels of lacrosse, those college aspirations he developed at a younger age started to become a reality. Others pushed Thomas to explore his options for increased exposure.

I had to go out and I ended up playing for this team in Ottawa. Then they started going to the states, like Maryland area. So we would always be out there. That's when I started getting letters right away. When I was like 15 years old, I was
getting letters already. They told my coaches - I was too young to even think about that stuff or care about that stuff. And they're just like you should start considering this prep school route.

But, college preparatory school was something that Thomas and his family had never considered. He is a self-proclaimed homebody who had not planned to leave his community. It was not something that many First Nations people had done before him. It was a dilemma for his family to send their child to the United States for school. But, lacrosse was the deciding factor.

It was obviously not the old boarding schools. But it was a preparatory school. So, they're like, just start considering this. And me, that was never on my mind. Even my parents were just like, ‘What? No. We don't want to send him away. He's only 15.’ But I started slowly going to check out prep schools. And then ended up getting accepted to a bunch of prep schools. I was one of the only Natives that was out there considering this, a prep school, because most kids don't go to prep school. I was in middle school already on the Rez. So I just stayed there. But, there was no lacrosse. No field lacrosse. No nothing. So I had to go to the states for it.

The move to prep school was a challenging time for Thomas. Not only was he leaving his home at a young age, but he would be the only Native in many spaces. He was acutely aware of his predominantly white surroundings, and it took time to get used to his new environment.
I headed out when I was 15. That was the hardest. I remember getting dropped off and my parents were like – they're even shocked too. Like, we're dropping him off? He’s pretty young. Like I said, I’m a homebody. And to me my home is everything. I loved it so much I didn’t really want to leave. But they're thinking long term. And they just said, you know, this is probably the right decision for him. And I wanted to do it too. But it scared me at the same time. It's like a whole new life. So, I remembered they dropped me off. I say my goodbyes. I’m crying walking to my room. Just like, ‘oh shit’. Then this teacher comes up to me and hugs me. And she’s like, ‘everything's gonna be okay.’ She was this old, really, really polite lady. And she brought me to get snacks and stuff. And at the time, I was just like, ‘Uh, there’s so many white people.’ Like I didn't know. It threw me off. I didn't feel comfortable. They don't know me. I don't know them. I didn't know anybody, and I felt super, super weird. But it started getting easier as the years went on.

One of the many challenges of prep school was it kept Thomas away from his culture. He was raised in a traditional household, but now he could not participate in ceremonies with his community.

I’m very, they say like ‘traditional’. So, I go to longhouse. I do ceremonies. Stuff like that. And I would miss it when I would be at prep school. So that made me upset. I’d be pissed. But then, they started telling me, you know if you go to ceremonies, yeah, it’s good and all. But, no matter what, you carry it with you. It's not just stuck at home. You carry it with you. So that helped me. And I think what everybody was worried about is I would kind of get whitewashed, I guess. My
mindset would change. But I think because I left so early it kind of kept me more grounded. If that makes sense. Because I know how important and how much it means to me. And it's who I am.

The college prep school route eventually worked out. Thomas received offers from several schools before deciding to attend his current institution. He made this choice early on in his high school career. It was a place where he had seen other Native men succeed.

I went to go visit when I was 15 or 16. They had this coach that I liked and then other Natives were there. And I was just automatically drawn to it right away because of them. And the head coach, he was a beauty. And I don't know, in my head I was locked in. Just because of the other Native players at the time. Now that I look back on it – because I was only 15 when I committed. So, I wish I weighed out more options at the time. But it is what it is now.

Thomas is now entering his senior year of collegiate lacrosse. We will learn more about his experiences and his journey towards critical self-authorship in the upcoming thematic analysis section.

This is Bella

Bella is a Haudenosaunee woman who grew up on her tribal reservation in the United States. She was raised by her mother and father and has three siblings. She first fell in love with lacrosse when she was in elementary school. She remembers having a dislike for the game at first because when she started, she was having to play with the boys. They would bully her and other teammates, which did not make the game fun. She
eventually found the girls team to play on and the game became more fun. She felt a spark in her love for lacrosse which would be the start to her journey of playing collegiate lacrosse. This is Bella’s story from her youth playing days to her enrollment at a Division I college athletic program.

I first fell in love with lacrosse when I was in fourth grade. At first, I absolutely hated lacrosse. The only option to play around here was boys’ field lacrosse. And my parents would have to bribe me to go to every practice because people were getting bullied by some of the boys. But then our reservation got our first girls’ lacrosse program. And my mom knew that was a historical moment, and she wanted us to be part of it. So, we switched from boys’ field to girls’ field. And I was also terrible at first. And then I started to sense this spark that, you know, this is something that I could be good at if I put my mind and my heart into it.

Bella also realized that lacrosse was bringing her family together. Her parents enjoyed providing this opportunity and it helped Bella to become closer to her father, who was always busy with his work. When she saw the love her father began to have watching her play the game, she fell more in love with the game herself. Lacrosse provided a sense of connection and healing in their relationship.

The thing that really solidified that for me was our father wasn't the most present growing up because of his work. So, he was always out and about working. From the minute we woke up to when we went to bed, we didn’t see him. And once he noticed how passionate we were about lacrosse, that was our thing together. That was sort of our way to mend our relationship, which we hadn't done that much of. And I would say that even carries the same impact to this day, in terms of like
how we all understand each other. Like 80% of our conversations with my dad are about lacrosse. And I’m not that upset about it. But yeah, I would say that's when I sort of fell in love with it was whenever I saw that. It really does have that impact to be medicine for people when they don't even realize.

As that spark began to ignite, Bella began to realize that lacrosse could be something more than just a game. Admittedly shy as a child, lacrosse provided a boost to her self-confidence that helped her build an identity.

I would say that my shyness was crippling. I was intelligent as a kid. But teachers would call my parents and let them know that if she doesn't start participating in class it could mess up her mental development. And so, hearing that was a wakeup call that I can’t be the shy little kid forever. There was nothing really pushing me to kind of feel comfortable and confident in my own identity. And it wasn't until I started to play lacrosse that I realized the confidence I was gaining. As I look back, playing lacrosse has definitely helped develop my social skills, my own sense of self, my own identity.

Lacrosse also helped Bella become closer to her Haudenosaunee roots, something that has not always been easy for her despite being raised on the reservation.

And even down to the point of feeling out my spiritual side and feeling connected to my Indigenous roots. Which is something that’s been awfully hard. Particularly because my family's been really impacted by assimilation and residential schools. And it’s this constant internal battle, like who am I? What do I believe in? Am I really Native? And lacrosse was definitely something that made me feel comfortable to feel Native.
Bella continues by describing the difficulty of being an ‘outsider’ to some traditional ways of being in her community. Which is why she felt a stronger connection with her love for lacrosse.

Just because there's kind of a clique-ness to going into the longhouse and stuff like that. And they say they want to be better. They want to have open arms and stuff like that. But there's still these negative connotations to being the new one there. And not wanting to approach that, lacrosse was my easier route in terms of feeling okay in my own skin. And kind of connected to my roots that I didn't necessarily feel before.

Bella played lacrosse with girls from her tribal community until about middle school. That was the time she started playing for a club team away from the reservation. Eventually, the time came for Bella to leave her community entirely and attend boarding school for her high school experience with hopes of gaining more exposure in the lacrosse world. This was another tough cultural hurdle, as some in the community did not understand why she would want to leave her reservation to chase her dreams. This created more internal conflict for young Bella.

Initially, I thought that everyone would be excited for me to pursue new opportunities and bring back all these new things we're going to learn to the community to help. But, one of the elders interpreted that completely differently. And said, you know, that all these young kids nowadays are so urgent to disconnect from their roots. Insulting us essentially. And 13-year-old me was just standing there like, okay. And what made it worse was people responded and said, no, no. Like don't worry. By the time these girls are 23 they'll be back here.
Which is like, who are you to set the timeline for my life? When I need to return and stuff like that. So that’s also another battle. Do I want to pursue this education and then come back here and be limited in job opportunities and stuff?

Nonetheless, Bella knew the next step in her process of becoming a collegiate Native lacrosse player was to head off to boarding school. She realized that lacrosse could be her springboard to bettering her education and ultimately her future. She was pushed by her father to think intentionally about the next steps towards a college experience.

My dad had told me write down your top 10 schools when I was in sixth grade. And looking back now that’s crazy that they would give that sort of responsibility to 12-year-old me to decide where I want to go to school in six years. But I wrote down the top lacrosse schools because that’s what I wanted to do. It was a pretty daunting thing. I remember exactly how it went too. I was in sixth grade. I was sitting at the counter eating cereal and my dad brought a pen and a pencil and told me to write down the top 10 schools I want to go to. I actually did it.

After leaving the reservation, Bella spent her first two years at a boarding school a few hours away from her reservation in the Northeast U.S. She finished her final two years of high school at another academy in the Southeast U.S. that focused more on lacrosse. Despite her love for the game, she did not always feel the same love from her teammates during her high school years.

In high school, girls on my team had assumed that I hated them because of how aggressively I would play in practice. And I’m not the social butterfly. I play so that whenever I’m walking off the field, I know that I left everything that I had
out on the field. And that's my sense of like, ‘okay, did I play well? Did I not play well?’ And so, whenever these girls were saying these things, my initial thing was to be like what they think doesn't really matter. If I’m playing well, people see that I’m playing well, then that's fine.

Bella's experience confirms the historical narrative that Natives in general were violent savages, and now she was portrayed as playing the game too rough, too savage (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2012, 2018; Salter, 1972, 1995). The game needed to be played in a less aggressive manner according to white folks. Bella’s aggressive style of play ended up costing her in ways out of her control. Yet, she did not let that deter her from maintaining her identity on the field. She was there for a larger purpose.

Eventually my senior year rolls around and I am a natural leader on the team. So, I was kind of thinking what if I get Captain? That would be so amazing. And I ended up getting told that I wouldn't be able to, simply because of how people perceive me because of how hard I play. And so that was a heartbreaker moment for me. But in reality, I know that you can't please everyone, and I’m not here to please these people. A lot of the girls on my team, you could tell they didn’t really love or care for the game. They were there because their parents paid for them to be there. And that definitely made it a lot harder. Because my parents were putting everything on the line for me to be there to have those kind of opportunities. So why am I going to half ass this just because you are? So that was definitely a big divider moment. And it made me grateful that I didn't let anyone sort of tell me how to be, or tell me who I am, or how I should be.
Bella’s purpose was to fulfill her dreams of playing collegiate lacrosse. She recognized the sacrifices her parents made to help her chase those dreams. It was important she play the game with maximum effort to show her respect for the game and the sacrifices of her parents.

As her college recruitment picked up, there were several options and she wanted to make sure she was choosing a program that would support her as a Native woman. She realized that not every college felt that way, which had an impact beyond her recruitment. She began to experience the weight of being one of the only Native women in collegiate lacrosse circles.

Some of these schools did not want to take a chance on the Native girls. Which definitely did some damage internally in terms of - I kind of want to give my younger self a hug for going through the identity crisis that I did. I was so aware of how I had to carry myself, making sure that people perceive me in the right way. Always trying to debunk stereotypes without saying it. And so, most of the rooms that I was walking into for most of my life, I was going to be the only Native there. So, there was this pressure to put off a good first impression for the entire race. So, that pressure is definitely daunting, but it put me in the best position to be aware of myself and my actions and how I treat others around me. It is a lot of pressure to put on Native kids whenever we enter these specific arenas, whether that be being an athlete or going to these big academic institutions.

Bella was feeling the burden of being the only Native in the room. The pressure to perform as a Native become the norm in her life as she continued to pursue her goals of
collegiate lacrosse. She would be one of the only Natives at her educational institutions, a common burden felt by Native college students. Eventually, the time had come for Bella to make a college decision. She chose her current institution because of their reputation in academics and for welcoming Native students.

As I got older and I started to see how much I valued my education and academic life, I thought I’m not going to be able to play lacrosse forever. I might as well set myself up to have the best opportunities. I don't think I would be at this institution without lacrosse. And definitely looking into the Indigenous roots of the school. Knowing that this was the school that had the most Natives on the east coast was something that I felt comfortable with. I can even say that to this day, I can't imagine myself at any other school. I know I made the right decision.

However, this decision did not come without some heartache as Bella was used to having her sister around. They grew up playing lacrosse together. Yet, now they would be separating as they each chose to attend different colleges. Fortunately, Bella has found a home at her current institution in many ways.

It definitely was an end of the world moment whenever my sister ended up going to another school. Throughout my entire process I looked at every school and was like, okay, we will fit in well here. But taking her out of the picture definitely made my heart drop into my stomach and question, did I make this correct choice for me? But I do know that I did make the right choice. And I definitely feel supported in all aspects of my experience. From feeling supported in the classroom to feeling supported by other Natives. I think that's something that
definitely saves me in my day-to-day life. And feeling supported by my coaches and my teammates. That's been huge.

It was clearly a difficult decision for Bella to choose a separate college from her sister. It created more internal conflict. Luckily, she has found support at her college and is comfortable with her college choice. We will explore more of Bella’s transition to college, her current experiences, and her journey towards critical self-authorship in the upcoming thematic analysis section.

**Stories of a Journey Towards Critical Self-Authorship**

This section will share stories across all participants that illustrate their journey towards critical self-authorship. Themes have emerged showing experiences and factors both inhibiting and encouraging participants’ journeys towards critical self-authorship. Ultimately, this section will share experiences and themes that reveal how much participants are able to be their authentic Native self while a member of their collegiate lacrosse programs. The themes that emerged as participants shared their stories were as follows: the transition, support systems, educating ignorance, playing Native, learning Native, college milestones, on the horizon, relationships to home, and the future of collegiate Native lacrosse.

The stories in this section answer the research questions that guided this dissertation study (a) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes’ journey towards critical self-authorship within their athletic program(s)? (b) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes’ journey towards critical self-authorship within their academic and co-curricular program(s)? The themes are presented and discussed below. Each theme may answer one or both research questions. I felt it was best to keep all the stories together
and then analyze and discuss their connections to each research question and the theories afterwards.

**The Transition**

All participants shared stories of their transition to college in general and their lacrosse programs specifically. Most of them experienced some difficulty at first, as they found themselves in an unfamiliar environment.

*Transition to College: I Didn’t Know What to Expect.*

**Aurora**

I was scared. And I actually just talked to another freshman about this the other day. I definitely was scared. It hit me that I wasn’t going to have my dad and mom around. I wasn’t gonna have my sister. I wasn’t going to have my cousins on my lacrosse team to back me up. From the way everybody joked about things, to the way they shopped, to the way they do their hair, everybody was different and it kind of scared me. But my dad was like, ‘you’ve been doing this. You’ve been playing lacrosse in the city for how long? You’ve been dealing with the lack of diversity for a while now. You just have to do it on your own. I’ve helped you for the past couple years now, with the club teams.’

And I never knew that’s another reason why he sent me to the club teams was he wanted me to be around non-Natives. So that when the time came for me to go off to college, I wasn’t as afraid. Which in reality, it did honestly help me. And if I didn’t do that, I think it would have been harder than what I thought; than what I had to go through mentally and by myself.

**Bella**
I was absolutely terrified. I think that my downfall is not communicating enough with those around me about my feelings. So being forced to sort of address these things was definitely a growing point for me. And I was also going through pretty tough times because of some of the things going on in my personal life. Which I think definitely held me back in hindsight. But, I was definitely the most nervous for classes. And I had my experiences with, you know, the whole imposter syndrome deal and feeling like I didn’t actually deserve to be there. And what if I am just a token Native kid is sort of like – all these ideas were flying around.

Jasmine

I didn’t have my sister there. No one knew me at all. I was the only Native. Also, we’re more in the south. And I don’t want to make it about politics. But, just in the south, like there’s not really a liberal view. So, it was really hard, because it kind of made me uncomfortable. Like, literally seeing the Trail of Tears history driving down. Seeing that was a weird gut feeling. I didn’t really know what to expect. I went to school in other red states, and as a Native you don’t have people on your side a lot. You have people that are going to not accept you because you’re not white. And yeah, we dealt with situations like that before. However, I had my sister with me. And I think going to school there, I was, I didn’t really know what to think.

Thomas

I’ll be honest, I didn’t even know what these schools really were. In my head, I’m just like, are they good? Who is this? I didn’t even know they’re like Division I. I didn’t really know much about NCAA at all. I just remember seeing some people
go to college lacrosse programs. And it wasn’t even hard for me, only because I went to those prep schools at such a young age. So that really prepared me. That made my transition so much smoother.

Participants shared various feelings from their initial transition to college. Aurora and Jasmine spoke to missing their families and feeling a cultural disconnect from the beginning. Bella talked about imposter syndrome and second guessing her presence on campus. Thomas shared his complete unfamiliarity with the institutions approaching him about playing NCAA Division I lacrosse. These stories were not surprising considering the transition to college is not easy for many Native college students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Schooler, 2014).

*Transition to Lacrosse Program: A Whole ‘Nother Level.*

More specifically, participants spoke about their transition to their lacrosse programs. They shared feelings of fear, nervousness, struggle, and isolation as sometimes the only Native in their program.

**Bella**

I was super nervous because the coach that recruited me to play for the team, left as soon as our class was coming in. The entire coaching staff ended up leaving. So, I was nervous. I had to play like I was getting recruited again. It was kind of like a life-or-death situation, is what it felt like. But I think that getting a new coach is a blessing in disguise. I was definitely nervous in terms of making the good, right first impressions on the coaches. And even my teammates. Particularly because seniority is absolutely huge on our team and just respecting your elders and stuff like that.
**Thomas**

I just wanted to play lacrosse. That’s all I wanted to do. I wanted to play at the highest level. And it was a whole ‘nother level. It was Division I and I was struggling as a freshman. I struggled that whole year. Then stuff started getting better as the years went on. But yeah, it was kind of like a welcome to the show moment because I remember I got hit pretty good. Everybody is so much bigger, stronger, faster. I was like, what the hell?

