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Virtual High School: Learning Communities for American Indian Students

Vickie A. Grant
University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, VAGRANT@STTHOMAS.EDU

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VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL:

LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Vickie A. Grant

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2011

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

Virtual High School: Learning Communities for American Indian Students

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality.
We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions
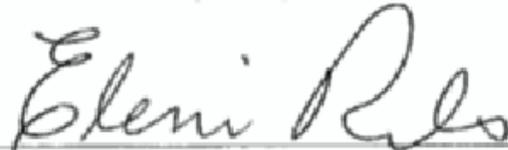required by the final examining committee have been made.
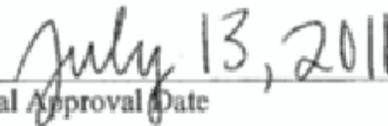
Dissertation Committee

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Sarah J. Noonan, Ed.D., Committee Chair

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Robert J. Brown, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____

Eleni Roulis, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____

July 13, 2011

Final Approval Date

Abstract

A case study was conducted to learn about the experiences of American Indian students attending a virtual high school who successfully completed coursework. Appreciative inquiry was used to gain student and coordinator perspectives regarding the factors contributing to successful course completion. Data from interviews, document analysis, and observations were analyzed using a critical and culturally responsive lens. Gang influences, pregnancy and parenting, social isolation, and disengagement with traditional forms of schooling led students to leave high school and later enroll in a virtual school to pursue the goal of a high school diploma. Enrollees were drawn to the virtual school for a variety of reasons, including the 24/7 availability of coursework, the opportunity to complete lessons online, and another chance to graduate. Course completion and graduation rates improved over time, demonstrating the need for sustained investment and programmatic adjustment based on student needs. Additional support beyond the coursework served as factors in student success. This included career education and cultural programming. A financial analysis showed the level of investment needed to offer an alternative program and also compared the costs associated with the virtual school to alternative educational program costs required to serve high need students. A comprehensive program to promote academic engagement should include a variety of student incentives to learn, provider flexibility, engaging coursework, enrichment programs, and program-wide integration of Tribal language and culture. Virtual delivery alone does not guarantee student success and district and state budgetary constraints put program sustainability at risk due to the high cost of serving at risk students. Recommendations included ways to counter financial challenges associated with initial low completion rates as well as a description of the added programming needed to support one of the most at risk populations with regard to educational attainment in the United States.

Acknowledgements

Ultimate credit goes to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as this doctoral journey has reminded me time and again that if I commit my works to the Lord, my thoughts will be established. During this time my Lord has also seen me through the loss of my precious niece, Megan and my wonderful mother, Joann Skanadore. To Megan, I'm grateful because although you were only 13, you left a legacy of befriending everyone and placing all faith in Jesus Christ. To my mother, you were a woman of a remarkable strength, faith, and grace throughout and at the end of your life, and I continue to grow and learn from your example.

Words do not adequately express my sense of appreciation and gratitude for my dissertation chair, Dr. Sarah Noonan. She saw me through the challenges of settling on a topic and recovering from a serious motorcycle accident at the same time my husband, Kelly, was going through cancer surgery and treatments. When I was ready to resume, she was there. The task often seemed daunting and Dr. Noonan always helped break it into manageable pieces and when e-mail was not quite enough, the phone would ring and she would walk me through it. As the study started to come together, she suggested a completion date and was there 24/7 to help me attain it. To her, I will be eternally grateful.

There have been several crises in my life during this voyage and the University of St. Thomas professors and staff have been tremendously supportive. The flowers and cards during times of loss and my accident were greatly appreciated. I truly felt supported by the University. A special thanks to Jackie Grossklaus and Dr. LaMagdeleine for going above and beyond and to Dr. Roulis and Dr. Brown for serving on my dissertation committee.

On a personal level, I am very thankful to Dr. Margo Heinert who encouraged me to embark on this doctoral endeavor. Finally, and most important, are the thanks to my husband,

Kelly, our children Scott and Stacy and their families, and my father, Bob Skanadore. The requirements of the program took me away from home on many weekends and extending the completion of the dissertation far too long meant that it was always in the back of my mind. It is because of the love, encouragement, and support of my family, that I am able to experience the satisfaction of seeing this doctoral program to completion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

We first knew you a feeble plant which wanted a little earth whereon to grow. We gave it to you; and afterward, when we could have trod you under our feet, we watered and protected you; and now you have grown to be a mighty tree, whose top reaches the clouds, and whose branches overspread the whole land, whilst we, who were the tall pines of the forest, have become a feeble plant and need your protection. (Red Jacket, Seneca Chief, n.d.)

American Indians who opposed the colonization of North America and westward expansion lost their lives and lands. During frontier battles (Glover, 2005; Takaki, 1993), forced marches (Spring, 2001), epidemics (Glover, 2005; Takaki, 1993), and starvation on the reservation (Reyhner, 1994), the American Indian people fought, struggled, and survived. They resisted government attempts to extinguish them and maintained their culture despite forced participation in government assimilation programs (Reyhner, 1994; Takaki, 1993).

