



EdD in Educational Leadership

USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY TO UNDERSTAND THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF
INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

A Dissertation Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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By

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ABSTRACT

The University of Saskatchewan (USask) set enrolment goals for Indigenous students to make up 15% of the undergraduate and 10% of the graduate population by 2025. To continue USask's decolonization and Indigenization efforts, the organization needs to know how to better support these students if the Indigenous student population is going to grow.

In this dissertation I explored the unique challenges and barriers that Indigenous students may face at USask that hinder their ability to complete their studies. I described a sample of staff and Indigenous students' experiences and lessons learned that outline what practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what interventions are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students. I designed this case study guided by appreciative inquiry to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at USask. Instead of focusing on what is not working, I learned from four Indigenous students who are successfully completing their studies at USask and five staff members in supporting roles.

In this study, the literature review themes included racism and resistance, decolonization and Indigenization, defining success, and my own journey acknowledging and understanding my White privilege and what role someone like me can play in Indigenous student success. The theme of defining success was present in both the literature review and participant interviews. This theme showed the need to adopt a holistic view of success for Indigenous students, understanding that success should be measured beyond colonial definitions and in ways that honor Indigenous perspectives and values. The themes from interviews also included the noticeable lack of Indigenous faculty and staff at USask and the need for safe spaces and a sense of community for Indigenous students. Lastly, the participants outlined the barriers and

challenges they have faced and how they overcame them, noting that they felt that these were not well known or acknowledged by the institution.

As USask aims to increase its Indigenous student population, barriers that prohibit many from successfully completing their studies need to be removed. The support systems available need to be accessible, equitable, and relevant to Indigenous students. While excellent support systems currently exist at USask, colonial policies and regulations continue to create obstacles that undermine the effectiveness of these supports.

Keywords: Indigenous student success, Indigenous student supports, University of Saskatchewan, appreciative inquiry

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I want to pay tribute to Lennard Fox, a cherished member of the USask community who passed away in 2022. Lennard, a dedicated student accounts specialist who assisted countless students, was fondly mentioned many times throughout my interviews. Having worked with him myself, I feel it's proper to acknowledge the incredible contributions he made during his time at USask. Lennard is greatly missed on campus, and I hope this serves as one more way to honour his legacy.

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DEDICATION

For my Mom and Dad: Thank you for this and for everything you have done to encourage and empower me to become who I am today.

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And of course, for my husband, who never once doubted my ability to complete this, and to my girls for all their 'help' with my schoolwork. Thank you for putting up with my nose in a book during cheer practices and hockey games. I hope I showed you that hard work pays off and that girls can do anything. And yes, mom is *finally* a Doctor.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page introduced
AES	Access and Equity Services	18, 87, 113
Ed.D.	Doctor of Education	9, 99
EDI	equity, diversity, and inclusion	13, 112
GORBSC	Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre	69, 108
Itep	Indian Teacher Education Program	72, 106
ISAP	Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways	72, 106
RTD	Required to Discontinue	88, 113
SUNTEP	Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program	72, 106
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada	33
USask	University of Saskatchewan	9, 50, 61, 98
USSU	University of Saskatchewan Students' Union	67

Manuscript 1: Reflections on Leadership Growth/Competencies with Respect to Problems of Practice

1.0 Introduction

If you are reading this, it is likely that you fall into one of three groups: The first are my committee in the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership program at the University of Saskatchewan (USask). The second group are family members trying to make sense of what I have been spending many late nights typing away at. Or you are in the third group, those who are passionate about Indigenous student success within postsecondary institutions. Whichever group you find yourself in, I invite you along for my journey of researching Indigenous student success at USask through better understanding their experiences and struggles and my personal growth as a descendant of White settlers within this colonial establishment.

An important value and protocol shared by many Indigenous cultures is acknowledging that people exist in relation to everything in this world (Cote-Meek, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to introduce and identify myself so that people know and understand where I come from. As a descendant of White settlers, I am now recognizing the role my ancestors played in colonization and how this has benefitted myself, my family, and community, while harming others (Gray, 2022).

At USask, the Ed.D. program is structured around four pillars: ethical leadership, social justice and equity, Indigenous ways of knowing and contexts, and comparative and international contexts and challenges (USask, n.d.-b). When beginning this program, I purposely avoided Indigenous ways of knowing and contexts because I felt that there was no place in that realm for me. As a White, middle class, cisgender female born and raised in Saskatchewan, I did not realize how little I knew about the struggles and challenges Indigenous people face. However, throughout my time as an Ed.D. student, I was stunned by how both personally and professionally, the program truly opened my eyes to colonialism and its long-lasting effects. For me, the more I learned of not only the struggles of Indigenous people but also their resilience, the more aware of my White privilege I became.

I previously worked for over a decade in graduate programs at USask, overseeing recruitment, admissions, and day-to-day operations of three programs. As such, I was well versed in the various struggles students on our campus face. Currently, as director of student recruitment at USask, meeting enrolment goals is a crucial part of my job, and the goals guide my work strategies. As explained throughout this study, USask has set goals to increase the Indigenous student population. Through my experience, I know that Indigenous student retention rates are not as high as those of non-Indigenous students, and I wanted to know what USask can do to better support these students.

The intent of this research was to identify successful practices that could enhance future successes. I conducted interviews with current staff and Indigenous students at USask, but instead of asking what is not working, I heard their stories of what has worked in the past to support Indigenous student success. Instead of trying to analyze the cause of problems and shed more negative light, the study focused on real experiences and history about what is working well and how to repeat past success (Hammond, 1998; Smith, 2023).

This research by no means intended to downplay the negative effects of colonization on Indigenous people, or the struggles they have faced over multiple generations. I identified what is working to draw attention to what is not, recognizing gaps in USask's current services and resources. The intent of this research was to make USask a better place for current and future Indigenous students. However, it should be noted that there are many Indigenous students at USask who have been successful in their studies without accessing any of the supports available.

Lastly, in this study I sought to emphasize that despite the violence Indigenous people around the world have suffered from colonization and genocide at the hands of European settlers and ensuing governments, they remain resilient (Babcock & Budowle, 2022). As a descendant of White settlers, I am privileged in many ways, including being able to be an Ed.D. candidate. I present the following as an effort in reciprocity – I owe this to the Indigenous students that attend USask now and in the future.

1.1 Background

My chosen problem of practice stemmed from my work and firsthand experiences at USask. I strongly support truth and reconciliation efforts focused on ensuring Indigenous

students have access to postsecondary education, but I do not believe the focus should be solely on getting students enrolled. I believe we should examine how institutions can help these students successfully complete their programs of study.

I wanted to learn about Indigenous students' experiences at USask to better understand the barriers they faced, and how, if possible, they overcame them. To do this I interviewed current Indigenous students at USask. I also interviewed staff at USask who are in roles that support Indigenous students to learn from their challenges and successes.

Historically, research and university administrators have focused on quantitative data, such as the number of students enrolled and the number that are graduating. Although these data show retention rates, they do nothing to tell the story of what is happening between enrolment and graduation. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) discussed decolonization and Indigenization strategies aimed at increasing the Indigenous student population. They highlighted how, in this context, Indigenization is perceived solely as a matter of inclusion and access, without prioritizing changes to the policies and structures that have historically made universities unwelcoming to Indigenous people. My intent for this research was to focus on the policies and structures at USask that create barriers for Indigenous students.

I wanted this research to enable participants and the institution to bring improvements for future Indigenous students. The research was guided by appreciative inquiry where I investigated what has worked in the past for Indigenous students and looked for more ways of doing that (Hammond, 1998). I believe enrolment goals are more well intended if USask creates an environment that supports students to get the most out of their university experience and thrive during their time here.

1.1.1 Key Concepts Related to Problem of Practice

A problem of practice is defined as a “persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, n.d., para. 1). Problem of practice statements focus on an issue that needs solving in the present, not a future goal (Singer, 2014), where the researcher sees it as practical and doable, rather than a “what-if” pursuit.

Focusing on Indigenous student success at USask as my problem of practice was an opportunity to focus on an identified localized problem rather than focusing on gaps in the research literature (Storey et al., 2015). Although literature review is a vital step in the research process, it may serve only to consider issues within a broader context (Archbald, 2014). My research provided a local context specific to USask.

As Bryk et al. (2016) noted, sources of evidence beyond literature are infrequently used to frame problems of practice, and systematic methodologies are used even more infrequently, which potentially limits the credibility of problems of practice. Problems of practice need to be fully understood to mitigate the chance of ineffectiveness simply because they were developed to solve a problem that does not exist as it was originally conceived.

Singer (2014) stated that if a problem of practice is too broad or narrow, it will be impossible to define the scope of research. Targeted questions must be broad enough to address the importance and relevance of problems of practice but focused enough for implementation. If a problem of practice is too general, there will be too many possibilities. The researcher needs to focus on what success of problems of practice will look like and use that vision to find specificity within their project.

As researchers consider qualitative and quantitative data, they need holistic understanding that can drive improvement that can also inform stakeholders' local decisions. The research environment needs to not only appreciate qualitative data, but also understand it to cultivate strategies that can be adapted and influence change (Leithwood et al., 2006; Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

1.1.1.1 Allied Concepts or Examples of Akin Problems of Practice

A similar problem of practice that could be examined is a support system analysis for international students. USask has similar enrolment growth goals for international students as it does for Indigenous students. A recent Canadian study by Baghoori et al. (2022) on international student mental health in Canada used Keyes' dual continuum model to examine over 330 international students, exploring coping mechanisms and perceived social support, and their impact on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most students reported optimal mental health, but almost half experienced moderate to severe psychological distress. The findings

suggested the need for comprehensive support services and focused strategies to address international students' concerns, improve satisfaction, and attract future students. The results were valuable for universities, health professionals, policymakers, and campus services to enhance positive mental health among international students (Baghoori et al., 2022).

More broadly, any equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts and practices by postsecondary institutions could also be considered. This includes any initiatives that involve recognition of past injustices and exclusions and the strategies to achieve a more representative student demographic. An example is Tamtik and Guenter's (2019) study of Canadian research-intensive universities who have demonstrated a shift in EDI issues, as indicated by a policy analysis of 50 documents from 15 universities. The findings revealed that EDI activities have become a policy priority, integrated into institutional action plans and performance reports. This shift was reflected in increased strategic efforts such as the establishment of equity offices, creation of senior administration positions, mandatory training, and initiatives related to student and faculty recruitment, including diversity admission policies, scholarships, access programs, and curriculum changes.

As many postsecondary institutions have committed resources to Indigenization, any studies arising from these efforts would also be of note. One important study by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), outlined the need for a comprehensive and nuanced approach to Indigenization in postsecondary institutions, emphasizing not only the acknowledgment of Indigenous perspectives but also the need to challenge and transform colonial structures. This information could be crucial for educators, policymakers, and advocates working towards a more inclusive and equitable educational system in Canada.

1.1.1.2 Theory Pertaining to Problem of Practice

This study involved a case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry. Below is a brief outline of case study methodology and appreciative inquiry in relation to this study.

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

Case studies are relevant when the research questions require an extensive in-depth description of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2018). I decided to do case study research because my research questions sought to explain how or why a social phenomenon worked. Case study

methodology is the most common method used for researchers interested in qualitative research, as it enables researchers to conduct in-depth exploration within a specific context (Baškarada, 2014; Rashid et al., 2019).

A case study is a methodological approach that delves deeply into the examination of a current phenomenon, commonly referred to as the "case," within its actual setting. Using a case study implies a desire to comprehend a real-world scenario, with the assumption that a comprehensive understanding is likely to encompass crucial contextual factors relevant to the case (Yin, 2018). For this research, the case is Indigenous student success.

Case study research also relies on a variety of sources of evidence and the need to compare them (Yin, 2018). By interviewing both staff and Indigenous students at USask, in this dissertation, I compare the perspectives of these two groups, aiming to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced and the support mechanisms in place. Interviews are commonly found in case studies, because they can be especially helpful in explaining the hows and whys of key events, as well as insights that reflect participants' relativist perspectives (Yin, 2018). This is similar to using an Indigenous lens, where research processes are informed by or focused on the how and why of the process and are concerned with how the processes are carried out and the intentions behind them (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). The key findings in this study outline the issues, what is working, and what USask needs more of.

Case study research is useful in program evaluation because it explains real-world interventions and their effects better than surveys or experiments can. Additionally, it is valuable for narrating an intervention alongside its real-world setting, offering descriptive insights into specific aspects within an evaluation. This study is an exploratory case study, because it is typically used for situations where the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2018). In this case, there was no single, simple answer to Indigenous student success. In addition, this was a single case study, studying the phenomenon specific to one environment, USask. As outlined by Tight (2017), a case study offers valuable insights without predicting large-scale outcomes. To view case studies as meaningful small-scale research, one must identify what makes them significant.

Appreciative Inquiry

Hammond's (1998) and Smith's (2023) research into appreciative inquiry identified that the natural tendency of the human brain is to give greater attention to negative aspects than positive ones. By focusing on past achievements and leveraging them for motivation, however, individuals can generate positive emotions as they contemplate their future goals. Appreciative inquiry serves as a transformative approach that seeks to uncover strengths within individuals, teams, and entire organizations. Instead of delving into the analysis of problems and assigning blame, this method centres on recognizing and strengthening what is working effectively.

For this study, I did not want to take on a rose-coloured-glasses approach and pretend that Indigenous students were not facing challenges at USask. However, after researching the barriers and traumas faced by this population, and by speaking to Indigenous students in my Ed.D. cohort, I began to think, what about the Indigenous students who *are* still enrolled? Has anyone asked them what is working?

As Smith (2023) suggested, appreciative inquiry can show what is wanted and engages the people directly involved in the process. Although the topic of this study is nothing new, taking an appreciative inquiry approach to my interviews provided unique data because it focused on positive outcomes, showed what is desired, and engaged current students and staff.

1.1.1.3 Contexts Pertaining to Particular Problem of Practice

There is a lack of research showing examples of whole-of-university approaches and strategies being applied directly to Indigenous student retention (Uink et al., 2021). My intent in this study was to examine Indigenous supports across USask that could then be used to assess potential gaps and needs, to contribute to Indigenous student success. The data collected provided insight into what was working and what was not with the supports USask was offering.

1.1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

By 2025 it is expected that Indigenous students will make up 15% of the undergraduate and 10% of the graduate population at USask (USask, 2018). However, more needs to be done to ensure these students do not just enroll, but that they successfully graduate from this institution.

To continue USask's decolonization and Indigenization efforts, the organization needs to know how to better support these students if the Indigenous student population is going to grow.

I focused this dissertation on what is working at USask to support Indigenous students. I learned from the Indigenous students who were successfully completing their studies, and those in supporting roles who were able to assist them. I used a case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry to learn about those who have overcome barriers and challenges and are still enrolled.

The major research question was: **What practices currently contribute to Indigenous student participants' success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcome for Indigenous students?**

By using an appreciative inquiry method, the questions were structured to answer:

- What has worked to keep Indigenous students enrolled at USask?
- What barriers have Indigenous students overcome, and how?
- What USask supports do Indigenous students currently access? What do they need?

Asking appreciative questions will confirm knowledge, confidence, and inspiration that USask has done well in the past and can continue to do well with heightened awareness of what works. Even if overall the average performance has been poor, some things are working well, at least some of the time and will remind USask that these moments of success exist (Hammond, 1998 & Smith, 2023). The end goal was to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at USask to enhance their educational experiences and foster success.

1.1.3 Relevance or Significance to Educational Leadership

I am confident that this research will provide results that benefit Indigenous students and USask. Analysis of the data provided more insight into what is available at USask in terms of Indigenous student supports and what barriers exist for Indigenous students studying here and identified gaps between the two.

Given USask's commitment to being a leader in Indigenization, my research will be of service to institutional leaders within USask and elsewhere. This research is a contribution to

those institutional leaders tasked with responding to EDI issues and looking to build leadership competencies in this area.

1.2 Stipulative Definitions

This study uses the term Indigenous, which includes Indians (First Nations), Inuit and Métis people, following the definition used by the Constitution of Canada (1982) and aligning with USask's policies and structures (Ottman, 2020). The term "Indigenous" is broadly understood to encompass a diverse range of First Peoples occupying a specific land or place. In the Canadian context, it is synonymous with the legalistic concept of "Aboriginal," representing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). I took the advice in an article by Joseph (2016) of asking what Indigenous people would like to be called, instead of assuming, so after discussion and reflection with Indigenous people in my Ed.D. cohort and conversations with Indigenous people on campus, the terminology from literature that referred to Indigenous people as Native, Indian, or Aboriginal was changed in this study to Indigenous.

In addition, this study uses Said's (1994) definition of colonialism and imperialism, where imperialism is the "practice, theory, and the attitudes of dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism,' which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said, 1994, p. 9). Decolonization can be understood as a related process involving the breakdown of colonial ideologies and their physical outcomes, coupled with the restructuring of colonial ways of being through the advancement of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Fellner, 2018). Again, after further discussion with Indigenous staff in the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement at USask, I wanted to include Indigenization along with any mention of decolonization. Decolonization involves removing obstacles, intentional or not, that hinder Indigenous people and their ideas from thriving independently in Canadian society. Indigenization is about incorporating Indigenous people and their ideas into institutions and society in ways that support their goals for self-determination, well-being, growth, and prosperity (USask, n.d.-d).

This study also uses terminology such as retention and recruitment that may be unfamiliar to those who are not involved in postsecondary education. For this study, recruitment means the active effort of spending time and resources to actively encourage students to attend

USask. Retention refers to students who progress from one academic year to the next in their studies.

This study references postsecondary services offered at USask, including on or off campus student housing (residence), childcare, financial services (scholarships, loans, bursaries), and wellness supports (physical, mental, and sexual health). A unit at USask that came up throughout the interviews was Access and Equity Services (AES), who in collaboration with faculty, is tasked with offering reasonable accommodations to students who encounter educational barriers due to factors such as disability, religion, family status, and gender identity (USask, n.d-a). The Student Wellness Centre was also mentioned, which provides physical and mental health care to USask students (USask, n.d.-e).

1.3 Limitations and Delimitations

When preparing for the research process, I understood that the ability to collect data from Indigenous students may be difficult because of access and privacy issues, and the fact that they may not be interested in participating. There is a lot of pressure already on Indigenous students, and my research was not looking to add to this.

I also expected that this study's findings would be influenced by the fact that participants are volunteering to be in the study and that I am also a current employee at USask. Another limitation was the timing of the study, in that I was looking to interview staff and students during April and May. This is a busy time on campus as students are either studying or writing exams. Staff are either supporting exam writing, catching up on holidays, or focusing on getting ready for the next term.

In addition, those that chose to participate may have had different views or ideas than those who chose not to take part and may not represent the views of an entire unit. The four students in this study did not speak for all Indigenous students and their experiences at USask. As for staff, it also did not mean that all staff in similar positions or units all had the same experiences and resources available to assist Indigenous students. Likely, those who participated were interested in and comfortable with sharing their experiences in supporting Indigenous students at USask. It is possible that those who had negative experiences or did not consider their experience noteworthy chose not to participate (Webb & Welsh, 2019).

Despite being widely used, coding has been criticized because some argue that it breaks data into separate pieces, losing the overall view important for qualitative analysis. Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) validated this criticism by stating that because coding does split data, it might make one focus only on the relationships between the codes and miss a complete understanding of the examples and situations being studied or ignore the context and other factors. In this study, I took steps to avoid this pitfall by using detailed notes alongside the coding to capture the richness of each data segment. I included notes on context, connections to other data, and my own initial interpretations.

1.4 Assumptions

One must consider the assumptions that are underpinning the research design and examine if USask is in fact doing enough to support Indigenous students and that the barriers to success are well known. Therefore, the two most important assumptions are that USask is in fact concerned with retention rates and that the university community wants to better support Indigenous students to improve them. Secondly, we must assume that Indigenous students want to successfully complete their studies at USask. My beliefs and stance as a researcher are that USask wants to do better and with the right action plan, it can.

As for the case study, it was assumed the research participants felt comfortable and were forthright during the data collection process. In fact, it was also important not to assume that just because a student was still enrolled at USask that they were having all positive experiences. In addition, I assumed that participants would feel safe and secure in sharing their experiences with me, and that they are best positioned to provide the necessary data to explore Indigenous student success at USask.

1.5 Philosophical and Theoretical Frameworks

As outlined above in case study methodology, to collect data, researchers need to talk with participants and be involved in their environment. This method is influenced by the ideas of constructivism and interpretivism, outlined below.

Constructivism

Constructivism involves in-depth qualitative assessment of words, actions, and behaviours. Archbald (2014) proposed that while literature can help clarify the ideal state, the most convincing problem definitions also include practitioner and stakeholder input through multiple modes of evidence, including secondary, primary, and/or anecdotal data. As a paradigm, constructivism may be similar to learning styles and processes of some Indigenous students, as opposed to the dominant strategies of existing colonial institutions (Little Bear, 2009).

A qualitative case study assumes a relativist and constructivist ontology, which excludes the possibility of a “true” construction. There is no objective world or truth, and everything is created by social beings and is relative. What is interpreted and the system of interpretation influences how we interpret the world. Therefore, the world and the truth that we perceive are constructed by our thinking and are products of our own mind (Rashid et al., 2019). Adopting a relativist standpoint requires engaging a constructivist methodology when formulating and executing a case study. This involves seeking to comprehend the viewpoints of diverse participants and emphasizing how their distinct interpretations shed light on research topics (Yin, 2018).

Interpretivism

Instead of seeing the world in an objective light, interpretivists construct the world by perceiving their own reality, and constructing meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). Interpretivists seek to have a deep understanding of the social phenomenon they are studying and recognize the participants subjectivity is part of the process (Rashid et al., 2019).

An interpretative standpoint perceives reality as diverse and subjective, shaped by meanings and comprehension. The knowledge derived from the research process is context-dependent, relative to both the study's time and setting, and the researcher actively engages and participates in the study (Harrison et al., 2017). The researcher strives to portray their interpreted understanding of the case, and studying the cases in their situational context allows for an exploration of the interconnected system in which the case develops.

Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2008) described grounded theory methods as flexible rules that help researchers gather data and develop theories step by step, starting from specific observations and building up to broader ideas. A grounded theory approach allows researchers to stay connected to their study subjects and create a set of linked ideas from their data that not only explain and interpret it but also reveal how things are connected and change over time.

Grounded theory guided me to approach the research with an open mind, and allowed the data to lead me to insights, rather than fitting the findings into preconceived ideas. By doing this, I was able to let the voices of participants in this study shape the development of theories. Grounded theory also helped to focus on the nuances of social justice, ensuring that the findings were not only descriptive, but also meaningful and actionable, showing where change can make a real difference at USask for current and future students.

A focus on social justice through grounded theory contributes to research that is broader and sharper as grounded theorists can explain when and how justice or injustice occurs, changes, or remains the same (Charmaz, 2008). This approach allowed me to learn about the real-life experiences of Indigenous students, focusing on how specific conditions, such as support systems or barriers, affected their success. By staying close to the students' perspectives and highlighting how different factors influence their experiences, I was able to uncover meaningful patterns and insights that help explain what contributes to their success or challenges. This method also ensured that the findings were rooted in the students' realities and could address issues of fairness, respect, and justice.

1.6 Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 is a review of literature brought together into four themes. The first three themes include racism and resistance, decolonization and Indigenization in postsecondary institutions, and defining success. The last theme is a personal journey of realization of my own White privilege, and the fears that come along with this. I also outline what it means to be an Indigenous ally.

Chapter 3 lays the groundwork for the methodology and methods of the study and further explains the interviews and process of data collection. Chapter 4 presents the key findings from the interviews and compares to ideas found within the literature review. Last, Chapter 5 summarizes the dissertation, focusing on the new findings I feel I have added to studies of Indigenous student success at postsecondary institutions.

1.7 Manuscript 1 Summary

This study explored the experiences of four Indigenous students at USask and five staff members who support students. I delved into the challenges faced by Indigenous students and uncovered factors contributing to their success at USask. Although numerous support systems for Indigenous students exist at USask, further research is needed to assess their effectiveness and impact. The study aimed to understand what has successfully supported Indigenous student success in the past rather than focusing on what was not working.

Manuscript 2: Review of the Literature and Background to Problem of Practice

2.1 Abstract

The University of Saskatchewan's (USask's) Indigenous strategy has a call to action to implement more efforts and resources to recruit and retain Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and leaders. Most postsecondary institutions already have resources and supports targeted to assisting Indigenous students, but how does one know if these are the right supports?

In this literature review, I analyzed external sources such as books and articles on Indigenous retention and success in postsecondary institutions, barriers faced by Indigenous people and students, decolonization and Indigenization in postsecondary institutions, White privilege, and what non-Indigenous people need to do alongside Indigenous people within colonial institutions. Additional documents include websites and materials from USask and other postsecondary institutions. From these sources, I categorized the information into four themes. The first three themes are racism and resistance, decolonization and Indigenization in postsecondary institutions, and understanding success. The final theme is a personal journey of recognizing my own White privilege and the associated fears.