**Aurora**

I was scared and I just remember thinking everyone’s going to think I’m weird. Just overthinking about how different I was. I’m actually the only Native American woman on the team. It does get to me sometimes. Because I feel some people don’t understand what it’s like to be different, I guess. I’ve had practice with this though since I was little. And then it ended up being – when we met the team everyone was so nice and so interested in who I was. And that was when I was like, this isn’t that bad. So, I think my teammates asking me about my culture, my values, and who I am is what helped a lot with getting comfortable here. Because if it wasn’t for them showing general interest in wanting to know where I come from, who I am, I think it would have been harder than it was. But I do remember being scared. As soon as my dad walked out those doors, I was like, yeah, I’m by myself now. But, my teammates definitely helped.

**Jasmine**

At first, I feel like when we go into a space where we feel uncomfortable, we tend to put up walls and we tend to be like sheltered and figure out how we’re gonna
adjust to a situation. When I went in, I had walls up my freshman year. And I wasn’t living because I was scared that they wouldn’t accept me. Because I was the only Native there. I was the only person of color there. I didn’t really know how to handle the situation. But once I let my guard down and I let people in, I think that’s where it created this connection to other people.

Although they experienced different kinds of struggles, each participant encountered some form of barriers as they transitioned to their lacrosse program. Bella, Aurora, and Jasmine shared worries about acceptance from their teammates and coaches. Being the only Native on the team fueled those worries for Aurora and Jasmine. While Thomas spoke about his struggles adjusting to the collegiate game. Eventually, participants would find comfort in their lacrosse programs and at school once they established their support systems.

**Support Systems**

As participants talked about their transition to college and lacrosse, they spoke of coaches, teammates, and Native peers from the general student population who impacted their experiences. Overall, teammates and Native peers were supportive for each participant. However, when it came to the coaches, some of those experiences were supportive and others were not as supportive.

*Support from Teammates: They wanted to be a part of my experience.*

**Jasmine**

At first, I kind of put my feet in the water not really expecting anyone to accept me. But after a couple months went by and I started talking about what lacrosse meant and the medicine game, people started to ask more questions. Like, ‘okay I
don’t want to sound mean, but can you explain this to me?’ And I changed my mindset when I realized that a lot of the girls wanted to be part of my Native experience. And that was really cool. And when I played for Team Haudenosaunee as well. We went to a tournament in Orlando. My whole team made a video for me. Wishing me good luck and hoping I have a good time. I’m getting ready for the flight and I look at this video and they’re like ‘Good luck!’ All of them wishing me the best. It put the biggest smile on my face because I don’t think I ever got that throughout high school besides from a few people. To see people appreciate me, even though not knowing me long, it made me realize like I did find a little home, between my team and the Natives at school. And that’s what really made it special.

**Aurora**

One of my roommates actually, she says she’s Native American. So, she would say, ‘oh, my great great grandmother was Native American. I just don’t know what nation or tribe.’ And I was like, ‘okay, well that’s really cool. You’ll have to let me know.’ I was interested to know at that point. So, then she started asking me questions. She was like, ‘what does your rez look like?’ And me telling one of my roommates about my culture, sparked an interest where she was telling my other roommates and teammates about the things I shared about my reservation. So I guess my one roommate really helped me feel comfortable and excited to let people know about my culture, values and ancestral background.

And they are still learning things to this day. I was telling them about the boarding schools in Canada. They are so supportive with stuff like that. My roommate
sends me these links of different organizations you can donate to. And not only does she send them to me, she sends them to our group chat. And to me it just shows that she genuinely cares about not only me, but my people. And it’s just awesome to have that. And my other teammates will send me things and be like, is this inappropriate? Why would they post this? Do they think that’s acceptable? And it’s nice to have them ask me questions about if certain things are appropriate or not appropriate. Because it shows me that they generally want to educate themselves. Not even about history, but about what’s right from wrong. And that to me is what has always made me feel comfortable here at the school, with my teammates.

Bella

Especially playing on a lacrosse team that’s primarily all white. Where they wouldn’t necessarily grasp what reservation life is like. And how completely different that is. And my freshman winter, I experienced an incident with an ex-boyfriend, which I referred to as my personal problem throughout that freshman fall. The situation escalated and I was pressing charges surrounding domestic violence. And going through was like an end of the world situation. I ended up having to return to school two weeks late into the winter term. And out of the 10 weeks we have to take a course, that’s almost like academic suicide. How was I going to catch up with all my work? But I did make it happen. And my teammates were all super understanding. I know how much accountability meant to them. So, I was able to talk about it and let them know why I was late and that in those really, really dark moments knowing I had a team to get back to and there was
nothing that was going to stop me. So, I think that that was a big turning point for me and my presence in the locker room and on the field. I was treated differently and not in a terrible way, where my teammates knew if I went through what I went through and I pushed through it to be there with them, that I 100% deserved everything that was coming my way. I think because of that I was treated like an upperclassman, which was a great feeling being one of the only freshman starting and playing.

**Thomas**

Some of them became some of my best friends. Because they’re like very intrigued and they want to know about me and like our culture and stuff. Or like values and whatever. So some of them became my best friends and I didn’t really have a problem with them. There’s been no trouble on the team at all. They’re some of the best guys I’ve met.

All four participants credited their non-Native, mostly white teammates for making them feel welcome in the lacrosse program. Teammates who took an authentic interest in the culture and traditions of Native identity positively impacted the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. Genuine questions from teammates about Native identity showed a desire to learn and be educated about Native culture. Teammates would then share their newfound information with other people in the lacrosse program, illustrating strong allyship.

This authenticity from teammates built trust. Bella found her teammates to be understanding of her struggles. Jasmine added that her teammates made her feel at home by wanting to learn about her Native culture. Aurora felt comfortable and excited to share
her culture with teammates. Thomas summed up the experience well by describing his teammates as some of the best people he’s ever met.

**Support from Native Peers: We had this presence that was very powerful.**

Participants spoke to the importance of having other Native students around to help with their transition to college and sense of belonging on campus. While they were able to find comfort with their teammates, having connections to other Native students on campus provided space for a shared understanding of their Native identities and experiences as college students.

**Jasmine**

Right after I committed, a girl from my school reached out because she was the President of the Native student organization, and she was very excited for me to come. She made sure to welcome me with open arms. And that’s one of the things that really kept me at school is we have a small group of Natives. But, we do a really good job of looking out for each other. And when I got to school, I had a family on the lacrosse team.

However, I had a different, close relationship with the family that I made with the Native Student Organization. And it was more like, it’s just humor. Like when you’re with your family, you can laugh at certain things. But when you’re with people who aren’t your family, there’s a different humor. There’s different connections. And there’s things you don’t have to necessarily explain. And I noticed when I was with my team, there were situations that I had to explain more. And add more perspective because they had no idea what I was talking about. Whereas with Natives, it was like we could talk about whatever and they
understood. They understand where I was coming from and what I was doing. And that was really special.

I made sure to keep a consistent relationship with them, even though I was always with my team. Because a majority of the time, probably 90% of the time, I was with my team. If it was for practices, if it was for lifts, if it was for conditioning, if it was for games, I was always traveling with them. But I knew it was really important with any of my free time, to spend it with other Native students. And even though I didn’t have as much time with them, as I did with my team, I felt the connection to them. It really, really made me appreciate how small but mighty we were. We just had this presence that was very powerful.

Bella

Immediately going in we had a complete Native orientation. There was at least 50 of us. And so, knowing that I have other people who feel the same exact things that I do. And being able to talk about things and have them understand, definitely saved me. There would be days when I would go right from practice to hang out in the Native American room. Just because I needed to feel like I was in my home space.

I even noticed that, the little things, like how I talked in the classroom and around my teammates definitely shifted once I stepped foot into the Native American room. And the way I laughed. I know that Native women definitely have a very distinct, loud laugh. So, occasionally, it would come out in front of my teammates, and they pointed it out. It would make me feel super insecure about it. So being able to let loose and not worry about those little things in the Native
American room definitely saved me. And just knowing that we all earned a seat at a table that was not made for us. I’m just happy that we’ve all made it this far and we all have each other to keep moving forward.

**Aurora**

Since I came here, luckily I have known a couple of the other Native American girls that have been coming here. Because I played lacrosse with them. Or they’re from my rez. I actually have a cousin coming here. She’s going into her freshman year, which is really nice because that’s the one thing I have right now, is her. And I think I’ve been more excited going into my school year than I have in a while, because I have someone from back at home that I know I can go to for anything. Which is really nice because I tell my dad things and it’s just like, ‘oh, you’re just being a girl.’ He doesn’t understand. So, it’s nice to be able to have someone from back at home and everything with me right now.

**Thomas**

There was already a rich history of other Natives going there. There was a good list of past players. And there’s a few kids who were still there when I got there, so that made it way easier.

Having other Natives around made the time at college easier for participants. For Thomas, there was a legacy of Natives who played lacrosse at his college, so he had other Native teammates to help him feel comfortable. But for the other participants, they had to find other Native students outside of their lacrosse program to help them. Aurora has connected with other students from her reservation and is excited to be joined on campus by her younger cousin, which provides a sense of comfort not found on her lacrosse team.
Jasmine and Bella talked about the importance of the Native student organizations. Being surrounded by other Natives provided a sense of belonging and understanding not found with their teammates. There is an unspoken shared understanding of what it means to be Native in these spaces. Participants felt more like themselves when they were with other Native students.

**Support from Coaches: Do they know how to coach Native players?**

The coaches of the lacrosse programs had a significant impact in the experiences of participants. Aurora and Bella had empowering experiences from their coaches, while Jasmine and Thomas had more difficult times in dealing with their coaches.

**Aurora**

The cool thing is, my coaches were the Haudenosaunee coaches. And one of my assistant coaches, she’s actually Native American. So, when she plays, she literally plays like a box lacrosse player. She’s the one that recruited me. So, I want to say she knew what she was getting into when she recruited me. And the defensive coach, she literally tells the defenders, take that risk. Don’t be afraid. They influence us to be different. Which is what I love so much about this school. They don’t have a play-by-play for us. Yeah, they have one or two plays. But they always want us to just be ourselves on the field, and that’s a big thing. That has definitely helped me with being so comfortable here. And knowing that my coaches want that from me. And they’ve commented and appreciated my creativity too. Which is really nice to have.

Also, the men’s coach, I think he knew I was scared at first. He came up to me and was like if you ever need to talk, I’m here. I was thinking, he definitely
knows. So that helped too, knowing not just do I have my coaches, but I have other coaches here that care about my well-being and who I am.

**Bella**

I think that my sense of comfort on the field sort of diluted out into my entire experience. The coach was absolutely amazing. She’s super understanding. It also was beneficial that our coaching staff was a little bit younger than the previous one. They understand more of what we were going through and saw us all as human and not as robots that need to be demanded on what to do. And so, I actually did pretty well my freshman year. I was starting. I was able to get my first couple career points before COVID came.

Another thing that meant a lot to me was I talked to my coaches about wanting to educate my teammates and wanting them to know the Indigenous roots of the game. As some people don’t. And my coach was supportive. She ordered a wooden lacrosse stick to hang up in the locker room, so it’d be the first thing you see when you walk in and the last thing you see when you leave. That absolutely meant the world to me, as it’s a way to remember where the game comes from and the values that come with it. One of those being open mindedness.

**Jasmine**

So, my coach, he coached one of the Haudenosaunee teams. He coached for two seasons. And why I bring that up is because when I committed, I also knew that I was gonna be with a coach who coached Native players. So, that was really important to me because he kind of knows how to coach Native players. He knows certain things. He knows how to adjust and whatnot. So that was another
big piece why I wanted to come. But when I came in, I felt like he was more worried about me sharing my story to make his image look better. Because I brought this diversity to the table. And when I was talking, it was like he could piggyback on what I was saying. However, his actions weren’t really respecting me and supporting me and making me feel like I was actually appreciated. Or if it was even worth talking. And I realized there was a difference between my team and my coach. Because he wouldn’t value you if you couldn’t pass a run test. That was one of the biggest obstacles I dealt with on the team. If you didn’t pass three run tests you couldn’t play. He saw no value in you. He wouldn’t even look at you. He wouldn’t look at your skill. He wouldn’t look at your IQ. If you couldn’t run, if you couldn’t pass these tests, he wouldn’t even see you.

Thomas

To be honest, it kind of changed. It’s not what it used to be. There was an assistant coaching change and from what I hear it’s not the same as it used to be. And to be honest, I don’t enjoy playing for those coaches right now, because they’re so…I don’t know. The Natives who do go there, they’re not having good experiences. So, either they left or…I don’t want to talk too bad about it. But our experiences haven’t been the greatest right now. There’s definitely been a culture shift.

It was evident that coaches played a significant role in how comfortable participants felt in their lacrosse programs. Aurora was fortunate to be recruited by another Native lacrosse player who had become a coach. There was a natural connection and an inherent understanding of Aurora and the way she played the game, which made
her feel comfortable. Although Bella was playing for a new coaching staff that did not actually recruit her, the new coaching staff was understanding and empowering. Her coach not only acknowledged but illuminated the Native roots of the game by bringing a traditional lacrosse stick into the locker room. This act of solidarity proved to Bella that her coaches were open minded and understood what the game meant to Native athletes.

Unfortunately, Jasmine and Thomas did not have the same empowering experience with their coaches. Although Jasmine was initially drawn to her lacrosse program because her coach had experience with Native players, she felt tokenized once she arrived on campus. Her coach only valued her Native identity because it boosted his image. She felt unappreciated by his actions. Thomas also chose his lacrosse program because of the legacy of other Native players in the program. However, he felt the culture had shifted during his time with the program. He was cautious to share too much because he did not want to disparage the program, but his experience has become not enjoyable at times. He felt the same was true for other Natives.

**Engaging with Ignorance**

Most participants had some encounters with ignorance in their athletics program. This ignorance to Native identity, culture, and traditions did not always come from malice. But, it certainly had an impact on their experiences as Native lacrosse athletes. These occurrences varied in how they took place but displayed many levels of ignorance. Participants were forced into an educator role, where they were having to explain their Native identity to others.

**Encountering Microaggressions: What do you think we are?**

**Jasmine**
There’s a movie called *Crooked Arrows*. In the movie, when the players do something well the coach will give the player a feather. Just like honoring and showing they are the best role model on the team. So, when I came back in the spring, my coach was like, ‘I want to do that. Do you think it would be cool if we made a little plaque or something, saying what lacrosse is and where it comes from? And who we’re acknowledging when we give out these feathers?’ And I was a little skeptical about it because I know that the team supports me but I don’t know if he does. Because it was kind of like walking on eggshells with him. I would see the way that he would treat people. And I didn’t know if he was like really treating me the right way or not.

So we did it. I was like alright; I’ll just agree with it. Maybe it could work in the long run. It could be instilled in our program. It could be really cool. However, if I leave, what if they don’t honor it the right way? It reminded me of a mascot being put on a logo for a white dominant team and they’re like, ‘oh, we’re honoring the Native people.’ But you’re not. It’s kind of racist. So that’s where I was like, I don’t know. I couldn’t tell. It was my say too because I was the only Native. So we did it for a while. He would give the feathers to people who had a good game. Or if they pass his run test. And it was all fine.

I get what he was trying to do, but he wasn’t doing it in a respectful way. And when he was giving out those feathers, he was at the same time not being respectful for the game. Because he was commenting on girls weight. And their body. It was tearing them down. And that was one of the biggest things for me that I was like, that’s not okay. You can’t be giving out feathers to girls that can
pass your run tests. But you’re bashing girls who can’t pass your run tests. I’m really lucky that I pushed myself, and I was able to pass his run test. Because they were hard. But I feel like I would be in a different position if I wasn’t able to pass the run test. If I was in that situation, I don’t think he would have tried to honor our people if I didn’t pass. What if I wasn’t a runner and wasn’t able to do that? And then our season got canceled and we all went home. So it was like, we didn’t really have a full season, where we could really utilize that.

Aurora

I came to school and people were like, ‘we didn’t even know Native Americans are still alive.’ Stuff like that. It’s just kind of crazy. And freshman year, people used to – it was like friendly joking. But people would tell me I speak weird. And it was like, ‘I do?’ And it is because I say dog weird or whatever. I had to tell them, when I was little I didn’t go to a school and learn my ABCs. I was going to school and learning 1-2-3 in my traditional language. Like I wasn’t learning 1-2-3 in English. And I say my ‘A’s different because how we pronounce it back at home. So, I was telling them, our A-E-I-O-U, all that stuff is different than how you guys say it. And when I said that, it kind of sparked them. ‘Oh, can you speak in your language for us?’ So then I just did like my ‘princess’ speech in my language. My name’s Aurora, blah blah blah. And they looked at me, like, ‘holy shit, what did she just say?’ So it sparked more conversations after that.

But honestly, I haven’t had many iffy interactions. Somebody once commented on the braid in my hair. I had a braid in my hair and they were like, ‘your braid is so good. Did you do that yourself?’ I said, ‘yeah, I did.’ And I told her, I have a
single dad, so I had to learn how to do my hair and my sister’s hair. She was like, ‘yeah, and you’re Native.’ And I just was like, no. I’m sure the girl sitting next to me knows how to braid her hair too. And along with that, I had other stuff going on, so it really got to me. It just annoyed me because if a non-Native American was to tell you the same interaction, you would not have said that.

Thomas

I was already prepared for the ignorance. I dealt with them at prep school. I guess the race thing does play a factor. You know how we are. Like a bit of ‘ahhh, I don’t know if I trust you.’ It’s a weird thing. I guess it’s just where I come from, like my community if there’s a white person walking around. It’s like don’t be surprised if you hear an earful from somebody. So, like that’s how my mindset kind of was when I first got to school. But now it’s slowly shifted. Some of them are my best friends.