As a result of the demise of the buffalo and manifest destiny, a life-style of many generations abruptly ended (Klug &Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001; Takaki, 1993). American Indians found themselves segregated in geographically-isolated reservations and contended with intensive efforts by the colonizers to destroy their cultures and way of life (Klug &Whitfield, 2003). Isolation, segregation, and education were means to this end (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Memmi, 1965; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001).

Before the arrival of the Europeans, indigenous education was by experience (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Children learned the traditional ways by watching their elders, then leaving the adults to practice until they could fully perform the task. When they felt competent in the task they would demonstrate what they had learned to an adult, a tradition not followed by Europeans (Pewewardy, 1994). Beginning in 1879 (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001), the U.S. government took young children from their families and sent them to Christian boarding schools to be "civilized" with the goal of abolishing Indian culture (Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner 1994;

Spring, 2001). These practices continued well into the 1960s (Cleary & Peacock, 1998), when

the Civil Rights movement brought strong resistance to deculturalization (Spring, 2001). The

Civil Rights Movement and ensuing events resulted in legislation, most notably the 1975 Indian

Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, allowing American Indians greater self-

determination (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). Despite changes in federal government programs,

the academic achievement and educational experience of American Indian students remains

troubling.

> Throughout history Indian people have been characterized as 'problems'. Such a
> description necessitated finding solutions, and schools as purveyors of
> assimilation became natural laboratories of research. Studying the formal
> education of Indians was a necessary step in the many educational experiments
> that sprang from the first attempts to formally educate Indians in colonial
> America. Nearly 400 years later, assimilation may not be the explicit goal, but
> the perplexities in Indian educational achievement still remain as a major field of
> inquiry. (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 115)

Information at the national level regarding the overall achievement and dropout rates of

American Indians remains sparse because American Indians are often not differentiated as a

separate cohort (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). State agencies track achievement and graduation

rates for American Indian students and their status remains alarmingly low. For example,

> According to *Education Week*, although the [Midwestern] state graduation rate
> was 74.5 percent in the 2002-2003 school year, the graduation rate for American
> Indians, the largest ethnic minority in the state, accounting for almost 10 percent
> of the state's overall population and more than 10 percent of the state's K-12
> enrollment, only graduated at a rate of 28.6 percent. American Indians are also the
> fastest growing segment of the state's population, and between 1990-2000,
> according to the state version the 2000 "Kid's Count," grew at an astonishing rate
> of 18.4 percent. Thus, the state is poorly serving its fastest growing and second
> largest constituency. (Center for Education Reform, 2007, p. 17)

Low achievement, absenteeism, and high dropout rates remain a universal problem for American

Indian students, causing researchers (Berry, 1968; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997) to ask questions

regarding the role and purpose of American Indian education. Deyhle and Swisher (1997)

suggested the structure and purpose of schooling should be considered when evaluating the academic achievement of American Indian students.

In light of the compelling reasons previously described I decided to investigate a national problem by studying one school district's efforts to increase academic achievement rates of American Indian students at a local level. I chose to conduct my study because of my commitment to American Indian education, having served as a professional educator of American Indian students for the last 18 years. I wanted to learn if there are better ways to serve American Indian students, including ways to preserve Indian culture and combat the poor track record of academic achievement. I was especially interested in studying alternative paths to high school graduation, as low achievement, absenteeism, and high school dropout rates on the Eagle Nest (pseudonym) Indian Reservation replicated national patterns.

Eagle Nest, Eagle Nest Reservation, and Eagle Nest Indian Reservation are pseudonyms used interchangeably to identify and refer to the Indian reservation referred to in this study. The terms Native American, American Indian, Indian, Indigenous, and Indigenous People are used interchangeably as deemed most respectful or appropriate when addressing Indigenous Peoples of the Americas. To avoid identifying a specific tribe, I used the terms Tribe and Tribal. To give flesh to this concern, to provide context, and to localize it, I next describe the people living on the Eagle Nest Indian Reservation and residing in the Sherman (pseudonym) County School District.

Eagle Nest Indian Reservation

The Eagle Nest people share a troubled history with other American Indian tribes throughout the United States. Maintaining their spiritual traditions and way of life, the Eagle Nest peoples' struggle to survive continues today as a result of generational poverty and its

associated effects on health and living conditions. The populace faces staggering unemployment. An estimated eight out of every ten residents is jobless (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2003), creating conditions of widespread poverty. A large portion of the Eagle Nest Indian Reservation resides within Sherman County. Sherman County consistently rates as one of the ten poorest counties in America due to a staggering statistic: 70% of the children living there fall below the Federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). While statistics are difficult to acquire, many residents suffer from depression, suicide, and substance abuse (South Dakota Suicide Prevention, 2008). Life expectancies on the reservation are among the shortest of any group in the Western Hemisphere: approximately 56 years (South Dakota Department of Health [SDDOH], 2007). The infant mortality rate is more than two times the United States national average (SDDOH, 2007).

Despite the dire statistics in their struggle to survive, the Eagle Nest Reservation touts the heaviest surge of reverse migration for any Great Plains Reservation, a gain of 26 percent in the 2000 census (Mitchell, 2004). The living conditions and generational poverty provide context for the challenges faced by children and families and influence the attainment of educational goals (South Dakota Suicide Prevention, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2003). In addition to the above factors, the unfortunate experience of American Indians with the public school system during the period of forced government assimilation adds yet another layer of distrust (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Takaki, 1993).