2.2 Background to Problem of Practice and Brief Foreshadowing of Themes

This paper presents a comprehensive literature review divided into four themes. The first theme examines denials of racism within postsecondary institutions, harmful stereotypes, and systemic barriers experienced by Indigenous students in postsecondary education. Despite efforts towards decolonization and Indigenization, racism manifests in various forms, preserved by social, cultural, and political structures (Cote-Meek, 2014). Denial, negative stereotypes, and systemic barriers continue in postsecondary environments, hindering Indigenous student success (Cote-Meek, 2014; Greenhill & Marshall, 2016; Saul & Burkholder, 2020). However, resistance strategies emerge in Indigenous students, including not self-identifying as Indigenous, accessing available supports, and advocating for cultural revitalization (Cote-Meek, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016; Restoule et al., 2013). While challenges continue to exist, Indigenous students demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in navigating postsecondary institutions (Cote-Meek, 2014).

The second theme outlines decolonization and Indigenization, showing why it is important to acknowledge and challenge the colonial impact that still exists today.

Decolonization and Indigenization involve recognizing that colonization is not merely a historical event but a continuing process that impacts Indigenous people today by exerting control over their lands, lives, resources, and self-determination (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012). Postsecondary institutions need to work towards undoing these harmful colonial influences, through efforts that focus on and are led by Indigenous people (Gray, 2022).

The third theme centres on Indigenous students in higher education, advocating for a change in thinking on the definition of success, extending beyond mere assimilation. For Indigenous students, a more holistic understanding and appreciation for how they define success is needed.

The final theme is a personal journey that explores the complexities of acknowledging White privilege, exploring fears, and what it takes to be an authentic Indigenous ally. This theme emphasizes the essential role of recognizing systemic racism and the responsibilities of non-Indigenous people.

2.3 Theme 1 Literature Review

2.3.1 Exposition of This Theme from the Literature

Racism is an oppressive system rooted in physical and cultural differences, deeply embedded in dominant cultural narratives and social institutions (Hasford, 2016). Resistance is a broad range of adaptive responses to injustice, which includes coping, or efforts to mitigate stressors, and resilience, or processes that result in positive outcomes despite facing social adversity (Case & Hunter, 2012). For this study, resistance is seen as the active response, acknowledgement, and challenge of racism – aimed at achieving equity and justice.

Racism

Despite postsecondary institutions making strides in decolonization and Indigenization, the work of Cote-Meek (2014) demonstrated that substantial work is needed to confront the daily racism that Indigenous students endure on campuses and in classrooms. Racism takes on various forms and persists as it is continually reshaped and reinforced by social, cultural, and political structures.

Kumashiro (2000) described that the prevailing method in education often concentrates on enhancing the experiences of students subjected to “othering.” In this approach, schools are environments where individuals considered as others, such as Indigenous students, are continuously subjected to harmful treatment through various forms of discriminatory practices. Cote-Meek (2014) described several unacknowledged racial challenges faced by Indigenous students in postsecondary education, including instances of denial, being pressured to embody the role of the Indigenous expert or stereotypical Indigenous person, and perceptions of insufficient intelligence and victim identity.

Denial in Postsecondary Institutions

Universities claim to be attempting to eliminate, or at least minimize, racism on their campuses, but this is an especially challenging task when many members of the campus community do not feel or see racism happening (Cote-Meek, 2014). Racism and the denial of racism both exist today, and not addressing them directly allows practices that demean, exclude, other, and oppress to continue (Greenhill & Marshall, 2016). As outlined by Saul and Burkholder (2020), members of the campus community must continuously ask themselves if they are actively engaging in opportunities to promote anti-racism and anti-discrimination. These practices include joining programming, hiring, admissions, and scholarship committees to support candidates, advancing comprehensive anti-racist efforts, making inclusive pedagogical and curricular decisions, and advocating for all students.

Called to Be the Indigenous Expert or Stereotype

Unlike Indigenous students, students from various backgrounds coming to the classroom with their own knowledge and background have no expectation that they must speak on their specific areas of experience. Universities must take responsibility for the attitudes and actions of their staff, emphasizing that it is unacceptable for educators to single out Indigenous students to play this role (Rochecouste et al., 2016). As presented by Cote-Meek (2014), when Indigenous students are recognized because they may have some unique knowledge and experiences, they find themselves in a role of having to respond to everything related to Indigenous people. Indigenous students also find their credibility as authentic Indigenous individuals is only believed if they meet the racialized expectations of non-Indigenous people as being cultural and spiritual beings. In an Australian study, Tuck et al. (2010) highlighted that in predominantly

White university classrooms, the dominance of privilege, power, and control was often evident in the desire to consume "the other." This behaviour mirrors a historical pattern of exploiting Indigenous knowledge and people.

Perceived Lack of Intelligence

There is an unfair perception that Indigenous students may be lacking the intellectual capabilities for higher education, rooted in a broader context of viewing Indigenous people as inferior, which casts them as at-risk individuals in need of support. When Indigenous students choose to pursue higher education, there is an assumption that their admission is a result of special policies or that they must be receiving some form of undeserved advantage (Cote-Meek, 2014). The prevailing assumptions regarding unearned privileges typically revolve around housing, education, healthcare, and food acquisition. Although individuals with Indigenous status may have the eligibility to access certain rights in these areas, such entitlements are scarce, primarily due to inadequate government policies (Gray, 2022).

Episkenew (2013) suggested that universities see Indigenous students as underprepared for postsecondary education and thus create special programs for assimilation into the university environment, aiming to make Indigenous people "feel more comfortable." As outlined by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), Indigenous inclusion as a form of Indigenization on its own is not enough because it does not work to make the academy a more Indigenous space, instead it works only to increase the number of Indigenous bodies in an already established Western structure and culture.

Victim Identity

Often Indigenous students are labeled with a racial tag that designates them as "at risk" and associates them with a victim identity, reinforcing the perception of their inferiority. The work of Cote-Meek (2014) and Little Bear (2009) showed the persistence of racism being continually manifested in ways that reduce Indigenous people to places of inferiority. Historically, and still today, Indigenous people and their ways of knowing and being have been unfairly viewed as inferior, or having a problem, rather than seeing the systems and people who perpetuate the ongoing colonialism as the problem.

Canadian universities must acknowledge they are products of the languages, cultures, and traditions of European immigrants, whose policies and practices are based on the assumptions that their way is universal, comprehensive, and right (Castellano et al., 2000). As stated by Little Bear (2009), educational establishments assume that there is nothing wrong with the system, so any issues are the student's or their lack of skills, academics, preparedness, and motivation to improve their own situations. It is incorrect to attribute low levels of educational achievement to inherent issues within Indigenous peoples and cultures. Instead, it is essential to recognize the shortcomings within postsecondary institutions.

Resistance

Despite the harmful impacts of colonialism, Indigenous people draw strength from resistance strategies that have ensured their survival and provided effective means of confronting ongoing racism and colonial imposition. Cote-Meek (2014) outlined strategies such as choosing not to self-identify as Indigenous and utilizing available Indigenous supports to build community and resilience. However, these actions are not merely reactive; they are deliberate, thoughtful strategies of resistance that reflect a deep understanding of oppression. The intentional and recurrent use of these strategies highlights their significance in the ongoing struggle for equity and justice.

Not Self-Identifying as Indigenous

A strategy to counteract continuous colonialism and racism involves students rejecting their Indigenous identity and distancing themselves from labels and racialized perceptions (Cote-Meek, 2014). Indigenous students may choose not to formally declare their Indigenous identity on official documents due to concerns about privacy issues, a lack of trust in the education system, or the fear that assessments will be based on cultural heritage rather than individual merit. Some students seek anonymity, while others aim to avoid being singled out as different. Additionally, some individuals may feel discomfort in self-identifying due to experiences of racism and the overall classroom environment (Cote-Meek, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016; Restoule et. Al., 2013).

From a colonial perspective, DNA and Indigenous identity are considered possessions to be exploited. In contrast, Indigenous people see their identity as something to embrace, embody,

and live (Gray, 2022). The legacies of colonialism and current practices of disconnection and dispossession have limited Indigenous identities to state-sanctioned legal and political definitions (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005).

Catacutan and de Guzman (2015) noted that there is a responsibility laid on the student in that they are the ones who need to acknowledge their responsibility as agents, whether it be that they are Indigenous, or are needing support services. However, the university must recognize and respect every student as a human being, regardless of economic and demographic profiles.

Available Indigenous Student Support

Gallop and Bastien (2016) observed that Indigenous students expressed a desire for support in three key areas: (a) general supports available to all students, including academic advising, health and wellness, and accessibility services; (b) specialized, Indigenous-focused services such as an Indigenous support centre; and (c) support for learning, inclusive teaching, and classroom-based supports. The findings highlighted the complex nature of the support systems sought by Indigenous students, ranging from broad institutional services to those specifically tailored to their cultural and educational needs. Gallop and Bastien's study provided insight into understanding the academic experiences of Indigenous students and what helped them to remain in school and feel supported. The findings of their study suggested that although concrete motivators such as small class sizes and the availability of Indigenous resources encouraged students to initially pursue postsecondary education, it was the quality of the relationships developed during their academic programs that were most important to their eventual academic success.

Studies by Pidgeon (2008) and Schwartz and Ball (2001) featured interviews with Indigenous students and reported that financial support, childcare, access to Elders, and Indigenous student services and programs were fundamental for the students' persistence within university. Their findings showed that being away from support networks and cultural ceremonies could negatively impact the persistence of Indigenous students who had relocated.

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2020) emphasized how being away from their communities can cause Indigenous students to feel alienated and excluded. Cultural strategies can act as a means of bringing Indigenous students together with other Indigenous members of

the university community by promoting culture and potentially increasing students' self-confidence to help them feel that there is a place for them within the campus community.

Cote-Meek's (2014) interviews captured a discussion of current Indigenous students acknowledging the importance of being able to access supports. These supports were an important strategy to deal with difficult course content on colonial violence and the emotions it raised. The discussions revealed that although the available support services were beneficial, there was a notable concern regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of students who chose to access them. In Indigenous student populations, which are typically small and close-knit, the fear of potential stigma associated with accessing these services emerged as a significant challenge. There is apprehension that students may be labeled as needy, inferior, or requiring assistance, creating a reluctance to seek help.

A qualitative case study by Kristoff and Cottrell (2021) examined how social supports impacted the academic persistence of First Nations and Métis students at a First Nation-affiliated university. The findings revealed that when administrative and educational practices were in line with Indigenous ontologies, students were better equipped to respond to challenges stemming from colonization. The study also found that social supports promoted advancement for the individual and their families, identity formation and cultural growth, community development, and Indigenous independence.

Last, in deconstructing the countless ways colonialism obstructs positive endeavours and continues to cause harm to Indigenous communities, it is crucial to create a space for recognizing and respecting Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012). Advocating for culture as a response to racism may face criticism from researchers, but the students in Cote-Meek's (2014) study found significance in using culture as a source of strength. This strength, stemming from their cultural connections, proved essential for Indigenous students when dealing with the daily occurrences of racism within the institution.

Traditional knowledge and Indigenous ways of life not only offer significant insights into community well-being, but also encompass the wisdom developed by Indigenous people in the face of colonization (Fellner, 2018). As Gallop and Bastien (2016) suggested, a strong cultural identity can act as a protective factor for many Indigenous students pursuing postsecondary

education, because it allows them to survive in an education system that is not constructed with Indigenous students in mind.

Theme 1 Conclusion

In the context of this study, the findings described above underscored the persistent challenges faced by Indigenous students within postsecondary education despite efforts towards decolonization and Indigenization. The literature revealed that racism manifests through denial, stereotyping, and systemic barriers that affect Indigenous students' experiences and opportunities.

In Chapter 4, I report on the Indigenous students' experiences navigating racism and building resilience. In addition, many of the staff participants recognized these strategies of resistance and, that moving forward, it is crucial to prioritize genuine recognition and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and being at USask to foster environments where all students, including Indigenous learners, can achieve their full potential.

2.4 Theme 2 Literature Review

2.4.1 Exposition of This Theme from the Literature

Decolonization and Indigenization

The process of decolonization and Indigenization begins by critically examining and questioning why colonisation is acceptable. This step involves confronting and challenging colonial ideologies and their visible effects. The objective is to avoid the continuation of these thoughts and actions, promoting a conscious effort to dismantle and move beyond the enduring influences of colonization (Fellner, 2018; Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012). Everyone must come to understand that colonization is not an incident that occurred in the past, it is a continued exercise of power over Indigenous lands, lives, resources, and self-determination (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012).

The history of the Canadian academy has been shaped by Western epistemologies, contributing to the devaluing of Indigenous ways of knowing and allowed for the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous students, communities, cultures, and histories (Louie et al., 2017). Despite growing movements towards decolonizing and Indigenizing education, postsecondary

institutions continue to be deeply entrenched in Western Euro-settler ways of knowing, being, and doing (Fellner, 2018). Alfred and Corntassel (2005) argued that institutional efforts to make meaningful change in Indigenous peoples' lives have not led to decolonization and regeneration, rather they have further embedded Indigenous people in the colonial institutions they set out to challenge.

Including Indigenous Voices and Knowledge

True decolonization and Indigenization efforts must focus on and need to be led by Indigenous people (Gray, 2022; Ottman, 2020). It is also imperative that institutions ask Indigenous people directly what their expectations of universities are and what supports they need to be successful in postsecondary studies (Pidgeon, 2016).

Pidgeon (2016) researched success within postsecondary institutions and identified challenges to Indigenization. The study emphasized social inclusion of Indigenous people, and how non-Indigenous people must take responsibility and be part of efforts towards reconciliation. The study positioned Indigenization in higher education as a movement that can reconcile disparities in education systems and societies for Indigenous people.

Cote-Meek (2014) noted that it is crucial not to downplay the persistent colonial violence embedded in the daily experiences of Indigenous people. However, the act of openly acknowledging and describing the full extent of ongoing colonial violence is a powerful political resistance. It allows Indigenous people to actively participate in uplifting their communities through cultural reclamation and revitalization.

Much more can be done to ensure that all operations of the institution, especially those affecting Indigenous people, honour and follow Indigenous models of governance (Pidgeon, 2016). The fundamental need to uphold respectful relationships serves as a guiding principle in all interactions and experiences within the Indigenous cultural paradigm, involving community, clans, families, individuals, homelands, plants, and animals (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). It is crucial to be guided by individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds, valuing their experiences, knowledge, and perspectives (Kitching, 2011).

An exploratory case study by Uink et al. (2021) on how one Indigenous Education Unit in Australia has led and implemented a whole-of-university approach to Indigenous student success examined a suite of activities which can be measured in retention and pass rates of Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. The study showed that for policy makers to gain knowledge on what works in Indigenous higher education, they need to adopt a comprehensive approach that is informed by Indigenous people.

There is limited evidence of postsecondary institutions fully integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula and providing the proper resources to meet the needs and values of Indigenous students (Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021). Decolonizing and Indigenizing the curriculum requires a critical look at all the ways colonial controls have harmed and continue to harm Indigenous people. The impacts of this intergenerational trauma are felt by Indigenous people who must interact and exist within these controls (Fellner, 2018).

Gray (2022) stated that individuals, groups, businesses, schools, and governments cannot simply integrate Indigenous knowledge without collaborating with Indigenous experts. It is crucial to comprehend that Indigenous people own their knowledge and that one needs to work respectfully with experts to incorporate it. Challenges in integrating Indigenous knowledge arise when it is not fully understood or respected as a manifestation of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Additionally, issues emerge when Indigenous knowledge is not presented or incorporated with the necessary respect, appropriateness, and adherence to Indigenous protocols. Successful integration requires leadership by knowledgeable individuals with lived experiences and connections to the Indigenous communities from which the Indigenous knowledge originates. Problems may arise when Indigenous knowledge is appropriated as general knowledge, used without permission, knowledge, or respect. Furthermore, diminishing Indigenous knowledge through words or actions and dispersing it into other information without allowing it to stand alone as unique, important, and beneficial knowledge, can hinder the respectful incorporation of Indigenous knowledge.

A concern persists among scholars, students, and communities that Indigenization policies are implementing a one-size-fits-all model which is challenging given the unique histories of each Indigenous community (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Despite vast cultural and sociopolitical differences among Indigenous peoples globally, they share a common struggle to

survive as distinct entities, resisting cultural, political, and physical erasure by colonizing states (Alfred & Cornthassel, 2005). Little Bear (2009) expressed that similarities among Indigenous people are rooted in their relationship to a place, and in Indigenous learning, distinctions between religion, education, social, government, politics, and economics are not made; instead, a comprehensive approach is used. This approach emphasizes the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches in Indigenization efforts.

Indigenization in Postsecondary Settings

Gaudry & Lorenz (2018) outlined three concepts of Indigenization in postsecondary institutions: Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation Indigenization, and decolonial Indigenization. Indigenous inclusion consists of policies aimed at increasing the presence of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff with the university community. The objective is primarily the assimilation of Indigenous people to the existing culture of the Canadian academy. Here, Indigenization consists only as inclusion and access, not changing the policies and structures that have made universities hostile to Indigeneity to begin with (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). The inclusion of Indigenous faculty, staff, and students may be seen as the most straightforward route to Indigenization, requiring only a minimal level of commitment.

Reconciliation Indigenization is a vision that seeks to establish common ground between Indigenous and Canadian ideals, fostering a broad consensus to determine the nature of relationships between higher education and Indigenous communities. The aim is to bridge gaps and create harmony through shared principles and values between Indigenous perspectives and colonial academic norms (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

As the political landscape evolves in Canada, universities are committing to reconciliation efforts, aiming to rectify the historical role of education in colonial activities. The impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC; 2015) has prompted a transformation, which moved discussions about Indigenization beyond academic dialogue and into administrative conversations (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). This shift in education necessitates going beyond merely integrating Indigenous content on a surface level. Instead, it involves integrating persistent Indigenous principles into postsecondary institutions in a sustainable manner (Louie et al., 2017).

Decolonial Indigenization is the most radical approach to Indigenization, requiring a complete overhaul of the academy to balance power dynamics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It seeks to restructure the academy into a new identity that departs from traditional colonial structures and practices (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Decolonizing is an action that is a deliberate and ongoing process which entails critically dismantling colonial modes of understanding, existence, and action (Fellner, 2018).

Despite the extensive efforts of Indigenous peoples to bring about positive transformations in various facets of life – socially, economically, politically, and culturally – the pace of change in the education system has been slow (Cote-Meek, 2014). As Little Bear (2009) presented, even though Indigenous students have the highest dropout rates and consistently rank at the bottom of performance scales, Canadian education systems have been unresponsive to the educational needs, desires, strengths, and weaknesses of Indigenous people. There has been significant resistance to implementing the necessary infrastructure, curriculum, and pedagogical changes essential for effectively serving Indigenous students. This neglect is notable, as other institutions in the country, such as the courts, have made substantial strides in recognizing colonization and racism in their historical practices and have begun the process of decolonization and Indigenization.

However, for most postsecondary institutions, the decolonization level of radical transformation would require extensive restructuring and would be too difficult to imagine sincere consideration by many university administrators. The decolonial Indigenization process involves two key aspects: first, implementing a model of university governance and practice based on treaties, and second, promoting a revival of Indigenous culture, politics, knowledge, and traditional on-the-land skills (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Treaty-Based Decolonial Indigenization

To embody treaty principles, many Indigenous programs would need more self-sufficiency and funding to operate according to their own directives and those of Indigenous community partners. These operations would include governance of their own budgets, curricula, and scholarly standards through a dual university structure (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). The primary objective for Indigenous communities regarding education has always been, and

remains, to establish control. The main strategy used to achieve that goal has been to mix curriculum with culture to strengthen identity, along with the development of culturally relevant and appropriate student support services (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Resurgence-Based Decolonial Indigenization

Resurgence is a parallel movement to decolonization and Indigenization focused on rebuilding and strengthening Indigenous culture, knowledges, and political orders. The outcome of the resurgence aspect of decolonial Indigenization is the prioritization of Indigenous knowledge and experiences in discussions about Indigenous issues, with Indigenous perspectives serving as the primary lens through which these issues are understood (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Historically, Western researchers maintained oppressive connections with Indigenous populations by using methodologies that ignored Indigenous traditions and excluded Indigenous communities as equal partners (Louie et al., 2017). The decolonial approach to Indigenization focuses on redistributing intellectual privilege and fostering collaborative relationships that decentralize administrative power (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). These viewpoints show the importance of improving research methodologies and fostering equitable partnerships in Indigenous research initiatives, with the intention to rectify historical imbalances and empower Indigenous communities.

Theme 2 Conclusion

In conclusion, in the literature review of this theme, I explored the complex journey of decolonization and Indigenization within postsecondary education, emphasizing the critical need to acknowledge and unravel colonial ideologies and their lasting impacts on Indigenous communities. This study further emphasizes the need for institutions to go beyond superficial changes, and instead advocate for fundamental transformations that include Indigenous voices.

2.5 Theme 3 Literature Review

2.5.1 Exposition of This Theme from the Literature

What is Success?

In this theme, I explored the Indigenous student experience within postsecondary institutions and the barriers to success that these students face, so I first established a clear and

focused definition of success. Colonial definitions of success link to assimilation of Indigenous students, where they adapted to the mainstream values and behaviours of the postsecondary institution (Gallop & Bastien, 2016), such as striving for higher socioeconomic status and career advancement. However, for most Indigenous students, the definition of success is more complicated than simply graduating from university – it is about students being empowered as Indigenous peoples in their determination, cultural integrity, and identity reclamation and retrieval throughout their educational journeys (Cote-Meek, 2014; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Pidgeon, 2016).

Uink et al. (2021) suggested that success should not focus solely on retention rates, as these rates do not show whether a student is progressing forward in their studies toward completion. Students may be failing and retaking courses or switching degrees, so measuring enrolment without measuring progression does not capture when academic progression is stalled.

An Australian study (Hearn & Kenna, 2021) examined the role quantitative methodologies and analysis played in providing a holistic view of Indigenous students' success and participation at postsecondary institutions, and they were found to be useful in the evaluation and development of programs and strategies. Despite many institutions investing significant fiscal resources towards scholarships and financial assistance for Indigenous students, the study showed that there was no correlation between financial investment and success rates. Instead, the universities that had high success rates were those that provided a suite of programs to support Indigenous students.

A comprehensive and inclusive definition of success among Indigenous students is essential as it respects and honours their diverse cultural backgrounds, aspirations, and values. Ideally this respect and honour will create educational environments that support holistic growth and achievement of Indigenous students.

This study defined success as guided by Pidgeon (2008): adopting a holistic perspective that encompasses the physical, emotional, spiritual/cultural, and cognitive needs of the individual, family, and community.

Barriers to Success

R. A. Malatest & Associates (2002) demonstrated that significant barriers exist regarding Indigenous participation in postsecondary education, including a legacy of distrust of education in Indigenous communities; lack of academic preparation; feelings of social discrimination, isolation, and loneliness; and social, cultural, and financial barriers. These barriers are elaborated on below to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges Indigenous students face and highlight the need for targeted strategies to support them.

A Legacy of Distrust of Education in Indigenous Communities

The historically ethnocentric practices of residential schools are reflected in the perception of postsecondary institutions allowing colonialism to continue through discrimination, silencing, and denial, reminding Indigenous people that historically, education was used a weapon of genocide (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Ottmann, 2020; Restoule et al., 2013). Placing children in residential schools resulted in many Indigenous children left unable to reconnect to not only their family, but also to their communities and culture (Cote-Meek, 2014).

There is skepticism among Indigenous learners and their families regarding the purpose of their educational efforts, and educational success, quality, and achievement (TRC, 2015). The legacy of distrust is apparent from ongoing intergenerational trauma of residential school survivors, their families, and communities. Fundamentally, schools and governments severed the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical bonds between children and their parents, community, and culture (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Historical Barriers Rooted in Residential Schools, Assimilative Education, and Insufficient Academic Preparation

Gray's (2022) work described how at least seven generations of Indigenous families are enduring the negative effects of residential and day school abuses dating back to the mid-1800s and continuing until the 1990s. In addition, for many Indigenous people, unresolved trauma can hinder concentration, feelings of safety, learning, and consistent attendance, leading to many Indigenous individuals still struggling to access suitable education. The elementary and high school system frequently leaves Indigenous students inadequately prepared to meet university

entrance requirements. Often, these students are first-generation college attendees who lack the valued forms of capital needed within the institution (Pidgeon, 2008).

Indigenous students face pedagogical challenges regarding their learning strategies and study skills and expectations about tests and assignments (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020). Additional academic barriers include those related to curriculum content, teacher attitudes, and teaching and learning practices (Uink et al., 2021). In Canada, most classrooms are multicultural demographically, yet teacher education programs in universities are still immersed in Eurocentric teaching styles and practices that do not reflect their multicultural classes (Little Bear, 2009).