They don’t really ask about lacrosse specifically. Just ask about us as a people. One of the questions that I got…‘I don’t want to sound like a dumb white person or an ignorant white person. But like do you guys live in teepees?’ And I’m just like, ‘ahhh no, not my people. Not my people. We’re longhouse people.’ Then they’re just like, ‘oh, okay. So you guys have electricity?’ And I’m like, what the hell? What do you think we are? Yes, we have electricity. We live in regular houses. There was another time…we have a mid-winters festival. It’s a five-day festival. It’s our new year, basically. So, I told them, yeah, I’m going back for a ceremony. And they’re just like, ‘um, what? A ceremony? What kind of ceremony?’ And I’m like, well it’s basically our new year. Where we thank all
living beings that helped us in this past year. Or we’re naming our babies. There’s a lot that gets condensed into five days. And they’re just like, ‘Oh, like you guys still do ceremonies?’ And it’s like, yeah you guys didn’t kill – you didn’t totally assimilate us. Then that’s when I joke with them. I’ll be like, fucking white people. And just kind of look at them.

**Bella**

There’s nothing that’s been said or done that’s made it super obvious. But there’s just these senses of underlying feelings. I’m a terribly observant person and I overthink everything. So I definitely pay attention to how my teammates carry themselves. How they treat each other. How they refer to their family. If you’re talking crap about your parents. Or, if they’re not reaching out to their siblings. And I think it comes down to what are the white perceptions of what Natives value? From family to lacrosse. I had a teammate come up to me and ask, like she was kind of blown away by the Indigenous roots of the game. And she hadn’t known and she had said that, like so many people just assume that it’s a whitewashed sport from a prep school in Maryland. They don’t really know any of the Indigenous roots and so I voiced to my coaches that that was something that I wanted to accomplish here in my time. Is just to let people know. And I pay attention if my teammates treat lacrosse like a chore. Or, if they’re 110% grateful to be there and have this sense of mindfulness for the respect of the game. And all these things I was sort of seeing that you know they are grateful.

Jasmine shared one of the more overt stories of racism experienced by participants. There was a shared sense of astonishment as Jasmine recalled the feather
story. You could tell she still could not believe her coach thought it was a good idea to hand out feathers to the team. Especially because he was not coaching the game with the respect it deserved. He was tearing down his players who could not perform up to his standards. His gesture lost meaning and certainly devolved to an act of appropriating the tradition of gifting feathers as a show of respect.

Aurora and Thomas shared more covert stories of racism through ignorance. People had little knowledge of Native culture so would ask ignorant questions masked as friendly joking. Aurora and Thomas were used to these kinds of interactions, but they still had to educate others about their Native culture and lifestyle. Aurora shared her Native language and dealt with ignorant comments about the braid in her hair. Thomas had to clarify his people are of the longhouse culture and do not live in tipis, and there is electricity on his reservation. He also shared about his traditional ceremonies. These seem to be common conversations for Natives navigating whiteness. Aurora and Thomas handled it in a mostly joking manner because of the friendly relationships they had developed with their teammates.

Bella spoke about the cultural disconnect she experienced around principles and values in life and lacrosse. She paid attention to how her teammates treated their family and approached the game of lacrosse. She would educate others about the Native roots of the game to be sure they understood the appropriate ways of approaching the game.

**Explaining Native Identity: I want to educate people.**

Similar to engaging with ignorance, participants spoke about having to explain their Native identity to others. While this sometimes felt like a burden, participants also found it as an opportunity to speak about their culture. Lacrosse has provided a platform
to effectively educate others about Native identity and participants felt empowered in their relationships to do so.

**Jasmine**

I don’t think they understood what Native really meant. When I say Native, I don’t think they’ve been introduced to what or who a Native person is and what they stand for. And there’s not many Native people that have big platforms, where we’re able to share and relay education. Especially in textbooks. There’s not a lot of information. For me that’s where I needed to change that narrative. If people were talking about something I would butt in and be like this is right or this is wrong. For example, I helped plan the Native Pow Wow. We did a lot for Indigenous Peoples’ Day. I would go on the lacrosse Instagram and say what Indigenous Peoples’ Day means to me and what it means being Native in this sport. And a lot of girls had no idea what that meant. So, I asked my team, ‘I’m going to do a video on Instagram, can you please send me messages of things that you would want me to answer?’ I could talk all day. However, I wanted to know the concerns or thoughts they had. And they were like little things – who is the Native role model that you look up to? Or, what does lacrosse mean to you? And that was one of the things that really made me happy. They actually wanted to know those things. That was really special. Seeing them take time out of their day and want to learn more, it made me realize how much more I need to be doing to educate. But, it needs to be more than one person. There needs to be more Native people talking about these things. Because if we don’t, parts of our history is going to be erased. And the reasoning why we play is going to be erased. And
people are just going to keep playing. But the history is going to eventually go away and the beliefs are going to go away. And the way that we see ourselves and value ourselves are going to go away. It has been hard throughout college teaching those types of things. But I think teaching it to the right types of people that are going to listen, is really, really important.

Aurora

Educating does get a little overwhelming. But over the past few years, I’ve learned to use that as my strength and wanting people to know. I don’t want it to be a secret that I’m different, I guess, in a way. I want people to know that, yeah, I speak weird. What about it? It’s because of this, this, and that. I definitely feel that my character has strengthened. Just because I’ve had to deal with stuff and I’ve had to overcome the loneliness and not feeling like people understand me. And now that I’m going into my senior year, I want people to know that I’m different in a way. Like I want to educate people. So, I’ve had little things said, but nothing major, just a few ignorant questions. I haven’t ever had a like full argument with anybody. Which is actually really nice to be able to say. Because I don’t know if other Indigenous women can say the same.

Bella

The opportunity came up where the league wanted to do an event for Native American Heritage Month discussing the Indigenous roots of lacrosse. They picked myself and a boy from another school who’s Native and plays lacrosse. We were chosen to speak to every lacrosse team in the league. That was absolutely nerve wracking. But I did receive a lot of messages after the fact.
Thanking me for voicing that. And even people that I had completely forgot about. A coach who previously recruited me, she messaged me and thanked me and wanted to catch up with how I was doing. All these little connections that I totally forgot about were coming back up. I can’t believe that was a thing I was offered. And I actually took up. So how is it already at this point, I’m a Native girl talking about the Indigenous roots of the game. And taking a step back and realizing how me taking these chances and putting myself out there has allowed for so many doors behind me to open up. And now I know that.

**Thomas**

It’s funny because we’ll give them history and they know if you go back into history white people were the worst to us. So, they know about it. And we could even make jokes with them. That’s how close we are. We could be like, ‘fucking white people’ or something like that. That’s how we talk and they just laugh at it. Because they know. They know it’s true. And we have a really good relationship with everybody on our team. Everybody understands.

Jasmine shared powerful thoughts about the need to educate others about Native identity using her platform. She has accepted the responsibility of changing the narrative about Native culture for those who lack the knowledge. She would share her culture on social media and answer questions from teammates. She knows the legacy of Native lacrosse is at stake with the erasure of Native knowledge. She was speaking to interrupting the settler colonial project and although it was difficult at times, Jasmine found that educating those who wanted to listen was worthwhile.
Aurora talked about how overwhelming it can be to educate others about her Native identity but also understood the importance of taking on the responsibility. She has grown to see her ability to educate as a strength and is proud to be different and represent her Native identity. Similarly, Bella was selected to speak to her entire conference about the Native roots of lacrosse. This helped her realize the importance of speaking about her Native culture. More specifically, she wants to be a voice for other Native women who came before her and were not allowed to play lacrosse.

Thomas shared his use of humor to confront his white teammates about their knowledge of the settler colonial project. His teammates know of the atrocities white society inflicted on First Nations people. Their relationships as teammates allowed Thomas to make strong statements masked in humor.

Playing Native

Participants spoke about the meaning of The Creator’s Game and playing lacrosse in college. When they felt empowered by their coaches and teammates to play the Native way, it strengthened their experience. However, for those who did not feel this empowerment to be themselves on the lacrosse field, it created disconnect from their Native identity.

Native Lacrosse: Our style is different. It’s healing.

Thomas

Our style of play is so much different. It’s so much fun to watch. If you watch regular field lacrosse, non-Natives play, it’s kind of boring. Very boring. Lacrosse is just so fun. If I’m ever having any kind of emotion, like any problems, whether I’m depressed or sad, I play lacrosse. Or, if I want to let out any kind of anger, I
play lacrosse. Not that I’m going out to hit people or anything like that. But, I’m putting all my energy into playing hard and I end up playing good. It’s like a getaway. When you’re finished, you’re just like, ahh, I had so much fun. It’s like happiness, or like laughter is the best medicine. That’s why we would put on these medicine games in the past for people to watch. And to them, this is entertainment. It makes them happy. But it was also called The Little Brother of War, at one point. And I’m not too knowledgeable on it, but what I was told is if we were going to war with any other nation, or had a dispute with them, we would play lacrosse.

Bella

Referring back to this internal battle that I’ve had my entire life about my Native identity. It made it tough for me to feel like, okay, I am Native enough to discuss these things. Part of what holds me back from being able to reach my full potential of talking and teaching about the Indigenous roots of the game has been my lack of confidence in feeling that connection. But realizing you know, lacrosse is my thing. Lacrosse is my outlet to be able to regain back something that was stolen from me. And it wasn’t stolen from me, it was stolen from all of us.

So I think lacrosse plays a huge part in that healing. And knowing the history of the game, it doesn’t deter anything. If anything, I think it benefits people to know the true values and the morale that you’re supposed to carry whenever you’re playing on the field. I don’t know, I’ve noticed that I’ve played, not the best, but something along those lines – taking into account every emotion that I carry when I’m playing, its heightened whenever I’m surrounded by people like me, being
Native. I have played on all-Native teams before and it’s experiences that you want to put in a glass case. If I’m completely doubting myself and where I’m going and how I’m playing, I think of those things and remember I must be doing something right if I was able to be there in those moments.

**Aurora**

We actually just had a team meeting the other day and my teammates asked me, like is there any way you can talk about the origins of lacrosse? And just compare what we’re looking for out of this season to the origins of the game? Basically, what we’re looking for is the team to be positive. The atmosphere to be positive. Like all that good stuff. It may not be the Medicine Game, but I think the energy that the game produces is definitely something that is similar. It’s hard to explain. But to me, it’s bringing the community together. I mean, you go to a box game and the men play the game and everybody from all over the rez are coming together. Different reservations are coming together. We’re all bringing together that good mind. Bringing the people together. Pretty much just having that good mind when playing. And that energy spreads to the people watching it and the community around too.

**Jasmine**

My mentality towards the game is different. A lot of the girls just think of it as a game – winning or losing. They don’t think about who you’re playing for and who’s it going to benefit. And once I’m able to calm myself down and think about what is this for? Why am I doing this? Why do I need to be doing this? I kind of ask myself these simple questions and it calms me down and grounds me. And
I’ve always talked to the girls in my class about the Medicine Game and how ours is different from the men’s game.

I feel like a lot of these girls, they grew up having lacrosse around for so long – having the right training, strength and conditioning, agility, classes, practices, games. Living in areas where there are hotbeds, it was a lot easier for them to just be a part of the lacrosse world. So maybe they haven’t felt that passion to just play. However, for me I didn’t have all that until high school. So by the time I went to college, I feel like I’m ready to go. I’m ready to play and I’m ready to explain what the game means. And talking about that passion, the more that I opened up about that, it helped other people. We come from two different worlds. You know, our cultural values and our beliefs, they’re very different. And the more I explain and made it more about our people, it allowed my team to open up that mindset as well.

All four participants shared a feeling of playing the game differently than their teammates. For some it was how different Natives literally play the game. For others it was about how different they approach and understand the meaning of playing collegiate lacrosse. Thomas talked openly about how boring it can be to watch non-Natives play field lacrosse. He talked earlier about growing up playing the faster and more exciting style of box lacrosse. He spoke about how beneficial playing lacrosse is to his well-being. He understands lacrosse as The Medicine Game and uses the game as a healing component in his life.

Bella shared more about lacrosse being her connection to her Native identity. Despite growing up on the reservation, she has not always felt connected to her Native
roots. She too recognizes lacrosse as a healing component in her life. She enjoys the game most when she intentionally thinks about her Native identity and connection to lacrosse. This connection is something that can be shared with others for the betterment of lacrosse programs. Aurora was able to share the meaning of lacrosse with her team. The goals were to build community and infuse positivity in the team environment. Playing the game with positive energy will spread to others and build a stronger community.

Jasmine shared similar feelings and felt she approached the game with more meaning than her teammates’ win or lose attitude. She likes to remind herself that she plays the game for her ancestors. She comes from a different world than her teammates and believes when she shares her passion for the game it is beneficial to others and they are able to understand the importance of bringing that same passion for the meaning of the game.

*Empowered to Play Native: Lacrosse helps me show who I am, where I come from.*

As discussed earlier, participant interactions with coaches and teammates varied. They shared more about how it impacted their experience. Aurora and Bella felt empowered by their coaches to play in their authentic Native way.

**Aurora**

I’m more of myself when I’m on the lacrosse field. I don’t know if this is going to make sense. Because I play the game different than other girls. I think my creativity and the way I play the game is what they generally enjoy. It’s funny because when we have Iroquois Nationals or Haudenosaunee tryouts, one of the dads literally said, you can tell which girls is from what rez because they all play
different. And here, I think I play more creative than most people. I’m more of myself. I’m able to show truly who I am through the game of lacrosse. I never have a set plan for anything. And that definitely shows through the game of lacrosse. Whether it’s me playing creative, or shooting as I’m falling on the ground, or doing a behind the back or an around the world, or something like that. Most people have scripts. Most people won’t do that behind the back pass. I just feel when I do it, it shows that I’m different. I’m going to think outside the box. And then when I do get that acknowledgement, I feel that people are like, ‘Oh, she’s had the stick in her hand because she grew up with the origins of the game.’ The game of lacrosse really helps me show who I am, where I come from, and everything.

Bella

I was a little bit nervous because I definitely do have a different style of play. I definitely had to be more aware of like, how is me playing this hard going to make this girl feel.

Well, it ended up playing out in my favor. I was appreciated for my sense of play in this new arena of college lacrosse because everyone’s faster. Everyone is more skilled. The goalies are better. So, everything had to sort of rise to the occasion. And this sense of what I thought was holding me back, actually benefited me. So, I did get a lot of attention on the attacker side, which definitely helped.

Aurora feels most comfortable when she has a lacrosse stick in her hands. She plays a creative style that is different from her teammates but appreciated by a supportive environment. Playing lacrosse serves as an outlet for her to be herself. Bella shared a
similar experience. The college game is played at a more elite level and she feels appreciated for her aggressive style of play. She was not afraid to rise to the occasion and was rewarded for her approach to the game.

_Disempowered to Play Native: There was no creativity. We’re just his robots._

Jasmine and Thomas did not have the same experience. They felt restricted by their coaches and disempowered to play the game their way.

**Jasmine**

Going to practice, coach created so much anxiety for people. And I never thought of myself as having much anxiety. But there was so much stress on if I was playing or not, based off if I could run or not. Or, if I could do things a certain way. Things had to be black and white. There was no creativity. And it was hard because I was seeing some of the best players, but it was because they’re being creative. Where, if you messed up a play he wanted or where he needed you to be – you mess it up, you’re off the field. He wouldn’t talk to you. My sophomore year, there were times where he took me off the field and would just ignore me. I was benched for six games. And he wouldn’t talk to me. I got to the point where I don’t know what’s going on. I had no idea. I’m like this is crazy. I felt like I was always walking on eggshells. It’s crazy that I normalized the emotional abuse. Mentally and physically, I didn’t know what to make of it because I just thought it was normal. And it wasn’t. I could not afford to just go anywhere else that I wanted to. And that’s what it came down to. I couldn’t just be like, okay, I’m going to get up and leave. But the thing is, our coach got fired. He had to step away and now he’s not there. And it’s really sad.
Thomas

It’s weird because there’s a certain way our coach thinks. It’s as if we’re just his robots. And nobody wants to be a robot. Our style is way more free-flowing and it’s just fun. And he completely changed that. And also his coaching attitude, he don’t give a shit about the Native roots of the game. He doesn’t really care about that. Nor does he want to hear it. He will listen to it just because he doesn’t want a bad rep or something. It’s like an image thing, at this point. But, once you get here it’s totally not what it used to be. And most of us think that. The Native kids who play there, we all have the same idea. I don’t even know how to describe it. More kids are starting to find out about it; other Native kids. And the school is not even on their radar anymore. And it’s not even coming from us. I don’t know what it is. I don’t feel like going into it that much because it makes me angry (laughing). Some of the other kids are shook by it. They don’t trust the coaches. But the head coach is a good guy. So yeah, I don’t know. It is what it is. I just want that degree and get out of there.

Jasmine felt stressed when playing in her environment. Even though she would watch other players succeed with their creativity, she was stuck in an anxiety filled environment because her coach was more restrictive. He would punish Jasmine for mistakes and completely ignore her presence. She felt confused and neglected by this emotional abuse. Unfortunately, she was not able to simply transfer schools or seek out other options. Eventually her coach would be forced to resign. She now plays for a new coaching staff.
Thomas also felt the lack of appreciation for the Native style of play. His coach was restricting to the fun style Thomas enjoys playing. This coaching style has created some cultural disconnect within the program for the Native players. The meaning and spirit of the game is not appreciated by some on the coaching staff, which leaves the players feeling alienated. Again, Thomas did not want to openly disparage his program, but he has shifted much of his focus to earning his degree and moving on from this chapter in life.