For many Eagle Nest students and families, the legacy of the past related to their historic struggle against colonizers, past and current dire living conditions, generational poverty, and threats to Native culture as a result of forced assimilation programs, serve as potential barriers to

the success of students in the educational system. This history provides an important background to the educational challenges facing American Indian students.

In the next section, I describe the impetus for offering an alternative school program for American Indian students living on the Eagle Nest Indian Reservation in Sherman County. Prior to 2007-2008, there was no public high school on the Eagle Nest Reservation. I conducted a case study of a new public high school option offered to students living on the reservation by Sherman County Schools.

Sherman County Schools

Located within Eagle Nest Indian Reservation boundaries, the Sherman County School District is the public school option for students residing on the reservation. The birth through eighth grade school system has a yearly student enrollment of approximately 1200 students at four attendance centers. Eagle Nest is one of the largest reservations in the United States, making travel from one attendance center to another a daunting event. More than ninety-nine percent of the student population identifies as Native American and ninety-seven percent are enrolled members of the Tribe. While almost no students report the Tribal language as their first language, one third of the adult population does. Prior to 2007, the Sherman County school district served students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade and did not provide a high school education program.

In response to dismal high school graduation rates, the state's legislature enacted a law to create the Midwestern State Virtual High School (MSVHS; pseudonym), charging it with providing "choice accessibility, flexibility, quality, and equity in curricular offerings for high school-aged students in the state" (South Dakota Department of Education [SDDOE], 2008, para. 2). The MSVHS expands current synchronous and asynchronous virtual class offerings.

School Improvement Study

While governmental and community leaders attempted to address the poor educational outcomes at a statewide level with new legislation, Sherman County School District was engaged in conducting a local study of educational outcomes for students in grades K-8. Sherman County school district engaged in a collaborative research project with a regional educational service agency, to determine the educational outcomes for the district's 2002 through 2006 8th grade cohorts as well as assess and make recommendations regarding the viability of expanding the public school grade span to include grades nine through twelve. The findings regarding graduation rates were similar to those previously described at the national levels.

Virtual High School

In response to the audit findings and a belief that the district was, in actuality, part of the graduation rate problem, the district requested and received PK-12 accreditation and created the Sherman County Virtual High School. The first Sherman County "virtual" student enrolled on September 5, 2007. No bricks and mortar -- the Sherman County Virtual High School offers a fully accredited high school designed to reduce "early leavers" and increase the rate of high school graduation among American Indian students. I was appointed in 2007 to serve as the virtual high school's first principal.

While few localities report higher dropout rates, Sherman County has global company in its quest to understand the nature and taming of this beast. Early school leaving has imposed geographic as well as social isolation upon these students. Geographic isolation in that they remain dependent upon their families and communities for sustenance as they lack the skills and credentials needed to sustain themselves if they were to move. Social isolation takes its toll as they are no longer considered part of the high school scene.

The topic of my study relates to the mission and goals established for Sherman County's virtual high school. *The Sherman County Virtual High School aspires to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to lifelong learning in a culturally diverse and technological world as evidenced by successful course completion and high school graduation. We commit to a comprehensive community-based system of support to assure this outcome.*

The purpose of my study was to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I examined their experiences and identified factors that influenced successful course completion.

Statement of the Problem

What experiences and factors influenced course completion and graduation rates of American Indian students seeking a high school diploma while attending a virtual high school? How might historic rates of early leaving and low student achievement be combated through successful course completion while attending in a virtual high school?

Significance

The significance of my study relates to informing practicing educational leaders and policy makers about factors that contribute to successful course completion rates for American Indians attending a virtual high school. The reservation's high school dropout rate hovers at about 72% and the majority of the virtual high school's enrollees are included in this statistic. Many students have not been in school during the past year and for some it has been three to seven years since they last attended. Most students are significantly older than the age normally attributed to their grade placement. By analyzing course progress and completion rates for a student cohort enrolled in virtual high school, this study will inform school administrators,

distance education providers, and policy makers about the quality of instructional processes and support mechanisms in distance learning courses and virtual programs.

Chapter One provides contextual and precursory background information, placing Native Americans on reservations, identifying their plight, and describing the evolution of virtual schooling in a Midwestern state. Chapter Two: Review of Literature, presents a body of literature that describes the evolution of Indian education from pre-colonial times through the present, highlights academic achievement and graduation data for Native American students, and introduces critical and culturally-responsive pedagogy as the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter Three: Methodology, guides the reader through the research design, setting, participant descriptions, data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation. In Chapters Four and Five, the analyzed data is presented. Chapter Four: Making the Decision to go Virtual, describes the evolution and first year of the virtual high school. Chapter Five: The Virtual Experience, describes the experiences of students and coordinators, identifies factors relating to course completion, and illuminates programmatic enhancements. Chapter Six concludes the study with a summary, implications, and recommendations for additional program development and further research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To provide the context and theoretical framework for this study of factors impacting successful course completion for Native American students attending a virtual high school, the following literature review covers three areas. First, I provide a review of "indigenous" education, followed by a brief history of the eras of Indian education. Next, I review the current status of educational programs, high school graduation, and achievement data for Native American students. Finally, I introduce theory to illuminate how existing contextual factors lead to undesirable outcomes for Native American students and to unearth factors explaining student success.