Parent (2017) studied the transition from high school to postsecondary institutions for Indigenous youth in British Columbia. The study used visioning, an Indigenous research design that resulted in challenging existing approaches to transitioning by revealing that Indigenous youth were deeply impacted by their lived experiences that occur before, during, and after they entered higher education. Successful transition is a continual process of relationship building, and it should be noted that multiple groups, including families, communities, and Indigenous Nations, play a part, and may in turn be impacted the students' experiences and outcomes in higher education. Parent's study impacted my research because it showed that the key to making higher education truly inclusive of Indigenous communities is to take heed of Indigenous students' knowledge, experiences, and stories to implement practical changes.

Restoule, et al. (2013) examined how postsecondary institutions policies and practices can support or deter the successful transition from high school to postsecondary schools for Indigenous people. The study was designed to identify strategies for Indigenous students to increase enrolment and completion of their chosen programs. The author surveyed over 250 Indigenous students in Ontario, and the results showed the need for relationships to be built while students are in elementary or high school, with students and the community itself.

Social, Cultural and Financial Barriers

There are also social barriers for Indigenous students from rural or remote reserves pursuing postsecondary education: adapting to an unfamiliar environment, integrating into university life, speaking new and different languages, experiencing the ripple effects of

colonialism, and challenges interacting with non-Indigenous students (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020).

Gray (2022) and Little Bear (2009) outlined how Indigenous students encounter various cultural challenges regarding the adjustment between individualistic and community lifestyle. Traditionally, Indigenous education focused on teaching the knowledge that was essential for the cultural, political, social, and economic prosperity of the community. This is a harsh contrast to the European systems that primarily teach students to adapt and contribute to individualized societies and wealth-based economies, rooted in competition and survival of the fittest. The current education system conflicts with Indigenous approaches, which emphasize holistic methods, community engagement, relationship-building, and a culturally grounded education.

Some of the greatest losses for Indigenous students are separation from friends and extended family, culture, community, and support systems. Often, these are replaced by isolation, culture shock, and little-to-no sense of belonging (Gray, 2022). The loss of community is also a significant barrier for Indigenous students because when they leave to attend postsecondary institutions, they leave behind all the things that were safe and familiar (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020). In addition, leaving the community also comes with intense pressure and expectations. Not successfully completing their studies has damaging effects for the individual, their families, and communities because lower educational attainment negatively impacts socioeconomic status, health, and overall well-being (Pidgeon, 2016).

As Little Bear (2009) outlined, an individual's economic and social standing will play a crucial role in influencing the learning process. When an individual lacks the financial means to access educational opportunities for self-improvement, they may find themselves caught in a cycle of social dysfunctions that negatively impact the learning environment. Many falsely attribute this situation to an individual's lack of ambition and motivation for self-improvement, but these social conditions are shaped by colonialism in the form of government policies and legislation.

As Indigenous families sought employment opportunities, they migrated to urban areas from remote and rural regions (Baxter & Myers, 2016). In urban settings, Indigenous individuals frequently encounter adversity marked by persistent structural inequality, poverty, racism, and

the repercussions of long-standing colonization which contribute to complex and multifaceted struggles for them (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Many Indigenous students have difficulty finding a school and life balance because responsibilities such as rent, earning income, and simply surviving are more important than their studies (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020).

Theme 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the barriers many Indigenous students face when pursuing postsecondary education are complex. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and respects Indigenous knowledge systems, fosters inclusive educational environments, and provides support systems that honour cultural diversity and resilience. There is a critical need to understand and address these barriers in order to develop effective strategies that support Indigenous students' success in higher education. This understanding is central to this study as it aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments for Indigenous students.

2.6 Theme 4 Literature Review

2.6.1 *Exposition of This Theme from the Literature*

White Privilege

While conducting this research, I unexpectedly became aware of my own White privilege. I realized that my background as a descendant of White settlers and studying and working at a colonial institution had shielded me from considering this before. Understanding the significance of taking responsibility for my actions as a person with White privilege has been a significant part of my personal journey. This final theme reflects my ongoing efforts to understand my role toward decolonization and Indigenization.

The crucial step in acknowledging and addressing the White privilege I possess or benefit from is recognizing the existence and extent of racism. Many individuals may not be aware of how their backgrounds, connections, education, and financial situations automatically provide them with an advantage, whether they actively seek it or not. They must acknowledge that racism that is present today is the result of racist practices of the past, formalized by social

institutions. I now understand that I need to be aware of where those practices remain and where I participate in them (Ayo, n.d.; Gray, 2022).

Racism can also manifest as a White saviour complex. When I began this research project, I mistakenly believed I could solve the Indigenous student retention issue at USask *for* Indigenous people. I am an outsider to the Indigenous student experience, so I had to confront my own biases and realize that meaningful solutions require input from those directly affected. The guiding principle of the USask indigenous strategy, “ohpahotân oohpaahotaan let’s fly up together” (Ottman, 2020), emphasizes "nothing about us, without us" as an antidote for exclusion. This approach resonated deeply with me, and I understood that to truly understand and address these issues, I needed to listen to Indigenous students and learn from their experiences, as their voices are crucial in shaping effective strategies for improving retention and fostering a supportive educational environment where they can achieve success.

Demonstrating empathy without causing harm is essential. Indigenous individuals may appreciate when non-Indigenous people show sympathy, attempt to understand their history, and express a desire to help, but imposing these intentions onto Indigenous people may not always be appropriate (Gray, 2022). Good intentions do not always translate into positive actions. Regardless of how well-intentioned my efforts were, I learned that there was no guarantee they would be welcomed or accepted.

Throughout this research I had an underlying worry about being a non-Indigenous person studying this topic, coming from the newfound consciousness of the complex and sensitive nature of Indigenous issues. My biggest fear is that, despite best efforts, I might inadvertently misinterpret or misrepresent Indigenous perspectives, or that this research might be perceived as intrusive or disrespectful. My apprehension highlighted the importance of approaching the subject with humility, openness to learning, and a commitment to respecting Indigenous voices and experiences. It also underscored the need for continuous self-reflection and engagement with Indigenous people to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and collaboratively.

I am not here to paint myself as a victim, for my White suffering in forms of stress and worry, is nothing in comparison to what Indigenous people face every day of their lives.

However, I wanted to further delve into my fears to gain a better understanding of myself and my role in decolonization and Indigenization.

The Fears of White People

Jensen (2020) outlined the fears – both known and unknown – that White people have to come to terms with regarding their privilege. The most significant concern is confronting the reality that certain privileges enjoyed by White individuals are undeserved, meaning some advantages I possess result from the efforts of others, distributed unevenly in society, and are beyond my individual control. Regardless of hard work or intelligence, an honest self-reflection acknowledges that my current position is not solely a result of merit. Many White individuals harbour fear of acknowledging this truth. I reflected on my experience as a high school graduate, in comparison to Indigenous students at the same time in their lives. There was never a question of if I would be able to attend university, it was only a question of where I wanted to go. I came from a middle-class family and was expected to attend a postsecondary school, but I could decide where and what I wanted to study. I was allowed to make mistakes, to change majors, to fail classes – all while being supported financially and emotionally by my family. I took this very much for granted at the time, and I see now how privileged I was to be in this situation. I had my own struggles with transitioning from a small town to university, but I wonder now if anyone ever doubted my ability to graduate. I was not labelled when I set foot on campus, and no assumptions were made about me, a privilege I now acknowledge.

The second fear Jensen (2020) presented was White individuals being afraid of potentially losing what they have as the economic, political, and social structures of their environment shift towards greater fairness and justice. The anticipation of such transformations can be scary in a world accustomed to affluence and material comfort and can manifest as resistance from professionals in educational institutions who fear losing their privileged positions. I could relate to this fear as I considered what would happen to my position at USask if a transformation as radical as Gaudry and Lorenz's (2018) idea of decolonial Indigenization was to happen. I would no longer have the privilege of being a White, educated female in a colonial institution – I would be equal to everyone else, and meaning I would not be more qualified than others.

The third fear Jensen (2020) presented involves the idea of a world where racialized individuals eventually acquire the same level of power over White people that has been historically monopolized by White individuals. Understanding and addressing this fear requires a commitment to promoting genuine equality and fostering dialogues that bridge divides and build mutual understanding. This made me consider a world where I am discriminated against based on the colour of my skin, where all things from my colonizing ancestors that gave me privilege now worked against me. Essentially, I had to imagine what it would be like to be treated how Indigenous people have been treated, and it was frightening.

The final fear involves the apprehension of being seen through by non-White individuals (Jensen, 2020). I, like many White people, including those actively advocating for racial justice, harbour some degree of racism in my feelings and thoughts. I may attempt to deny its existence, but I am aware that it exists. The related fear is the possibility that others can perceive what I may be thinking or feeling, so I could be revealed as insincere or harbouring hidden racist tendencies. I worried that people would think “she did her dissertation on Indigenous student success but does nothing to improve the situation for Indigenous people on campus.” Or that I was successful in this doctoral program because I used Indigenous people. Recognizing this fear shone light on my need for self-awareness and continuous personal reflection. I am working to acknowledge and confront implicit biases and am committing to ongoing learning and unlearning. I know now that my role in decolonization and Indigenization starts with educating myself and it is a constant ongoing process, with no final destination.

Indigenous Allyship

To educate myself in preparation for this study, I read *First Nations 101* by Gray (2022), which provided valuable insights into the daily experiences of Indigenous individuals, the traditions of Indigenous communities, historical interventions aimed at assimilating them into mainstream society, the repercussions of these interventions on Indigenous families and communities, and the contemporary efforts of Indigenous people in pursuing holistic health and well-being. As evident in this study, Gray’s work influenced my understanding and was instrumental in shaping my insights throughout this research.

I also learned about what I personally can do to better support Indigenous people. Gray (2022) presented a thoughtful and comprehensive guide on being an effective ally to Indigenous people. By following the principles outlined below, individuals can contribute positively to Indigenous causes and work towards fostering understanding, respect, and collaboration. Allies need to approach their support with sincerity and a genuine commitment to learning and taking meaningful action, creating a more inclusive and equitable society for Indigenous communities.

I want to stress that I cannot decide that I am an Indigenous ally, that determination rests with Indigenous people. I can, however, combine my knowledge of what it takes to be an ally and what my fears are as a non-Indigenous person and change my actions. An effective Indigenous ally acts in these ways:

Learns From and About Indigenous People's Efforts

This learning includes actively engaging in ongoing education to gain insights into the diverse cultures, histories, and current issues facing Indigenous people and their communities. This includes seeking information from reliable sources and staying informed about Indigenous initiatives. Effective allies help lift morale, forge cross-cultural understanding, contribute ideas through respectful discussion, and show their understanding and commitment through actions (Gray, 2022). Even if one possesses awareness of racial issues, they must avoid being self-righteous or boastful about it.

Supports Indigenous-Led Efforts

As Gray (2022) outlined, this support includes amplifying Indigenous perspectives, advocating for their inclusion in decision-making processes, and actively supporting initiatives and movements led by Indigenous individuals or communities. Allies can contribute in numerous ways, including advocacy, volunteering, and providing financial and other resources to support the priorities of Indigenous people.

Does Not Show Allyship for Their Own Personal Benefit

Allies must prioritize the well-being and goals of Indigenous communities over their own personal gain. The ally is genuinely motivated to contribute to the betterment of Indigenous people's lives and respects their sovereignty in deciding their own needs and objectives (Gray,

2022). An ally expects nothing in return for their support: Their actions are driven by a genuine commitment to justice and equality, not by a desire for recognition or reward (Ayo, n.d.). True allyship is an ongoing process that requires dedication, reflection, and a willingness to be held accountable by Indigenous communities.

Is Willing to Learn What Not to Do, to Avoid Causing Harm

An ally must acknowledge the potential for harm, even unintentional, being receptive to feedback, correcting misconceptions, and adapting behaviours so their actions do not continue stereotypes, misinformation, or harm to Indigenous communities (Gray, 2022). An essential principle of this commitment is to not take more than one gives (Ayo, n.d.). This approach emphasizes the importance of balancing the benefits of research with meaningful contributions to the communities involved, fostering mutual respect and equity.

Educates Themselves About Indigenous History and Rights

An ally must recognize the significance of understanding the historical context and rights of Indigenous peoples. This involves self-directed learning, acknowledging the diversity among Indigenous communities, and respecting unique histories, languages, and traditions (Gray, 2022). Engaging in this education allows allies to deepen their understanding of the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous peoples.

Shares What They Learn About Issues Important to Indigenous People

An ally will actively engage in dialogue with their family, coworkers, peers, and community to share the knowledge gained about Indigenous issues, enabling greater awareness, understanding, and empathy, and contributing to a more informed and supportive social environment for Indigenous people (Gray, 2022). Allies distinguish themselves from those who simply aim to express minimal or no prejudice towards Indigenous people. Being an ally requires a commitment to going beyond merely controlling one's own prejudices (Brown & Ostrove, 2013).

Acts Even When Indigenous People Are Not in The Room

An ally actively champions change and advocates for inclusivity across various environments. This entails a proactive dedication to challenging stereotypes, exclusions, and

racism, even in scenarios where Indigenous individuals are not directly involved (Gray, 2022). Allies consistently address racism, ignorance, and inappropriate behaviour and language whenever encountered (Ayo, n.d.). This proactive stance demonstrates a commitment to creating environments that are respectful, inclusive, and supportive of Indigenous peoples, even in their absence.

Knows What Indigenous Nation's Land They Are on and Shares That Knowledge

Allies acknowledge the historical and ongoing connection of Indigenous peoples to the land and identify the specific Indigenous Nation whose traditional territory they are living, working, playing, or studying on. In addition, they share this knowledge with others to promote a broader understanding of the historical context and significance of the land (Gray, 2022).

Transforms Guilt into Positive Allyship Efforts

Allies acknowledge any feelings of guilt or discomfort and channel those emotions into positive action, actively contributing to efforts that uplift Indigenous people and their communities. An ally is an individual who collaborates with others to achieve a shared goal through understanding and support. Merely labeling oneself as an ally is insufficient; true allyship is demonstrated through ongoing actions (Gray, 2022).

Seeks To Understand Any Privilege They May Take for Granted

An ally reflects on their own privilege and actively seeks to understand how these privileges may impact their perspectives and interactions. To do this, an ally must listen and learn from the experiences of Indigenous individuals and be supportive (Gray, 2022).

Is A Good Listener and Concise Sharer

An ally prioritizes active listening when engaging with Indigenous individuals and communities. Additionally, they must effectively communicate insights and information to others in a concise and respectful manner, fostering open and constructive dialogue within their social circles (Gray, 2022). Actively engaging in attentive listening to people of colour and genuinely believing in their experiences can be enlightening. It is important to respect and acknowledge these experiences, recognizing that firsthand experience holds more weight than personal opinions.

Theme 4 Conclusion

During this research, I realized my own White privilege as a descendant of colonial settlers. This understanding was a key part of my personal journey toward decolonization and Indigenization. I had to confront my unconscious participation in systemic advantages and the White saviour complex, understanding that true solutions for Indigenous student retention at USask need Indigenous voices.

Being an ally requires empathy, humility, and continuous self-reflection. This means supporting Indigenous-led efforts, advocating for inclusivity, and turning guilt into positive action. Recognizing my fears and privileges has shown me the importance of respectful engagement with Indigenous issues. My role in decolonization and Indigenization is an ongoing process of learning and action.

2.7 Synthesis and Conceptualization of the Themes

This study revealed the ongoing challenges and barriers Indigenous students face in postsecondary education despite efforts toward decolonization and Indigenization. Overcoming the barriers Indigenous students face requires a comprehensive approach that respects Indigenous knowledge systems, fosters inclusive environments, and supports cultural diversity and resilience. By addressing these barriers, the university can develop effective strategies to support Indigenous students' success and create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

The literature review emphasized the complex process of decolonization and Indigenization, demonstrating the need for institutions to pursue fundamental changes that incorporate Indigenous perspectives. Through this research, I recognized my own White privilege and the necessity of true allyship, which involves supporting Indigenous-led efforts, advocating for inclusivity, and transforming guilt into positive action. My journey toward decolonization and Indigenization has highlighted the importance of continuous learning, self-reflection, and respectful engagement with Indigenous people.

2.8 Discussion

As stated by Pidgeon (2016), there is a challenge in higher education in trying to create a meaningful space for Indigenous people within colonial defined and recognized structures,

academic disciplines, practices, and policies. Postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to empower their Indigenous student population through self-determination. There is a need to address decolonization and reconcile systemic and societal inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

As Indigenous student numbers grow, it becomes increasingly important to move away from simply getting students enrolled, to using evidence-based practices, evaluations, and statistical measurements to assist with identifying what supports are needed and what support systems play a role in Indigenous students' success (Hearn & Kenna, 2021). In addition, Gaudry and Lorenz (2008) stated that Indigenous student success is enhanced when universities focus on ensuring that Indigenous students can access programs specific to their inclusion and academic learning. Indigenous inclusion policies are a vital component of improving the experiences of all Indigenous people on campuses.

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2020) showed that while Indigenization attempts are occurring at postsecondary institutions, improvements are needed to provide a culturally relevant and safe environment in which Indigenous students can be successful. The literature review has shown that there is a need for interventions that are culturally and socially oriented that can be developed and/or elaborated and applied at USask to promote a positive educational experience for Indigenous students.

Kristoff and Cottrell (2021) noted that when administrative and educational practices align with Indigenous ways of knowing, students are better prepared to address challenges arising from the lasting impacts of colonization. In addition, social supports promote advancement for the individual and their families, identity formation and cultural growth, community development and Indigenous sovereignty.

The postsecondary system is designed in a way that expects students to leave their emotional baggage behind and manage this aspect of themselves through counseling or therapeutic sessions (Cote-Meek, 2014). For effective support, institutions must gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by Indigenous students. To overcome these obstacles, internal examination is crucial, necessitating a focus on organizational development. This reflection involves creating and implementing strategies for success, ensuring that efforts

and resources are not only available but also accessible and distributed effectively to maximize their potential in aiding Indigenous students' success.

2.9 Manuscript 2 Summary

In this paper I provided a comprehensive literature review organized into four main themes. The first theme highlighted the persistence of denial, harmful stereotypes, and systemic barriers faced by Indigenous students in postsecondary education despite efforts towards decolonization and Indigenization (Cote-Meek, 2014; Greenhill & Marshall, 2016; Saul & Burkholder, 2020). Nonetheless, Indigenous students demonstrate resilience in navigating these environments (Cote-Meek, 2014). By honouring Indigenous voices and ways of knowing, institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, promoting both academic success and cultural revitalization.

The second theme showed the importance of decolonization and Indigenization, emphasizing the ongoing impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples' lives and self-determination (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012). Postsecondary institutions must actively work to undo these colonial influences alongside Indigenous leadership and people (Gray, 2022).

The third theme emphasized the importance of redefining success in higher education to align with Indigenous perspectives. I found a broad definition of success that respects Indigenous values and knowledge necessary. By including Indigenous perspectives into notions of success, universities can create supportive environments where Indigenous students can excel academically and personally (Pidgeon, 2008).

Last, the final theme explored was a personal journey, which included confronting White privilege, facing fears, and recognizing the crucial role of non-Indigenous individuals in addressing systemic racism. I aimed to emphasize the impact of personal growth as a White settler and the need for continual active engagement in supporting Indigenous people and striving for fairness and equality.

Manuscript 3: Research Design and Methods Inquiry – Operationalizing Problem of Practice

3.0 Abstract

This research asks **what practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students?**

The University of Saskatchewan (USask) is actively engaged in initiatives to increase the Indigenous student population, and although progress has been made in increasing enrolment, retention rates remain a critical concern. This research focuses on understanding the challenges and barriers faced by Indigenous students and identifying effective support mechanisms.

The methodology involved an exploration of Indigenous student success through interviews and document analysis. The research included nine participants – four Indigenous students and five staff members who support Indigenous students – offering a range of perspectives. Semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) captured firsthand experiences, beliefs, values, and perspectives on the support systems at USask.

3.1 Chapter Introduction and Framing of Problem of Practice Research

USask set enrolment goals to have Indigenous students make up 15% of the undergraduate and 10% of the graduate student populations by 2025 (USask, 2018). This research centres on the hypothesis that Indigenous students encounter distinctive challenges, hindering their successful completion of studies at USask. The research asks **what practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students?**

This study aimed to uncover the strengths and positive strategies of the Indigenous student participants at USask, acknowledging the unique challenges they face. I did not intend to minimize the historical impacts of colonization, or the multigenerational struggles faced by Indigenous people. Instead, the focus is on identifying effective practices and bringing attention to gaps in USask's services and resources. My ultimate goal was for this study to contribute to making USask a more supportive environment for current and future Indigenous students.

3.2 Approach to Inquiry

I used a case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry. As outlined by Patton (2012), in this approach, evaluations answer three questions to guide thought processes and practical steps: What? So what? and now what? Progressing from understanding the information, to evaluating its significance, to determining the next steps involves transitioning from raw data to analysis and to implementation. Acting is a result of applying insights derived from the evaluation findings. In social and corporate settings, conducting evaluations can and should enhance the quality of interventions designed to solve or improve issues (Owen, 2007).

The rationale behind evaluation, as described by Fournier (1995) and echoed by Patton (2012), is a systematic process aimed at making judgments about the value or worth of the object under review, known as the *evaluand*. The evaluation process involves the following steps: establishing criteria for worth, constructing standards, measuring performance, and making judgement.

The first step is establishing criteria for worth. This is done by determining the dimensions on which the evaluand must excel (Fournier, 1995). Therefore, evaluation involves assessing the merit, worth, value, or significance of something (Patton, 2012). The second step is to construct standards by defining how well the evaluand should perform (Fournier, 1995). Evaluations typically focus on describing and assessing intended goals and objectives (Patton, 2012). The third step in logical evaluation is measuring performance and comparing with standards, by assessing how well the evaluand performed by considering unintended consequences, the actual implementation, and achieved outcomes and results (Fournier, 1995). The last step is synthesizing and integrating evidence into a judgment of merit or worth, by determining the overall worth of the evaluand based on the collected evidence (Fournier, 1995). The evaluator then discusses the implications of these findings, which may include recommendations and suggestions for future actions (Patton, 2012).

Viewing evaluation as a process that produces knowledge emphasizes its reliance on thorough empirical investigation. The value of investing time and money in evaluation becomes evident when the knowledge generated is dependable, aligns with the requirements of policy and program stakeholders, and can be effectively utilized by these stakeholders (Owen, 2007).

As Patton (2012) outlined, utilization-focused evaluation is an approach to evaluation that emphasizes the importance of confirming that evaluations are useful and relevant to the needs of stakeholders. The main idea of utilization-focused evaluation is that evaluations should be assessed based on their usefulness and actual application, identifying the intended users(s) of an evaluation is critical. A primary intended user will have the responsibility to do things differently, because of their engagement in the evaluative process or with the evaluation findings. For this study, the intended users are university administrators, who have the authority and ability to use the key findings to make decisions, change strategies and policies, and take action. They will be able to use the learnings from the study to inform their decisions and actions.

3.4 Methodology and Methods of Inquiry

I used case study as a research methodology. As Scotland (2012) said, “methodology asks the question: how can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?” (p. 9). Case study guided by appreciative inquiry is an appropriate methodology because it is already known that while retention rates for Indigenous students at USask are lower than those of non-Indigenous students, there are Indigenous students who are successfully completing their studies.

Yin (2018) defined a case study as an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon, the “case,” in depth within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clear. For this study, a case study can be used to understand the real-world case of Indigenous student success and assume that contextual conditions are involved. This study used an explanatory case study method to explain how events happened by comparing data based on cause-effect relationships (Kahkonen, 2014).

How and why questions are explanatory and lead to the use of a case study as the preferred method because these questions do not deal with occurrences or frequencies, but instead with a historical tracing of processes (Yin, 2018). Using a case study with interviews allows in-depth discussion in which why and how questions can be asked. Participants can then provide context and background to the nature of issues which can be further explained. Case

studies make it possible to gather rich empirical data and the ability to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Kahkonen, 2014).

Qualitative methods in this study included individual interviews and document analysis. To collect data for the study, interviews were used. The data collected were based on questions about what USask was doing well, what participants wished would happen, and what they needed more of. Studies need to be logical with theoretical perspectives embedded within the methodology, with methods that are specific to the setting and assessment (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Conducting interviews with staff at USask who interacted with and were in roles to support Indigenous students every day provided an insider's view and emphasized the significance of the study for the benefit of Indigenous students and USask as a whole (Pole & Morrison, 2003). However, nothing should be about Indigenous people without Indigenous people, so I also interviewed current Indigenous students, asking comparable questions, to learn first-hand about their experiences, needs and wishes.

The value of this case study research is that it offered methods for furthering and attempting to understand the first-hand experiences of staff and current students, even if they seemed fragmented or lacking in coherence (Parker, 2007). The desire to understand complex social phenomena created the demand for case study research because they allow the research to focus in-depth on a case and retain a rounded and real-world perspective (Yin, 2018). The Indigenous student participants were happy to know that intentions of the study were focused on improving the experience of Indigenous students in the future.