Native Women’s Collegiate Lacrosse: I realize how important my presence is.

The three women participants talked repeatedly about the importance and uniqueness of their accomplishment of reaching the NCAA Division I collegiate level of lacrosse. As covered in the literature, Native women traditionally did not play lacrosse, so the women’s game is still growing. They all talked about the gender dynamics in their introduction stories. But, their experiences as collegiate lacrosse athletes overlap, as well.

Aurora

I’m actually the only Native American woman on the team. I think I’ll be the first woman to finish all four years here. Freshman year I had my struggles with academics. I went through an injury. I tore my ACL. I was out for almost two years and then COVID happened. So I kind of, I didn't have time to really think about graduating. And now that it's here it's just shocking to me that I’m actually going to do it. That the boys in my high school, when I committed, they thought I was lying. They thought that I was making this up. I remember them saying like, no way you committed to a DI school. No way. You're not that good at it. I was like, what? I was just kind of like, well I did it, so. And now that I’m graduating,
it's just kind of cool that I’m proving people like him wrong. And I hope not to be the only one. I really hope to see other girls on this lacrosse team soon.

**Bella**

It was gut wrenching to know I was the only Native woman lacrosse player in the league. It was something at the back of my head, but I didn't clearly think about it or process. I just hope I can do enough where that statistic will not apply any longer. That's also why I knew I had to take the responsibility of voicing to my coaches we needed to have this awareness of the Indigenous roots of the game. Me being the first, I don't know who else will be soon after. So, making sure that gets done. There are so many generations of Native women before me who did not even have this seat. Or did not even have the opportunity to raise their voice. So I have to take that into consideration, feed off of that, to push myself to do these things. It makes me realize how important my presence is, in terms of putting aside my doubts and anxieties about not feeling good enough to be at school. And doing it for the sole reason of representing those who couldn’t. Native girls weren’t allowed to play lacrosse or even touch a stick a couple of years ago.

**Jasmine**

In the schools that I have been to and the teams I played for, a lot of times I’ve been the only Native. So, I started to understand that I was probably the first Native people will ever meet. There became this mindset that I want to make a first great impression on them because they may never meet another Native person. It's forced me a bit out of my comfort zone, and it's made me grow a lot as
a person. And when I think of what lacrosse connects me to, I think of friends. I think of family. I think of healing. And if I wasn’t playing lacrosse, I wouldn’t be given the platform where I can talk about these certain things and it’s done a lot for myself, my family, my community.

These women are breaking barriers and understand the magnitude of their presence and accomplishments. All three women will be the first Native woman to graduate from their lacrosse programs. Aurora talked about overcoming the struggles and doubt to do so. Bella recognized the responsibility she carries with being the only Native in her lacrosse program. Jasmine talked about growing up through the process because of the need to represent her people well. Overall, these women understand they are breaking barriers for their ancestors who had limited opportunity and to increase the likelihood of playing collegiate lacrosse for the next generation of Native women lacrosse athletes.

Learning Native

Participants also spoke about their educational experiences and what it is like to be Native in their learning environments. Some struggled academically in their transition to college. They eventually turned things around as they took academics more seriously. In addition, participants spoke about empowering connections in the classroom that helped them feel comfortable in adjusting to the college learning environment. However, there were also moments of cultural disconnect from their learning environment as participants encountered more ignorance about Native identity or subject matter not in tune with their traditional Native values or knowledge systems.
**Early Academic Challenges: All I cared about was lacrosse.**

For Aurora and Thomas, all they cared about was lacrosse at the beginning of their college careers. For Bella, being the only Native in her major was intimidating. As a result, they struggled initially with their learning environments.

**Aurora**

I thought walking into my team, being the only Native was scary. Being in a classroom with 200 other people, it’s more scary honestly. I struggled my fall semester because all I wanted to do is play lacrosse. I went to practice, went to the dining hall, came back to my dorm, showered and went straight to bed. All I did was sleep and play lacrosse. And it was so bad. And that was the worst GPA I’ve ever had. My dad was so disappointed in me. And it sucked. I knew I could have done better. And I also wasn’t in the classes that I was generally interested in. I was taking Oceans classes and I was like, what? Why did my academic advisor put me in this? Since I wasn’t interested I kinda was like, I’m not going to do it then. It was bad.

**Thomas**

I think it was more the academics that threw me off. I don’t know, I just really didn’t get into school. All I cared about was lacrosse. I didn’t care about the academics, at all. I’ll be honest, I kind of slacked off my freshman year. I did pretty bad. My freshman year I sucked. And then sophomore year, eh. Junior year, I was like, oh shit, I’m having a kid. It was like, well I gotta start thinking about real life. I’m still a student.

**Bella**
The beginning was so intimidating. So insane. Government is like, ugh. The courses are definitely a lot different. I have had a couple of negative experiences in terms of being the only Native person there. And it always falls on my shoulders if there’s anything that could even kind of like refer back to Natives. I’m always the one that has to raise my hand and make sure it’s remembered and it’s stated. And as someone who’s a little bit on the shyer side, it’s definitely tough. It’s made me have to grow up a little bit faster and be able to make sure that myself and where I come from isn’t forgotten.

Jasmine

It definitely was really hard at first being 12 hours away. And without my sister because I wasn’t able to find a sense of home. When I first got to school I was doing really well. But then going into our fall ball season there was this stress. I was going into this funk again. I feel like if we’re so worried about these things so often, we can almost abuse ourselves by worrying about so many things.

Aurora was intimidated by the class sizes, but also felt disconnected from the material. She did not understand why she was taking some of the general education requirements. So, she spent all her time in her comfort zone of lacrosse. Her GPA suffered as she neglected her schoolwork. Her dad was disappointed, and she knew she could do better. Thomas was solely focused on lacrosse. He did not care about the academic side and slacked off from his schoolwork, as well.

Bella struggled with being the only Native in her major. Her shyness did not help the transition to the classroom or the responsibility of having to speak on behalf of all Natives while there. Bella was forced out of her shell to be sure she was properly
represented in the classroom. Jasmine also felt the burden of being the lone Native in many spaces and found herself entering a funk as the fall quarter progressed. She was away from home and her family, which fueled her initial struggles.

_The Turnaround: Lacrosse is not all I’m going to be good at._

Participants spoke about the moments that helped turn around their learning experiences. They realized there is more to life than lacrosse and academics became more of a focal point in their experience.

**Thomas**

I had a daughter last August. She’s about to be one years old. So, at this point, everything I do is for her. Lacrosse, it’s still important. But I’m just like, I want that degree. I’m really upping my GPA and that’s all I want now. My mind has been shifted more to academics than lacrosse. Obviously, I still care about lacrosse. But I have a daughter now, so it totally changed everything. As of right now, I just want to get that degree. I even started putting it before lacrosse. At night when we had nothing to do, even though I would have homework in the past, I would still go play lacrosse. Just leave my homework. Where now I’m stuck doing homework.

**Aurora**

My injury turned things around. I tore my ACL. It was a realization that lacrosse is not all I’m going to be good at. It’s not going to be everything. It’s not always going to be in my life. So, when I got injured, it was like all right, I need to start working. Or start wanting to figure out my future. So, I became a manager back at home at one of my family friend’s gas stations. That’s what helped me realize that
I want to go and do the business field. So, it went from being injured to realizing lacrosse isn’t going to be everything in my life all the time. Trying to find new interests and jobs and getting hired as a manager and realizing I want to go into business field. I guess is what helped me flip the switch pretty much.

**Jasmine**

I think I made it easier by making sure I had people to look out for me. Kind of explaining to them, yeah I’m in a good mood today. I’m doing really well. But can you help me out when I’m at my lowest point? Or, if I’m not doing well? Or, if you can check in? That was really important for me to learn, because I don’t know how long being in a funk would last. It could last a couple days, a couple weeks, a couple months. It’s different compared to when you’re doing really well. I utilized our Native student group. If there’s not places on campus to be a part of, I would utilize talking to someone or talking to my roommate. Making sure I’m not just sitting there sulking and keeping to myself. So, definitely talking to people that I trust and letting them know whether I’m okay, not okay. And not allowing myself to get to a point where I’m like, I hate it here. I don’t want to be here anymore.

For Thomas, it was having a daughter that helped him realize there is more to life than lacrosse. He spoke several times about the purpose she has brought to his life. Lacrosse used to be everything, but he now realizes it will be his degree that helps him build a better life for his daughter. Thus, Thomas has shifted his focus more towards academics. Aurora also experienced a significant life event that shifted her priorities with more focus on academics. She suffered an injury that forced her away from the game for
an extended period of time. She realized playing lacrosse would not be an option forever. She began exploring job opportunities and found a desire to learn about business and marketing. This helped her flip the switch in her academic performance.

Jasmine found comfort in people with whom she could openly talk about her struggles. This was mainly teammates and Native peers. She did not want to live in an environment that she disliked. So, she knew it was important that she not let her feelings linger and prolong the funk.

**Empowering Connections: I’m getting recognized by the right people.**

There were several stories about the positive connections participants made in their learning environment. These empowering interactions occurred inside and outside the classroom with faculty and staff, both Native and non-Native.

**Jasmine**

It’s interesting because I only truly had one semester in person. I was in an English class my freshman year. I really connected with the professor because she loves reading about Indigenous excellence and she loves Indigenous authors. She didn’t know I was Native at first. But, when I was sharing certain things she was like, ‘Okay, I don’t want to come off rude, but are you Native?’ She wanted to know more and once I was able to connect with her, writing my paper, I was able to flow so much more because of that connection.

Also, I did a podcast and it was really cool how it turned out. The President of the university actually emailed me. He said, ‘Yeah, I’d love to meet you someday. I’m so glad that you’re a part of our community. I’m very grateful to hear your story and everything that you went through.’ And I was like, wow! To hear that
from him, I felt everything I’ve been doing up to right now, it’s been good
because I’m getting recognized by the right people. And even though I can get
overwhelmed with everything, once I share parts of my story and educate the right
people and talk to the right people, things in the universe can be reciprocated and
it can feel like it’s for the best. So, I think that’s really important.

**Bella**

We all (Native students) kind of felt the same way. Are we smart enough to be
here? Or does the school need to fill their diversity requirement for Native
students? But our mentors for the Native American program did a really good job
at reminding us we deserve to be here. We’ve earned our spot. And what you do
moving forward is what matters. And they always make sure to include that
you’re not better than anyone else. Which I think was an important aspect of all
that. Because I’ve noticed when people go to good schools, they come back home
and can treat others different who simply cannot afford to go to these big time
schools. But they’re still getting their college education. We’re all contributing to
Indigenous accomplishments and excellence.

And I love my Native American Studies courses. All the professors are amazing.
They do a good job at making the Native students feel like they deserve to be
there and they know the information. And have this connection with us because as
much as we learned from them, they can also learn from us too and the things that
we’ve gone through. Some of the professors aren’t Native, but they do a really
good job at immediately stating that they aren’t Native and they’re sensitive to all
the stuff they’re teaching.
Aurora

We do a lot of introductory stuff and I always make sure to state, I’m from the Tribal Reservation. And a lot of times that’ll spark conversations, which is pretty cool. I’ve taken one class, a Native American history class, and the professor was really cool. It was nice to have a professor know exactly where I was talking about. And on campus, I’ve had my name up on the TV, because I was a business major. So I’m walking into the Business School and I had my name listed on a TV – women’s lacrosse, my name, my Nation. It was awesome they had it up for all the students to see. And it’s because I play lacrosse. So, this game really helps me show who I am. Not only on the lacrosse field, but even when I’m just walking to class. When I saw that, I was like, wow that’s so cool. And it says my Nation. I sent it to my dad, and he goes, ‘How much do you want to bet, how many people Googled our Nation after that?’ It’s stuff like that. Being able to have the school put up my Nation and people to read that and see that, it’s pretty cool.

Thomas

I started reaching out to teachers more. Talking to the teachers more. Getting tutors. And really taking it serious. Everything totally shifted. I’ve been putting more work into school than lacrosse, as of the past year. I take it serious now that I’ve gotten help.

All four participants talked about the importance of having positive interactions with faculty. Jasmine felt a connection to her English professor, which created a deeper connection in her schoolwork. She also received praise from the university president for
sharing her story on a podcast. This was affirming for Jasmine as it helped prove there was value in her sharing her story. She was touching the right people.

Bella appreciated the presence of the Native mentors on campus. They were helpful in affirming her and other Native students presence on campus but also encouraged accountability for how Native students carried themselves. Bella also connected with faculty in her major, both Native and non-Native. Faculty were also affirming to Native students, and she appreciated how they learned from students and self-disclosed their non-Native identity, when necessary.

Aurora felt seen in her interactions in the classroom and her major. She is confident sharing about her Native identity in class and appreciates when others take interest. It felt good to have a professor know exactly where her reservation is located. Having her profile posted in the college was empowering. Not only to know that lacrosse is what helped her get recognized, but ultimately having her home community recognized by the college made her proud.

For Thomas, his connections came as he started to take academics more seriously. He began to engage with the content more and was reaching out to professors for help. He also took up tutoring. He began to feel more connected to the work and the classroom.

Cultural Disconnect: Our way of thinking is just different.

There were also moments of cultural disconnect in the learning environments. Participants interacted with people who do not understand the cultural wealth Native students possess. In addition, the classroom content did not always align with the interests and cultural values of participants. They were bothered by these experiences.

Aurora
I remember one of my classmates telling me – because we had to do like an icebreaker with people – oh, I didn’t even know there were that many Native Americans until I came here and I saw the men’s lacrosse team. And I didn’t even know they had one on the woman’s lacrosse team. And just stuff like that. I’ve never had anything serious. Well, I once had somebody ask me about an incident with a friend and people were spreading rumors about him, involving it with drugs. And I was like, that has nothing to do with it. And it made me upset because that’s one of our Native men. And it was the fact that it was a typical stereotype of Native Americans and drugs and alcohol. So, when I heard someone talking about it, I was like, ‘Can you not repeat that? Because that’s not true. That’s not what happened. And whoever did tell you that, you can tell them too, it’s not true. I’m confirming it right now. And it’s a stereotype that I’m not okay with people saying.’ And the girl looked at me and goes, ‘that’s a stereotype? That’s not a stereotype. I’ve never heard that before.’ Luckily I had a friend with me and she backed me up like, ‘no, that is a stereotype. Just respect Aurora right now.’ And the girl goes, ‘well, I live next to a rez and I’ve never heard that before.’ So then I go, ‘well, I live on a rez and I’ve had that said to me.’ That’s been the worst thing that I’ve ever had happen and really get to me. I was just more frustrated because it was somebody that has helped me with schooling and stuff like that.

**Bella**

During the winter, I had taken a government class about U.S. politics. One of the final projects, we had to pick a group that we wanted to join. One of the topics
was looking at the Iroquois Confederacy and how they impacted the foundation of U.S. politics. And I was like, this is perfect. This is everything I care about in a project. But, I am the only one in the class that wants to do it. And immediately, I was like wow. That made me feel worse. My professor had to force people to take the project. That showed me they don’t even care to learn about this stuff. It was sad.

As we’re going through the project, I did a lot of the heavy lifting. I totally understand why I did most of the heavy lifting because they didn’t even know what the Iroquois Confederacy was. So, I took it into my hands to make sure all the groundwork was covered. I did a couple of interviews with our chiefs, so that was great. But as we are presenting the project my professor made a point to include the fact he had tried to write his college thesis on this particular subject. But wasn’t able to find any solid evidence. Implying the Iroquois Confederacy didn’t impact the U.S. Government. So, going into that, you already debunked everything we’re about to present on, and that pissed me off. As we’re getting into it, we allude back to this quote by Benjamin Franklin – the quote about the merciless savages. And the professor had the audacity to say, ‘you know, he was actually a pretty sarcastic man.’ And I was like, oh, so you hung out with him? Like you would know that? It was so infuriating.

But we ended up doing really well on the project. He even reached out to me and said I brought to the table more than he was able to find. I always made sure to refer to the fact that we as Native people have developed these sort of trauma responses. So, when an outsider wants to come in and wants to know about us,
what if they get in and they end up harming us. So we keep this very rigid wall up. If you’re white, you’re just simply not going to know these things. I’m sorry. That’s how it is sometimes. And so, I made sure to refer to that. Maybe that’s why he didn’t do so well on the thesis (laughing).

And having to voice these things in front of all these students, this selective group, it was super nerve-racking. But I knew if I didn’t do it, who else is gonna do it? And what are the chances they had a member of the Iroquois Confederacy who was passionate about government sitting in the room.

**Thomas**

I don’t know because whether they’re teaching about psychology or something, I find our perspectives are so much different than theirs. Even our way of thinking is just different than theirs. Our values are different than theirs. I don’t even know how to put it. I have to take everything with a grain of salt that they’re teaching. Because they don’t offer any Native courses. There’s no Native teachers. There’s nothing like that. So I kind of just take everything with a grain of salt. Especially when it comes to being in a classroom. I wasn’t always the best. I’d either be sleeping, be on my phone playing games or watching a movie or something.

That’s what I would do. Now I’m paying attention, it’s like, oh shit. This is hard. But yeah, like I said, I just take everything with a grain of salt, because our values and our beliefs. Well, mine anyways or our community, the “traditional” mindset. A lot of it would be money driven or something like that. To be honest, I don’t care about money like that. It’s not important. Obviously, it’s good to have once in a while. But yeah, it’s not important. So, I would be like, I’m not going to use
this where I live. I even felt like I was wasting my time at one point, because they had no Native classes. But at the end of day, especially in the world we live in now, you kind of need a degree.

These experiences were frustrating for participants and created disconnect between their Native identity and the learning environments. Aurora experienced a classmate questioning the existence of Native students on campus and the lacrosse program. Another classmate spread rumors about her Native friend perpetuating negative Native stereotypes about drugs and alcohol. The student then ignored Aurora’s plea to not spread rumors and stereotypes about her Native peers. This was upsetting for Aurora because it came from someone who she had trusted.