What would education in the United States be like today if the English colonists had adopted the educational ways of American Indians? Native American children experienced an "indigenous" education: their education was integrated into the tribe's community life (Grande, 2004; Klug & Whitfield, 2003). In preparation for tribal life, children listened to the stories told by elders, worked with adults, and participated in ceremonies that reflected the customs of the clan (Grande, 2004; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 2007).

Because American Indian languages were oral and not written, knowledge regarding educational practices was shared through oral tradition. Written accounts of educational practices were based on the European "colonizers" perspective (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). Because Europeans viewed the Indian culture as "savage," their goal was to accomplish total cultural transformation: eliminating Indian ways and culture and replacing it with the dominant White culture. The text produced by European colonists contained few references to the American Indian culture (Szasz, 2007).

Adopting the educational ways of American Indians or even integrating them into European American ways was never a consideration. European American discussions of education for American Indians focused on total cultural transformation (Grande, 2004; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 1999). This cultural transformation of or "civilizing" Native Americans included "the instilling of a work ethic; creating a desire to accumulate property; repressing pleasure…; establishing a nuclear family structure with the father in control…; implementing authoritarian child-rearing practices; and the converting of Indians to Christianity" (Spring, 2001, p. 42). According to Grande (2004):

> Indian Education was never simply about the desire to "civilize" or even deculturalize a people, but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources. (p. 19)

Authentic accounts of Indian educational practices appear in explorer descriptions of Indian culture. Christopher Columbus wrote that Indians were "very gentle and without knowledge of…evil… They love their neighbors as themselves, and have the sweetest talk in the world, and gentle, and always with a smile" (Takaki, 1993, p. 32). Russell described the Wampanoags, encountered by the Pilgrims in 1620, as farmers who had a representative political system and entertained a division of labor (as cited in Takaki, 1993). Arrow making, woodworking, and leather crafts were among their areas of specializing.

While mapped in a variety of ways, delineating the history of Indian education into eras reflecting established systems of power is an approach utilized by several researchers (Grande, 2004; Szasz, 1999; Thompson, 1978). Grande (2004) listed these eras as:

> (1) the period of missionary domination, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries; (2) the period of federal government domination from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries; and, (3) the period of self-determination from the mid-twentieth century to the present. (p. 12)

Missionary Domination

During the period of missionary domination, the church and state seemingly worked hand-in-hand to advance civilization by colonizing minds and to convert Indians to Christianity by saving souls (Grande, 2004). In 1611, French Jesuits opened mission schools aimed exclusively at educating Indian children in the *French way* (Grande, 2004). While many American Indians wanted to become literate, they resisted colonist education and conversion efforts. Szasz (2007) described that in the early seventeenth century, the Virginians encountered overwhelming resistance to their meager efforts at educating Indian children because the Powhatan Algonquian saw theirs as the superior culture, not the colonials.

The colonists, in turn, were criticized for putting little time and effort into sharing their knowledge. Rather than well intended, Jennings described the colonists' claims of interest in the education of Indians as a "missionary racket" (as cited in Spring, 2001, p. 43). Money collected for missionary work, including founding a college for Native Americans, instead financed endeavors benefiting the colonists. In the 1640s, England chastised the colonists for failing to convert Indians, an act that finally forced them into action (Jennings, 1976).

In 1646, the Massachusetts General Court declared that any "Christian or pagan…wittingly and willingly…denying the true God, or his creation or government of the world…shall be put to death" (Jennings, 1976, p. 241). From the mid-1600s into the twentieth century, most educators and Protestant ministers believed Indians had to be civilized and had to be Christian. John Elliot, known as the "Apostle to the Indians," advocated separating converted Indians from their villages and pushed for placing them in small reservations (Jennings, 1976).

The boarding school was born out of this notion that eliminating contact with the "uncivilized" life of their villages would cause the Indians to become civilized (Reyhner, 1994; Reyhner & Eder, 1989; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 2007).

The most famous colonial American Indian education efforts, including the tradition of using boarding schools to civilize Native Americans, started with the work of Eleazar Wheelock who founded Dartmouth College in 1769 (Spring, 2001; Szasz, 2007). Wheelock claimed that education was cheaper than war and advocated for removing children from their families and tribal communities and placing them in boarding schools for civilizing and Christianizing (Reyhner & Eder, 1989). Interestingly, the colonists resisted the Dartmouth charter's charge "for the education and instruction of youth of the Indian tribes," (Spring, 2001, p. 44) by serving primarily White youth.

Federal Government Domination

After the American Revolution ended in 1783, the colonists feeble civilization efforts were replaced by a major U.S. government impetus to use civilization policies to acquire Indian lands (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). Weary from a hard fought and costly war, President Washington and the U.S. government were more interested in purchasing lands through treaties than obtaining them through conquest. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 offered the promise of peace and negotiating for the purchase of Indian lands. It states, "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed" (Vogel 1972, p. 74).