3.4.1 Sampling and Participants

Interviews were conducted with nine participants from USask: four current Indigenous students and five staff working in roles that supported Indigenous students. The staff participants came from different departments across campus including colleges, centres, and units. The student participants were in various years of study and from multiple colleges and programs. Using one-on-one interviews allowed me and respondents time to develop trust to support collecting robust and accurate data. I spent approximately 10 minutes at the start of each interview explaining my role on campus, the Doctor of Education program, the goals of the

research, and for what it would be used. This set the tone for a safe space, as my expectations were clear, and participants had the chance to ask any questions or seek clarification.

I placed boundaries on who could participate in the study. Potential participants had to meet the following criteria to be eligible:

- be a staff member or student at USask.
- if staff, be directly involved with supporting or providing services to Indigenous students at USask.
- if student, be Indigenous.
- be willing to share their perspectives and experiences.

The criteria for excluding participants were:

- non-Indigenous students currently attending USask.
- USask staff who do not support Indigenous students in their roles.

The results identify that participants work and/or study at USask, but their specific departments or units are confidential. The confidentiality of participants and their data was protected, but I could not guarantee their anonymity, only their individual contributions, because specific support systems within certain units were identified, and context could expose identity.

I used USask's internal PAWS system to post two announcements. The first was targeted to all students currently attending USask, and the second was for all staff at USask. For staff, I also reached out to my connections on campus who were in support roles for Indigenous students and gave them an option to participate.

Through the PAWS announcements, those interested were instructed to send me an email. When a participant showed interest, I shared the interview questions and consent form, and then asked them for available times. When a time was set, participants were sent a Zoom meeting invite link via email. Participation for all was optional, and all participants could remain anonymous if they chose. No incentives or compensation were provided to the participants.

3.4.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected via semistructured interviews. The interview questions were developed after further exploration of appreciative inquiry and were designed to answer three questions: What is working? What do you wish there were more of? What do you need more of?

The semistructured interviews had questions prepared ahead of time but allowed me to go off-script to expand on participants' comments and experiences. Keeping the interviews semistructured allowed for flexibility in exploring and expanding on comments.

For staff participants, the first group of questions explored what is working. This allowed participants to reflect on successful experiences supporting Indigenous students and share their pride in their work. These questions also detailed the support offered to Indigenous students and current retention efforts. For Indigenous students, I asked them to tell me about their journeys, and how they overcame any barriers they faced. These questions allowed participants to share thoughts, feelings, and associations regarding Indigenous student success and recommend current support systems at USask, while also expressing areas for improvement.

Asking what participants wished there were more of at USask served to create a hypothetical scenario where there was unlimited time and resources. It created a safe environment where participants could suggest anything and everything. The data collected identified additional support needed to enhance assistance for Indigenous students. Participants were also able to discuss ways USask could help remove barriers for Indigenous student success and specify what support was required from USask. It was valuable to learn about how staff and students got their information on support systems for Indigenous students. Last, by asking what they needed more of, I learned the participants' stories. I asked them to identify trends regarding barriers faced by Indigenous students and allowed the participants to propose changes to USask's Indigenous student support systems.

I ran a pilot study in March 2024 to test if the questions generated useful data and to see if questions needed to be changed, removed, or added. The pilot allowed me to estimate the amount of time needed to have participants answer the questions and complete the interviews. The results of the pilot study dictated how the interviews were delivered in the future. One revision I made is that I did not ask Indigenous students to verify or state their Indigenous membership, because based on feedback from the participant in the pilot interview, I felt that some may feel this question was intrusive, and I did not want anyone to feel that I was asking questions that were too personal.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

The coding process involved three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the first step, open coding, I used an inductive approach, which means I let the codes emerge directly from the data rather than imposing any pre-existing ideas (Pole & Morrison, 2003). As new themes and questions came up, I connected them across all stages of data collection, linking back to earlier information and forward to new findings.

Grounded theory aligns with this inductive approach because it generates hypotheses and theories directly from the data collected (Cohen et al., 2018; Engward, 2013). This approach helped me avoid assumptions and maintain a neutral stance (Simmons, 2006). Grounded theorists are able to find and analyze contradictions, comparing what people say to what they actually do, providing deeper insights into behaviors and patterns (Deutscher et al., 1993).

To ensure the research was credible, I allowed patterns to emerge naturally from the data rather than relying on my own interpretations (Engward, 2013). The second step, axial coding, involved examining these patterns, similarities, and differences (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This analysis led to the third step, selective coding, where key themes were identified that directly answered the research questions.

3.4.4 Rigor and Reliability/Trustworthiness of the Inquiry

The interviews in this study were conducted throughout April and May 2024. The participants were not asked to define their gender or race; however, all the Indigenous students did identify their Indigenous heritage. The student participant group had three undergraduate students and one student enrolled in a graduate program at USask. They were studying in various colleges at USask and were all in at least the third year of their programs.

The five staff participants interviewed worked in different units and colleges across USask, in various roles. Although they were asked to state their current positions, many spoke of their work experience in many different positions over their time at USask.

Although these nine participants represented a small sample of staff and Indigenous students at USask, their stories provided robust data that formed the basis for the key findings

presented in this study. Their unique first-hand perspectives offered valuable insights into the challenges and experiences within the USask community.

3.4.5 Ethical Consideration

To protect the participants in this research, I conducted my case study with special care and sensitivity, as presented by Yin (2018) and guided by the National Research Council (2003). “Gaining informed consents from everyone who may be part of your case study, by alerting them to the nature of your case study and formally soliciting their volunteerism in participating in the study” (Yin, 2018, p. 88). All participants reviewed a consent form (Appendix B) that outlined the project, its procedures, benefits, and risks. Consent was discussed in the interviews, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty and that they could refuse to answer questions with which they were not comfortable. They could request that the recording be paused or leave the interviews at any point if they wished.

“Protecting those who participate in your study from and harm, including avoiding the use of any deceptions in your study” (Yin, 2018, p. 18). No deceptions were used in this study and no aspect of this study was kept ambiguous. There were potential ethical implications of my chosen participant pool in that I had the potential to add to the burdens of Indigenous students or risk making them feel tokenized. Those who chose to participate were sent the interview questions (Appendix C) in advance, so they had time to review and request further clarification if needed.

“Taking special precautions that might be needed to protect especially vulnerable groups (for instance, research involving children)” (Yin, 2018, p. 18). The procedures I used to conduct this research may have also created ethical issues. I did not assume participants were willing to participate in the research. There was a possibility that reflecting on and answering some of the interview questions may cause participants psychological or emotional distress, especially when reliving trauma or difficult experiences. Therefore, I provided information about wellness supports to the participants in the consent form ahead of time, and following the interviews I stopped recording and checked in to make sure everyone was doing okay. I again mentioned the wellness supports, and I asked if there was anything further that they wanted to talk about off the record.

“Selecting participants equitably, so that no groups of people are unfairly included or excluded from the research” (Yin, 2018, p. 18). At USask, all students and staff have access to the PAWS announcements, ensuring inclusivity. In addition, because the announcement targeted all current students, Indigenous students had access even if they were not self-declared, thereby adhering the principle of equitable participant selection.

Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate so that, as a result of their participation, they will not be unwittingly put in any undesirable position, such as being placed on a list to receive requests to participate in some future study, whether conducted by you or anyone else. (Yin, 2018, p. 18)

The data I gathered included sensitive issues, so there were ethical implications regarding privacy and access issues, as well as participant confidentiality. By interviewing current USask employees, anonymity was especially important because employees shared stories of their everyday experiences. Allowing participants to remain anonymous allowed me to capture the context and difficulties of their everyday roles supporting Indigenous students. Keeping Indigenous student participants anonymous allowed them to have a safe space to feel free to say how they truly felt, without worry of being judged, or thinking that it may negatively affect their studies at USask.

I considered the four moral domains: trust, transparency, caring, and honesty to construct safe spaces for participants (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Trust entails avoiding making the conversation about my feelings or reactions. I needed to recognize that when a person of colour discussed their experiences with me, they were placing trust in me, and that I must treat trust with the highest level of respect (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Although Indigenous people have been the subject of research by governments and academics for centuries, much of it has been conducted with a Eurocentric bias and not necessarily for the benefit of Indigenous communities (Ayo, n.d.; Gray, 2022). To avoid this bias, I took time to share with all participants the intent of my actions and words (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017).

Transparency entails being clear that this research was not there to “fix” anyone (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). In addition, the way I asked questions had an effect, because those

participating in the interviews may have interpreted the questions in their own context. It was likely they were also trying to guess the real intention of the process (Smith, 2023).

Caring is a process of considering all stories and experiences shared with me as sacred in nature (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). As a researcher, I learned and appreciated that it was a privilege to hear stories directly from Indigenous peoples as oratory has been vital in maintaining Indigenous history and culture (Gray, 2022).

Honesty was essential in that that I needed to be upfront with participants. Although I shared the visions and goals of the process, there may still be a limited possibility that it would create positive lasting changes (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Because appreciative inquiry questions were used, where participants could say what they wished for in a hypothetical situation where resources and time were not an issue, there sadly was the realization that a lot of these wishes would not be possible. I also had to be honest with student participants, because even if my key findings were going to be put in place by USask, there was a good chance that it would be after they had completed their studies.

3.5 Manuscript 3 Summary:

With goals to increase the Indigenous student population at the USask, it is a priority to shift focus from merely increasing enrolment numbers to ensuring the successful graduation of these students. Using a case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry, I looked to uncover strengths and positive strategies that contribute to Indigenous student success. The study gathered and analyzed the experiences of four Indigenous students who were completing their studies and the supports that facilitated their success. The primary research question focused on identifying practices that contributed to Indigenous student success and determining innovations necessary to overcome existing barriers. The appreciative inquiry method structured questions to explore what has worked in keeping Indigenous students enrolled, how they have overcome barriers, and what supports they accessed at USask.

This research aimed to uncover the strengths and positive strategies of the Indigenous student participants at USask, acknowledging the unique challenges they faced. I did not intend to minimize the historical impacts of colonization, or the multigenerational struggles faced by Indigenous people. Instead, the focus was on identifying effective practices and bringing

attention to gaps in USask's services and resources. The ultimate intent was to contribute to making USask a more supportive environment for current and future Indigenous students.

Manuscript 4: Results/Findings/Responses to Research Questions/Discussion

4.1 Abstract

This paper begins by outlining the problem of practice that serves as the foundation for this study. Following this, a brief summary of the relevant literature on the subject is provided to frame the research and the themes derived from it. The methodology section details the processes involved, including participant debriefs, data collection, and analysis. Finally, the findings from participant interviews are presented, focusing on the issues identified, what is currently working at the University of Saskatchewan (USask), and the additional supports participants felt was necessary to enable future success. This format aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for Indigenous student success at USask.

4.2 Introduction to Particular Problem of Practice

The problem of practice stems from the unique challenges and barriers Indigenous students face that prevent many from successfully completing their studies at USask, compared to non-Indigenous students. This study asked **What practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students?**

I interviewed four Indigenous students to learn about their experiences at USask to better understand the barriers they faced, and how, if possible, they overcame them. I also interviewed five staff members at USask who were in roles across campus that support Indigenous students to learn from their challenges and successes.

4.3 Brief Description of Extant Literature and Related Studies

The literature review was divided into four themes: racism faced by Indigenous students in the postsecondary education system, decolonization and Indigenization within postsecondary institutions, identifying what Indigenous student success means, and a personal exploration of White privilege and what it means to be an Indigenous ally.

Throughout this chapter, the work of Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) in examining Indigenization through concepts such as inclusion, reconciliation and decolonization is acknowledged. Indigenous inclusion aims to increase the number of Indigenous people within

current structures. Reconciliation Indigenization strives to connect Indigenous and Western values. Last, decolonial Indigenization advocates for a fundamental transformation of academia to balance power dynamics and bring Indigenous culture and knowledge to the forefront (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

4.4 Methodology

Case study research relies on a variety of sources of evidence, and the need to combine various sources of data (Yin, 2018). In this case, by interviewing both staff and Indigenous students at USask, I was able to combine and compare the data from the two groups. The key findings outlined the issues, what is working, and what participants felt USask needed more of. Interviews are commonly found in case studies, because they can be especially helpful in suggesting explanations of the hows and whys of key events, as well as insights that reflect participants' relativist perspectives (Yin, 2018). This process is similar to using an Indigenous lens, where research processes are informed or focused on the how and why of the process and are concerned with how the processes are carried out and the intentions behind them (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017).

By interviewing Indigenous students, I was able to hear first-hand their positive and negative experiences within our institution. I wanted to show that not all Indigenous students face the same barriers, but that there were common themes and issues that the four participants in this study encountered. I also interviewed staff members so that I could hear instances of when they were able to successfully support Indigenous students. I acknowledge that the small data set of Indigenous student and staff at USask that participated in this study was a limitation, but at the same time, all those that participated were passionate about Indigenous student success and making this institution better for future Indigenous students.

I wanted to make sure to include Indigenous voices in this research. I was naively thinking that I knew what was best for Indigenous students and that I could solve the retention issue for them – when I did not fully understand their struggles. The truth was, I only knew what would work for them to complete their degrees at USask by adhering to colonial policies and procedures, which ultimately was just assimilation.

I knew that something must be working, however, because there are still Indigenous students enrolled at USask. Although many students are succeeding on their own, others need supports. Therefore, I chose to use appreciative inquiry to understand what supports were working for these students.

Hammond (1998), and more recently Smith (2023), described appreciative inquiry as the framing of issues to look for positive outcomes for the future rather than analyzing what went wrong in the past, to identify conditions that lead to success. Instead of analyzing problems and assigning blame, this approach focuses on identifying and enhancing what is already working well. The goal is consistently to uncover, reinforce, and enhance the organization's strengths – the aspects that uplift it, instill pride in people, serve as motivators, and lead to outstanding performance.

If the focus remains solely on what is wrong or missing, that perspective becomes the reality, leading to a tendency to view everything through a negative lens (Hammond, 1998). Instead, by examining what is working and the conditions that have made success possible, new possibilities can emerge that would not have been discovered by continuing to focus on the problem (Smith, 2023).

4.4.1 Inquiry Goal

The major research question was: **What practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students?** By using an appreciative inquiry method, the questions are

- What has worked to keep Indigenous students enrolled at USask?
- What barriers have Indigenous students overcome, and how?
- What USask supports do Indigenous students currently access? What do they need?

4.4.2 Sample and Data Collection

In April and May 2024, I interviewed five current USask staff members and four current Indigenous students at USask. The participants were not asked to define their gender or race; however, all of the Indigenous students did identify their Indigenous heritage in the interviews.

The student participant group had three undergraduate students and one student enrolled in a graduate program at USask. They were studying in various colleges at USask.

The five staff participants worked in different units and colleges across USask, in various roles. Although they were asked to state their current positions, many spoke of their work experience in many different positions at USask over the course of their careers.

A participant recruitment post was made in PAWS announcements (Appendix D), the internal web environment used by all students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other members of the university community. Two different notifications were placed, one for all USask staff and another for all USask students. Both groups of participants signed up for the interviews by emailing me and expressing their interest. The study was then discussed further, and if they wanted to proceed, a meeting time was set. During the one-on-one semistructured interviews via Zoom, they shared their experiences, challenges, and successes with me.

4.4.3 Data Analysis

The coding process in my data analysis involved three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Influenced by grounded theory, I began by reviewing the interview transcripts, which I found helpful to print out. I first highlighted anything that seemed relevant—this was the open coding stage, where I used an inductive approach, allowing the codes to naturally emerge from the data rather than starting with preconceived ideas (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Grounded theory guided this process by ensuring that my analysis was rooted in the data itself, rather than imposing any existing theories or assumptions.

Next, I went through the highlighted notes again and began to color-code them based on emerging themes. This was axial coding, where I explored patterns, similarities, and differences within the data (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). As new themes emerged, they were connected throughout the data collection process—linking back to earlier data, across to related data, and forward into the next stages of information gathering (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Grounded theory influenced this step by emphasizing the importance of seeing how themes interact and relate to one another, rather than viewing them in isolation. I made sure to let patterns emerge naturally, maintaining the credibility of the research by relying on these patterns rather than my own interpretations (Engward, 2013).

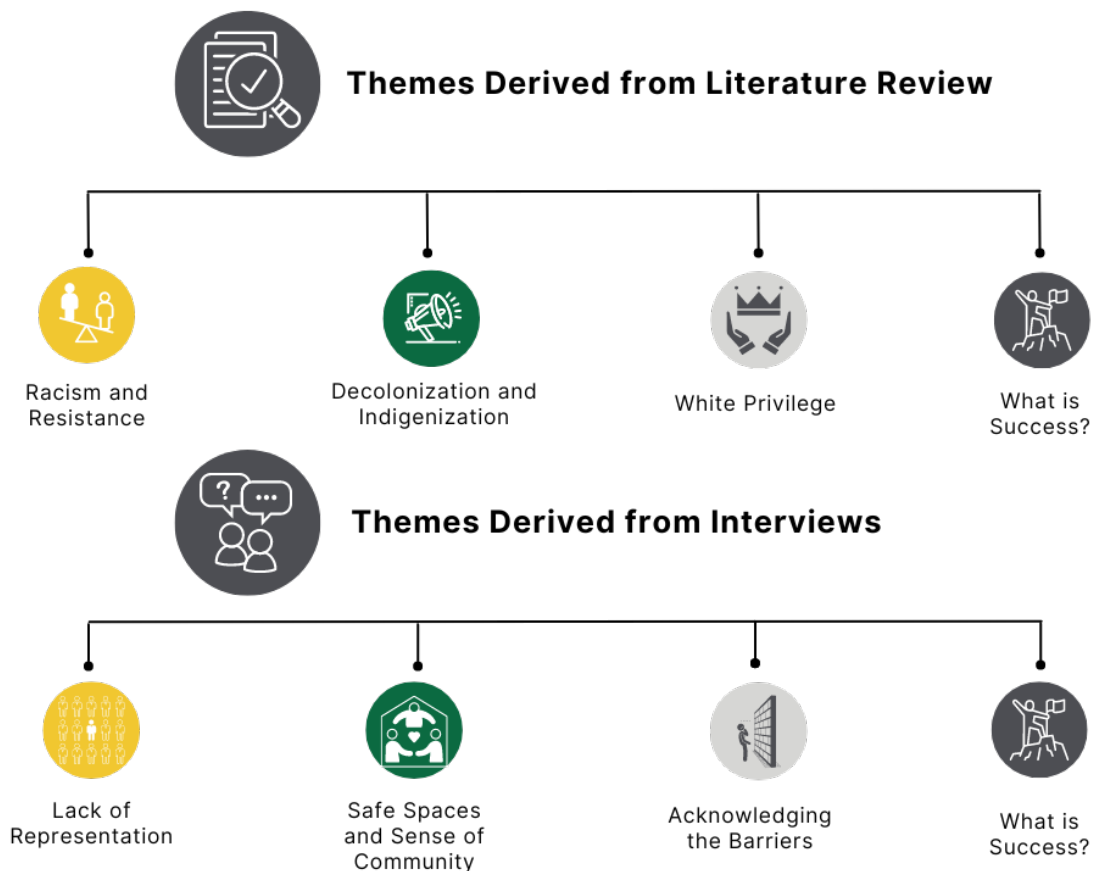
Finally, in selective coding, I focused my analysis on one main category or closely related categories (Engward, 2013). Grounded theory’s influence was evident as I started with a broad range of ideas but then narrowed down to four main themes: lack of representation, the need for safe spaces and a sense of community, colonial systems that create barriers, and defining success. These themes are described in detail in the following section.

4.5 Findings and Discussion, Including Comparison of Findings to Literature

Figure 4.1 depicts the themes arising from the literature review and the participant interviews.

Figure 4.1

Literature Review and Interview Themes



When analyzing the data from the literature review and participant interviews, I derived seven themes. The final theme, defining success, was evident in both the literature and the

interviews. This study showed that although the first three themes appear different, there are underlying similarities among them. For instance, when contrasting racism and resistance to the lack of representation, the literature review suggested that racism still exists on campus, which may contribute to the small number of Indigenous faculty and staff in postsecondary education.

The efforts of postsecondary institutions in decolonization and Indigenization relate to the need for safe spaces and a sense of community for Indigenous students. The literature and interviews revealed that when these supports were available, Indigenous students were more successful.

Lastly, acknowledging the barriers that exist for Indigenous students aligns with understanding White privilege. Many non-Indigenous people may not realize that these barriers exist, thus showing the importance of awareness and action in addressing these challenges.

Lack of Representation

The Issue

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2020) reported that when there is an underrepresentation of Indigenous people in faculty and staff in postsecondary education, the dominance of Western ways of knowing and lack of understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing can create a context in which Indigenous students feel isolated. In addition, these students' interactions become limited to being with individuals who do not fully understand their culture, and therefore may not be able to support them.

Cote-Meek (2014) identified that Indigenous faculty, staff, and students enter the postsecondary classroom and find themselves faced with the ongoing effects of colonialism and oppression. In addition, the colonial structures that hold the academy in place fundamentally control what is taught, how it is taught, and by whom within this space. As a result, significant pressures and expectations are placed on Indigenous faculty who may already be feeling vulnerable and alienated as a visible, marginalized minority on campus. In addition, many Indigenous staff experience marginalization or tokenism (Gray, 2022; Schmidt, 2019). Work needs to be done to create mechanisms, processes, systems, and external partnerships to support Indigenous faculty in the identification of barriers that exist for them, or their peers (Ottmann, 2020).

In their interview, one student explained how empowering it was to have an Indigenous person as the president of the University of Saskatchewan Student Union (USSU). They noted that “seeing Indigenous faces on there, that really inspired me. The Indigenous president told me ‘Just remember you belong here. You belong here.’ That message and positive reinforcement was really helpful from leadership and people in positions of authority.”

What is Working?

Elders and Knowledge Keepers

As Little Bear (2009) presented, the engagement of the community plays a crucial role in the education of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous individuals may perceive the world through the lens of relationships, and integrating the community into the learning process is essential. Community involvement can be seen as a form of community development. The underlying principle is that educational success necessitates the active participation of the community in every facet of the learning journey. This collaboration should include Indigenous communities, and Elders and Knowledge Keepers who are accessible to students on campus and can take roles in advisory councils and other governance structures within the institution (Pidgeon, 2016). In addition, Elders and Knowledge Keepers should have a key role as representatives and knowledgeable presences in classrooms and curriculum development, allowing for regular cultural teachings, protocol learning, and relationship building (Wallin & Tunison, 2022).

Higher education institutions should shift away from biased perspectives in education and adopt Indigenizing teaching methods to counteract the systemic dominance of knowledge and communication (Louie et al., 2017). Fellner (2018) suggested that teaching decolonizing curriculum does not mean dismissing the value of Euro-Western approaches entirely. Instead, deconstruction is necessary to dismantle existing power hierarchies between Eurocentric and Indigenous methods, creating room to centre work on Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Many Canadian universities have set goals within their Indigenous strategic plans to enhance the roles of Elders, through Elders-in-Residence and Indigenous Knowledge Keeper programming, to build greater capacity for culturally appropriate teaching and learning (Ottmann, 2020; University of Manitoba, 2019; University of Victoria, 2017). Some Canadian

universities (University of Alberta, 2022; University of Victoria, 2017) have identified that there is a need to develop formal protocols for working with Elders and Knowledge Keepers who are available to the entire campus community. When appropriate, universities should also seek to develop governing or advisory bodies that include representation and voices of Indigenous students, community members and Elders. Wallin & Tunison (2022) suggested involving more Indigenous people could demonstrate the value and impacts of Western education, helping to shift the distrust of the education system and open possibilities that may not have been previously accepted in Indigenous communities.

Elders' presence on campus is also important to Indigenous students. One student emphasized how crucial Elders were in their upbringing:

The elders used to always tell us to go to ceremonies, and they always say 'it's hard to be Indigenous, but it's supposed to be. You're supposed to have a hard life. That's the only way you grow your spirit, how you develop as a person. If you have an easy life, then you're always taking. You're never giving back or serving anything.

Cultural Efforts

Staff and students acknowledged that they felt the work that USask was doing towards Indigenization, reconciliation, and decolonization was positive. Staff participants mentioned that they felt the USask land acknowledgement has been highlighting the constant effort being made by the institution. They felt that having it said before events, meetings, and becoming a normal and routine part of day-to-day operations of the entire campus community has shown that the dominant class has a desire to learn more and was a way of countering some of the barriers that Indigenous students faced. One staff member said, "I think doing things like the land acknowledgement is small but huge."

An Indigenous student noted:

If I'm a first-year Indigenous student and it's my first time coming to USask, I can see the Indigenous symbolism throughout campus. I can see that the university is acknowledging that there's missing and murdered Indigenous women. So I'm like, this is a university that's at least trying to be welcoming of Indigenous students and issues and talking about

them. And then I see the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre (GORBSC), and I like how they're at least trying to invest in Indigenous related things and in students.

Since the mid 1980s, USask has hosted Powwows and Métis celebrations to honour the academic success of Indigenous students (USask, 2024). Three student participants expressed how proud they felt to be an Indigenous student at USask during these events. For the graduation Powwow, students spoke of how it was an honour to take part in convocation ceremonies, but even more so to be able to be a part of something that was just for Indigenous students. One student, when talking about the feelings they had when remembering Powwows showed me the visible goosebumps on their arms.