Bella experienced some disconnect in the classroom when she had to correct and inform her professor about the impact of the Iroquois Confederacy on U.S. politics, a topic directly related to her culture and heritage. She also felt disappointed her classmates did not express similar interest in the topic. As a result, Bella was responsible for most of the work in the group. Her professor also centered his own opinions in the conversation and made comments questioning the validity of the topic. She used the term infuriating to describe this experience. However, the group did well on the project and the professor expressed amends with his shortcomings in knowledge about the topic. Bella again felt the responsibility to speak up for her Native identity and she was happy to share her passion and knowledge.

Thomas spoke about his traditional cultural values not being aligned with the content being taught in the classroom. He thinks different from the teachings. He also did not have any Native professors or take any courses covering Native-centric topics. At
first he had trouble understanding how he might use the knowledge being shared. But, he ultimately understands a college degree will be beneficial to his future.

**Relationship to Home**

Earlier we shared participant feelings about initially leaving home to pursue their lacrosse dreams. We also discussed how their relationship to home has developed since they have been at college. These relationships can be complicated, but participants proudly represent their reservations and remain active participants in their home community. They spoke about being role models to younger generations and giving back through lacrosse and their education.

**Going Home: No matter what I do it’s for my home.**

Participants shared their feelings and experiences when going home after being away at college for an extended period of time. For some, there were contentious interactions with people because of their choice to leave the reservation to pursue lacrosse and their education. However, home is where their family support still resides, so it can be relaxing and a time to reconnect with their family and loved ones.

**Thomas**

It’s funny, I literally had the most weird interaction. I was at a restaurant and I saw somebody there, an old buddy from school. They were having a few drinks, whatever they were doing. I walked in and they’re just like, ‘Oh, I don’t see you anymore?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I don’t know.’ And they literally said, I think I’m too good. I was just like, this could be a movie. No, I don’t. But that’s when I don’t even argue with them. I was just like whatever, I don’t have to prove
anything. I’m not even going to argue with you. I’m just going to go. So I just took off. That was just one of the rare, few instances.

Other than that, I have a lot of support. Whether it’s friends, family, people. I guess now that I think about it more, it’s a unique experience because there are the people who are going to think, ‘Oh, he thinks he’s too good for the town or reservation.’ Or, they’ll be like get that white stuff outta here. But, no matter what I do it’s for my home. I represent my community wherever I go. No, I do not think I’m too good. Come on. I don’t need to hear this right now. But for the most part, I have a lot of support, even from people who go to the longhouse and stuff for ceremony. Because that’s our family in itself. I had so much support from them. And I still do. They just want me to finish.

Aurora

This is a tough question. I guess whenever I go home I feel like I have weight lifted off my shoulders. I don’t know what it is about home, but when I go home it’s just so refreshing to go home. Some people dread going home. For me, I’m so excited. I’m going home to my grandmother, and my dad, my dog, my cousins, my aunties, my uncles. It’s just so fun. So, when I go home, the difference between why I want to go home and someone else is maybe the family orientation and different values. I have a strong family relationship with every member of my family. For other people, it might not be the same. Because back home, everyone lives down the street from their cousin. Or their aunts and uncles. Maybe that’s why I always want to go home. It’s just nice knowing that I’m surrounded by my family. I’m always excited and ready to go home.
Bella

Honestly, I think the situation surrounding the incident that I went through and that whole case definitely sent ripples through how I was perceived. That made it really hard for me. I was not someone who had social anxiety or really care about what people thought of me because I always knew what I was doing was for me and I was gonna achieve my goals no matter how it made other people feel. So, this has sort of been a terrible wake up call. In terms of waking up my doubts and anxieties about how people perceive me or think of me. And being home for this long. I only went back to campus for the winter quarter because that was the only time I could get housing. That was the only time I was approved and I needed to get out of here because I’ve been home for a long time. The longest I’ve been here for the past five years because of school and stuff.

I hate to admit it, but up until COVID, I only ever came home for Christmas, Thanksgiving, summer. So, it was easy to associate my time here with rest, a break, time away. I always associated with working a job to get money to go back to school. So, being home for this long, it’s definitely kind of put me in a place where I don’t feel – I feel like that every time I leave here I grow and I change and I get better. It’s kind of this phenomenon of not feeling like I’m getting better while I’m here. That also came with feeling suffocated by being in the environment I was hurt in. And hurt the most I had ever been hurt in my entire life. So, coming back here definitely makes it tough.

And throughout this entire journey there’s been a lot of sacrifice in making it as a Native student athlete. Having to leave home at such a young age. Not being able
to make sure my little sisters are taken care of every day. I had to really take into consideration, who am I surrounding myself with? Are they someone that’s going to be there at the end? Do I want them to be there? So a lot of my friendships growing up on the rez, I sort of stopped engaging because I knew they weren’t someone I wanted to be like. I was around them and choosing to surround myself with them because of the time. And I don’t use that as a measure of my connection with someone anymore. That’s something that I’ve learned a lot. And another thing that really plays into this too is feeling like I kind of sacrificed my time with my Totas (grandparents) who are getting older now. And feeling like I might have missed out on being able to know more, because both grandparents on both sides are fluent in our language. That’s one of my biggest regrets is going away to boarding school and not putting in enough time with my grandparents. So, I would say definitely something that has defined my career is sacrifice. Missing a whole lot of special events, birthday parties, because I had to be prepping for lacrosse. Or putting in the work in school because lacrosse is going to take away from that.

Thomas shared an interaction with a disgruntled community member who he had not seen in a while. Their now distant relationship was a result of Thomas leaving home, but there were no hard feelings on Thomas’ part. However, the community members felt Thomas had changed because he left the reservation. Thomas found this odd and was sure to reinforce that he mostly has support from those back home. He is proud to represent his reservation.
Aurora shared feelings of relief and relaxation when thinking about her home community. Her return trips to the reservation provide a time to reconnect with family and loved ones. She has fun and is excited to return home to her reservation.

While home is joyful for Aurora, Bella’s relationship to home is complicated by her personal experiences and the sacrifices she made to pursue elite level lacrosse. She felt that peoples’ perception of her changed at home after details came out about the domestic violence incident she experienced with another community member. When combined with the lengthy duration of her most recent home visit, Bella had feelings of being suffocated by her time at home. However, Bella also shared about the sacrifices she made when leaving home to pursue lacrosse and the regrets she lives with in missing out on time spent with her grandparents and other loved ones. Bella’s relationship to home is another example of the internal conflict with Native identity she speaks openly about throughout our conversation.

**Being a Role Model: Being someone I needed when I was younger.**

Participants shared thoughts and feelings about being considered a role model by their home community.

**Bella**

I know for me, I would have loved to have a me to talk to when I was younger. And just knowing that I’m taking the time to be someone that I needed when I was younger, I think that will change the lack of players (in college lacrosse). I hope I do leave a positive impact on these girls because the same way I teach them, they’re also teaching me stuff every time I see them. Making sure to always stay curious and never stop asking questions, never stop wanting to learn, because
when you reach that point where like, oh I can’t learn anymore, is where cockiness and arrogance comes in. That definitely does not align with the morals of the game. And although women are not allowed to participate in the Medicine Game, lacrosse has been my own medicine and has helped me make other people feel better.

Aurora

Every time I go home, I have younger girls ask me about school and tell me how they look up to me and stuff. But I want them to be able to look up to themselves too. So, I’m just happy to let them know that what I’m doing, they can do the same thing. I have a cousin going down to Coastal Carolina playing lacrosse. And she always tells me how excited she is and stuff. And she tells me, you’ve always been a good role model growing up. So, I want to say I’m more of an influencer than a role model, just because I feel people are like, she’s doing it, so why can’t I? Or I try to share my struggles, along with my successes, because I want people to know what I’m doing isn’t easy. There is going to be road bumps. Me showing them I am also going through struggles shows them it’s not going to be easy. And when they go through a struggle they’re not the only one that had to go through it.

Jasmine

I’ve never wanted to shy away from who I am, as a Native person, and you know as a mentor and as a role model. Especially since I have two younger sisters that live at home with my parents still. I never had dreams to go to college or want to play college lacrosse until I was a little kid. To see the things I had to sacrifice, it just came from when lacrosse was introduced to me when I was a little girl. So, I
want to share my story. There’s more kids now growing up and wanting to play girls lacrosse. It is honestly really empowering to see that. I didn't have that at my age. Other kids that wanted to play.

All three women shared about their responsibility as role models to the next generation of Native women lacrosse athletes. Bella shared about filling a void she experienced as a young girl. She wants to be there to support young girls on her reservation who are pursuing lacrosse, encouraging them to continue learning about the game and playing the game with the right energy. Her mentorship is a two-way relationship as she learns from the youth, as well. Aurora speaks specifically about being a role model to her cousin who will be playing collegiate lacrosse. Aurora shares her story with her cousin and other girls, so they know their goals are attainable. She is intentional about sharing her struggles as well to illustrate her journey has not been easy. Jasmine adds her desire to share her story as a Native woman and be a role model to her younger sisters. She had not always had dreams of playing collegiate lacrosse, so her goal is to help others open their dreams by hearing her accomplishments. Knowing what lacrosse has afforded them, participants felt a natural desire to be a role model for the next generation of girls lacrosse players.

**Giving Back to Youth: They’re very much capable of performing.**

Participants also shared stories of giving back to their home communities.

**Jasmine**

I did this program with U.S. Lacrosse. I did a camp on one of the Tribal Nations and there was two other Native coaches that were girls players. We all coached with other Black coaches. We were coaching a bunch of kids from the boys and
girls clubs. It was crazy to see there was more people of color than white people. Seeing those situations, it was really awesome because U.S. Lacrosse gave those kids shirts. They gave them sticks. And the kids were like, ‘Oh, here’s your stick back’. And we’re like, ‘no, no, these are yours’. And they’re like, ‘really?’ And just seeing them connect with the stick and be happy to have that stick, it was so awesome to see.

**Aurora**

I do make sure to try to help. I have a lot of cousins back at home, and my sister too, who all want to go to college, but don’t know exactly what they want to do in college. So, whenever I go home I always have conversations with them. I’m friends with a lot of younger girls because I have a younger sister. And I always have conversations with them about different opportunities. Like, they want to be business majors, but the business school can sometimes be hard to get into. You can go into communications, and you can do the business side of communications, where it’s maybe a little bit easier. And you won’t have to do as many numbers. Or, if you’re not looking to be a lawyer, there’s different options for law. I feel like people don’t understand the different options they have so it’s always nice to be able to do that for other people. So, when I think of me graduating I think of me laying down the first brick right now and a bunch of other ones coming along with me soon. I’m making the dream come true of that freshman girl that was scared to leave her dad. I’m just hoping to be able to see other girls see me do this and be like, wow I really want to do that. Or, wow, she did it, so why can’t I?
Bella

Letting these girls know – little kids, we have to be so gentle with them. But you also have to know they’re very much capable of performing. And I think it’s just making sure we’re instilling this awareness within them. Giving them golden nuggets to form their own ideas around aspirations. And not giving them a script to read or something, in terms of how they feel or what they want to pursue. It took one teacher telling me she thought I was smart and she thinks I should go away to boarding school. And I did that. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have gone to my university. It’s little things. I just want to make sure these resources are there, and these kids can be believed in where they’ll reach their full potential. Especially little girls here because there’s so many things working against us. And I don’t want them to lose that spirit we’re born with. Or to have it shaped or broken down by the terrible things we can’t control experiencing.

Participants shared the various ways that they have given back to the youth in their communities. Jasmine participated as a coach in a lacrosse camp provided to Native and Black youth. It was rewarding for Jasmine to contribute to this environment and refreshing to see the enthusiasm from youth participants. Aurora shares her knowledge with her cousins and other youth on the reservation so they understand the opportunities available to them as they pursue college. She also knows her upcoming graduation will serve as a tangible example they can follow. Talking with the youth about her experiences and accomplishments will empower them to follow in her footsteps. Bella also shares her knowledge with the youth to activate their potential and empower them to chase their aspirations. She understands the importance for Native youth to have people
believe in their potential. Overall, participants talked passionately about paving the way for Native youth, specifically young girls, and sharing their stories as knowledge to help the youth understand the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Contemporary Collegiate Native Lacrosse

After discussing their experiences in their lacrosse programs and learning environments, participants shared feedback to help the future generations of Native lacrosse players and advice for coaches who may recruit those players.

*Feedback for Coaches: Go to the Native communities.*

**Thomas**

That’s an interesting question. Because to them they’re out recruiting and they see someone’s good and it’s like we’ll give them a call. Try to get them in. And that’s about it. But I know a few coaches who will literally travel to your house and get the experience of what it would be like to be on the rez, which was really, really good. I would stress that more because at the end of the day, you have to know who you’re really recruiting. Because our experiences are just so much different. Living in a tight knit community is just so much different. There’s different experiences in each family. Whether it’s good or bad. It’s that historical trauma and generational trauma. No matter what Native community you go into, that is always there. And I’m not saying it’s not like that for other communities. But, I think there’s a unique difference from Native communities. But, you really have to get to know us because our family dynamics can be different. And these coaches should immerse themselves in our culture more. We’re the ones who
always have to go be out of our comfort zone on your college campus. Do you know what that’s like to be out of your comfort zone in our home community?

**Aurora**

I’m not a college coach, but I would recommend a college coach going to a box lacrosse game. Going to the Native American Indigenous games. The box lacrosse tournament and that will help you target. And then approaching that kid and telling them, hey here’s my card. Have one of your parents or someone call me. Get them psyched for the opportunities that could come about. Because a lot of college coaches only go to the big tournaments. In order to go to one of those tournaments, you got to drop $500. Or to be on a club lacrosse team or a travel team, you have to drop a grand just to play. I was fortunate enough to where my dad picked up extra shifts and stuff to be able to afford that. I didn’t go on family vacations because lacrosse was my vacation. So, college coaches, yes, go to tournaments to find whatever player they’re looking for. But if you’re looking for a Native American, go to the rez and to the high school that’s near them. A lot of people can’t afford to go to these tournaments or to be on a club lacrosse team. Some of us are fortunate enough and some of us aren’t. There’s so much talent out there that doesn’t have the money to be able to showcase it. And that’s what sucks. And it’s sad to say. But that would be my advice is to not only recruit at these fancy lacrosse tournaments. Think outside the box to find that player.

**Jasmine**

I think there needs to be more outreach from college coaches to go to Native communities, hosting a free clinic or something. Because a lot of these Native
kids need to be given that opportunity for them to see it. Every family is different. They may be pushing them to play lacrosse. It’s fun and whatnot. Or, oh you’re not going to college. We can’t afford it. It varies from different families. And I think with college coaches, they need to recognize that we don’t have the same resources as the other kids they have recruited in their class. I feel it may need to be like a mindset. Like, okay, I need to take time out of my day, out of my moral beliefs, out of my own being to do this for these kids that need it the most. There definitely needs to be more of that because the more college coaches recruit, the more bridge we’ll have between Native Americans playing lacrosse but also pursuing their education. And more we can bring home. The more we can create that bridge between college coaches and Native communities there will be more diversity. And there will be less of these incidents that are happening today with people not understanding the game. And if college coaches were able to recognize they need to have more diversity, then you have those Native players able to teach other kids what it means to be really playing. And I feel the only way they can do that is by like, okay, I’m going to go do a camp here, see how it goes, kind of figuring out what I learned and then going back and teaching my team the same things.

Because in most situations if a Native kid goes to a camp, they’re going to be quiet. They’re going to be closed off because a lot of these kids don’t look like them. If a coach goes to the reservation – yes, they may be a little bit uncomfortable because you got a bunch of Native kid there. But it creates situational awareness and they’re able to understand us and they’re able to
understand what we come from. If they go through a rez maybe they create awareness and understanding. And I think college coaches need to do that instead of us going to them first. Getting to understand us a little bit more.

**Bella**

So I’ve definitely been more in touch with recognizing, okay, how can we get more Native athletes to this level? And part of that has been through coaching. I’ve definitely noticed that coaches can really make or break a player. And they do not take that enough into consideration. In terms of getting these kids to get recruited by these colleges, there does have to be more resources for them to feel supported in the classroom. And how can we train our coaches or require certifications for the coaches around here. Because believe it or not, the coaches around here, whenever they take a job, they’re also kind of taking the responsibility of possibly being a parental figure to some of these kids. And so making sure they’re being really intentional about what they say and how they’re teaching them.

All four participants explicitly suggested that coaches should be intentional about going to Native communities to recruit more lacrosse players. There is talent in the Native community that does not always receive the exposure necessary to pursue elite levels of collegiate lacrosse. Many of the upcoming Native players do not have the resources to play on a club team or travel to larger tournaments where coaches are recruiting. So, it is important for coaches to understand their role in recruiting Native players to their programs. Coaches can build trust with Native communities and provide
resources by going to the reservation for a camp or a visit. The words of participants said it best.