U.S. government leaders saw civilization programs as the best way to convince southern tribes to sell their lands. They felt that trading houses, a key component of civilization programs,

would make the Indians aware of what they could purchase from the sale of their land (Prucha, 1984; Spring, 2001; Spring, 2005; Takaki, 1993). The major flaw in these policies was the assumption of willingness on the part of the Indians, to sell their land. Faced with mounting resistance, President Jefferson was convinced that cultural transformation—"the transformation of Native Americans into yeoman farmers who, living on farms and no longer dependent on hunting, would not need vast tracts of wilderness" (Spring, 2001, p. 45)—was the key to acquiring tribal lands. "Jefferson wanted to change Native American values regarding the economy, government, family relations, and property and manipulate desires regarding the consumption of goods" (Spring, 2005, p. 116). To implement Jefferson's policies, government agents established schools and taught men how to farm and care for animals, while women learned domestic skills such as spinning and sewing (Prucha, 1984).

In 1819, Congress passed the Civilization Fund Act (Grande, 2004; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2005). This act provided financial support for those willing to live among and teach Indians. Thomas McKenney, superintendent of Indian trade, believed that education, rather than trade, was the key to social control and that the creation of tribal school systems operated by white missionary teachers would culturally transform Native Americans in one generation. Given relative peace at the time with the tribes, "McKenney didn't consider the possibility that some tribal members might resent and resist this attempt at cultural transformation" (Spring, 2001, p. 48). Welcomed by tribal progressives who courted acculturation and resisted by traditionalists who wanted to maintain their customs and ways of life, the act "contributed to the development of social classes and a lasting division between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists'" (p. 48).

By the late 1820s, Congress was looking for a more permanent solution to the problem of the southern tribes (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). This solution involved negotiating with the

Indians for their removal west of the Mississippi. McKenney wrote that, once removed, Indians were to be guaranteed lands in the west and "schools should be distributed over all their country. The children should be taken into these, and instructed… [in] reading, writing and arithmetic, in mechanics and the arts; and the girls in all the business of domestic duties" (cited in Spring, 2001, p. 48).

"The period of federal government domination ideologically commenced with the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830" (Grande, 2004, p. 12). The Cherokees, using an alphabet invented by tribal member Sequoyah, had started their own system of education (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). In spite of these and other advances towards civilization, the "Five Civilized Tribes" were forcefully removed from their homelands and marched westward. Woodward wrote that in 1838 the Cherokees were "assembled at bayonet point and marched west, an estimated 4,000 of the 11,500 Indians who started on the 'Trail of Tears' died of dysentery, malnutrition, exposure, or exhaustion before they reached Oklahoma" (cited in Reyhner, 1994, p. 39). The experiences of the other tribes were similarly devastating (Reyhner, 1994; Takaki, 1993).

The creation of school systems along with the removal of the southern tribes to west of the Mississippi occurred in the 1830s during what is called the "common school movement" (Cremlin, 1970; Spring, 2001). The forerunner of today's system of public education, common school proponents believed that in addition to teaching all students academics, education should prepare youth for citizenship. These historical events, along with the Civilization Fund Act, signified the importance of schooling in not only the development of social classes, but as previously noted, contributed to the lasting division between progressives and traditionalists.

> [T]ribal progressives have argued for acculturation of Native Americans to the dominant social and economic system of the United States. In contrast, traditionalists have tried to maintain Native American customs and ways of living, and they have often rejected European forms of schooling. (Spring, 2001, p. 48-49)

In the decades following Indian removal, church and state worked together in developing "manual labor schools…Under this experiment, churches were endowed with land for Indian children to plow, maintain, and harvest" (Grande, 2004, p. 13). While there was still an emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic, to get at agricultural skills, the concept of forced labor transformed "the ostensibly 'moral' project of civilizing Indians into a for-profit enterprise" (p. 13). Windfall profits led to competition for funding and the ensuing friction between churches contributed to the repeal of the Civilization Fund in 1873, which in turn initiated increased government involvement in education (Grande, 2004).

The government sensed that Indian resistance would lead to the failure of civilization and removal policies (Grande, 2004; Spring, 2001). They further believed that the established day school model that allowed students proximity to their families was detrimental to the goal of deculturalization; therefore, the manual labor boarding school became the model of choice (Grande, 2004). "The key to the process was the removal of children from the influences of family and tribe and there placement in educational institutions where they would not be allowed to speak their native languages or practice native customs" (Spring, 2001. p. 175).

> When pupils returned to the reservation, they often became objects of ridicule…training they had received had little or no application to reservation life…these pupils became the first victims of the 'either/or' policy of assimilation. Their education forced them to choose either the culture of the white man or the culture of the Indian; there was no compromise. (Szasz, 1999, p. 10)

Additionally, investigations in the 1920s revealed horrific conditions in the boarding schools—malnourishment, bordering on starvation; epidemics and disease, precipitated by overcrowded

living spaces; forced labor, severe physical punishment, and daily routines closely resembling those of a military school (Klug & Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 1999).