Before this study, I had never participated in the Powwows, as I did not fully understand their purpose. I felt as a White settler I would not belong, or worse, that I would be in the way. I was surprised to hear how many students expressed joy when they remembered that non-Indigenous staff and students participated in the Powwow. Students recalled being in an introductory Indigenous Wellness course, where their lectures were cancelled for the day so students could go out and participate in the Powwow, and that they were shocked that the majority of the class attended. The student said:

There were so many people there who weren't Indigenous, and it felt really nice to see people appreciating and just enjoying themselves and enjoying our culture. It's very rare that you'll see someone who isn't Indigenous there, but there was just such an abundance of people, and everyone just looked so happy. The mood felt good, the atmosphere and vibes all felt good, and everyone was just happy.

Students also reflected on the Powwows as a chance to see Indigenous students who had relocated to the city reconnecting and sharing openly with each other. They felt it highlighted the importance of staying connected to community, culture, and relationships and was a perfect way for Indigenous students to highlight self-determination, and the ability to continue on. One student said, "There's a lot of perseverance that came through that you could see really fueled a lot of the students that had showed up. So that was something that was really cool."

Lastly, both staff and student participants noted the importance and positive effects of smudging on campus. Staff noted that changes to USask's smudge and ceremony policies to

allow them to occur anywhere on campus was a nice win (USask, 2023). Students again acknowledged the positive effects on their mental and physical health when being able to attend a smudging circle at GORBSC that was readily available.

What Do You Need More Of?

More Indigenous Faculty and Staff

Nearly all participants interviewed in this study expressed a need for more Indigenous faculty and staff members at USask and stressed the importance of representation. Staff participants wanted to ensure that Indigenous representation was across campus and that Indigenous students had Indigenous staff members available to connect with. They hoped this would ensure that Indigenous students feel understood and supported, instead of solely interacting with White settlers who may not fully comprehend their experiences. A staff member noted “USask has a large Indigenous staff and faculty compared to other institutions, but it still isn’t enough. There’s always room for more, and I know how difficult it can be even to retain staff sometimes.”

Many supporters of Indigenous students found themselves spending significant time assisting students with nonacademic issues, which was challenging work and could often lead to staff burnout. One staff responded,

Indigenous student services for any Indigenous engagement job is heavy work. It's training, it's lots of emotional labor, and it's constantly just ‘No, no, no’ ...And then you get ONE ‘Yes,’ and then you run with that. It's very, very hard work that not everyone’s cut out for, so there’s high burnout.

There was also concern about tokenizing the limited population of Indigenous people on campus. A staff participant shared an example where an Indigenous staff member was required to sign off on any and all things Indigenous within their department, which led to increased workload for that person. The staff member said,

The desire of the institution to do well and consult with Indigenous individuals is good, but there was not a large enough body of individuals to be consulted with. We couldn’t move anything that had an Indigenous identity attached to it forward without actually consulting

a single individual. First and foremost, they are not the only Indigenous individual that we have working here, but secondly, that's unfair to them, because that is so taxing. So I think just having more Indigenous staff would have broad cultural ramifications.

Staff interviewed who worked in graduate programs expressed concern that many Indigenous students were unable to have Indigenous members on their committees. Most students stressed the importance of having Indigenous people on campus because it allowed them to have someone that could understand what they were going through and provide not only support, but also mentorship. One student participant noted "Having an Indigenous person in an area that I felt very unwelcome and overwhelmed, and somebody who was compassionate and understanding of my intersectionality was so profoundly comforting."

Gaudry and Lorenz's (2018) policy framework of Indigenous inclusion stated that Indigenous inclusion is simply a matter of including more Indigenous people, where it is assumed that universities can Indigenize without substantial structural change. Instead, elevating Indigenous scholars to administrative roles enhances the potential for broader institutional improvements. A study by Uink et al., (2021) suggested that having more Indigenous voices at all levels of the institution will create changes that will have a ripple effect where there is a better understanding of what Indigenous students need to succeed, where Indigenous students will become part of a university system that is ready to support and receive them. Pidgeon (2016) believed that addressing the support needs of Indigenous students would lead to improved retention and graduation rates. This success would then create a larger pool of Indigenous candidates for graduate programs and future faculty, staff, and leadership positions. Successful Indigenous students in these roles can mentor others and drive systemic change by practicing Indigenous values.

Support for Faculty

There are calls for Indigenous faculty members to have opportunities for networking, and have mentors provided to them (Ottmann, 2020; University of Victoria, 2017). However, universities need to try harder than simply focusing on removing obstacles, instead, they need to work with Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and communities to overcome obstacles (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Both students and staff mentioned that there needs to be more recognition of oral history, storytelling, and different formats and ways of teaching within the classroom. Kuokkanen (2008) argued that by not including different ways of knowing, universities have limited themselves to a narrow view based on Western traditions. Embracing Indigenous knowledge would allow universities to broaden their understanding and include perspectives that have been overlooked, which one could argue is consistent with a universities purpose in the first place.

Staff participants expressed a desire for Indigenous content to be integrated throughout the curriculum rather than being limited to modules, add-ons, or elective courses. However, they noted that achieving this goal would require additional support for instructors to learn how to be more inclusive in their content and courses. To accomplish this, they emphasized the need for increased capacity and support for curriculum development among instructors.

Indigenous Programming

Below I outline how programs at USask, such as the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), and Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways (ISAP), to name only a few, are well regarded for bringing Indigenous ways of knowing and being into their curricula and program structures. Students mentioned specific instances where they felt faculty did an excellent job of developing curriculum that included and focused on Indigenous ways of knowing and engaging with knowledge. One student told the story of about a class they were taking that was studying critical analysis. They learned how to engage in Western pedagogies and approaches to research, and then how to apply Indigenous ways of knowing. The class was instructed to attend and participate in a Powwow, and then return to class ready to critically analyze their participation and what it meant to participate. The student reflected on how much they appreciated this being added to the course content.

Those are the most valuable resources, Indigenous academics and philosophers, critically decolonial minded people, making an effort to hold space for Indigenous thought and Indigenous ways of knowing in the institution. They're the champions of it. The proponents of it are very, very important.

Staff noted that there were a lot of Indigenous students enrolled in Indigenous Studies, and they wondered if that was the department or major that they felt safest in, if it was the most accessible option, or if it was truly out of personal interest. They were concerned that they were not doing a good enough job at showing Indigenous students the opportunities that exist in other majors. To contrast, one student participant who was an Indigenous Studies major noted that they felt they did not care about the education, they were only here to get ratified by a colonial institution. They were frustrated that their lived experiences were not enough, saying, “I won't be able to have a proper and stable livelihood without a degree. So, I'm going through the motions of learning what I already know.”

As presented by Cote-Meek (2014), for many Indigenous people, the historical narrative they have been exposed to has been presented from a White, Eurocentric perspective, depicting Indigenous people as primitive, unintelligent, and a dying race. Realizing that these portrayals are rooted in racism and understanding their profound impact on oneself, family, community, and other Indigenous groups can be a validating experience. For some, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the colonial narrative that critically examines the history of Indigenous people is not only validating but also uplifting. However, for some Indigenous students, realizing the severe effects of persistent colonial violence and personally making these connections can draw out a range of intense emotions, sometimes necessitating supportive counselling.

Cote-Meek (2014) outlined that not recognizing the potential trauma inflicted upon Indigenous students by these courses was an indirect form of racism. There is no doubt that Indigenous students face significant challenges in grappling with the history of colonialism and the enduring the ongoing violence it has created. One student participating in this study, majoring in Indigenous Studies, expressed that the course content was triggering. They shared their experience of attending class shortly after their sibling died by suicide. Learning about theories related to Indigenous health and the challenges faced by Indigenous communities became overwhelming for the student, prompting them to take a 4-year break from their studies before returning to complete their degree.

Safe Spaces and Sense of Community

The Issue

Indigenous students seek out spaces where they feel safe to express themselves and can find strength and rejuvenation. These actions in themselves become strategic ways to resist ongoing colonialism and racism (Cote-Meek, 2014). Although many institutions have recognized the importance of having Indigenous-focused centres, gathering spaces, and supports, it is important that all spaces across campus welcome these students and that there are ample opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to work collaboratively and willingly with recognition, respect, sharing, and mutual responsibility (Ottmann, 2020).

Student and staff participants both articulated the need for students to be able to develop a sense of community within USask. A staff member noted

There's a lot of opportunities and instances of Indigenous knowledges, people and Elders, Knowledge Keepers, all the things being uplifted at USask. So, I think that's a really important aspect. And how those cohorts, those different specific programs, really help guide students through their experience at USask.

Community-building strategies are vital to success because they recognize Indigenous students' spiritual, intellectual, and emotional needs that are sustained through one's sense of community and relationships with others (Pidgeon, 2016). If not addressed, these social and cultural challenges may significantly reduce Indigenous students' ability or desire to connect and identify with the university, which may reduce their success, and potentially lead to them withdrawing from their studies (Hearn & Kenna, 2021). As these barriers show, the responsibility for success does not lie solely with the students; support programs are needed and will work best if they are targeted and known throughout all levels of a university (Uink et al., 2021).

Fellner (2018) emphasized that creating physical spaces that reflect Indigenous cultures, values, and beliefs could be instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and relationality for students. Additionally, collaborative efforts with the community can serve as a bridge, enabling Indigenous individuals less familiar with their traditions to reconnect with their people's ways of knowing, being, and doing.

What Is Working?

Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre

Both students and staff noted the importance of a place on campus where Indigenous students could see Indigenous faces. One student noted that even when they were not seeking support, they could still be found within GORBSC:

It's just being in those spaces and seeing each other and knowing I'm not the only Indigenous person here on campus, I'm not alone. With how big and large the campus is, GORBSC definitely helps with assuring me that there's lots of us here. I'm not alone, and just being in those spaces feels really good.

Building Relationships

As this study emphasized, the inclusion of Indigenous voices is necessary to create any meaningful change. Staff mentioned the importance of actually talking to students and understanding what are the issues and barriers that are affecting their ability to move forward. One staff recalled

Having a conversation of what would be helpful, brainstorming and then finding the solution that works best for that individual student because everybody is individual. When we try to fit everybody into this kind of image of what we view as a university student should look like, that's where we get into trouble.

The staff noted that although there are policies and procedures that they must adhere to, there were times when they could be flexible and work to identify existing barriers without creating more obstacles for students along the way. The willingness to sit down and talk through the issues and navigate the bureaucracy has shown positive effects on student retention numbers. One staff member said,

As an institution I think we underestimate how detrimental those different types of processes and policies can be, and how that can actually be the tipping point for a student wanting to leave an institution. It's just too hard to navigate.

Both students and staff noted that Indigenous students tended to have a go-to person: an Indigenous advisor, a staff member, or faculty member because they had developed a relationship, within their college or not. An example of the importance of relationships was a staff member who noted that there were students that had no issues with deadlines, but there were also students going through family issues. They spoke of a time where a student was unable to do the required paperwork to apply for a leave of absence at the correct time. However, when the student did come back, the staff member was able to sit down with them and the student was willing to share what they went through. The staff member knew that they could apply for a retroactive leave of absence, but the student was unaware this was possible. The student was grateful to be able to have their time extended in the program and felt they were able to complete their studies. The staff member noted that if the student had not felt comfortable coming to them, they may have never finished their program.

What Do You Need More Of?

Centralized Supports

Although many Indigenous student supports exist at USask, staff and students commented that sometimes it was difficult to navigate who to talk to and where to find the supports. Staff noted that many times their roles overlapped with other units and that they needed to work collaboratively not just across campus, but also within Indigenous communities, and they needed to make sure everyone was aware of what everyone was doing, so they had the ability to share opportunities.

Staff said they hoped that if everything for Indigenous students were located in the same place, having a one-stop shop, students would not be bounced around when seeking support. Not only is moving across units difficult, but the huge campus also presented barriers where students were intimidated about going to additional locations. Many supports exist within GORBSC, and staff suggested the additional need for a centralized database of Indigenous support systems across campus, where all things Indigenous students needed to access could be in the same location. Staff also mentioned that they would like to see the creation of guidebooks or training manuals that were Indigenous-student specific.

More Opportunities to Meet Students Where They Are

Throughout the interviews, both staff and students mentioned how effective it was when supports like college advisors, financial specialists, or library staff came to the GORBSC to meet with Indigenous students for drop-in and scheduled appointments. Staff commented that students were more likely to meet with them within GORBSC than if they had to find their offices. Students said they were worried they would not be able to find the right office locations around campus.

Both students and staff commented that students felt safe within the walls of GORBSC and were able to talk and express what they were going through. However, staff wished there were still more opportunities for them to get in front of Indigenous students and share what resources they had and their contact information so students could reach out.

Staff also spoke about the need to be able to access contact information for Indigenous students to be able to share information. They spoke about issues with the Indigenous verification process, saying that the information was difficult to access, even for those in direct support roles for Indigenous students. As one staff noted,

It's quite confidential information to access, but I wish it were more accessible to staff so we know who Indigenous students are and who to target to get specific information out. The more informed they are, the more information they have to know what's happening, then the more capable and confident they'll be in university life and have less problems. The less information they have, the more frustrated they're gonna be, the more likely they're gonna want to quit and leave and call down about this place, and we don't want that.

Within the Indigenous Strategy for the University of Saskatchewan (Ottmann, 2020) there is a commitment to develop policies and processes to support and empower Indigenous self-identification, but there is also a need to monitor the information and allow relevant groups on campus to have access to it. However, as Pidgeon (2016) described, tensions can hinder Indigenization if there is the possibility that the institution is tokenizing students, instead of meaningfully practicing Indigenization.

One staff member also noted that there are many funding opportunities available to Indigenous students, but they have difficulty getting that message out to them. They wished they had more opportunities to not only be able to send messages to Indigenous students, but also to

help direct students where they can go if they have questions or need support in applying for funding. This challenge showed the disconnect between centralized Indigenizing strategies and the distribution of Indigenous supports across campus.

Barriers Created by Colonial Institutions

The Issue

A staff participant remarked,

I think we're moving further away from the European model of education as a public service, and more towards the US model of education as a commodity. As we do that, we're creating more barriers for all students, but I think it intensifies for our Indigenous students.

Both staff and student participants mentioned that they felt the issues and challenges Indigenous students were facing at USask had not changed in decades. Although they felt that change was coming, they did not believe it had fully arrived yet. A staff member said,

I think the trend is just how slow the university is in helping students needs. It shouldn't always be on the onus of the student to force the university to keep up with the times. We shouldn't have to have a huge student complaint from the population to make a change on campus.

Administrative Barriers (Policies, Procedures, And Deadlines)

One student gave an example of USask policies hindering support systems, discussing the trauma they endured after the death of their brother. Because they had to drop out of school, they no longer had access to Student Outreach and Affairs services, including counselling. The student shared that they no longer had a support mechanism. Despite having built a support system and relationship with counsellors, they were unable to access assistance when they needed it most because they were no longer enrolled. The student also noted how difficult the situation was for the staff member, because even though they had developed a rapport and could identify the student was in distress, they had to deny support because of policy.

Staff also noted that Indigenous students were often at a disadvantage when it came to applying for scholarships and bursaries. One staff member expressed that it was unfair that the

grade point average requirements affected Indigenous students' eligibility for awards, without recognizing the trauma or experiences they faced during their studies which likely impacted their academic performance.

Band Funding

Band funding came up as a topic of frustration in many of the interviews with staff and students. Many staff members felt that the timelines for Band funding were confusing, and knew the confusion was even worse for students. Staff felt frustrated that students who were waiting to see if they received Band funding before applying had limited options when applying to USask. They may have only a few colleges to choose from that still had open applications, and even those with open applications may have only limited classes with seats available for registration. One staff member said,

Students don't know whether or not they have it until later on in the term compared to when USask is accepting applications. We want students to come in and register but there's always a delay between if students know they can even afford to come to university this year.

Another staff participant remarked, “There is a disconnect between Band funding, deadlines, and the process there. That is not a fun situation to navigate. It's like a chicken before the egg type of situation.” In essence, students need to be enrolled before they can get their funding, but they also need their funding to be enrolled. It was a daunting thing for students to understand because it varies depending on their Band. Staff said that having case-by-case situations became a huge administrative task.

Another issue with Band funding that came up in the interviews was that the requirements could be strict. Sometimes students needed to be registered in more credits than a standard full-time student. Most students are considered full time at nine credits per term, but staff noted instances where Band funding required students to be in at least twelve credits, which limited the option to drop classes if they were not doing well. As one staff member explained, “So sometimes they're sticking out a course to keep their funding from which they really should withdraw. It would be beneficial to their average if they withdrew from it, but they can't because they need their funding.”

Finding housing when being reliant on Band funding was also a struggle staff and students mentioned. If students were unable to have their funding until close to the term start date, it impacted them being able to start because they had to find somewhere to live. A staff member said, “They have to move. They have to get set up, and then they're already two or three weeks behind the term, which is not a great way to start out your university experience.” Students noted the difficulty in being able to find a place to rent so close to the start of term, but also expressed that they felt there was racism in the city of Saskatoon. One student spoke of having to use their husband’s last name because no one would rent to them with an Indigenous-sounding name.

For on-campus housing, staff recognized the mismatch of Band funding and timelines did not give students the opportunity to apply to residence. The guideline was to apply to residence before being accepted to university because it fills up fast. However, when some Indigenous students are applying for the first time in the summer, the room offers have already gone out.

Staff members also mentioned that for Indigenous students, the Student Health and Dental plan opt-out process is a recurring issue each year. In some case, the Band funding did not cover the cost of the student health and dental plan, but students were unaware of this, and when their Band funding finally became available, they owed funds for the Health and Dental plan. By that time, the students had usually missed the deadline to opt out of the plan, and worse, then had financial holds on their accounts which could affect their ability to register for classes in the future. Staff mentioned how difficult it was to get a hold of the plan office and how unfriendly and unsupportive they were, so they could not imagine how difficult it would be for students who needed assistance. One staff member wished the USSU would get involved and be able to offer support.

Staff and students spoke of how many Indigenous students who are unable to receive Band funding or scholarships needed to work either part or full time, which meant less time for schoolwork. Students noted that because of work commitments, they had difficulty handing in assignments on time. One student remarked

I have very good comprehension of the content, but when it comes to late deductions on my papers or people refusing to accept my papers because they're late, it dramatically

impacts my grade. I barely scrape by some of my classes, even though I'm the most engaged student and having full conversations and fully comprehend the content.

Overall, Band funding was a huge issue for Indigenous students. Although it offers support, its policies and timelines affect students' ability to meet deadlines set by USask. Both staff and students noted that there is a lot of reliance on Band funding. Students noted that even though band funding, scholarships, and grants exist, nothing is guaranteed. Even if the student knew they could get the funding, they would not know when it would come through or when it would be approved. Staff noted that it was also difficult to identify who would need assistance with the funding practice, as a lot of new Indigenous students do not know who to go to or how to ask for help.

Assimilation

One student noted that they felt that USask's attempts at Indigenization were just repackaged assimilation. They felt that the support mechanisms USask was providing were focused too much on succeeding within a colonial system and not enough for individuals to succeed as individuals. They said, "It's kind of a really wicked vicious cycle. In order to do well in a in a colonial institution, you basically have to assimilate, and act colonized."

Indigenous participants spoke of feeling liked they needed to neglect their community, ceremonial, and cultural obligations and responsibilities to do well and get the grades needed for scholarships so they would not have to work while attending school. One student said

To me it was survival. It's not about using a system, it's about trying to survive within a system just to stay above water, just to prove to my children that it can be done. It's hard, but it can be done, you just gotta learn how to be resourceful.

Family Commitments

Staff recognized that some Indigenous students were stretched too thin. A staff who worked with Indigenous PhD students noted that the students are often working part or full time, are often caregivers to elderly parents and/or young children and are also doing a lot of volunteering and/or committee work.

As reported by Anderson (2021) at Statistics Canada, Indigenous youth were more likely to be young parents than non-Indigenous youth. As of 2016, 10.5% of Indigenous youth had children living at home compared to 2.9% of non-Indigenous youth. Almost all staff and student participants mentioned the struggles for those who needed childcare, mentioning a shortage of daycare spots at USask and limited options for family housing.

Participants noted the significant emphasis on supporting the family in the Indigenous community. They highlighted that for USask, one impactful measure would be to assist Indigenous students needing childcare. This connection to family and the broader community influenced the dynamic with the institution, which primarily focuses on individual development. One staff said,

Having a culture in which being a parent is a part of the culture instead of a “thing that we have to figure out how to deal with” would make a big change for a lot of our Indigenous students who are parents.

One student participant spoke about the flexibility granted to them to take a maternity leave during their studies. Acknowledging expectations and commitments outside of school needs to apply to retention efforts. A staff member noted, “Retention isn't just in that 4-year window. Retention can mean they came back after a three-year break, widening that spectrum of understanding of what retention looks like. Is it to retain them, or what is their definition of success?” Staff and students discussed family commitments beyond children also needed to be understood. Indigenous individuals place their family first, even when their family is far away. Whenever their family needed them, Indigenous students’ focus immediately shifted, and they went to support their loved ones. As one student explained, assignments and exams often slipped past them because they were going home to help their mothers and younger siblings. A staff member said, “This family dynamic is something that we, as members of the dominant Western culture, recognize only a small part of. Our culture is largely driven by individualism, which contrasts with the communal values seen in Indigenous cultures.”

Being away from family was also a struggle many of the Indigenous participants discussed. For many students, attending university was their first experience being on their own.

The Indigenous student participants noted the shock of coming from smaller high school classes to large lectures with over 200 students. One student remarked

I think a lot of it is just feeling alone, and even just getting thrown into a completely different lifestyle. A lot of us came from small towns that are many hours away. We grew up with the lake or river right there. Now having to quickly adjust to city life, I think the biggest thing is just learning how to figure out life on your own. Just being on your own and having to get used to that.

What Is Working?

Providing Education

At USask, resources are available for students, staff, and faculty in Indigenization and Indigenous education professional development (USask, n.d.-c), through workshops, online modules, and courses. However, as outlined below, if this were made mandatory as it is at other institutions, it would likely have a greater effect. One staff member noted,

When I think about my friends who don't work on campus, they don't really get that experience to dive into Indigenous culture and understand these systemic and historical roots of where the issues that we see come from. So anytime we can do more of that, I'm so in support of it for our teams. I feel really lucky that my unit has latched on to priorities like that.”

Breaking The Rules – Flexibility/Accepting Alternate Forms

One staff member noted that within their department, PhD students’ comprehensive exams had a reading list, but it was all from Western scholars. This meant that students studying Indigenous topics had to learn the Western content and the Indigenous literature as well, which led to these students having a lot of additional work to proceed in their programs. They said, “I do think there would have been a handful of Indigenous students that would have left over the years had we been rigid and unwilling to not be flexible when it comes to the PhD program.”

Another staff member mentioned that their unit was slowly starting to move away from what was viewed as a traditional dissertation. They said,

There were students who did part of their dissertation on moose hides, and an Indigenous student and a non-Indigenous ally who were able to work together on their dissertation. When those kinds of stories come out, it's nice being involved in an institution that actually allows that to happen.

Indigenous Specific Programming and Cohort Models

I asked students to give examples of times they felt USask performed well in supporting them as an Indigenous student. Many mentioned Indigenous specific programs such as ITEP, ISAP or SUNTEP, where the Indigenous-specific lens honoured and uplifted Indigenous knowledges and cultures. Students spoke positively about the programs using a cohort model, allowing Indigenous students to be together, so they did not feel so alone. One student noted,

I just really wanted to belong. I wanted to fit in. I felt like an outsider already, but coming in and then being accepted, or even being in a smaller group helped me transition. You get a better idea of how the classes are run, the grading system, and all of that introductory kind of stuff. It was really beneficial.

Students noted that once they knew who to go to and where to find support, these programs were excellent for providing both formal and informal support. As one student said, “I don't know if I would have been where I am now, academically, or professionally, without that guidance. And that's important those first few years.” They also spoke of how having a group of Indigenous students to share experiences with was invaluable. One student said, “Having colleagues and peers that you can lean on really makes a huge difference to success and retention.”

In addition to the people, students appreciated the smaller class sizes while still being able to feel connected to campus. Both staff and students also mentioned the importance of the Indigenous Parent Circle and other student groups, events, and activities for Indigenous students on campus. One student shared fond memories of a recreational volleyball team that students signed up for at GORBSC. Even though the players did not know each other, they quickly became close and made new friends because they felt safe and secure having a group of Indigenous peers.

What Do You Need More Of?

Review of Policies and Procedures

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) described how transforming university structures appears to be more challenging than implementing policies to assist Indigenous students in adjusting to them. Staff felt that many of the policies and procedures they need to adhere to when supporting Indigenous students may be outdated. They felt a lot of the procedures on campus were not to serve students, but instead were there to serve the university. This creates issues because it placed a significant burden on the students to navigate these processes, putting them at a disadvantage.

Staff expressed a need for the policies and processes to be reviewed to make them more student friendly. They wished there could be more proactive measures to assist students, rather than always responding defensively or reactively.