**Conclusion**

Findings addressed the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse players at NCAA Division I historically white institutions. Each participant shared stories introducing their unique journey to becoming a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete. Subsequently, themes emerged across participant stories as they shared about experiences in their collegiate lacrosse program and learning environment. The stories and themes represent the journey towards critical self-authorship for these collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. The seven main themes are as follows, along with their subthemes: (1) The Transition – Transition to College; Transition to Lacrosse Program; (2) Support Systems – Support from Teammates; Support from Native Peers; Support from Coaches; (3) Engaging with Ignorance – Encountering Microaggressions; Explaining Native Identity; (4) Playing Native – Native Lacrosse; Empowered to Play Native; Disempowered to Play Native; Native Women’s Collegiate Lacrosse; (5) Learning Native – Early Academic Challenges; The Turnaround; Empowering Connections; Cultural Disconnect; (6) Relationship to Home – Going Home; Being a Role Model; Giving Back to Youth; and, (7) Future of Native Lacrosse – Feedback for Coaches. The following chapter expands on these findings by discussing their connections to theory, implications in the broader landscape of collegiate Native lacrosse, and areas in need of further research.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Factors Impacting the Journey Towards Critical Self-Authorship

In the previous chapters, I presented my research on the experiences of collegiate Native athletes playing NCAA Division I lacrosse at historically white institutions. I listened to their stories to understand their journey towards critical self-authorship and their ability to thrive in their lacrosse and academic programs as their authentic Native self. The following questions guided my research: (a) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their athletic program(s)? (b) What factors influence Native lacrosse athletes' journey towards critical self-authorship within their academic and co-curricular program(s)?

The need for the study derived from understanding the history of lacrosse and its roots in Native American culture. Although lacrosse is the Creator’s Game given to Natives, data introduced in Chapter I illustrated the significantly low number of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes competing at NCAA Division I programs (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020a). The literature reviewed in Chapter II examined lacrosse as a function of settler colonialism and the intentional forced removal and displacement of Natives and Native culture from their game (Downey, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). In addition, Native college students in general are lowly represented on college campuses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The literature suggests some Native college students experience racism, invalidation, silencing, lack a sense of belonging to campus, and other inhibiting factors (Brayboy,
Therefore, collegiate Native lacrosse athletes find themselves underrepresented in both their lacrosse programs and their academic and co-curricular learning environments, creating a need to examine their experiences.

Tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory are infused throughout this research. I used Critical Indigenous Research Methods (Brayboy, Gough, et al., 2012) to investigate the experiences of NCAA Division I collegiate Native lacrosse athletes to understand their journey towards critical self-authorship (Hernandez, 2016). CIRM provided a lens to examine any pertinent power structures or systems of oppression present between participants and their institutions. CIRM also promotes Native researchers conducting research with Native communities to foster a shared understanding of Native identity. In addition, critical self-authorship centers the Native identity of participants in this research by looking at how the social systems of an institution impact the experiences of racialized students from historically marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds? (Hernandez, 2016). Ultimately, I wanted to know what it is like to be a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete at an elite level NCAA Division I historically white institution. As a member of an underrepresented community, I wanted to know if they felt an ability to thrive in college as a Native student, or if they were forced to mask their Native identity, and what factors impacted this experience.

In this social constructive research, I used the conversational method to host one-on-one discussions with participants. Conversations were designed to address the following about critical self-authorship and collegiate Native lacrosse athletes (2016): (1) How do I make meaning of my social world? (2) How does my social world shape my
sense of self as a racialized being? (3) What relationship do I want with others for the
benefit of my social world? Furthermore, our conversations were geared to explore the
following four themes of critical self-authorship discussed in Chapter II (Abes &
Hernandez, 2016): (1) validating students with oppressed identities as knowers, (2)
valuing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self, (3) acknowledging the
difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity, and (4) recognizing the
performativity of identity. I used narrative analysis to examine each participants’
individual story, followed by thematic analysis to identify emerging themes across all
participant stories. Subthemes emerged within each major theme identified.

Findings captured the complexities of the experiences of NCAA Division I Native
lacrosse athletes and their journey towards critical self-authorship. The following seven
themes emerged, along with their subthemes: (1) The Transition – Transition to College;
Transition to Lacrosse Program; (2) Support Systems – Support from Teammates;
Support from Native Peers; Support from Coaches; (3) Engaging with Ignorance –
Encountering Microaggressions; Explaining Native Identity; (4) Playing Native – Native
Lacrosse; Empowered to Play Native; Disempowered to Play Native; Native Women’s
Collegiate Lacrosse; (5) Learning Native – Early Academic Challenges; The Turnaround;
Empowering Connections; Cultural Disconnect; (6) Relationship to Home – Going
Home; Being a Role Model; Giving Back to Youth; and, (7) Future of Native Lacrosse –
Feedback for Coaches.

In this final chapter, I expand on these findings to address the overarching focus
and purpose of this study. Building upon the results and meanings presented in the prior
chapter, I discuss the impact of the social institutions that are historically white
institutions on the journey towards critical self-authorship for collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. I organize my discussion of these findings through the following subsections: (1) Conclusions, (2) Implications, and (3) Future Research.

**Conclusions**

Through this dissertation study, I represented the voices of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes regarding their experiences within their lacrosse program and their academic environments at NCAA Division I historically white institutions. In this section, I discuss the seven themes and their subthemes presented in Chapter IV. In each subsection, I expand my thoughts to consider how each theme impacted the journey towards critical self-authorship for participants. I connect their stories to the literature and theory reviewed in Chapter II.

**The Transition**

Participants shared their stories and feelings about their initial transition to a college campus and their lacrosse programs. As suggested in the literature, participants shared feelings of fear and anxiety as they began their college journey (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2021). Thomas was completely unfamiliar with NCAA lacrosse and the institutions where it was played. Bella shared specifically her feelings of imposter syndrome and Jasmine and Aurora talked about feeling alone as the only Native in their new environment. However, Aurora felt lacrosse helped her transition to college as it prepared her to navigate predominantly non-Native environments. Prior research recognized the importance of sustained familial connections for Native college students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), something that appeared in all four participants stories as they shared feelings of missing their families and their home communities.
As for their lacrosse programs, Division I lacrosse was an entirely new level of competition that came with various challenges for each participant. Bella inherited an entirely new coaching staff as the coaches who recruited her left for another school. Thomas recognized how everybody was much bigger, faster, and stronger than he had previously experienced. Aurora and Jasmine shared anxieties about being the only Native women on their teams and fear of not being accepted.

In terms of critical self-authorship, the feelings of fear and anxiety shared by participants as they transitioned to college and their lacrosse programs acknowledges the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). Participants were hesitant to step out of their comfort zone for fear of being judged or misunderstood. Aurora stated, “I was scared and I just remember thinking everyone’s going to think I’m weird.” Jasmine added, “we tend to put up walls and…be sheltered and figure out how we’re gonna adjust to a situation.” They understand there is risk associated with being authentically Native. As Brayboy (2004) discussed, when Native students choose to be invisible, it may actually contribute to their marginalization. But, these students are aware that Native culture is different from the culture of HWIs, so they were hesitant to be themselves at first in an effort to preserve their cultural integrity (Brayboy, 2004). They would rather be themselves in a reserved state than expose their Native identity to attempts at marginalization from people ignorant to their Native culture, such as teammates, classmates, faculty, coaches, and administration. Native athletes going from reserved to more outspoken and comfortable about their Native identity illustrates the development of intercultural maturity as participants negotiate their
values and beliefs in pursuit of being comfortable with oneself in interactions with others and free of anxieties that may stem from disapproval from others (Magolda, 2008).

**Support Systems**

Crucial to their transition to college was finding positive support systems. Participants talked about building positive relationships with their teammates and other Native students on campus. They also talked about their relationships with their coaches, which were more positive for Aurora and Bella than they were for Jasmine and Thomas.

Participants generally spoke positive about their relationships with their teammates. Although participants shared stories about having to answer ignorant questions about their Native identity from teammates, participants felt their teammates were genuinely trying to learn more about their Native identity. Participants initially had fears and anxieties about being different or being accepted, but teammates asking authentic questions about their Native identity helped in building relationships with their team as teammates genuinely wanted to know more about Native cultures. This experience positively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship because it allowed participants to feel comfortable amongst their teammates. As Brayboy (2004) discussed, Native students exercise strategies that make them invisible to the largely white communities in which they attend school. These strategies of invisibility help preserve their Native identity, yet simultaneously contribute to their marginalization because their voice is silenced. However, the participants in this study shared how authenticity from teammates in learning about Native identity helped participants be their Native selves. They were able to build genuine relationships and were proud to share their Native culture with their teammates. In addition, these stories connect with the first
theme of critical self-authorship, as teammates were validating the Native identity of participants and valued their knowledge and culture (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

Participants also spoke positively about the community they built with other Native students on campus. Thomas was fortunate to have other Natives on his team, but Aurora, Jasmine, and Bella did not have that experience. They had to find other Natives on campus to build community. Although student Native spaces were powerful and important to the experiences of participants, their time was limited due to their lacrosse commitments. Ultimately, the Native community allowed participants to be even more of themselves, as there are shared understandings across Native cultures. For example, Jasmine talked about not having to explain certain things when she was with her Native peers, Bella shared about speaking different when around her Native peers, and Aurora felt comfortable when she was able to connect with others from her reservation. Prior research supports these findings, as Native college students are more comfortable on campus when they are able to build a community with other Natives (Schooler, 2014; Tachine et al., 2017). These experiences positively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship as having a Native community while on campus values communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

Relationships with coaches emerged as a factor impacting participants journey towards critical self-authorship. Aurora and Bella had positive experiences with their coaches, while Jasmine and Thomas shared less positive experiences. Aurora and Bella both felt supported by their coaches and had their Native identity validated. Aurora was fortunate to have a Native person as one of her coaches, so there was an inherent understanding of Native identity on the coaching staff. Bella’s coaches were supportive
in educating the team about the Native roots of lacrosse and even ordered a traditional wooden lacrosse stick to hang in the locker room.

However, Jasmine and Thomas both shared feelings of being tokenized by their coaches for their Native identity and did not feel like their coaches truly appreciated their Native identity. Thomas was reluctant to expand too much about his feelings. He did not want to fully disparage his coaches or the program, but he did identify a culture shift in the program and stated he was not really enjoying his experience at the time we spoke.

It was quite apparent that coaches impact the journey towards critical self-authorship. For Aurora and Bella, their coaches validated their Native identity and valued the cultural connections to the game by centering their Native identity in a positive community building approach. For Jasmine and Thomas, almost the exact opposite occurred. Their coaches verbally expressed support of Native identity in the recruitment process, yet the actions of coaches said otherwise. As Jasmine and Thomas told their stories, you could sense their struggle with agency and authenticity. Jasmine was a bit more open about her experience, as her coach was eventually asked to resign, so it seemed she was not worried about any possible retaliation by sharing her story. Whereas Thomas was a bit more reserved because he understood the risks associated with truth telling. Overall, the support or lack of support from coaches is a factor in the journey towards critical self-authorship. Participant stories spoke to being validated as knowers, coaches valuing or devaluing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self, and acknowledging the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).
**Engaging with Ignorance**

While most participants spoke positively about their collegiate experience, there were also stories of having to deal with ignorance in the form of silly questions about Native identity or interactions with racist microaggressions. Participants were thrust into a position of having to explain their Native identity,

Jasmine’s story about the feather was astonishing. As she told the story, I could sense her frustration and continued disbelief that her coach thought this was a good idea and he burdened Jasmine with the responsibility of approving or denying what she described as his “borderline racist” idea. He was exploiting the Native roots of lacrosse for his own personal gain and image while his coaching style did not have the same respect and honor for the game he was trying to illustrate. He was blatantly disrespecting players while simultaneously handing out feathers to others. This approach by Jasmine’s coach is rooted in the settler colonial mindset as he attempted to co-opt a piece of Native culture, yet he completely misappropriated and misrepresented the feather idea. His actions illustrate the tenets of TribalCrit suggesting that colonization is endemic to society and policies towards Indigenous peoples are rooted in a desire for material gain (Brayboy, 2005; Wolfe, 2006).

The experiences for Aurora, Bella, and Thomas were less blatant racism but interactions with ignorance that most Natives can relate to (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). They shared stories of peers not understanding Native identity and asking ignorant questions about reservations or Native language. Not excusing the actions of their teammates and classmates, it seemed as though participants had become used to dealing with these microaggressions. The degree to which these
interactions bothered participants also depended on their relationship with the perpetrator. For example, ignorance from teammates seemed to be tolerated more than others since participants had a stronger relationship with their teammates than their classmates, faculty, or other staff. As Abes and Hernandez (2016) point out, participants recognized the performativity of identity. They had come to understand these interactions as part of the territory in being one of the few Natives in an environment.

These encounters with microaggressions often forced participants to explain to others their Native identity. Although sometimes overwhelming, participants took a positive approach to this responsibility and have developed a sense of strength in educating others about their Native culture, traditions, and identity. Jasmine talked about the importance of sharing with the right people. Aurora shared her pride in being different than the rest of her teammates. Bella shared an experience of being nominated to speak to the entire league about her Native identity and connection to lacrosse. Thomas used humor when dealing with his teammates and their understanding of Native identity. Overall, explaining Native identity to others had become a prideful undertaking and illustrates positive outcomes in participant journeys towards critical self-authorship. Whereas they were afraid to be themselves in the early moments of their college experience, participants have developed a strong sense of self during their time in college. They feel comfortable in sharing about who they are and what that means.

*Playing Native*

Participants shared stories about the meaning of lacrosse and what it means to be playing collegiate lacrosse. They also shared experiences about feeling empowered or
disempowered by their coaches to play lacrosse the Native way. All three women spoke repeatedly about the importance of breaking barriers as Native women lacrosse athletes.

All participants acknowledged they play lacrosse in a different but unique manner than non-Native players. They play a more creative style that is free flowing and less structured. Thomas called the game boring when he watches it played by non-Natives. Participants also shared how different their approach to the game is from their teammates. Their approach is rooted in their cultural connections to the Creator’s Game and an inherent understanding in how you should respect and honor the game of lacrosse.

Participants felt it is beneficial to their teammates and the program to understand the Native roots of lacrosse to be sure they are approaching the game in the appropriate ways. Having a lacrosse program supportive of this movement positively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship. Being intentional about the cultural connections of Native lacrosse athletes is validating to their Native identity and values communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

Expanding on the earlier conversation about the importance of coaches, participants shared stories about their style of play and feeling empowered or disempowered by coaches to be themselves on the lacrosse field. Again, Aurora and Bella had positive experiences and Jasmine and Thomas had negative experiences. Aurora shared that she is most herself when she is playing lacrosse. Her personality is infused in her game. She is empowered by her coaches to play creative and be herself on the field. Bella has a similar experience. Her aggressive style is appreciated on the team and she feels supported by her coaches to play the game her way.
Unfortunately, Jasmine and Thomas felt disempowered by their coaches to play the game their way. Jasmine shared stories about feelings of anxiety amongst the team and being removed from the game for making a mistake. Her coach then completely ignored her for an extended period of time. Thomas felt his coaches wanted too much structure of the Native players, describing his experience as having to be a robot on the lacrosse field. He also suggested one of the coaches does not truly care about the Native roots of the game. He only listens to protect his image. This is reminiscent of the historical narrative settlers built around Native lacrosse players, where the goal was to eliminate the Native style of play (Delsahut, 2015; Downey, 2018).

Ultimately, feeling empowered to play the game the way these Native athletes know how is significant in their journey towards critical self-authorship. Aurora and Bella feel connected through their style of play. Whereas Jasmine and Thomas feel disconnected by the restrictions their coaches have placed on their style of play. These restrictions are rooted in the settler colonial mindset of dispossession and disempowerment of the Native style of play (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). In addition, Jasmine and Thomas are being forced to assimilate or risk playing time, illustrating TribalCrit as policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation (Brayboy, 2005).

For Aurora and Bella, their journey towards critical self-authorship is positively impacted by their coaches validating their Native identity and valuing communal knowledge and relationships (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). For Jasmine and Thomas, their coaches are doing the exact opposite and negatively impacting their journey towards critical self-authorship. Also, the extent to which coaches validate collegiate Native
lacrosse players’ style of play connects to TribalCrit and the desire of Indigenous peoples to obtain and forge self-determination (Brayboy, 2005).

In addition, all participants understand the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity, but their outcomes are different (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). When empowered by their coaches it is easier to be oneself. When disempowered by their coaches, it becomes more difficult to speak out against restricting forces because of the risks associated with doing so, like less playing time. Participants also recognize the performativity of identity, as they are being asked to perform in a way that upholds specific narratives about Native lacrosse (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). This is a positive experience for Aurora and Bella, but a negative experience for Jasmine and Thomas.

Jasmine, Aurora, and Bella spoke repeatedly and enthusiastically about their role in breaking barriers for Native women’s lacrosse. To their knowledge, all three will be the first woman to graduate from their respective lacrosse programs. This is remarkable considering the reluctance from their own Haudenosaunee communities in letting girls and women play lacrosse, a complex ideology that reinforces a masculine construction of the sport rooted in the legacy of the settler colonial project in Haudenosaunee communities (Downey, 2012). Nonetheless, each have taken their game to new places and proudly carry the legacy of Native lacrosse and educating their teammates and others about the Native history of the Creator’s Game. As suggested by TribalCrit , the experiences of the collegiate women lacrosse athletes in this study illustrate how “tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429).
Sharing their stories promotes positive visions for the future of Native women lacrosse athletes and examines traditionalism versus progressivism and the adaptability of Native communities.

Overall, the journey towards critical self-authorship for participants was validated by supportive teammates and coaches who authentically engage with the cultural roots of lacrosse and the Native culture and traditions of these collegiate Native women athletes. Conversely, experiences with disingenuous teammates and coaches can feel exploitative and tokenizing and negatively impact their journey towards critical self-authorship.

**Learning Native**

Participants shared stories about experiences with their learning environments. Most of them struggled in some way academically early in their transition to college. Lacrosse often took a front seat to academics, but eventually a waking moment occurred that helped participants turn their academic journey in a more positive direction. There were empowering connections made in the classroom and beyond that made participants feel more comfortable in their learning environments. Yet, there were also some experiences that illustrated a cultural disconnect between participants and their academics.