Frustrated by failed attempts to make Indians self-sufficient on their reservations and a developing dependence by Indians on government annuities, the General Allotment (Dawes) Act was passed by Congress in 1887 (Reyhner, 1994). The allotment program was designed to distribute commonly held tribal property to individual Indians (Spring, 2001). Seen as a way to instill capitalistic values as well as being a means to deal with Indian land problems—tribal holdings dwindled from 140 million acres to 50 million acres (Reyhner, 1994). As Whites acquired the newly available reservation lands, they demanded public schooling for their children (Szasz, 1999). In 1906, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Francis Leupp directed the mass transfer of Indian students into public schools (Grande, 2004). Not only was this economically advantageous to the government, it also propagated the process of Americanization whereby Indians would be taught to take on the ways of their White counterparts. By 1912, enrollment of Indian children in public schools was greater than in government, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), schools (Grande, 2004; Reyhner, 1994).

Szasz (1999) wrote about unimpeded assimilation policies of education and land allotment, leaving an Indian population alarmingly illiterate and "suffering increasingly from disease and a short life expectancy, malnutrition and starvation, a diminishing land base, and a stagnant unrealistic school system." (p. 12). The publication of the Meriam Report in 1928 acknowledged the ills that had befallen the Native peoples and completely reversed the educational philosophy stating that "the modern point of view in education and social work lays stress on upbringing in the natural setting of home and family life" (Spring, 2001, p. 176). Federal policy after the Meriam Report stressed community day schools and the rebuilding of the

cultural life and languages of American Indians (Grande, 2004; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2005; Szasz, 1999). In 1933, John Collier became the Commissioner of Indian affairs and oversaw the implementation of recommendations from the report, including the end of allotment, increased Indian religious freedom, and greater tribal self-government (Grande, 2004; Reyhner & Eder, 1989; Szasz, 2003).

Eventually, Collier's reform efforts "fueled liberal sentiments to 'free' the Indian from government control, particularly from the reservation system" (Grande, 2004, p. 15). Between 1945 and 1968, during the "termination period," the government terminated the reservations and attempted to relocate Indians to urban areas. Without adequate preparation, states became responsible for Indian education (Grande, 2004; Reyhner, 1994). Lacking foresight in educational planning, "this program was added to the pile of failed government experiments, brought down by its own inherent deficiencies and a growing tide of Indian resistance" (Grande, 2004, p. 16).

Era of Self-Determination

By the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, Native Americans actively resisted termination policies and demanded greater self-determination. BIA policy changes reflected these demands. The 1961 report from the Task Force on Indian Affairs, offered a new vision of Indian affairs: " to insure the success of our endeavor we must solicit the collaboration of those whom we hope to benefit—the Indians themselves…equal citizenship, maximum self-sufficiency, and full participation in American life" (Spring, 2001, p. 395). Self-determination supported the desire of Indian people to have a say in their own destiny, serving as the impetus behind Indian organizations such as the National Indian Education Association and studies of Indian education, including an important report, Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A

National Challenge (Grande, 2004; Klug and Whitfield, 2003; Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001; Szasz, 2003).

The efforts of Indian educators and leaders along with the findings of the Indian education studies were instrumental in securing passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act in 1975 (Reyhner, 1994; Spring, 2001). Spring (2001) stated this act "gave tribes the power to contract with the federal government to run their own education and health programs . . . [and] strengthened Indian participation in the control of education programs" p. 397). This included giving authority over Indian education programs to a committee composed of parents of Indian students in those instances where the board of a local school district was not seated by an Indian majority. Additionally, the Tribally Controlled Schools Act of 1988 provided grant monies to tribes to support the operation of tribal schools (Spring, 2005).

In 1990, the Native American Languages Act committed the federal government to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages" (Spring, 2001, p. 397-398).

> There is, of course, an ironic twist to federal legislation…when placed against the backdrop of history. The Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory were operating their own…school systems…..The Cherokees were conducting bilingual education….These forms of self-determination…ended when Indian Territory was dissolved in 1907…tribes…were subjected to policies consciously designed to destroy their cultures, languages, and religions…federal legislation of the 1970s and 1980s,…required many tribes to discover and resurrect languages and traditions that the federal government had already partially destroyed. (p. 398)

Significant political documents published during the 1990s reveal some progress with regard to Indian education during the past thirty years, however, American Indian students continue to exhibit the "highest dropout and lowest achievement rates…endure Euro-centric curriculums, high faculty and staff turnover rates, [and] unprepared teachers" (Grande, 2004, p. 17). These lingering statistics attest "to the fact that centuries of genocidal and assimilationist

policies cannot be undone in a matter of years" (p. 17). This unfortunate history of American Indian experience in education illustrates the challenges in educating American Indian youth. A description of American Indian achievement and school completion rates as well as alternative educational programs follows.

Current Educational Programs and Achievement Data 2000+

In 2003 American Indians in the United States represented 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population with almost ninety percent of American Indian students attending regular public schools (Freeman & Fox, 2005; Institute of Education Science [IES], 2006). The remaining ten percent attend charter public schools, alternative schools, BIA schools, tribal contract/grant schools, and private schools. Less than 25% of American Indians live on reservations.