Students felt that the USask community does not understand that many Indigenous students do not have the same privileges of other students attending the institution. Policies and timelines benefit the privileged and put those at a disadvantage even further behind. As one student said,

I have to work three or four shifts in a row instead of working on my paper, but I have the same deadline as somebody who lives at home with their mom with absolutely no responsibilities. It ain't fair. Ever. It sure ain't equitable.

Staff Training

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) identified that reconciliation Indigenization goes beyond simple Indigenous inclusion by aiming to change the university's structure and educating faculty, staff, and students to transform their perceptions and interactions with Indigenous people. It envisions universities playing a role in citizenship education, promoting reconciliation efforts that extend beyond university campuses. Uink et al. (2021) emphasized the need for professional development for those within universities who support Indigenous students that includes practical and contextual cultural awareness training. Currently, many institutions provide this training as a resource to front-line staff, so they could become more aware of the history of

Indigenous people in Canada, including colonial policies and practices (University of Manitoba, 2019; University of Victoria, 2017).

Some training and professional development does exist at USask, but it is not mandatory. Staff participants spoke of the desire to have this type of training, not only so that they could better support students, but also so they could feel that they were doing their part for decolonization and Indigenization efforts. They felt if everyone had access to continuous training, they could engage in reconciliation efforts and learn to appreciate diverse learning styles, empowering each person to contribute in their own way. A staff member noted,

And if everybody does that, 12,000 staff members go separate ways, we have this whole hive of people working towards what I think is a better support system and institution where Indigenous students might feel welcome, and a place they can thrive in.

The University of Victoria (2017) uses a unique strategy: ensuring students in professional programs who may work with Indigenous people are educated on Indigenous history and culture and on what impact colonial practices have had on Indigenous people and their communities. Fellner (2018) supported this, noting that including reconciliation decolonization in the learning process prepares researchers, educators, and practitioners to engage with Indigenous communities with humility and openness. This education involves understanding protocols and practices that enable them to better align their work with community agendas in culturally relevant ways.

Staff shared their concerns that new international students at USask may not know or understand the history and challenges of Indigenous people in Canada. The staff felt that USask had a role and responsibility to better prepare international students who are looking to transition into employment and to maybe become permanent residents with education and awareness around the colonial history of Canada. As one staff noted “How do we better prepare students who want to immigrate to Canada about their role with reconciliation? I know that's not an Indigenous student support, but that's supporting Indigenous people broadly.”

As Cote-Meek (2014) and Pidgeon (2016) presented, raising awareness about Indigenous people and the longstanding history of colonialism is a continual act of resistance. Despite facing pressure to stay silent on issues of racism, Indigenous individuals persist in educating society.

This ongoing effort is crucial for fostering a deeper understanding of Indigenous people, their history, and contemporary challenges they face.

However, the burden of educating society should not be the responsibility of Indigenous people. Instead, non-Indigenous individuals must actively engage in their own decolonizing and Indigenization journeys and embrace their responsibility to educate themselves and others. Telling the truths of Indigenous roots of Canada will play a key part in naturalizing Indigenous knowledge, and it is the education establishments' responsibility to bring out these truths (Little Bear, 2009). By doing so, our community can collectively move towards reconciliation and create a more inclusive environment within postsecondary institutions and beyond.

Access and Equity Services Accommodations

As Pidgeon's (2008) work identified, the elementary and high school system frequently leaves Indigenous students inadequately prepared to meet university entrance requirements. Often, these students are first-generation college attendees who lack the academic skills needed to advance within the institution. In addition, as referenced in studies by Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2020) and Uink et al. (2021), Indigenous students face pedagogical challenges regarding their learning strategies and study skills and expectations about tests and assignments. Additional academic barriers include those related to curriculum content, teacher attitudes, and teaching and learning practices.

Student participants expressed how helpful it would be if Indigenous students could have Access and Equity Services (AES) accommodations, such as note-taking and time-and-a-half for papers and exams, without having to go through the paperwork and application process. They felt they should have the same access as people who have physical or cognitive obstacles because they have all these barriers and stresses in their life that they are constantly overcoming. One student noted,

I think it should just be guaranteed, and you shouldn't have to go through all these obstacles because it's so overwhelming and you don't know what to do. You come to the city, and you're overwhelmed. You don't have any resources, support mechanisms, or people to hold your hand. Or if you do, you're too shy to even ask for them.

Creating a Message of Hope

One staff participant mentioned that they were working with colleges at USask to rework the wording in the Required to Discontinue (RTD) letters. These letters are sent out to students whose average falls below a specific percentage determined by the colleges and informs them that they need to take some time off from their studies. The staff member emphasized that if USask is aiming for retention, it is important to illustrate hope in these communications. RTD letters are an unfortunate message to receive, and the current format primarily tells the student how to contest it. A staff member said,

You are illustrating how to be combative with you as an organization as opposed to stating that this is an awful situation that you're finding yourself in, but we can help you to get out of it. When it comes to bounce-back style programming, hope is the key and consistently focusing on potential and not using language that indicates failure.

One student also mentioned the language used in the RTD letters, saying,

I think one of the biggest barriers is language. A lot of students operate out of fear. So if you're using language that is intended to induce fear, I guess that needs to go. The whole power and structure of somebody has my future in their hands, and it's over if I don't act agreeable.

One student also mentioned the language used in the process of withdrawing from classes, saying,

I felt like I was being judged. The questions were, "Why did you not reach out before? Why did you not do this by a certain time? How are you gonna ensure that you don't do it like that again?" Because if my trauma response is to freeze and shut down or detach, I can't guarantee that I'm not going to do it again, because I don't know myself enough yet.

Transition Support

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan's (2020) research showed that transitioning from high school to postsecondary education had significant challenges for Indigenous students. Even with the best support systems in place, the complexities associated with moving away from communities could create feelings of isolation, demotivation, and depression. One student

suggested it would be helpful to audit a class first and then complete it again for grades. They noted that the anxiety of the unknown prevented them from being able to successfully complete the course. They ended up always withdrawing or dropping the course, or worse, “freezing” and giving up and failing. They noted if they could sit through the entire class first, they would not feel that there were any surprises when they retook it, and that they would better be able to successfully complete the course. Staff also suggested it would be beneficial having students be able to experience one class on campus before the term started.

Both staff and students spoke of the academic supports they needed to adjust to university life. Bringing awareness to the disconnection between university and high school education for Indigenous students was a significant topic of conversation. Staff noted that many students came lacking science or math courses before they arrived. They thought this negatively impacted the students’ experience because they needed to play catch up. Students noted that they did not feel their rural schools did any intentional work towards supporting them in their transition to postsecondary education. Students commented that they were lucky they had family members who had attended university to learn on in such cases. One student said, “I was very lucky that my mom was a USask Grad. I had that support system there. I think if I didn't have that, it would have been a different experience.”

Staff and students both mentioned that the USask supports for Indigenous students focused on academics instead of outside the classroom. They suggested a course, training, or available support mechanisms that could help students learn the transit system, navigate campus, fill out housing applications, file taxes, etc. One Indigenous student remarked on the needs of first-year students:

They need to know where to buy groceries. They need to know where to live, how to how to read landlord agreements, just basic living skills and life skills. I wish there were more resources to help students integrate into Saskatoon city life.

Another non-academic situation outlined earlier was that students who were waiting to receive Band funding missed the deadlines for residence applications. A staff member suggested removing the challenges of students having to find somewhere to live on short notice by dedicating housing for Indigenous students and their families if needed.

As Restoule et al. (2013) showed, institutions need to focus efforts to make the transition to postsecondary education easier for prospective Indigenous students, which could result in a positive change in the experience of these students. When remembering their experience transitioning into university, one student said,

When you come to the university and you don't have that background all you see is brick and some not-so-friendly faces, because you're looking for a threat. You're always scanning for threat first, before you'll look for the good, happy, smiley faces because we grew up in trauma. That's how we're trained, it's automatic.

How and When to Let Students Know About Supports

Staff noted the importance of Indigenous students knowing what is available for supports:

Campus is a pretty incredible place of supports and resources, but Indigenous students aren't used to asking for help. How do you sense their needs, or how do you tell them what they need to know before they realize they need to know it? I think that is probably where we lose a lot of Indigenous students, because they might not even know these supports exist.

Other staff members noted that beyond asking for help, students need self-advocacy to be able to know what questions to ask and then be able to take that information and navigate the university systems. Staff found it difficult to find a way to weave that communication and awareness piece throughout the academic year. Students noted that when they were first applying or registering at USask, as soon as they indicated they were Indigenous, many support systems reached out. One student said,

I even remember when I was accepted and the Dean of my college actually called me and asked how things are going, how the move was from up North, and if everything was fine. That felt pretty cool to know people are here and people care about me. But that was kind of really only in my first year.

The difference from first to second year in the level of contact about supports was evident in many of the interviews with students and staff. Students expressed that they would like to have more check-ins and more information about the supports in their upper years.

Year-Round Financial Support Options

Staff wished there were more awards and financial assistance for Indigenous students accessible throughout the year, instead of just at the beginning of the term. A staff member said,

I wish there was a constant award application that they can access and apply for, and it's guaranteed. If they meet the requirements they get it. I wish more was accessible throughout the year, and not only sometimes because students are needing money anytime throughout the year for whatever circumstances they have.

Many Indigenous families, like other families who live in poverty, live in delicate circumstances where one minor event can catastrophically impact their daily lives (Baxter & Meyers, 2016). If ongoing support existed, this would also support students who missed entering awards deadlines and create more opportunities for financial aid when it was really needed.

What is Success?

The Issue

Many staff expressed that they felt USask was defining success solely based on numbers and enrolment data, rather than considering a holistic approach. One example of differing definitions of success came from a staff participant describing an event for Indigenous youth that had external corporate sponsorship. The sponsors measured success in terms of getting 30 to 40 youth to attend the event. However, the staff member and their USask unit felt that if they were able to impact positively on one student's life, then the event was a success. The staff member said,

Success doesn't have to be a large quantity. As long as it impacts at least one person, I think it's successful. So even if we encourage a student to come and try university but they may decide a different program is a better fit for them, that's still a success. They have grown, and then they figured stuff out.

However success is defined, it was not always viewed as a positive outcome. One student mentioned that success could be detrimental when they returned home to their communities:

There is a pressure to finish what you start and get your degree and go home. But when you get home, you're isolated and thought to be assimilated now, and that "you're just

gonna push all their White people shit on us, and you don't have our interest at heart no more," because the relationships broke down. It's kind of a damned if you do. Damned if you don't.

As presented by Gallop and Bastien (2016), a comprehensive and inclusive definition of success among Indigenous students is essential, as it respects and honours their diverse cultural backgrounds, aspirations, and values. By embracing a more inclusive and holistic view of success, institutions can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by Indigenous students, to create a more equitable and supportive educational experience.

What Is Working?

Self Determination

Gallop and Bastien (2016) suggested that the relationship between self-efficacy and learning engagement is circular, in that the more a student is engaged and the more they can learn, the more self-efficacy they will have. Instilling self-efficacy in Indigenous students is vital to success because confident students stay motivated and engaged, even in the face of short-term setbacks. When asked what they value most about being an Indigenous student at USask, a student participant stated,

What I value the most is that I'm here, and I can be here. I'm taking up these spaces. I'm doing what I can and I'm proving that. I'm finishing off my third year, I'm hopefully gonna be graduating next year. I'm doing it. And I CAN do it.

Cote-Meek's (2014) work showed how Indigenous students could come to the classroom carrying their own family and community history of colonialism its negative effects and the continuous experience of living in a society where racism and violence continue every day. Understanding the intergenerational trauma of the impact of racisms is critical to gain a fuller context of how current ongoing colonialism may impact Indigenous students. One student noted,

I noticed that happens a lot with Indigenous students, the shutdown, the distancing. They stop going to classes, stop communicating. I really did a lot of self-introspection throughout this journey because I had to really heal parts of myself just so that I could stay in school and really stay committed to my goals of completing university.

In the past, colonization imposed many barriers to limit Indigenous self-sufficiency to cast doubt on Indigenous individuals' ability to support themselves and to ensure settlers did not face economic competition from them (Gray, 2022). Both staff and students mentioned the need for self-determination. Students said they valued it within themselves. One student noted that "Learning how to advocate for yourself, understand and believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, that's going to stop you from asking for help. They're kind of interrelated."

Students noted that it takes so much courage to actually admit they need help, and then even more to ask for it. One student said,

I think there are lots of support out there, and I am confident enough in myself to go out and find those supports, but I know that is not the case for the majority of us. I know a lot of people really don't know what's out there, or don't know that there's any supports.

Although staff wished they could do a case management system where advisors or counsellors could reach out to each Indigenous student periodically to check-in, no one I interviewed had the resources to do this. Students had two different responses to this idea, with some noting that regular email check-ins letting them know about supports available would be helpful and welcomed, but others thought that the emails would fill their already crowded inboxes and cause more stress. As one student noted, "Sometimes I don't even see emails because there's so many, and they get piled up. So they get buried. It sounds like I'm being aloof, or I'm just not paying attention or dismissive when in actuality I'm just overwhelmed."

Moments of Pride

Staff were asked for moments when they felt proud of their work supporting Indigenous students. One staff commented that they were proud of the dedicated Indigenous support they had within their units. They said they were never worried they would not have dedicated professionals for Indigenous students, because they knew it was a university priority for Indigenization and supporting Indigenous students. They felt that they would always be able to find resources and did not feel that positions would be cut. One staff member said,

I think it's one of the things on campus where I know that they'll find money to do stuff which is not the case for a lot of initiatives, but it's it seems to be one where the university actually takes its commitment seriously.

Both Indigenous staff members interviewed felt it was important to give back and share their experiences of being an Indigenous student at USask. They felt dedicated to making the experiences of current Indigenous students easier and more pleasant than their own. They spoke about how it made them feel good to get positive feedback not only from students, but also from members of Indigenous communities and other USask staff members. One staff member said,

I don't get a whole lot of face-to-face interaction, and I'm oftentimes glued to my laptop. When I get good email responses back and they tell me what it means to them, what I was able to do for them. Oftentimes I forget that stuff. I'm often trying to learn from those negative experiences where I couldn't help, and I forget about the good I do. I forget about that a lot so when I get that positive feedback, it means a lot to me.

What Do You Need More Of?

Redefining Success

Staff noted that they saw a difference in Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and their desire to make positive change. They observed that non-Indigenous students often wanted to change the world and be recognized for it, while Indigenous students aimed to improve their communities without seeking recognition. Staff perceived a selflessness in Indigenous students' definition of success, which focused on learning about the world and engaging in the processes that enhance the experience of their families and communities.

One staff member noted that success should be measured in relation to the Indigenous student meeting their own goals and achieving the results they intended to. For all students, staying in school and completing their program is a momentous success. However, many Indigenous students came to USask as the first generation to go to postsecondary in their families, and just being admitted could be a success to them. Many student participants mentioned how proud they felt to be the first in their families to attend university.

Others noted that they were proud to be following in their parents' or grandparents' footsteps. Knowing this made them feel like they could be successful. One student said "I know I can do this. My parents did it. My grandparents did it. Just kind of keeping on and breaking that cycle. I'm here, I'm in these spaces, and I am doing pretty freaking well."

Gallop and Bastien (2016) argued that colonial definitions of success are tied to the assimilation of Indigenous students, encouraging them to adopt mainstream values and behaviours of postsecondary institutions, like aiming for higher socioeconomic status and career advancement. Uink et al. (2021) suggested that, in contrast, success should not be measured solely by retention rates, as these rates do not indicate whether a student is making progress towards completing their studies. Simply focusing on keeping students enrolled, without assessing their academic progress, means students may be recorded as retained even if their academic advancement is stalled.

Holistic View of Success

Pidgeon (2008) conducted a study to further theoretical and practical discussions about the educational success of Indigenous students by expanding the definition of success and aligning retention theories to advance the agenda of Indigenous higher education. In this study I emphasized that a holistic view should incorporate the physical, emotional, spiritual/cultural, and cognitive needs of the individual, family, and community.

Participants suggested that a holistic view of Indigenous student success would recognize that even attempting university is a win. A staff participant said,

When a student says, "at least I'm here and at least I tried." That sort of thing could be a success, but generally in terms of what I want for them, I'm hoping that they intend to do it for themselves.

In addition, one staff noted that even if an Indigenous student discovered a different career path outside of the university or came back later in life to finish their studies, this should also be considered a success. However, one staff said, "So Indigenous student success might just be getting them to come and try it. I am always worried, though, Is it actually not for them? Or were the supports not available? And did we not make it for them?"

The recognition of the holistic nature of individuals in the teaching-learning environment requires pedagogical approaches that are different from traditional university settings. Unlike the reliance on cognitive methods and the compartmentalization of functions in teaching, learning, and support services like counseling, a more comprehensive approach is essential for Indigenous students (Chichekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020; Cote-Meek, 2014). One student said, “And so that was a big chunk of my growth here was developing my voice, and my reconnecting with my spirituality while still trying to succeed. The Western, and the Indigenous perspectives are so different.”

As said by Uink et al. (2021), supports for Indigenous students need to rely on context-specific factors, where there is a broad spectrum of interventions that those in supporting roles are aware of. Whatever supports are available need to be well known and accessible by all members of the campus community and they need to be regularly reviewed to ensure that Indigenous voices are included in decision-making.

4.6. Implications of Study to Practice, Theory, and Further Research

I learned quickly that just because students were still enrolled, it did not mean they were feeling positively about this institution. I naively thought I would not struggle with difficult interviews, but that is an essence of my White privilege. I had a tough time in many of the interviews keeping my interviewer hat on and not trying to fix situations for the students.

I found hearing first-hand students’ traumas and struggles affected me greatly. More than once, interviews with students who shared about family members’ suicides, their declining mental health, their struggles, and how they were trying to overcome the trauma broke me, and I found myself crying following the interviews. Then I thought, who am I, with all of my White privilege, to be crying over an Indigenous person’s trauma? I had to hear about this for an hour, and this person lives this everyday. I was not sure how to move on in this research process until I remembered, and kept reminding myself, I am here to make this place better. I knew that it was an honour to have the participants share their experiences with me, and I owed it to do them to do something with the information they gave me.

I became even more committed to recognizing trauma and not immediately trying to fix it so that Indigenous students could assimilate to this colonial institution. Instead, I heard what they

needed and what they wanted, and used my sphere of influence to work with Indigenous people to make USask a place where Indigenous students can thrive.

4.7 Manuscript 4 Summary

When I began this research, I set out to fix the issue of Indigenous student retention at USask for Indigenous students, not with them. I hope the number of quotes used in this dissertation shows the importance of including Indigenous voices in decolonization and Indigenization. The quotes come from both non-Indigenous staff and Indigenous staff and students, and all those involved in the interviews showed that the people of USask genuinely care about the student experience for all students.

The intent of this study was to hear first-hand stories to find instances where USask was performing well. This did not mean that I assumed that all Indigenous students access support systems or need assistance, as many succeed on their own. In addition, I by no means intended to downplay the role that colonialism has in not only creating, but also enforcing these barriers and challenges. Instead, my intent was that this study shed more light on – based on what the Indigenous students themselves said – what the issues were, what was working, and what USask needs to do to better support these students.

I am grateful for the experience of researching Indigenous student success in postsecondary settings, as it allowed me to learn about Indigenous people, a topic that was largely absent from my small-town Saskatchewan upbringing. This research has helped me better understand my place in decolonization and Indigenization. As a descendant of White settlers, I recognized that it was my responsibility to continue to educate myself and others about what I learned from this experience. I am pleased that this study was able to show many things were working at USask for Indigenous supports, but this study also showed that there is much work to be done. As a USask employee, I have become more confident and ready to collaborate with Indigenous people to support Indigenous students in achieving success, however they define it.

Manuscript 5: Overall Synthesis and Overview, Including Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to contribute to Indigenous student success by shifting the focus from just enrolment numbers to a more holistic view of success – one that blends academic achievement with a culturally enriching experience. Using a qualitative case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry, I examined successful past practices through interviews with staff and Indigenous students, highlighting strengths and areas that need improvement. I was driven by a desire to learn about Indigenous students' experiences at the University of Saskatchewan (USask). I wanted to better understand the barriers they faced and how, if possible, they overcame them. To do this, I conducted interviews with Indigenous students and staff who work in roles that support Indigenous students at USask to learn from their challenges and successes.

The major research question was **What practices currently contribute to Indigenous student success at USask and what innovations are necessary to overcome continuing barriers to equitable outcomes for Indigenous students?** More specifically, my study sought to answer the following questions:

- What has worked to keep Indigenous students enrolled at USask?
- What barriers have Indigenous students overcome, and how?
- What USask supports do Indigenous students currently access? What do they need?

While the topic of Indigenous student success is not new, taking an appreciative inquiry approach to the interviews provides data that USask will be able use to make meaningful changes. As Hammond (1998) and Smith (2023) describe, the essence of appreciative inquiry is that it focuses on a positive outcome by reframing or flipping the problem. It focuses on what is wanted and engages the people directly involved in the process. Instead of delving into the analysis of problems and assigning blame, this method centres on recognizing and strengthening what is working effectively.

For this study, I did not want to take on a rose-coloured-glasses approach and pretend that Indigenous students were not facing challenges at USask. However, after researching the barriers and traumas faced by this population, and by speaking to Indigenous students in my Doctor of

Education (Ed.D.) cohort, I began to think, what about the Indigenous students who are still enrolled? Has anyone asked them what is working?

A limitation of semi structured interviews is that the process can be daunting, tiring, and/or onerous for both the participants and the researcher. Pole and Morrison (2003) said, “interviews demand much of the researcher in terms of sensitivity and ethical awareness, that, on occasions, demands that the ‘listening ear’ also ‘bites his or her lip’” (p. 35). My own experiences at USask and my knowledge of available supports made it difficult at times to remain a neutral listener. It was infuriating to hear stories of students whose AES accommodations were not followed, or students dealing with traumatic events not receiving the compassion or support they needed to continue their studies.

Staying neutral was hard – I often found myself wanting to jump in and fix things. It was very difficult to remain a neutral researcher and just listen and not interject to try and fix situations. At the end of the interviews, I did find myself many times helping students understand that, for example, they could still be eligible for graduate programs, or that they could appeal when professors did not follow their AES accommodations. This highlighted a critical finding of the study: students often didn’t reach out for help, instead trying to solve issues on their own or giving up entirely. This reinforced the need for more proactive, compassionate, and accessible support systems for Indigenous students at USask.

Ultimately, this research journey was not just about identifying problems but about learning directly from the students who persist, finding out what helps them succeed, and amplifying those strengths to create better outcomes for future Indigenous students.

5.1 Manuscript 1:

This manuscript presented an introduction to the study and the problem of practice. The problem of practice outlined that although support systems exist, further research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness. Instead of focusing on increasing the Indigenous student population, USask needs to enhance supports for Indigenous students to increase their chances of success.

5.2 Manuscript 2:

The findings from literature review were broken down into four themes: racism and resistance, decolonization and Indigenization, defining success, and my own journey into acknowledging and understanding my White privilege.

Racism and Resistance

Racism persists in various forms, reinforced by social, cultural, and political structures. Despite efforts to Indigenize postsecondary education, Indigenous students continue to face daily racism on campus (Cote-Meek, 2014). Kumashiro's (2000) research highlighted the "othering" of students, where Indigenous students endure denial, pressure to act as Indigenous experts, and assumptions of intellectual inferiority.

Denial of racism in universities remains prevalent, even as institutions claim to combat it. Indigenous students often feel isolated and pressured to represent their culture, which perpetuates colonial stereotypes (Cote-Meek, 2014). They are also unfairly perceived as less intelligent or benefiting from undeserved advantages, a view rooted in colonialism (Gray, 2022).

Cote-Meek (2014) outlined strategies such as choosing not to self-identify as Indigenous, actively participating in education to raise critical consciousness, and utilizing available Indigenous supports to build community and resilience. However, these actions are not merely reactive; they are deliberate, thoughtful strategies of resistance that reflect a deep understanding of oppression. The intentional and recurrent use of these strategies highlights their significance in the ongoing struggle for equity and justice.

These findings show the need to address racism systematically and offer Indigenous students effective support. Ultimately, universities have a responsibility to actively dismantle systemic barriers and actively develop environments where Indigenous students achieve their full potential academically and culturally.

Decolonization and Indigenization in Postsecondary

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) identified three concepts of Indigenization in postsecondary institutions: Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation Indigenization, and decolonial Indigenization. Indigenous inclusion increases Indigenous presence within existing structures. Reconciliation

Indigenization aims to bridge gaps between Indigenous and Canadian ideals. Decolonial Indigenization seeks a radical overhaul of the academy to balance power dynamics, promoting Indigenous culture and knowledge. Decolonial Indigenization involves treaty-based governance and resurgence-focused efforts to strengthen Indigenous culture and knowledge. This process requires redistributing intellectual privilege and fostering collaborative relationships that decentralize power, moving towards meaningful and sustainable change.