Thomas and Aurora shared openly about really only caring about lacrosse during their freshman years. They suffered academically because of that. Jasmine experienced some personal struggles as she transitioned to a new college campus 12 hours away from home and her family. The class sizes were intimidating and the general education courses could be disinteresting. Ultimately, the early transition to being the only Native in the classroom was challenging. Participants spoke to what TribalCrit describes as the
problematic goal of assimilation inherently linked to HWIs (Brayboy, 2005). In addition, participants had to negotiate their agency and authenticity to survive their early academic struggles (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

Thomas, Aurora, and Jasmine shared the moments that helped turn around their early struggles. For Thomas and Aurora it was about realizing that lacrosse would not always be at the forefront of their life experiences. Thomas had a daughter, which completely shifted his approach to life, lacrosse, and school. He still loves lacrosse, but he began to take academics more seriously as he realized it would be his college degree that helps shape much of the remainder of his life. Aurora suffered a knee injury early in her college career that forced her away from the game for an extended time. She also realized she would not be playing lacrosse forever and began to focus on her future as a business major. Jasmine was able to open up more to others about her struggles which helped her persevere through any loneliness or homesickness that occurred. These moments that helped participants turn around their early struggles are evidence of their strengthened intercultural maturity and critical self-authorship. Participants gained a stronger sense of self and belonging as they matured and understood the significance of their academic journeys to their future.

This turn around was strengthened by the empowering connections participants made in the classroom and with others across campus. Jasmine shared a positive connection to her professor that empowered her writing. She also received an email from the university President expressing his gratitude for sharing her story and enthusiasm about having her on campus. Bella shared connections with the mentors and faculty in the Native American studies program. Aurora found herself on the videoboard as she walked
The image introduced Aurora and her tribal Nation, something she was unsure of happening all that often. Thomas began to contact his teachers and tutors more, which helped him feel more connected to the course content. Overall, these experiences validated students’ presence in the classroom and on campus and strengthened their ability to be authentically Native in certain spaces. Participants were validated as carriers of knowledge and valued amongst their learning community. In these moments, their Native identity was empowered, strengthening their ability to build agency and exude authenticity.

Unfortunately, there were also moments of cultural disconnect that negatively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship. Aurora experienced the spreading of rumors about a friend that reinforced negative Native stereotypes. When confronted by Aurora, the perpetrator doubled down on their ignorance and suggested they were not aware that the use of drugs and alcohol were a negative stereotype about Native people. This was frustrating and disappointing for Aurora. Bella shared an encounter where her government professor assigned a project about the impact of the Haudenosaunee on the history of U.S politics. She was the only person in the class passionate about the topic and ended up doing most of the work. She then dealt with having to stand up for her history and community as the validity of their experience and contributions were questioned by the professor. Bella described this experience as infuriating. As suggested by TribalCrit, the stories from Aurora and Bella illustrate how concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens (Brayboy, 2005). Also for Bella, her experience as a Haudenosaunee women in a government course displayed TribalCrit and how Indigenous peoples occupy liminal
space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of Native identity (Brayboy, 2005).

Meanwhile, Thomas felt completely disconnected from the course content. His traditional Native values did not always align with the teachings in the classroom, resulting in disconnect from the content and his coursework. These experiences of cultural disconnect from the classroom and the learning environment negatively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship. Participants had their Native identity invalidated and were inhibited by others from building agency and authenticity. They also recognized the performativity of Native identity and resisted stereotypical narratives about their Native identity. This is an illustration of strengthened intercultural maturity in their journey towards critical self-authorship, as participants felt confident in pushing back on inaccurate narratives about their Native identity. Although, the opportunity cost in these encounters is enduring the negative energy associated with racial battle fatigue or complete cultural disconnect from the learning environment.

**Relationship to Home**

Participants spoke about their relationship to home in their introduction stories as they examined their cultural connections to lacrosse and their journey from growing up on their tribal reservation to now playing collegiate lacrosse at an NCAA Division I historically white institution. Waterman (2012) determined home-going as a strategy for success among Haudenosaunee college students as they remained culturally centered by going home often. In other words, their critical self-authorship was strengthened by their ability to visit their home community and stay more connected to their Native identity. Participants shared perceptions of going home as collegiate Native lacrosse athletes and
shifts in their relationship to their home community as they progress through college. In addition, prior research found that Native college students are motivated by a desire to return home and give back to their community (J. D. Lopez, 2018; Salis Reyes, 2019). Jasmine, Aurora, and Bella are no different and shared feelings about being a role model to the youth in their community and sharing knowledge about their trailblazing accomplishments as Native women lacrosse athletes.

Participants mostly spoke about their positive experiences with going home as a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete. Although, Thomas shared a negative encounter with other tribal residents saying they felt Thomas thought he was too good for the community now that he had gone away. Nonetheless, Thomas felt supported by his home community and always represents his tribal reservation. Bella shared earlier about the internal conflict she was having about her Native identity, which also showed up in her relationship to her home community. She left at such a young age to chase her lacrosse goals which complicated her connection to home. She felt regret for sacrificing time with her grandparents and other loved ones, but knew she wanted to pursue collegiate lacrosse. She enjoyed going home because she could rest and take a break, but was also ready to get back to her college campus when she felt suffocated by being home. Aurora was excited and felt relief to go home as she was able to reconnect with all of her family and friends.

Overall, the relationships participants have with their home community impact their journey towards critical self-authorship. As Waterman (2012) suggested, students remained culturally centered from their trips home. Their sense of self strengthened as they maintained connection to their Native culture and community. However, negative
experiences with their home community challenged their sense of self by questioning their Native identity in relationship to their home. This is also an example of acknowledging the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity of their Native identity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

Bella, Aurora, and Jasmine shared feelings about being a role model and giving back to the youth in their home community. Bella described wanting to be “…someone I needed when I was younger…” and positively impacting the youth by sharing her story. She encourages the other girls on her reservation to pursue their goals and aspirations by believing in themselves. Aurora gets questions from the younger girls in her community about her experience and sees herself as an influencer by showing what she can accomplish through lacrosse. She gives back by sharing her knowledge about attending college and experiences as a collegiate Native woman lacrosse athlete. Jasmine does not shy away from her identity as a Native person and role model. She is grateful for the things lacrosse has brought to her life and wants other young girls to have that experience. Jasmine gives back by coaching youth lacrosse camps and helping youth build a connection to the game. These experiences positively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship because they validated the barriers broken and valued the communal knowledge of their experience as collegiate Native women lacrosse athletes. This strengthened their self of self and validated their identity as knowledge sharers.

The Future of Collegiate Native Lacrosse

Participants shared perspectives on the future of collegiate Native lacrosse and feedback for coaches in recruiting Native lacrosse athletes to their collegiate lacrosse programs. Essentially, the feedback for coaches is they need to go into the Native
communities to get to know the Native lacrosse athletes. Growing up on the tribal reservation is a different experience than for other NCAA Division I lacrosse athletes. The collegiate lacrosse programs are asking Native lacrosse players to step out of their comfort zone and onto a college campus, so coaches can reciprocate that experience by going out of their comfort zone and onto the tribal reservations. This could be by giving a lacrosse camp or going to more Native centric lacrosse tournaments or other events. As reviewed in Chapter II, a colonized educational system often void of Native perspective continues to act as a contemporary settler colonial force that erases Native histories, which may result in the dispossession of an already complex Native identity (Adams, 1995; Corntassel, 2012; K. Tsianina Lomawaima, 1995; K Tsianina Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). So, going and meeting potential Native lacrosse athletes in their communities could alleviate the historical and contemporary settler colonialism endemic in higher education and college athletics.

In addition, Aurora and Jasmine felt fortunate to be connected to resources to help their journey to collegiate lacrosse but were aware that not all Native youth have the same access to resources to play club level lacrosse and travel to compete in elite competitions. Participants shared enthusiasm for the number of talented Native lacrosse players that exist within their home communities. As suggested by TribalCrit, coaches going to Native communities may increase their understanding of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions and visions for the future that are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples (Brayboy, 2005). Traveling to Native communities may increase access to resources and potential to connect with more capable Native lacrosse athletes.
Furthermore, Aurora expressed the importance of Native lacrosse players not just looking to play at the division I level. There are many other levels of competition and the ultimate goal for Native lacrosse athletes should be to access their college education. Despite their stories that illustrated the problematic goals of assimilation inherently linked to these HWIs by TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), participants felt their education was valuable to their future as they developed intercultural maturity and strengthened their sense of self during their college experience (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Magolda, 2008).

This feedback expressed a positive impact in their journey towards critical self-authorship because participants would feel their Native identity validated by lacrosse coaches who made an effort to visit their home community. Native people value the communal knowledge and relationships of their tribal community and seeing a coach put in the effort to build a relationship with the tribal community is empowering to these Native lacrosse players because it shows the coaches genuinely care about the Native identity of the athletes.

**Implications for Practice**

In this study, I examined the journey towards critical self-authorship for collegiate Native lacrosse athletes at NCAA Division I historically white institutions. Through Critical Indigenous Research Methods, I considered factors that impact contemporary collegiate Native lacrosse players’ journey to be their authentic Native self (critical self-authorship) within their athletic and academic programs. Results from this study suggest the themes and subthemes that emerged through conversations have an impact on the journey towards critical self-authorship, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. The implications from this study are as follows: (1) colleges and universities must exemplify
the four themes of critical self-authorship, (2) people in relationship with collegiate Native lacrosse athletes must act in ways that empower the journey towards critical self-authorship, and (3) collegiate lacrosse programs must fully embrace and appropriately elevate the cultural connection of Native identity and lacrosse.

One implication from these findings is for colleges and universities to exemplify the four themes of critical self-authorship in their work and support for collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. This includes students, staff, faculty, administration, coaches and others who work within these historically white institutions, specifically the athletic departments, lacrosse programs and learning environments. To understand their impact on collegiate Native lacrosse athletes’ ability to be themselves in their athletic and academic programs, institutions must embrace the following: 1) validating students with oppressed identities as knowers; 2) valuing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self; 3) acknowledging the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity; and 4) recognizing the performativity of identity (Abes & Hernandez, 2016).

However, as reviewed in the literature, Native communities have a tragic history with settler colonialism and educational institutions. So, one must wonder if it is even possible for these HWIs to fully embrace the four themes of critical self-authorship to better support their Native lacrosse athletes. As TribalCrit reminds us, these educational institutions and their policies are geared towards the problematic goals of assimilation (Brayboy, 2005). HWIs are inherently designed to force Native people to act in ways that inhibit their growth towards critical self-authorship. As a result, it becomes the responsibility of Native lacrosse athletes to strengthen their intercultural maturity so they
can navigate their HWI in ways that preserve their cultural integrity, meaning at times they really cannot be their authentic Native selves.

Therefore, it must be the responsibility of the institution to better serve Native lacrosse athletes by putting the appropriate support systems in place. Staff, faculty, and administration must value Native identity and the knowledge lacrosse athletes carry both in their athletic programs and their learning environments. HWIs can learn something from Native communities by valuing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self. These institutions often elevate an individualistic approach to research and practice. They must shift their thought process and understand the institutions’ role in maintaining an assimilationist environment for Native lacrosse athletes. Environments where Native identity and contributions were valued resulted in a more positive experience for the lacrosse athletes. In turn, HWIs need to understand the risks for Native lacrosse athletes in seeking agency and authenticity during their journey.

Participants in this study were acutely aware of the risks involved in building agency and showing up as their authentic Native self. Thus, another implication from the findings is people in relationship with collegiate Native lacrosse athletes must act in ways that empower their journey towards critical self-authorship. This happens by building positive relationships with Native lacrosse athletes by authentically learning about their Native identity and its inherent cultural connection to the game of lacrosse. The more we understand about the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes, the more we are able to support their journey towards a strong sense of self and intercultural maturity. The results identified specific examples from participant stories that positively and negatively impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship. People in relationship with
collegiate Native lacrosse athletes should be aware of how their actions are either positive or negative to the athletic or academic experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes.

A third implication from the findings is for collegiate lacrosse programs to fully embrace and appropriately elevate the cultural connection between Native identity and lacrosse. Coaches need to be intentional about acknowledging, educating, and celebrating the Native roots of lacrosse. Participants spoke repeatedly about the significance of the people around them engaging in authentic dialogue about their Native identity. They felt more comfortable when teammates and coaches would support their Native identity through actions that appreciated and elevated their cultural connection to the Creator’s Game. Coaches must appropriately represent the cultural connection between Native identity and lacrosse by learning the history of the Creator’s Game and working with their Native athletes to elevate the Native ways of knowing and playing the game. Coaches should also embrace traveling to tribal reservations to promote access to the college game for the Native youth. Coaches should stretch their recruiting agenda beyond the traditional club lacrosse tournaments and make their way to tribal communities to learn about the Native cultures and traditions. This will help build confidence and a strong sense of self in the future collegiate Native lacrosse athletes. This will also help build authentic relationships between tribal communities and collegiate lacrosse programs.

Directions for Future Research

My research with collegiate Native lacrosse athletes shared and examined stories that impacted their journey towards critical self-authorship. As disclosed above, the implications of this research suggest the need for historically white institutions and their
lacrosse programs to embrace the four themes of critical self-authorship, act in ways that empower the journey towards critical self-authorship, and fully embrace and appropriately elevate the cultural connection between Native identity and lacrosse. The section proposes directions for future research.

I recommend a deeper examination of collegiate Native lacrosse players’ experiences across various levels of competition. This study only looked at the experiences of four NCAA Division I Native lacrosse athletes. There is room to study the experiences of those in other levels of collegiate lacrosse, such as NCAA Division II and III, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), community colleges, and Men’s Collegiate Lacrosse Association (MCLA). This would provide a wider snapshot of the overall experience of collegiate Native lacrosse players as they navigate various types of colleges and universities and their learning environments.

I also recommend a deeper examination of the experiences of Native women and collegiate lacrosse. Although Downey (2012) introduced the gender dynamics of Haudenosaunee lacrosse and the traditional exclusion of women in the Creator’s Game, there is room for a more nuanced understanding of what it is like to overcome institutional barriers in their tribal community and their college lacrosse program. To their knowledge, the three women in this study will be the first Native women to graduate from their respective lacrosse programs. That is a remarkable groundbreaking accomplishment that deserves further examination to learn more about how to support the journeys of future Native women playing collegiate lacrosse.

I recommend expanding this research to include the experiences of other collegiate lacrosse athletes who identify with other racial and/or ethnic categories other
than Alaska Native/American Indian, such as Black, Latinx, Asian, and/or Native Hawaiian. With NCAA Division I lacrosse being comprised of about 87% white athletes, there is room to understand the experiences of other lacrosse athletes who identify from another underrepresented community. In addition, each community has their own historical experience with settler colonialism. This history can be examined to explore how other traditional cultures intersect with the Native roots of lacrosse and the settler colonial symptoms that show up in contemporary collegiate lacrosse and the HWIs in which they operate. Research around this area is needed to learn and understand the general experiences of non-white collegiate Native lacrosse athletes and their journey towards critical self-authorship. Research may also compare and contrast the experiences of collegiate Native lacrosse athletes across various racial and/or ethnic identities.

Finally, I recommend more research be conducted exploring the journey towards critical self-authorship for all collegiate Native athletes across all sports. There is room to grow this study beyond Native identity and lacrosse. Collegiate Native athletes are underrepresented across all sports in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2020b). There are also varying cultural connections to sport that exist across varying Native communities. Just as lacrosse is critical to the identity of the Haudenosaunee athletes in this study, other collegiate Native athletes may have a deep cultural connection to their respective sport that impacts their journey towards critical self-authorship. This research is needed to learn and understand these experiences to promote continued success for collegiate Native athletes by fostering athletic and academic programs that appropriately acknowledge and elevate their Native identity and empower their journey towards critical self-authorship.
In conclusion, this study examined the experiences of Native lacrosse athletes playing at NCAA Division I institutions and their ability to show up as their authentic Native self in their athletics and academic experiences. The emergent themes from our conversations illustrate factors that impact the journey towards critical self-authorship for the collegiate Native lacrosse athletes who participated in this study. I am appreciative of their trust in this project and willingness to share their stories. Their vulnerability was crucial to developing a critical study that can be utilized in pushing social change.
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183


185


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APPENDIX: DISSERTATION STUDY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

These questions are meant to guide the conversation(s) between researcher and participant(s). In using Indigenous Methodology, every question may not be used and follow up questions not listed may be asked. Furthermore, some potential participants have received press coverage or conducted other interviews, in which case their previous commentary may also be referenced to guide the conversation. Here is the initial interview protocol:

Introductions

1. Researcher Background/Relational Questions and Comments
   a. Introduce self, including Native identity, hometown, and educational background. Discuss interests and motivations for conducting this study.
   b. Review issues of confidentiality and IRB
   c. Thank participant for taking part in study. Provide opportunity for participant to ask any questions.

2. Can you describe yourself as a person? Can you tell me about yourself, like where do you come from and your background?
   a. Where are you from? Where did you grow up? What tribe are you? Did you grow up on the reservation or more urban area?

3. Can you describe your motivation in becoming a collegiate lacrosse player? How has your Native identity impacted this journey?