As previously noted, American Indian students exhibit low achievement rates compared to their White counterparts. While cognitive skill development of American Indian children is similar to other children at the ages of eight to twenty-two months (Freeman & Fox, 2005), by fourth grade, American Indian students score lower than White and Asian/Pacific Islander students on measures of academic achievement as evidenced by their performance on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; IES, 2006). For eighth grade, approximately fifteen percent more American Indian students demonstrate Below Basic skills in reading and mathematics as compared to the total population. The gap for eighth grade students attaining proficiency in these areas is similar (Freeman & Fox, 2005). For twelfth grade, the gap between the percentage of White students and American Indian students attaining proficiency on the 2005 NAEP was 17% in reading and 23% in mathematics (Grigg, Donahue, & Dion, 2007). Only 26 percent of American Indians attained proficiency in reading and a dismal six percent

were designated as proficient in mathematics. Basic skill deficiencies serve as one of the most common barriers to graduation.

Early School Leaving

The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE; 2003) reports four-year high school completion rates by state as well as by race/ethnicity. For 2000-2001, the lowest completion rate for any group was 42.1 percent for South Dakota's American Indians (USDOE, 2003). Of the 36 states reporting, Hispanics had the lowest completion rates of any race/ethnicity in 16 states, followed by American Indians in 12 states, and Black/non-Hispanic in eight states. Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) found poor attendance, low achievement, and being retained or over-age for grade were student factors that significantly impacted dropout rates in their meta-analysis of studies related to the dropout rate. In addition to skill deficiencies, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) identified disengagement as a prevalent reason for early school leaving. Disengagement predicted early school leaving even when both academic achievement and student background were factored out; poor attendance served as a major indicator of disengagement and a gradual alienation towards school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 2004).

Home factors, perceptions of school, and academic and social competence were predictive in distinguishing absentee from regularly attending high school students (NWREL, 2004). A study of non-attending student perceptions revealed sources of disengagement and alienation including: boring, irrelevant, or unchallenging classes; impaired relationships with teachers and other students, too many discipline incidents resulting in frequent suspensions, the school does not feel safe, and failing schoolwork or not being able to keep up with it (NWREL, 2004).

The National Indian Education Study (IES, 2006) surveyed eighth grade students taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and found that only 45% of the students surveyed believed what they were learning would "very much" prepare them for the life they wanted to lead. Further, in the NWREL (2004) study of strategies that increase student attendance, students resoundingly agreed on the factors that would likely keep them in school, including an educational setting that respects them for who they are, requires them to do their best, and supports their efforts to do their best. Given what American Indian students said about their educational experience, what promising strategies might reduce these barriers to high school completion?

Virtual Schools

Nationally, only about one half of minority students graduate from high school (Swanson, 2004). To improve high school graduation rates, new strategies and alternative education programs have been proposed. Virtual schools, programs offering regular school courses primarily via individual online instruction, represent one of the fastest-growing opportunities in K-12 education (Roblyer, 2006; USDOE, 2004). In *White Paper: E-learning Frameworks for NCLB*, Collins (2004) describes barriers and solutions to online learning also known as e-learning. The obstacles identified primarily fell into the categories of policy, quality, and funding. Interestingly, measuring attendance was identified as a policy obstacle to successful implementation of e-learning (Collins, 2004) and a major obstacle encountered by American Indian students on the path to high school graduation (Reyhner & Dodd, 1995). Poor attendance is a factor that significantly influences dropout rates (Hammond et al., 2007). In fact, missing too many days and not being able to catch up is the second highest reason cited by dropouts for leaving school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

The top reason cited by dropouts for leaving school is "classes were not interesting" (Bridgeland, et al. 2006, p. 3) and what might help them stay in school is to "improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work" (p. 11). The NWREL (2004) synthesis of research evaluated the potential of online programs to serve diverse populations. Student academic performance in online courses may be impacted by numerous complex factors including program effectiveness, socioeconomic status, school climate, parental involvement, teacher qualifications, and learner characteristics (NWREL, 2004). Learner characteristics such as cognitive ability, motivation, and feelings towards school influence academic performance as do "pedagogical approaches, including student-centered teaching, constructivist learning models, collaboration, problem-based learning, authentic performance based assessment, principals of differentiation" (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005, p. 54). In order to respond to different learning characteristics, Ally (2004) emphasizes that online programs must become increasingly more diverse, utilizing behaviorist, to teach the facts; cognitivist, to teach the how; and constructivist, "to teach the real-life and personal applications and contextual learning" (p. 24) learning theories in the design of online materials.

Summary

Having endured missionary and federal government domination, American Indian education has improved as the government has heeded demands for greater self-determination. Never-the-less, American Indian students continue to exhibit the highest dropout and lowest achievement rates in the United States, imploring educators and policy makers to embark on more effective educational strategies for this population (Cleary & Peacock, 1998). In the next

section I describe two theories, critical pedagogy and culturally-responsive pedagogy, adopted to form a conceptual framework for my study of American Indian students and online learning.

Critical and Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy

"Unlike traditional [positivist] theories that are empirically grounded in an attempt to generate increasingly accurate descriptions of the world as it exists, critical theory tries to generate a specific vision of the world as it might be" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 27). There is ample empirical evidence of the world as it exists for American Indian students—dismal academic outcomes are indisputable.