Overall, for postsecondary institutions, embracing these concepts of Indigenization means moving beyond token gestures and instead towards genuine and sustainable change. It requires commitment to equity, justice, anti-racism, and tangible actions such as curriculum reform, resource allocations, community engagement, and institutional governance restructuring. This transformative change, rooted in respect for and integration of Indigenous perspectives, hold the promise of fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for all.

What is Success?

Colonial definitions of success link to assimilation of Indigenous students, where they adapted to the mainstream values and behaviours of the postsecondary institution (Gallop & Bastien, 2016), such as striving for higher socioeconomic status and career advancement. However, for most Indigenous students, the definition of success is more complicated than simply graduating from university, it is also about students being empowered as Indigenous peoples in their determination, cultural integrity, and identity reclamation and retrieval throughout their educational journeys (Cote-Meek, 2014; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Pidgeon, 2016).

Once success can be understood, the barriers to success also need to be identified. The work of R. A. Malatest & Associates (2002) demonstrated that significant barriers exist regarding Indigenous participation in postsecondary education, including a legacy of distrust of education in Indigenous communities; lack of academic preparation; and social, cultural, and financial barriers.

Examining the differing definitions of success for Indigenous students highlights the disconnect between colonial expectations and Indigenous values of empowerment and cultural integrity., USask needs to continue to work to create a supportive educational environment that

integrates Indigenous perspectives and values to foster the genuine decolonization and Indigenization of the institution. These efforts will not only enhance academic outcomes for Indigenous students, but also contribute to their holistic empowerment and overall wellbeing at USask.

White Privilege

During the research process, I became deeply aware of my own White privilege, stemming from being a descendant of White settlers and studying and working at a colonial institution. This realization highlighted the importance of acknowledging and addressing racism and understanding how my background affords me certain advantages. This awareness has led me to recognize my responsibility in decolonization and Indigenization.

Recognizing White privilege involves confronting the reality of systemic racism and understanding that many advantages come from an uneven distribution of opportunities rooted in historical and institutional racism. This awareness means acknowledging where these practices persist and examining my own participation in them.

Jensen (2020) outlined several fears that White people may have to confront regarding White privilege. These include recognizing undeserved privileges, fearing the loss of status if societal structures become more equitable, apprehension about racialized individuals gaining power, and the fear of being perceived as insincere or harbouring hidden racist tendencies. These fears call for honest self-reflection and a commitment to ongoing learning and unlearning.

Being an effective Indigenous ally involves continuous education, supporting Indigenous-led efforts, and ensuring actions are not self-serving. Allies must prioritize the well-being and goals of Indigenous communities, be receptive to feedback, and educate themselves about Indigenous history and rights. These steps involve sharing knowledge, advocating for inclusivity, and actively challenging stereotypes and racism, even when Indigenous people are not present.

Knowing the land's Indigenous history and transforming guilt into positive actions are crucial steps. Allies must understand the privileges they take for granted, listen actively, and communicate respectfully. True allyship is demonstrated through consistent, supportive actions that uplift Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, this study has been a deep journey of learning about Indigenous people, and the challenges Indigenous students face in postsecondary education. It has shown me the urgent need for genuine and meaningful efforts towards decolonization and Indigenization. I know that true allyship requires humility, empathy, and a commitment to challenging my own and others' biases and the unfair systems that Indigenous students experience. I want to stress that I cannot decide that I am an Indigenous ally, that determination rests with Indigenous people. I can, however, combine my knowledge of what it takes to be an ally with an understanding of my fears as a non-Indigenous person, and change my actions accordingly.

5.3 Manuscript 3:

Research Goals and Hypothesis: USask aims for Indigenous students to comprise 15% of undergraduates and 10% of graduates by 2025 (USask, 2018). This research hypothesized that Indigenous students face unique challenges that impede their successful completion of studies. The primary goals were to understand why Indigenous retention rates are lower than those of non-Indigenous students and to identify ways USask could improve these rates through support systems. The study focused on uncovering strengths and positive strategies among Indigenous students and acknowledging historical impacts of colonization while identifying gaps in services and resources at USask.

Research Approach: The research used a case study methodology guided by appreciative inquiry, addressing three questions: What is the issue? What is working? What do you need more of?

Methodology and Data Collection: The study used case study methodology to delve into Indigenous student success within the real-world context of USask. Data collection involved semistructured interviews with nine participants: four Indigenous students and five staff members supporting Indigenous students. The interview questions focused on identifying successful experiences, desired improvements, and additional support needs.

Data Analysis: Data analysis involved open coding to identify themes, axial coding to explore patterns, and selective coding to determine dominant themes related to the research questions. Grounded theory guided this process, allowing patterns to emerge without preconceived assumptions.

Rigor and Reliability: The research adhered to guidelines for conducting sensitive and respectful studies with Indigenous participants. Ethical considerations included informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and creating a safe space for honest discussion.

5.4 Manuscript 4:

The research provided insights into the experiences and support needs of Indigenous students at USask, which I hope will contribute to improved retention rates and a more positive experience for these students. The key findings are intended to guide university administrators in making informed decisions and implementing effective strategies for Indigenous student success. The study highlighted the importance of culturally responsive approaches and addressing systemic barriers to create equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous students.

Lack of Representation

The Issue

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan (2020) described how an underrepresentation of Indigenous people in faculty and staff in postsecondary education, the dominance of Western ways of knowing, and lack of understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing create a context in which Indigenous students can feel isolated.

At USask, both students and staff expressed that the need for more Indigenous representation among faculty and staff. Students wanted to see faces that looked like them in positions of authority. Staff raised concern about ensuring that Indigenous students have support from individuals who understand and can effectively advocate for their cultural needs.

What is Working?

Elders and Knowledge Keepers

As Little Bear (2009) presented, the underlying principle is that educational success necessitates the active participation of the community in every facet of the learning journey. Both staff and students discussed the positive aspects of having Elders and Knowledge Keepers available on campus for Indigenous students to access as they provide not only cultural guidance, but also emotional and spiritual supports. Their presence on campus bridges the gap between traditional knowledge and Western education practices. It creates an environment where

Indigenous students can see their identities and cultures reflected and respected, enabling a sense of belonging.

Cultural Efforts

Staff and students both acknowledged that they felt the work that USask was doing towards Indigenization, reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization was positive, including Powwows and Smudging ceremonies. These cultural events and practices serve as tangible representations of USask's commitment to respecting and celebrating Indigenous traditions and knowledge. The positive reception of these decolonizing and Indigenization efforts reflects USask's progress in creating a more culturally aware educational setting.

What Do You Need More Of?

More Indigenous Faculty and Staff

All participants in this study wished there were more Indigenous people on campus. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) argued that true Indigenization requires more than just including Indigenous people; it demands substantial structural change. Elevating Indigenous scholars to administrative roles can drive broader improvements. Uink et al. (2021) found that more Indigenous voices at all institutional levels fostered a better understanding of Indigenous students' needs, creating a supportive system. Pidgeon (2016) believed addressing these support needs would improve retention and graduation rates, increasing the pool of Indigenous candidates for future leadership roles.

Support for Faculty

Staff participants wanted Indigenous content integrated throughout the curriculum, not just in modules or electives. They noted that this goal requires additional support for instructors to learn how to be more inclusive. Increased capacity and support for curriculum development among instructors is essential to achieve this. If this were available, it could lead to greater inclusivity and cultural understanding and empower instructors to teach Indigenous content effectively.

Indigenous Programming

Programs at USask, such as the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), and Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways (ISAP), are known for integrating Indigenous ways of knowing into their curricula. Students and staff praised faculty for developing curricula that focus on Indigenous knowledge. Cote-Meek (2014) highlighted that many Indigenous people have been exposed to a White, Eurocentric historical narrative that portrays them negatively. Recognizing these portrayals as racist and understanding their impact can be validating and uplifting. However, for some Indigenous students, confronting the effects of colonial violence can evoke intense emotions, sometimes requiring supportive counseling.

Creating and adapting programming for Indigenous students that addresses their unique needs and promotes their academic and personal success alongside integrating Indigenous ways of knowing across all disciplines and existing programs at USask, could enhance the educational experience for all students. However, this would need to be done with sensitivity to potential challenges or trauma triggers for Indigenous students. This shows the importance of providing robust support systems, such as culturally sensitive counselling services, mentorship programs, and safe spaces that aim to ensure Indigenous students feel safe, respected, and supported while navigating potentially difficult or triggering content.

Personal Reflection and Recommendations

This study showed me how the lack of representation contributes to a sense of isolation among Indigenous students and how vital it is for them to have mentors who truly understand and can advocate for their cultural needs. Ideally, the solution would just be to hire more Indigenous faculty and staff, which USask has already committed to. However, this is not a quick fix, as we need to make this campus a safe and welcoming space for Indigenous people to not only attract them here, but so they want to stay.

A first step could be offering support to non-Indigenous faculty in decolonizing teaching practices. There has been a desire to integrate Indigenous knowledge into all areas of the curriculum, but many instructors struggle with how to do this effectively. As such, a vital first step could be supporting all faculty with resources, training, and mentorship on Indigenization

that would not only enhance inclusivity but also ensure that these efforts are sustained and meaningful. This could include creating opportunities for faculty to collaborate with Indigenous knowledge keepers, participate in cultural awareness training, and engage in reflective practices that challenge Western-dominated pedagogies. By equipping faculty with the skills and understanding necessary to teach Indigenous content effectively, USask can foster a more inclusive and culturally respectful learning environment for all students.

Ideally the faculty would be across academic disciplines at USask. This way Indigenous content is embedded throughout all courses and programs at USask, rather than confining it to specific majors, single courses or units. This approach would ensure that all students, regardless of their field of study, gain an understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, histories, and contemporary issues.

There is the potential for resistance among faculty, simply because integrating Indigenous content or decolonizing their teaching practices is often rooted in practical concerns and personal fears. Time and workload pressures are significant barriers; faculty may feel that adapting their curriculum to include Indigenous perspectives adds to an already overwhelming list of responsibilities. This type of change requires careful thought, planning, and often, a shift in teaching approach, which can feel like a daunting task for many instructors, and therefore would not be received favourably.

Additionally, some non-Indigenous faculty may feel apprehensive about engaging with Indigenous content due to fears of misrepresentation or unintentionally offending Indigenous communities. These concerns are understandable, and something that I shared as I took on this study as a non-Indigenous person. It would be natural for some educators worry about making mistakes or being perceived as inauthentic or insensitive when addressing topics outside their lived experience. They may also feel that teaching Indigenous content is not their responsibility, especially if they lack personal or academic background in this area.

To address these concerns, it is essential to provide structured support, resources, and guidance that help faculty feel confident and competent in integrating Indigenous perspectives. Emphasizing that this work is a shared responsibility, and providing clear pathways for support,

can help to alleviate fears and encourage broader participation in creating a more inclusive and respectful educational environment.

Safe Spaces and Sense of Community

The Issue

Indigenous students seek out spaces where they feel safe to express themselves and can find strength and rejuvenation. These actions in themselves become strategic acts to resist ongoing colonialism and racism (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Student and staff participants both articulated the need for students to be able to develop a sense of community within USask. Community-building strategies are vital to aid in success because they recognize Indigenous students' spiritual, intellectual, and emotional needs that are sustained through a sense of community and relationships with others (Pidgeon, 2016). Fellner (2018) emphasized that creating physical spaces that reflect Indigenous cultures, values, and beliefs can be instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and relationality for students.

What is Working?

Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre

Both students and staff noted the importance of a place on campus where Indigenous students can see Indigenous faces. The Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre (GORBSC) was mentioned many times throughout the interviews as a space where students felt safe and welcome. Staff also noted that holding drop-in advising or events at GORBSC significantly increased student attendance compared to other locations on campus.

Having this space is essential to USask because it creates a sense of belonging and community among Indigenous students, which is essential for their overall well-being and academic success. The study showed how GORBSC enhanced their confidence to engage in seek support services and participate in academic and social events.

Building Relationships

Staff highlighted the importance of talking to Indigenous students and building a relationship to understand the issues and barriers they faced. Both students and staff noted that

Indigenous students often have a go-to person – an Indigenous advisor, staff member, or faculty member – due to having developed relationships, regardless of the college.

For students, building relationships with trusted individuals can enhance Indigenous students' sense of belonging and connection to the university community. This can then positively impact academic success by creating a supportive environment where students feel valued and understood. For staff, those who have established relationships with Indigenous students are better equipped to advocate for their needs within the university system. They can provide guidance on navigating academic and administrative processes while advocating for policies and practices that promote inclusivity and equity.

What Do You Need More Of?

Centralized Supports

Although USask has many Indigenous student supports, staff and students noted difficulty in navigating who to talk to and where to find them. Staff suggested a one-stop-shop approach to prevent students from being bounced around when seeking support. Moving across units is challenging, and the large campus can intimidate students from visiting multiple locations.

Centralizing Indigenous student supports at USask would be beneficial because it would be more approachable by reducing the complexity of navigating multiple units and locations, making it easier for Indigenous students to access the services they need. In addition, it could improve efficiency in service delivery and potentially improve Indigenous student's experience by addressing support needs more comprehensively and quickly.

More Opportunities to Meet Students Where They Are At

Both staff and students noted the effectiveness of having college advisors, financial specialists, and library staff meet Indigenous students at the GORBSC for drop-in and scheduled appointments. Students were more likely to meet with staff at GORBSC than searching for their offices around campus. However, staff wished for more opportunities to present their resources and contact information directly to Indigenous students.

Personal Reflection and Recommendations

Reflecting on the feedback from staff and students in this study, I see the pressing need for USask to simplify access to Indigenous student supports. Although the university offers many resources, navigating these services can be daunting. The study highlighted how confusing it is for students to determine where to go or who to approach, especially when adjusting to the many challenges of navigating the university system.

While creating a centralized "one-stop shop" for supports would be ideal, it may require significant resources. In the meantime, I recommend that colleges and units continue or start holding office hours at GORBSC. This would help reduce the frustration of students being redirected across campus and make accessing help more student-friendly, enhancing their experience and fostering a sense of belonging.

As the study showed, when advisors and specialists meet students in familiar, culturally safe spaces like GORBSC, it significantly increases the student's likelihood of engaging with available supports. This approach of meeting students where they feel most comfortable, breaks down the barriers that traditional office settings can present. I encourage USask to expand this model by fostering more collaboration between GORBSC and other campus units. Building strong, ongoing relationships will ensure that Indigenous students receive current, accurate information and can easily connect with the support they need to thrive. It is not just about being present in the space; it is about creating a consistent, responsive dialogue that truly supports Indigenous students' success at USask.

To achieve these recommendations, I believe it is essential for USask to invest more in the GORBSC, including adding additional staff to support the incredible work already being done. The current team is dedicated and effective but increased human resources would help expand their capacity to better meet the growing needs of Indigenous students, especially if the intent is for the Indigenous student population to grow.

With more support, the GORBSC staff would be able to take a more active role by reaching out to colleges and units across the university, gathering updated information about resources, and inviting more departments to have a presence within the centre. Equally important is for colleges and units to maintain reciprocal relationships by regularly updating GORBSC on new programs and services and committing to meeting with students in these accessible spaces.

Moreover, it is crucial that colleges and units invest in their own representatives to engage directly with students at GORBSC rather than placing the full responsibility on the centre's staff. This approach reflects true reciprocity, emphasizing that supporting Indigenous students is a shared responsibility across the entire campus. It is not solely the job of GORBSC; a whole-of-campus commitment is needed to foster an inclusive environment where Indigenous students feel seen, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Barriers Created by Colonial Institutions

The Issue

Both staff and students felt that the issues and challenges Indigenous students faced at USask have not changed in decades. Although they sensed change was coming, they believed it had not fully arrived yet. They discussed barriers stemming from USask being a colonial institution, including administrative policies, Band funding issues, assimilation pressures, and family commitments.

What Is Working?

Providing Education

At USask, resources are available for students, staff, and faculty to engage in Indigenization efforts through workshops, online modules, and courses. These resources aim to create and understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives. However, while these resources are accessible, participation is voluntary. Making these Indigenization resources mandatory, as is the case at other institutions, would likely have a more significant impact. This could help to create a more inclusive environment for Indigenous students, staff, and faculty, by ensuring that Indigenization efforts are integrated into the core practices and values of USask.

Breaking The Rules– Flexibility/Accepting Alternate Forms

Staff reflected on occasions when they could be flexible to support Indigenous students, such as moving away from traditional dissertation formats within their unit. These shared incidents showed how the staff valued being part of an institution that fostered such flexibility to help support students.

Traditional colonial rules and structures may not align with Indigenous ways of learning or expression, which can put Indigenous students at disadvantage as these often marginalize Indigenous students. Breaking these norms would help to address historical inequities and promote a more inclusive environment. Flexibility in educational practices and policies is a tangible way for institutions to operationalize their commitment to decolonization and Indigenization.

Indigenous Specific Programming and Cohort Models

When I asked students for an example of a time they felt supported as Indigenous students at USask, many cited programs like ITEP, ISAP, or SUNTEP. These programs were praised for honouring and uplifting Indigenous knowledges and cultures. Students also appreciated the cohort model used in these programs, which helped them feel less isolated.

By providing supports tailored to Indigenous students' needs, these programs promote a sense of belonging and community on campus. Investing resources in these programs would likely enhance the educational experience for Indigenous students making them feel valued and supported. This, in turn, would increase their likelihood of academic success at USask.

What Do You Need More Of?

Review of Policies and Procedures

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) discussed ongoing debates about colonial expectations evolving, but transforming university structures proves more challenging than implementing supportive policies for Indigenous students. Staff noted outdated policies and procedures that prioritized university interests over student needs, placing a burden on students. They expressed a need to review policies to make them more student-friendly and advocated for them to be more proactive instead of reactive.

By updating policies to prioritize Indigenous student needs and promoting proactive approaches, USask can create a more inclusive and supportive environment. This would not only improve the overall experience of Indigenous students, but it also aligns with goals within postsecondary institutions that focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).

Staff Training

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) emphasized that reconciliation and Indigenization require more than simple Indigenous inclusion; they involve transforming university structures and educating faculty, staff, and students to change perceptions and interactions with Indigenous people. Uink et al. (2021) underscored the need for professional development among university staff supporting Indigenous students, including practical cultural awareness training.

While some institutions, like the University of Manitoba (2019) and University of Victoria (2017), provide such training, it is not mandatory at USask. Staff expressed a desire for this training to better support students and contribute to decolonization and Indigenization efforts. They believed continuous training could empower everyone to engage in reconciliation efforts and appreciate diverse learning styles.

Access and Equity Services Accommodations

Student participants expressed how helpful it would be if Indigenous students could have Access and Equity Services (AES) accommodations, such as note-taking and time-and-a-half for papers and exams, without having to go through the paperwork and application process. They felt they should have the same access as people who have physical or cognitive obstacles because they have all these barriers and stresses in their life that they are constantly overcoming.

This streamlined approach would eliminate administrative barriers that many Indigenous face when seeking essential accommodations. By reducing the stress of navigating a complex administrative process, students would have more time to focus on their studies and well-being, instead of being caught in an extensive administrative process. It should be noted that not all Indigenous would use the accommodations, but the option would always be available. There would still be some onus on the student wanting to use the accommodation, as they would be required to self-identify as Indigenous.

Creating a Message of Hope

One staff participant discussed that they were working with colleges at USask to rework the wording in the Required to Discontinue (RTD) letters. These letters are sent out to students whose average falls below a specific number determined by the colleges and informs them that

they need to take some time off from their studies. The staff member mentioned that if USask is aiming for retention, the important thing to do for those receiving bad news is to illustrate hope.

RTD letters are an unfortunate message to receive, and the way the letters are currently laid out they tell the student first how to contest it. Student participants also mentioned that the wording in the letters was scary and did not make them feel as though they had any options to move forward at USask.

Transition Support

Chichekian and Bragoli-Barzan's (2020) research showed that transitioning from high school to postsecondary education has significant challenges for Indigenous students. Even with the best support systems in place, the complexities associated with moving away from communities can create feelings of isolation, demotivation, and depression. Both staff and students spoke of the academic supports they needed to adjust to university life. Bringing awareness to the disconnection between university and high school education for Indigenous students was a frequent topic of conversation. Staff and students mentioned that supports for Indigenous students focused on academics instead of outside the classroom, and that more support was needed to help students find housing, learn to pay bills, take the transit system, etc.

How And When to Let Students Know About Supports

Staff noted the importance of Indigenous students knowing what is available for supports. They also noted that beyond asking for help, students then need self-advocacy to be able to know what questions to ask and to be able to take that information and navigate the university systems. Staff found it difficult to find a way to weave in that communication and awareness piece throughout the academic year. Students noted that when they were first applying or registering at USask, as soon as they indicated they were Indigenous, many support systems reached out. Students expressed that they would like to have more check-ins and more information about the supports in their upper years, not just their first year.

Year-Round Financial Support Options

Staff wished there were more awards and financial assistance for Indigenous students accessible throughout the year, instead of just at the beginning of the term. Many Indigenous

families, like other families who live in poverty, live in delicate circumstances where one minor event can catastrophically impact their daily lives (Baxter & Meyers, 2016). If ongoing support existed, this would also support students who missed entering awards deadlines and create more opportunities for financial aid when it was really needed.

Personal Reflection and Recommendations

Based on staff participants in this study, and my own experiences as a USask employee, I recommend that USask mandate practical and ongoing cultural awareness training to better equip non-Indigenous staff and faculty to support Indigenous students. Understanding the unique challenges Indigenous students face would enable staff to advocate for policy changes that address their specific needs. For example, students in this study expressed a need for streamlined access to AES accommodations without the burden of excessive paperwork, acknowledging their unique barriers. While some may criticize this as an unfair advantage, improved cultural awareness could shift perspectives and encourage faculty to approach policies, such as extensions or accommodations, with more empathy and flexibility.

While there is already some transition support available, I believe USask should extend this beyond academics, incorporating life skills training in areas like housing, financial management, and transit navigation. This holistic support would better prepare students for university life and help ease the transition from high school.

I would also encourage colleges and units to provide consistent communication about available supports throughout a student's journey, not just during their first year. Regular check-ins and reminders of resources can prevent information overload at the outset and keep students connected to support systems over time.

Finally, year-round financial aid options are crucial, as ongoing support would help Indigenous students manage financial instability, offering a necessary safety net during unexpected challenges. By documenting the process, USask could better allocate funds and administer awards, identifying trends such as peak times for financial needs and specific amounts frequently requested. This data-driven approach would enable more strategic budgeting and timely responses to student needs. Implementing these recommendations would foster a more inclusive and supportive environment that not only acknowledges but actively addresses the

unique challenges faced by Indigenous students at USask, enhancing their academic and personal success.

What is Success?

The Issue

Many staff expressed that they felt USask was defining success solely based on numbers and enrolment data, rather than considering a comprehensive approach. As presented by Gallop and Bastien (2016), a comprehensive and inclusive definition of success among Indigenous students is essential, as it respects and honours their diverse cultural backgrounds, aspirations, and values. By embracing a more inclusive and holistic view of success, institutions can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by Indigenous students, to create a more equitable and supportive educational experience and environment.

What Is Working?

Self Determination

Gallop and Bastien (2016) suggested that the relationship between self-efficacy and learning engagement is circular, in that the more a student is engaged and the more they can learn, the more self-efficacy they will have. Instilling self-efficacy in Indigenous students is vital to success because confident students stay motivated and engaged, even in the face of short-term setbacks. Students noted that it takes much courage to admit they need help and then even more to ask for it. Staff wished they could do a case management system where advisors or counsellors could reach out to each Indigenous student periodically to check-in, but no one interviewed had the resources to do this.

Moments of Pride

Both Indigenous staff members interviewed expressed the importance of giving back and sharing their experiences as former Indigenous students at USask. They were dedicated to improving the experiences of current Indigenous students, aiming to make them easier and more positive than their own. They found fulfillment in receiving positive feedback from students, Indigenous communities, and other USask staff members. The staff members also took pride in the strong Indigenous support within their units. They expressed confidence in the university's

commitment to Indigenization and supporting Indigenous students, noting it as a priority. They felt assured that resources and dedicated positions for Indigenous support would be consistently available.

What Do You Need More Of?

Redefining Success

Gallop and Bastien (2016) argued that colonial definitions of success for Indigenous students promote assimilation into mainstream values and behaviours of postsecondary institutions, focusing on socioeconomic status and career advancement. In contrast, Uink et al. (2021) suggested that success should not solely rely on retention rates, as these do not necessarily indicate academic progress. Merely focusing on enrolment and retention could mask instances where students' academic advancement has stalled.

One staff member emphasized that success for Indigenous students should be measured by whether they achieve their personal goals and intended results. While completing a program is a significant success for all students, many Indigenous students are the first in their families to attend postsecondary education, therefore viewing admission itself as a major accomplishment. Several student participants expressed pride in being pioneers in their families' educational journeys or following in their parents' or grandparents' footsteps.

Holistic View of Success

Many Indigenous students may return to university later in life, which should also be seen as a success. However, student participants felt that USask's policies and timelines favoured privileged students, worsening disadvantages. Uink et al. (2021) stressed the need for context-specific supports for Indigenous students, emphasizing accessibility and regular review to ensure inclusivity in decision-making processes across the campus community.