Exploring Critical Self-Authorship

1. Cognitive Dimension - How do I make meaning of my social world?
   a. How would you describe your experience as a collegiate Native lacrosse athlete at an NCAA Division I program and a historically white institution?
   b. Can you describe what you remember about your transition to college and division I lacrosse? How would you describe your progression from your initial transition to now?
   c. How often do you speak about your Native identity (cultural values, traditions, practices, etc) in your lacrosse program experience? In your classroom? In other campus environments?
   d. How is your college experience similar from your experiences in your tribal community? In regards to both lacrosse and education?
   e. How is your college experience different from your experiences in your tribal community? In regards to both lacrosse and education?
f. Have you experienced racism while participating in your college lacrosse program? From the campus environment? If so, can you say anything about your experience to the extent you wish to share?
   i. Micro/Macro-aggressions and/or stereotypes
   ii. Internal racism – From those within the program or the institution
   iii. External racism – From those outside of the program or institution

2. Intrapersonal Dimension – How Does My Social World Shape My Sense of Self as a Racialized Being? Specifically, as a Native (be tribe specific) person?
   a. Describe your experience within the lacrosse program as it pertains to the Native roots of lacrosse. Do your teammates and coaches and others understand the cultural connection between your Native identity and lacrosse?
   b. How do you manage your Native identity within your lacrosse program? How do you manage your Native identity within the classroom? Within other campus environments?
   c. How does your Native identity impact your experience with your lacrosse program or campus environment?
   d. Can you think of any particular incidents or situations where you felt empowered to be your authentic Native self while immersed in lacrosse activities or in the classroom?
   e. Can you think of any particular incidents or situations where you felt resistance from others when trying to be your authentic Native self while immersed in lacrosse activities or in the classroom?
   f. Imagine you were back home with your Native community, are you able to be the same person with your collegiate lacrosse community? In the classroom? With your peers in other campus environments?

3. Interpersonal Dimension – What relationship do I want with others for the benefit of my social world?
   a. Describe your relationship(s) within your lacrosse program. How are your relationships with your teammates, coaches, medical staff, athletics support staff, etc.?
   b. Describe your relationship(s) within your academic program. How are your relationships with classmates, professors, academic support staff, etc.?
   c. How have these relationships changed over time?
   d. Where do you find support within your lacrosse program?
   e. Where do you find support within your academic programs?
   f. Where do you find support within your social circle(s)?
   g. How would you describe your relationship with home while you are on campus? Do you miss home? Are you able to still be involved at home while playing collegiate lacrosse?
CURRICULUM VITA

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. Candidate, Counseling and Personnel Services with concentration in College Student Personnel, University of Louisville, December 2021
Dissertation Topic: The Journey Towards Critical Self-Authorship for Native Lacrosse Athletes at NCAA Division I Institutions

M.S., Sport Administration, University of Louisville, May 2014

B.A., Human Performance and Sport, Metro State University-Denver, May 2011

A.A., General Studies, North Seattle Community College, December 2007

HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Western Washington University

Director, Office of Student Resilience, Aug. 2021 – present
Counseling, Health, and Wellness (CHW); Enrollment and Student Services

Coordinator, Men’s Resiliency Program (MRP), Aug. 2018 – Aug. 2021
Counseling, Health, and Wellness (CHW); Enrollment and Student Services

Program Development

• Establish strong collaborative partnerships, both on and off campus, resulting in programming that supports the holistic development and well-being of students in conjunction with the goals of Counseling, Health, and Wellness, the Multicultural Student Services Center (my office location), Enrollment and Student Services, and Western Washington University.
  o i.e., Wellness Wednesdays; Men & Mental Health; Beat the Blues; Period Products Drive, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Indigenous Resistance for Liberation, etc.

• Develop, implement and evaluate creative and innovative social, cultural, and educational programs to support multicultural student success, including programming which centers racial and ethnic identities, experiences, and histories
• through a lens of Tribal Critical Race Theory and various student development theories.
  o i.e., Black History. Black Resilience. Not Just Social Media. Social Justice. Discussion for Gay, Bi, and Queer Men, Native American Student Union Pow Wow, etc.

• Supervise the founding of WWU’s first ever Black & Brown Male Success Collective (BBMSC), a research-based affinity group for male-identifying BIPOC students that promotes intercultural communication, dialogue, conflict resolution, inclusive celebrations, and transformational learning in support of positive academic progress.

• Engage students, student organizations, and faculty and staff in workshops and trainings addressing anti-Black racism, Indigenous liberation, implicit bias, systemic oppression, and other challenging topics in support of an inclusive and just university.

• Oversee communication and marketing of programs important to students of color and other marginalized populations to infuse culturally inclusive perspectives across campus.

**Student Development**

• Outreach to university populations, including first-year, transfer, and graduate students, student organizations and clubs, alumni, academic departments and colleges, and community organizations, to promote and support success in all elements of student life for students of many racial and ethnic identities.
  o i.e. New Student Orientation, Black Student Organizations, Athletics, Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center, The Lighthouse Mission, Psychology Dept., etc.

• Supervise 8+ THRIVE Peer Health Educators: recruit and train student leaders; lead the development of content for mental health promotion; supervise marketing strategies of Counseling Center services; and more.

• Actively communicate and collaborate with campus colleagues to provide assistance, referrals, and information to connect students to campus resources as needed.
  o i.e. Financial Aid, LGBTQ+ Western, Disability Access Center, CHW, etc.

**Administration**

• Develop and monitor budget spending for all Men’s Resiliency Programs and collaborations.

• Collaborate on external funding projects, including receiving a $5,000 grant from the Sustainability, Justice, and Equity Fund to assist in taking eight students from the BBMSC to the National Black Male Summit at Akron University.

• Serve on the core team for President Randhawa’s Structural Equity and Bias Response Team (SEBRT), to engage the campus community in support of an inclusive and just university.
• Serve on the Social Justice and Equity Committee, including as a project lead on the comprehensive Summer 2020 Underrepresented Student Needs Assessment Project.

• Assist in the development of a centralized Multicultural Center Student Staff Training Program.

• Exhibit proficiency in Microsoft Office, Student Success Collaborative, and other software.

University of Louisville

Academic Counselor, Sr., Aug. 2016 – July 2018
Education Advising and Student Services; College of Education and Human Development

• Provide academic counseling to 500+ Health & Sport Sciences (HSS) students per semester.

• Provide assistance, referrals, and resource information to enrolled and prospective students to support their holistic student development: course selection; scheduling; major declaration; etc.

• Actively communicate and collaborate with campus colleagues to connect students with a variety of campus resources (financial aid, housing, counseling, etc.).

• Develop, implement, and assess the strategic plan for the inaugural HSS Living Learning Community (15 students) for first-year student engagement: recruitment and selection of students; planning professional development opportunities; collaborate in community service learning; schedule trainings; develop creative and innovative workshops; and more.

• Maintain detailed and accurate records of academic plans and monitor institutional requirements for satisfactory academic progress and degree completion.

• Conduct assessments, including CAS self-study, to evaluate progress on key performance indicators in meeting the needs of students.

• EASS Liaison to the University of Louisville Athletics Academic Services Office.

• Exhibit a working knowledge of PeopleSoft, Student Success Collaborative, OnBase, Microsoft Office and other software.

Administrative Associate to the Executive Director, May 2015 – Aug. 2016
Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH) Learning Center; Office of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success

• Manage the Student Success Welcome Center and foster a positive learning space for students.

• Supervise front desk staff of 10+ per semester: recruit potential candidates; select qualified candidates; onboard & train selected staff; manage staff schedules; approve payroll; provide professional development opportunities; lead ongoing cultural competency trainings; and more.
• Organize, plan, and coordinate OutREACH events to promote student engagement with the Learning Resource Center, Math Learning Center, Computer Resource Center, and Peer Ambassador Program.
• Partner and collaborate with other campus programs and resources to support the infusion of culturally inclusive perspectives across campus.
• Serve as REACH procurement card holder and accurately reconcile monthly expenses.
• Display a working knowledge of PeopleSoft, TutorTrac, GradesFirst, SharePoint, Student Success Collaborative, Microsoft Office and other software.

Human Resources, Office of the President
• Supervise front desk staff of 10+ per semester: recruit potential candidates; select qualified candidates; onboard & train selected staff; manage staff schedules; approve payroll; provide professional development opportunities; lead ongoing cultural competency trainings; and more.
• Counsel and advise employees through complex situations involving their benefits, including medical, dental, vision, disability, FSA, HSA, FMLA, and life insurance.
• Serve as the primary resource in initial problem resolution which requires in depth knowledge of HR policies, procedures, and departmental processes and operations.
• Coordinate front desk operations by greeting and assisting visitors and answering and directing all incoming phone calls and emails to the correct associate or department.
• Oversee the PC Loan program - review applications, determine and approve eligibility, provide data to payroll and track progression of applicant profiles.
• Demonstrate a working knowledge of PeopleSoft, OnBase and Microsoft Office for data management and to examine, explain and resolve employee issues.

Doctoral Intern, Spring & Summer 2016
Academic Support Services; Department of Athletics
• Develop, coordinate, implement and assess discussion topics and activities to promote first-year, student-athlete development and transition to UofL Athletics.
• Monitor progress of student-athletes in summer coursework and first-year transition to campus.
• Monitor study hall sessions and assist athletes in successfully completing assignments and tasks.

EVENT MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE
University of Louisville

Support Staff, June 2015 – July 2018

Graduate Intern, Aug. 2012 – May 2014
Sports Information Department; Department of Athletics
- Supervise 10+ student volunteers at each athletic event: lead the organization of the media relations hospitality suite; organize staff and delegate assignments to assist with media responsibilities of players and coaches; assist with press row setup and management; and more.
- Support the Sports Information Department at UofL athletic events (official game stats, media notes, TV stats, press conferences, game stories, social media, press row, etc.).
- Support event management and gameday operations for 45+ ACC and NCAA championships.
- Display a working knowledge in Adobe InDesign, PageMaker and Photoshop.

Jam Active and Jam Brands
Assistant Event Manager (Contractor), Aug. 2012 – Aug. 2015
- Supervise 20+ volunteers and support staff at each event in the setup and take down of running events up to 3,600 participants in 20+ cities: recruit and select local organizations to partner; schedule volunteer staff; onboard and train volunteers; motivate and manage volunteers; delegate tasks to meet deadlines and event expectations; reconcile inventory; and more.
- Assist in runner registration, fee payment, course setup and closure, construction of stages and running chutes, risk management, awards ceremony, audio setup, etc.
- Demonstrate an understanding of local policy and regulations to develop action plan.

University of Denver

Ritchie Center Events and Game Operations; Department of Athletics
- Assist with operations of Magness Arena (approx. 7,200 seating capacity) for basketball, gymnastics, hockey, lacrosse, soccer and swimming.
- Supervise and schedule support staff (10+) in setup, take down, and oversight of events.
- Facilitate staffing and budget reconciliation of the parking program.
- Demonstrate an understanding of governing policies, risk management, and crowd control.

OTHER RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Association of American Indian Physicians
Certified School Health Index Trainer, June 2013 – June 2018
School Health Index Self-Assessment Project
- Responsible for over $50,000 in grant funding for various Bureau of Indian Education schools.
• Recruit, train, lead and supervise staff in predominantly Native school districts in SHI self-assessment.
• Includes extensive grant funded work with over 25+ schools in Native communities in Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

Ten-plus years of hospitality experience, including supervising staff and operations.

COLLABORATIONS AT WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
Campus Collaborations & Community Partnerships

• Athletics
• African Caribbean Club
• Black Student Union
• CASAS Survivor Advocacy
• Center for Cross Cultural Research
• Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence
• Community Engagement Fellows
• Compass 2 Campus
• Counseling Center
• Department of Psychology
• Department of Sociology
• Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services
• Ethnic Student Center
• Fly Fishing Club
• Geneva Elementary
• Happy Club
• Happy Valley Elementary
• LGBTQ+ Western
• Lighthouse Mission
• Native American Student Union
• New Student Services Advising & Orientation
• Northwest Indian College
• Off Campus Living
• Outdoor Center
• Social Justice & Equity Committee
• Student Outreach Services
• University Residences
• Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center
• Woodring College of Education

Events & Programs

• A Night at The Eureka (Escape) Room
• Alaska Federation of Natives Annual Convention 2019
• Beat the Blues
• Black & Brown Male Success Collective
• Black & Brown Male Summit at Highline College
• Black Male Summit at The University of Akron (COVID-19 Cancellation)
• Boys Who Like Girls – CASCADIA International Women’s Film Festival
• Casting for Care: Fly Fishing Retreat
• Discussion for Gay, Bi, and Queer Men
• Domestic Violence Awareness Month
• Finals Week Goodie Bags
• Gender & Sexism in the Workplace
• Happy Hour: Positive Psychology Series
• Indigenous Resistance for Liberation with Simon Sedillo
• Introduction to Kayaking
• Men & Mental Health Wellness Series
• Men's Outdoor Wellness Retreat at Viqueen Lodge (COVID-19 Cancellation)
• NASU Pow Wow 2019
• Period Products Donation Drive
• Seattle Mariners: Trip to Safeco Field
• Sexual Assault Awareness Month (COVID-19 Cancellation)
• Social Distance Warriors Podcast
• The Morning Scoop: Race, Gender, Class, and more in Sports
• THRIVE Peer Health Educators: Mental Health Promotion & Counseling Center Outreach
• Wellness Wednesdays
Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Workshops

- Implicit Bias: Examining Power, Privilege, and Oppression
  - Multicultural Center Student Staff Training (F20)
  - Residence Life Student Staff Training (F19)
- Not Just Social Media. Social Justice. (S20)
- An Introduction to Racialization in the United States (F19)
  - BLOOM: 28th Annual Ethnic Student Center Conference
- Black History. Black Resilience. (W19)
- Engaging Men in Conversations Addressing Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct (W19)
  - National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH) Leadership Conference

Classroom Discussions

- Critical Race Theory in Education
  - School Counseling Techniques; Dr. Shaun Sowell (F20)
- Gender Identity Panel
  - Frames of Mind FIG; Prof. Justina Brown (F18, F19, F20)
- Introduction to Indigenous Research Methods
  - Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology; Dr. Kevin Delucio (F20)
- Natives in Education
  - Multicultural Education for Teachers; Dr. Jessica Ferreras-Stone (U19, F19)
- The Mask You Live In & The Socialization of Masculinity
  - Counseling Center Pre-Doctoral Interns (W19, S20)
  - Ethnic Student Center (S19)
  - Gender & Work; Dr. Jenny Nguyen (S19)
  - Global Studies; Prof. Leah Lippman (F18, W19, S19, F19, W20)
  - Psychology of Gender; Dr. Christina Byrne (W19)
  - Psychology of Gender; Dr. Kevin Delucio (W20)
  - Psychology of Gender; Dr. Lena Ericksen (F18, W19, S19, F19, W20)
  - Residence Life (Nash Hall W19, Fairhaven W19)

Research Collaborations

- Center for Cross Cultural Research, Department of Psychology
- WWU BIPOC Student Experiences with COVID-19 and Civil Unrest: A Talking Circle Project
  - Project Lead: Social Justice & Equity Committee (U20)
  - Project Lead: Dr. Anna Ciao, Department of Psychology (Ongoing)

Grants & Awards
• $5,000 – Sustainability, Justice, and Equity Fund (S20)
• Professional Staff Award for Excellence, 2021 Award Recipient; 2019 Nominee

Committee and Organization Participation
• Faculty & Staff of Color Council
• Social Justice and Equity Committee
• Structural Equity and Bias Response Team
• Tribal Advisory Committee

OTHER TEACHING, RESEARCH & PRESENTATION EXPERIENCE

Courses Taught
Health and Sport Sciences Orientation; Fall 17
College of Education and Human Development; University of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

Freshmen First Year Experience; Fall 17
Humanities Department; Jefferson Community and Technical College (Louisville, KY)

Student Success Seminars; Fall 15, Spring 16
Resources for Academic Achievement (REACH); University of Louisville (Louisville, KY)

Guest Lectures & Workshops
Resisting Systems of Oppression and Engaging in Social Justice on Campus
ECPY 663 – Multicultural Issues; Summer 16
University of Louisville, Education and Counseling Psychology

Native American Mascot Use in Sport
SPAD 284 – Issues & Ethics in Sport; Fall 16, Spring 17, Fall 17, Spring 2018

Native American Issues in Sport & Society
SPAD 561 – Senior Seminar in Sport Administration; Spring 17

Lacrosse as a Function of Native Colonization
SPAD 391 – Sociology of Sport; Spring 17
University of Louisville, Sport Administration

Critical Conversations Across Stakeholders: Acting on the Processes and Findings from a Study of Candidates of Color
University of Louisville, Departments of Teaching and Learning (2017, October).
Thomas, S., Smith, T., Nightengale-Lee, B., & Joseph, B.
Research Projects

Non-Native Student Perceptions of Native American Mascot Use in Sports
Project Lead: Dr. Megan Shreffler, Assistant Professor; Sport Administration Department; University of Louisville

Exploring the Experiences of Teacher Candidates of Color in the Middle & Secondary Education Programs at the University of Louisville
Project Lead: Dr. Shelley Thomas, Assistant Department Chair and Associate Professor; Department of Middle and Secondary Education; University of Louisville

The Learning Methods and Experiences of Students of Color in Higher Education
Project Lead: Dr. Susan Longerbeam, Associate Professor; Department of Counseling and Human Development; University of Louisville

Academic Advising Theories and Approaches to Student Engagement Campus Racial Climate and Critical Race Theory in Student Affairs
Project Lead: Dr. Tia Dumas, Clinical Assistant Professor; Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education, University of Louisville (Dr. Dumas is now the Assistant Dean for Professional Development and Inclusive Excellence in The Graduate School at Clemson University)

Conference Presentations


Joseph, B. (2016, October). Reclaiming Our Culture: An Examination of Lacrosse as a Tool for Enculturation and Avenue for Sustained Academic Success in Native American Communities. Presented at the National Indian Education Association Convention, Reno, NV.

Committee Participation
University of Louisville
- Diversity Committee, College of Education and Human Development
- Student Conduct Hearing Board
- Residency Review Board
- Native American Student Organization, Founding member

Professional Organizations & Workshops
- American College Personnel Association (ACPA)
- National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)
- National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
- PLAN Diversity Workshop Series, University of Louisville
- PLAN Grant Writing Academy, University of Louisville
- Title IX Training, Office of Civil Rights at the University of Louisville
- World Suicide Prevention Day, University of Washington
- Youth Mental Health First Aid, Certified Trainer