Pidgeon (2008) conducted a study advocating for a holistic view of Indigenous student success, emphasizing the importance of considering physical, emotional, spiritual/cultural, and cognitive needs. Success for Indigenous students should encompass attempts at university education and career shifts over time.

Traditional metrics of success in universities may not fully capture the diverse ways in which Indigenous students define and achieve success. Recognizing multiple dimensions of success ensures that Indigenous students feel validated, included, and valued within the academic community. This allows USask to be able to better support students throughout their educational journeys and facilitate positive transitions into careers or further studies.

Personal Reflection and Recommendations

This study showed the need to redefine success for Indigenous students at USask, as conventional metrics often fail to capture the extent of what success truly means for these students. Traditional university standards like graduation rates or retention statistics tell only part of the story and often miss the personal, cultural, and familial achievements that are deeply significant to many Indigenous students. As I have learned from the interviews in this study, success is not just about earning a degree; it's about the journey, the resilience, and the fulfillment of personal and community goals.

For example, one powerful aspect of success for Indigenous students is being the first in their family to attend university. This is a profound accomplishment that carries with it the weight of breaking generational cycles and setting a new path for future family members. Another example is the pride students feel in reconnecting with their cultural roots through their studies, such as taking courses that center on Indigenous knowledge or participating in traditional ceremonies on campus. These experiences are critical to their sense of self and identity, yet they are often overlooked by standard success metrics.

Success can also look like a student navigating the complexities of university life later in life. For many Indigenous students, returning to education after years away is a triumph that reflects resilience and determination. These students bring a wealth of life experience to their studies and often balance work, family, and academic commitments in ways that younger, more traditional students may not. Celebrating these non-linear educational journeys as successes challenges the rigid expectations often placed on students to follow a straightforward path from high school to degree completion. I would encourage USask to focus on these students as a target market for recruitment, showing them that they are welcome back, and supporting them through the process or re-enrolling.

I believe that USask could benefit from reimagining how success is communicated and celebrated within the university community. For instance, showcasing stories of students who have taken unconventional routes, such as returning to school after time away or shifting academic focuses, would help normalize these experiences and validate them as important forms of success. By embracing a more holistic approach, USask can create an environment where Indigenous students feel truly seen and valued, not just for their academic accomplishments but for the entirety of their journeys.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations

The sample size was a limitation to this study: The views and experiences from staff and students were from a small proportion of the USask community. However, these nine individuals had wonderful insights, aspirations, and goals to make USask a better place.

Another limitation was that USask staff participants assumed they had to be Indigenous or working directly in Indigenous programs or units to take part in the study. The requirement was that staff had to be in roles that supported Indigenous students, and although I never stated staff had to be Indigenous, I found that many of my requests were forwarded to those who were Indigenous or worked in Indigenous-specific programs or units. I identified with this unintended situation immensely because I knew that these people did not feel that they had the right experience for what I was asking. When a staff member responded with these concerns, I was able to better explain my research and assured them that any experience or encounter where they were supporting an Indigenous student was fine. I was happy that anyone who initially doubted their value to my research was able to come around and participate. I was also grateful for the Indigenous contacts that I was able to meet through this study. I interviewed three non-Indigenous staff members and two Indigenous staff members. Regardless of the participants' backgrounds, they all wanted to make sure that this study contributed to Indigenous student success at USask.

Despite being widely used, coding has been criticized because it breaks data into separate pieces, losing the overall view important for qualitative analysis. This criticism is valid because coding does split data, which might make a researcher focus only on the relationships between the codes and miss a complete understanding of the examples and situations being studied, or

they may ignore the context and other factors (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). In this study, I took steps to avoid this pitfall by using detailed notes alongside the coding to capture the richness of each data segment. I included notes on context, connections to other data, and my own initial interpretations.

5.6 Implications for Educational Leadership and Practice

The Ed.D. program at USask has four pillars: ethical leadership, social justice and equity, Indigenous ways of knowing and contexts, and comparative and international contexts and challenges. In this section, I outline how this research contributes to each pillar.

Ethical Leadership

My previous education was in business, where I learned what it meant to be an ethical leader and the importance of the triple bottom line, corporate social responsibility. I learned that to be a good business leader, I had to treat the people working for me well, to motivate them to achieve success. In business, success meant maximizing outputs. In a postsecondary setting, success in a colonial sense means those who enroll graduate. However, in an ethical sense, it would mean all who enrol have both equitable and positive experiences.

I once again took a personal reflection to determine what ethical leadership meant in this study. Throughout this research journey, I have become very aware of the privileges I have because I am a descendant of White settlers, including being able to be an Ed.D. candidate. In addition, my role at USask gives me a sphere of influence where I feel I can make change and encourage others to do their part in decolonization and Indigenization. I have completed this project as an effort of reciprocity – I owe this to the Indigenous students that attend USask now and in the future.

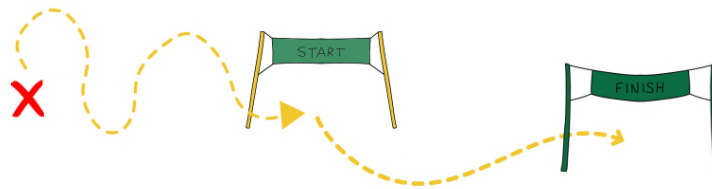
Social Justice and Equity

I created Figure 5.1 to encompass how I felt at the beginning of this research. The metaphor of a race and starting lines shows that Indigenous students face challenges and barriers that prevent them from beginning their educational journeys at the same starting line as others. Offering supports for Indigenous students to start at the same place does not put them at an advantage; it merely brings them to the same starting point.

Figure 5.1

Figure 5.1 depicts a starting and finish line, illustrating the different starting points of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This visual representation highlights the additional challenges that many Indigenous students face to start postsecondary education, compared to their non-Indigenous peers.

Where Is the Starting Line?



This metaphor first came to me in my past work with graduate students at USask. Many of these students were coming back to study after being away for years working, and they struggled with the rigour of the coursework while managing their families and jobs. When students came to me and shared that they were having trouble focusing or were challenged by deadlines, etc., I would recommend that they go to AES to see if they could receive accommodations. Sometimes accommodations were simple things like a private quiet space to write exams, and some were more formal like time-and-a-half to complete assignments and exams. A common phrase I used was “Don’t be a hero. Ask for help and take it if you get it.”

So, when I began thinking about Indigenous students and my research goals, this experience again came to mind. I wanted to use the metaphor to show why the supports exist. Many might wrongly think that supports are putting students ahead of others or giving them an unfair advantage, but the figure highlights the difference between equality and equity in education. As Levinson et al. (2022) stated, equality means giving everyone the same resources, and equity means giving each student access to the resources they need to learn and thrive.

Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Contexts

As a non-Indigenous person who has been active in this realm, this theme brought into context the need for me to make the effort to learn about Indigenous people and the longstanding history of colonialism. The responsibility of educating society should not solely fall on

Indigenous people; it is important for non-Indigenous people to take on this responsibility and be part of their own decolonizing process, moving themselves toward reconciliation (Cote-Meek, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016).

I know it is my responsibility to lead my own reconciliation and Indigenization efforts. To do this, I am committing to completing the professional development resources available to me by USask, including the 4 Seasons of Reconciliation course. I will continue to encourage others on campus to do the same. Additionally, I will actively seek out opportunities to engage with Indigenous people, participate in cultural events, and listen to the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous students, staff, and faculty. By fostering open dialogues and building meaningful relationships, I aim to contribute to a more inclusive and respectful environment at USask.

Comparative and International Contexts and Challenges

USask has similar enrolment growth goals for international students as it does for Indigenous students. I am hopeful that research will be conducted to improve the experience of international students in Canadian universities. I would suggest taking an appreciative inquiry approach similar to this study, as learning first-hand from international students about the challenges they face could be extremely valuable. By applying these insights to USask, the university community can determine whether we are supporting these students effectively or contributing to the numerous obstacles and barriers they already encounter.

The recent Canadian study by Baghoori et al. (2022) on international student mental health in Canada examined over 330 international students, exploring coping mechanisms and perceived social support and their impact on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most students reported optimal mental health, almost half experienced moderate to severe psychological distress. The findings suggested the need for comprehensive support services and focused strategies to address international students' concerns, improve satisfaction, and attract future students.

5.7 Implications for Theory

The implications for theory from this study on Indigenous student success at USask include the following:

Understanding that Perspectives Matters. This study showed that understanding Indigenous student success requires considering cultural, social, and institutional perspectives specific to Indigenous students. It was crucial to include the voices of current Indigenous students who are achieving success at USask.

Focusing on Strengths. I wanted to hear the stories from those students who were still enrolled at USask and were completing their studies, instead of those who had discontinued. Using appreciative inquiry highlighted the importance of focusing on strengths and successful practices rather than just problems. This approach allowed me to find out more about the issues, what was working, and what USask needs more of.

Creating Holistic Models. The findings supported creating models of student retention that include not just academic factors but also cultural, social, and personal aspects. Both staff and student participants expressed the need to support Indigenous students through academic and non-academic situations. The insights can help develop policies or supports that specifically address the needs of Indigenous students.

Fostering Supportive Relationships: Emphasizing strong, supportive relationships between students and staff is crucial for retention and success. This finding could inform theories on student engagement and support in relation to student success in postsecondary settings.

5.8 Implications for Further Research

A longitudinal study could be done to track the academic and personal trajectories of Indigenous students over time, beyond their immediate experiences at USask. This could encompass their journey through the entire student life cycle, and beyond into their careers. This would provide insights into factors influencing long-term retention and success.

Research could be done to compare retention strategies and outcomes across different institutions and regions to identify best practices and contextual differences. This could inform effective approaches that could be adapted or scaled to other contexts.

Further qualitative research could be conducted to delve deeper into the nuanced experiences of Indigenous students, including those who have discontinued their studies. Understanding the specific barriers they face and their perspectives on support measures could inform targeted interventions.

A study could be conducted that evaluates the outcomes of specific programs or policy adjustments implemented based on research findings in this study. The study would be aimed at what impact the changes or initiatives had on Indigenous student success.

Lastly, a study could be done with Indigenous students that explores intersectionality of their experiences and considers factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, and geographic location. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of diverse challenges and needs within the Indigenous student population.

5.9 Concluding Thoughts

In examining Indigenous student success from the perspective of a White settler, this study has illuminated the complex relationship of cultural, social, and institutional factors that influence the educational experiences of Indigenous students at USask. I, and other non-Indigenous people, must recognize our position of privilege and the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization that shape these students' journeys. Using appreciative inquiry provided a path forward that moved beyond deficit-focused narratives, highlighting the resilience, achievements, and potential of Indigenous students.

Non-Indigenous people have a responsibility to critically examine and transform the policies and practices within postsecondary educational systems. This transformation involves actively listening to and learning from Indigenous voices, fostering strong, supportive relationships, and committing to ongoing reflection and action to dismantle systemic barriers. While USask looks to increase retention rates to lead to Indigenous students graduating from the

institution, it needs to focus on Indigenous student success through making the university experience culturally fulfilling and empowering (Pidgeon, 2016).

My initial assumption that I could solve the issue of Indigenous student retention was flawed and reflected a White saviour mentality. Instead, it was crucial to listen directly to Indigenous students to gain genuine insights into their experiences.

Throughout this research, I have felt apprehensive about potentially misinterpreting or misrepresenting Indigenous perspectives, highlighting the need for humility, openness, and a commitment to respecting Indigenous voices. This fear underscores the importance of ethical, collaborative research and continuous self-reflection.

This study has truly been a life changing journey for me. In my 3 years in the Doctor of Education program, I have learned more about Indigenous people than I had ever been exposed to before. Learning about Indigenous cultures and histories forced me to look inside myself and recognize my privilege. My cultural heritage was never something I identified with – because I never had to. Now, I understand that I am a descendant of White settlers who played a horrific role in colonization, with long-lasting effects that are evident today. The struggles of Indigenous people are the result of this history, and it *does* affect me. Most importantly, this realization now pushes me to be and do better.

While I aim now to conclude this dissertation, I know I have not reached the conclusion of my own personal journey of decolonization and Indigenization. As a non-Indigenous person, I understand that acknowledging the privilege I have benefited from throughout my personal and professional life, including being part of the first student cohort of this program, is just the beginning. Instead of dwelling on feelings of guilt about the impacts of colonization, I am now committed to taking meaningful action. This study marks the start of my efforts to contribute to decolonization and Indigenization by learning, listening, and actively supporting Indigenous-led initiatives. I am dedicated to challenging colonial systems in my daily life, being accountable, and understanding Indigenous perspectives. My focus is on moving beyond feelings to actions that genuinely support and uplift Indigenous voices, fostering equitable outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Approval & Ethics Course

Certificate of Completion



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 28-Feb-2024

Certificate of Approval

Application ID: 4480

Principal Investigator: Michael Cottrell

Department: Department of Educational
Administration

Student(s): Courtney Schroeder

Funder(s):

Sponsor: University of Saskatchewan

Title: Using Appreciative Inquiry to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan

Approved On: 28-Feb-2024

Expiry Date: 28-Feb-2025

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Interview Consent Form

Interview Questions

PAWS Announcement

Email Notice

Acknowledgment Of: TCPS2 Core Certificate (Schroeder)

Review Type: Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2022). The University of Saskatchewan Beh-REB has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the current approved protocol. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures must be reported to the Chair through submission of an amendment for Beh-REB consideration in advance of implementation.

To remain in compliance, a status report (renewal of closure form) must be submitted to the Beh-REB Chair for consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the Research Ethics Office website for further instructions and current forms.

*Digitally Approved by Pammla Petrucka
Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board
University of Saskatchewan*



Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Courtney Schroeder

*successfully completed the Course on Research Ethics based on
the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research
Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE 2022)*

Certificate # 0000937384

15 June, 2023

APPENDIX B: Participant Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Using Appreciative Inquiry to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan

Student Researcher(s): Courtney Schroeder, Graduate Student, Education Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Michael Cottrell, Associate Professor and Graduate Chair, Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

The University of Saskatchewan (USask's) enrolment goals show that by 2025 it is expected that Indigenous students will make up 15% of the undergraduate and 10% of the graduate student populations. This research centers on the hypothesis that Indigenous students encounter distinctive challenges, hindering their successful completion of studies at USask. The primary goals are to understand why Indigenous student retention rates are lower than those of non-Indigenous students and to identify ways in which USask can enhance retention. The research aims to recognize and highlight the specific challenges faced by Indigenous students while shedding light on existing supports and initiatives contributing to their academic success.

Importantly, this research is geared towards uncovering the strengths and positive strategies of Indigenous students at USask, acknowledging the unique challenges they face. It does not intend to minimize the historical impacts of colonization, or the multi-generational struggles faced by Indigenous people. Instead, the focus is on identifying effective practices and bringing attention to gaps in USask's services and resources. The ultimate intent is to contribute to making USask a more supportive environment for current and future Indigenous students at the institution.

Procedures:

- Indigenous student participants will be asked to about their Indigenous identity, and will be asked to share their experiences, knowledge, and insight on current support systems available for Indigenous students at USask.
- Staff participants will be asked to share the unit at USask they work for, and will be asked to share their experiences, knowledge, and insight on current support systems available for Indigenous students at USask.
- Zoom will be used to interview participants virtually, and the audio and video will be recorded. Participants have the option to participate by phone.

- Zoom privacy policy: <https://zoom.us/privacy>. USask's agreement with Zoom ensures that data will only be stored on servers in Canada. While all precautions will be taken, no guarantee of privacy of data can be made.
- The estimated time commitment of the participants is 60 – 90 minutes.
- The student researcher will transcribe recordings of the interviews.
- The Zoom interviews will be conducted in a private area of the student researchers' home or office, that will not be accessible by individuals outside the of the research team during the interview. Participants will be encouraged to find a similar space to take part in the interview.
- Participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of an interview.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Potential Risks:

- There is a possibility that reflecting on and answering some of the interview questions may cause participants psychological or emotional distress. Therefore, respondents can refuse to answer questions that they are not comfortable with, or request that the recording be paused, or end the interview at any point if they wish. The following wellness supports are also available:
 - Students: [redacted contact information]
 - Staff: [redacted contact information]

Potential Benefits:

- The intent of this research is to create a program evaluation for USask that will serve to increase retention rates of Indigenous students.

Confidentiality:

- The data collected will be disseminated in a dissertation for the Doctor of Educational Leadership program. In the future, it may be disseminated in articles, and reports to the University of Saskatchewan and stakeholders.
- Data collected will be reported anonymously and reported in aggregated and summarized forms. The student researcher will de-identify the data. Note that nothing will be included in publications that would directly or indirectly identify participants.
- Although the data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences, the data will be reported in aggregate form so that it will not be possible to identify individuals.
- Participants will be identified as working or studying USask, but their specific departments or units will be kept confidential.

Storage of Data:

- Recordings of the interviews will be saved to a local USask-managed computer and encrypted to protect participant privacy.

- The principal investigator will store the electronic data on a password-protected computer during analyses, and will then move it to a USask system for long-term storage (OneDrive)
- The storage period for the data will be five years post-publication.
- Identifying information, (e.g., Consent Forms, Master Lists) will be stored separately from the data collected and will be destroyed when the data collection is complete, and it is no longer required.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary, and you can participate in only those discussions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to withdraw, you may leave the interview at any time; however, data that have already been collected cannot be withdrawn.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position (e.g., employment, academic status, access to services) or how you will be treated.

Follow up:

- To obtain results from the study, please contact the researcher for a summary of the results using the information at the top of page 1. Summary of findings are estimated to be available August 2024.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: [redacted contact information]; out of town participants may call toll free [redacted contact information].

Consent:

Continued or On-going Consent:

- If the research involves follow up interactions, your consent will once again be required.

Signed Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Oral Consent:

- If needed, the student researcher can obtain your consent verbally at the beginning of the interview, and will complete the following information on your behalf, while seeking your oral consent to participate.

I read and explained this consent form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

Name of Participant

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: Participant Interview Guide

Staff Interview Questions

- *What College or Department do you currently work in?*
- *How many years have you been in this position?*
- *How do you support Indigenous students at USask?*
- *What do you feel are the most common issues Indigenous students that you support face?*

What is Working?

1. Describe a time when you feel you or your team performed really well when supporting an Indigenous student. What were the circumstances during that time?
2. Describe a time when you were proud to be a member of USask involving Indigenous students. Why were you proud?
3. What do you value most about being in a role that supports Indigenous student?
4. What supports do you or your unit offer to Indigenous students that you want others to know about? (People, places, events, resources) Please explain support and provide a link where more information can be found.
5. As USask aims to increase the Indigenous student population, what do you or your unit do to aid retention of Indigenous students?
6. What thoughts, feelings and associations do you have when you think about Indigenous student success at USask?
7. What current support systems would you talk about if you were recommending USask to an Indigenous person?

What do you wish there were more of?

1. What further support do you or your unit need to better support Indigenous students?
2. What does USask need to do to assist Indigenous students in removing barriers, so they are able to successfully complete their studies?
3. As someone who supports Indigenous students, what do you or your unit need from USask to be able to support better?

What is your story?

1. What's a trend you've noticed about Indigenous students and the barriers they face at USask?
2. If you could change one thing about USask Indigenous student support systems, what would you change?
3. Where do you get information on support systems for Indigenous students at USask?

Closing questions:

1. Is there anything else we should know about your expectations for future support systems at USask?
2. Is there anything that you feel is important that we missed when talking about Indigenous students?
3. Can you think of any topics related to this subject that we could have talked about?
4. Are there any other points you'd like to make about Indigenous students at USask?

Indigenous Student Interview Questions

- As an Indigenous student what factors have contributed to your success?
- What barriers to successfully completing your studies have you overcome?

Have you accessed any of the following Support Services at USask? If so, please rate the services you received on a scale from 1 – 5. 1 Being Poor, and 5 being great.

- Academic Advisors
- Access and Equity Services
- Career Services
- Childcare (Saskatoon campus)
- Faith Leaders
- Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre
- Grad Students Association (GSA)
- Graduate Student Hub
- International Student and Study Abroad Centre
- IT Support Portal
- Learning Hub
- Parking and Transportation Services
- Protective Services
- Residence
- Shop USask
- Student Affairs and Outreach
- Student Central
- Student Wellness Centre
- University Library
- USask Community Centre
- University of Saskatchewan Students' Union (USSU)
 - Food Centre
 - Help Centre
 - Pride Centre
 - Women's Centre

What is Working?

1. Describe a time when you feel the USask performed really well in supporting you as an Indigenous student. What were the circumstances during that time?
2. Describe a time when you were proud to be an Indigenous student at USask. Why were you proud?
3. What do you value most about being an Indigenous student at USask?
4. When did you last use a support or service intended for Indigenous students at USask? Can you give an example of when and how?
5. What current support systems would you talk about if you were recommending USask to a fellow Indigenous person?
6. Tell me about a time you experienced an issue as an Indigenous student at USask that you were able to resolve?
7. What positive experiences have you had with the support systems on campus for Indigenous students? How did you first hear about this support system?
8. Give an example of a support system for Indigenous students that has really stuck with you.

What do you wish there were more of?

1. If you could change one thing about USask Indigenous student support systems, what would you change?
2. What can USask do that would make a difference for Indigenous students?

What is your story?

1. What's a trend you've noticed about Indigenous students and the barriers they face at USask?
2. Do you expect Indigenous students will need more or less support in the upcoming year?
Why?
3. Where do you get information on support systems for Indigenous students at USask?

Closing questions

1. Of all the topics we covered today, which do you feel were most relevant to you?
2. Is there anything else we should know about your expectations for future support systems at USask?
3. Is there anything that you feel is important that we missed when talking about Indigenous students?
4. Can you think of any topics related to this subject that we could have talked about?
5. Are there any other points you'd like to make about Indigenous student retention?

APPENDIX D: Recruitment Scripts

PAWS Announcement

For Students:

Research Studies

We are looking for current Indigenous students to participate in interviews for a research study entitled: Using Appreciative Inquiry to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan. This research centers on the hypothesis that Indigenous students encounter distinctive challenges, hindering their successful completion of studies at USask. The primary goals are to understand why Indigenous student retention rates are lower than those of non-Indigenous students and to identify ways in which USask can enhance retention. The research aims to recognize and highlight the specific challenges faced by Indigenous students while shedding light on existing supports and initiatives contributing to their academic success.

Importantly, this research is geared towards uncovering the strengths and positive strategies of Indigenous students at USask, acknowledging the unique challenges they face. It does not intend to minimize the historical impacts of colonization, or the multi-generational struggles faced by Indigenous people. Instead, the focus is on identifying effective practices and bringing attention to gaps in USask's services and resources. The ultimate intent is to contribute to making USask a more supportive environment for current and future Indigenous students at the institution.

For more information, please contact:

Student Researcher(s): Courtney Schroeder, Graduate Student, Education Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Michael Cottrell, Associate Professor and Graduate Chair, Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

For Staff:

Research Studies

We are looking for USask staff members who currently support Indigenous students to participate in interviews for a research study entitled: Using Appreciative Inquiry to understand the support needs of Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan. This research centers on the hypothesis that Indigenous students encounter distinctive challenges, hindering their successful completion of studies at USask. The primary goals are to understand why Indigenous student retention rates are lower than those of non-Indigenous students and to identify ways in which USask can enhance retention. The research aims to recognize and highlight the specific challenges faced by Indigenous students while shedding light on existing supports and initiatives contributing to their academic success.

Importantly, this research is geared towards uncovering the strengths and positive strategies of Indigenous students at USask, acknowledging the unique challenges they face. It does not intend to minimize the historical impacts of colonization, or the multi-generational struggles faced by Indigenous people. Instead, the focus is on identifying effective practices and bringing attention to gaps in USask's services and resources. The ultimate intent is to contribute to making USask a more supportive environment for current and future Indigenous students at the institution.

For more information, please contact:

Student Researcher(s): Courtney Schroeder, Graduate Student, Education Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Michael Cottrell, Associate Professor and Graduate Chair, Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Email Notice

Subject: Request for Interview on Indigenous Student Support at USask

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Courtney Schroeder, and I am a current doctoral student in the Educational Administration department at the University of Saskatchewan.

I am reaching out to inform you about my research project focused on Indigenous student retention at USask. My objective is to gain insights into the specific support needs of Indigenous students to enhance their educational success.

To achieve this, I am seeking to interview staff members who play a vital role in supporting Indigenous students throughout their academic journeys. I am particularly interested in gathering experiences and perspectives on what has proven effective in the past. This may include program advisors, front-line staff, or any other individuals who have valuable insights into the support structure for Indigenous students at USask.

If you could share this with any staff that you think would be willing to participate in an interview, I would be grateful for an opportunity to discuss their experiences and perspectives. The interview is expected to take approximately 60 minutes, and I assure you that all information shared will be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to the possibility of engaging in a meaningful discussion!

Regards,

Courtney Schroeder
University of Saskatchewan

For more information, please contact:

Student Researcher(s): Courtney Schroeder, Graduate Student, Education Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Michael Cottrell, Associate Professor and Graduate Chair, Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan, [redacted contact information]