> Schools have historically failed with non-elite populations and have thus replicated the social hierarchy, thereby advantaging the elites in the society. This has ensured that large numbers of lower socio-economic and minority people engage in the lowest level and least satisfying jobs in the society (or no jobs), while being in a position to make few serious political or economic demands on the elites. Indeed, the fact that they have low literacy skills can be used (by themselves and the elites) as a rationale for them to be in low-level jobs and the elites in higher level ones. (Gee, 1990, p. 31)

To the contrary, opportunities abound for understanding the existing world, exploring what it might be, considering ways to facilitate change, and moving beyond racism and capitalism towards a world exemplifying the Native American values of generosity, courage, fortitude, and wisdom. It is towards this end that critical and culturally responsive pedagogy inform this study.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy emerged when "critical theory encountered education" (Kincheloe & Steinberg in Grande, 2004, p. 20). Contemporary critical educational theory had its beginnings prior to World War II and was inspired by Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theoror Adorno (McLaren, 2007). According to Brookfield (2005), "critical theory views thinking critically as being able to identify, and then to challenge and change the process by which a grossly iniquitous society uses dominant ideology to convince people this is a

normal state of affairs" (p. viii). Theory, critical in this instance, is useful if: (a) it helps us understand an aspect of the world, (b) it moves this understanding of what is to how the world might be improved, and (c) it offers hope to counter negativity (Brookfield, 2005). Simply stated, critical theory seeks "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (McLaren, 2007, p. 186). Critical pedagogy places a moral choice upon educators to, as suggested by John Dewey, view society as a function of education where classrooms "invite students to become agents of transformation and hope" (p. 184). Giroux (2001) asserted "critical pedagogy at its best attempts to provoke students to deliberate, resist, and cultivate a range of capacities enabling them to move beyond the world they already know without insisting on a fixed set of meanings" (p. 20). Critical Pedagogy is informed by lived experiences, challenging us to name, critically reflect, and act upon these occurrences (Wink, 2005).

In *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought,* (Grande 2004) puts forth Red Pedagogy as a means of diversifying "theoretical itineraries" of both indigenous and critical educators. Further elaborating:

> What distinguishes Red pedagogy is it basis in hope . . . a hope that believes in the strength and resiliency of indigenous peoples and communities, recognizing that their struggles . . . are part of the indigenous project of sovereignty and indigenization . . . [providing] an explanatory framework that helps us understand the complex and intersecting vectors of power shaping the historical-material conditions of indigenous schools and communities. (pp. 28-29)

Dropout and unemployment rates, a resistance by many American Indians to materialistic domination, indigenous views of time and progress that are not necessarily linear, and a rejection of humans as being at the center of the universe suggests that while critical pedagogy will serve as an invaluable analytic tool, some of its components will lie in conflict with American Indian epistemology (Bowers, 1993; Grande, 2004). Therefore, a filter by which this study will be

consistently scanned is the notion of "culture as conditioned by material forces and of schooling as a site of struggle" (Grande, 2004, p. 26). Critical pedagogy alerts the researcher to the notion that some instructional methodologies are liberating for oppressed populations (Freire, 1970) and culturally responsive pedagogy speaks to the benefits of teaching academic knowledge and skills through the students' own cultural and experiential filters (Gay, 2000). Teaching and learning methods associated with culturally responsive pedagogy illustrate how classroom teachers may be responsive to the issues raised by critical pedagogy, such as developing critical consciousness of oppression (Freire, 1970), seeking ways to resist institutional and cultural forms of oppression.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching uses "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2000, p. 106). Teaching academic knowledge and skills through the students' cultural and experiential filters improves academic achievement of ethnically diverse students (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Cummins, 1988; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cummins (1988) found minority students experienced failure in classrooms where teachers used transmission methods of instruction with more passive forms of learning such as lecture, memorization and completion of worksheets. After reviewing transcripts from interviews with teachers of Native American children, Cleary and Peacock (1998) found that all children, not just Native Americans, are innately inquisitive and motivated by feedback, competence, and autonomy.

Society is becoming more diverse. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2009), public school enrollment for Whites in 2007 was down to 56% from 78% in 1972. Historical patterns of underachievement on mainstream standardized achievement

tests among Native American children are well documented, with close to 85% of fourth graders reading below grade level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Critics of these results challenge this performance, stating performance on standardized tests reflects test bias and the degree of Anglo-acculturation more than academic competence (Gonzales, 2001; McShane & Plas, 1982; Reyhner, 1994). Never the less, even traditional (i.e., those who are minimally Anglo-acculturated) Native families expect their children to be "taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life" (Delpit, 1995, p. 45).

In teaching students from diverse backgrounds, Mvududu (2010) emphasizes meeting them at their point of need, including those that have been excluded, valuing difference rather than attempting to make everyone the same; and broadening the definition of success and how it is attained. There are cultural differences in the way students express themselves and a culturally competent teacher listens for these differences and strives to provide students with opportunities to demonstrate what they have learned in various ways. Goals and objectives remain the same, the means to goal attainment changes (Mvududu, 2010). By filtering out cultural communication differences, culturally competent teachers view themselves through the cultural lenses of their students, thereby hearing the intended message (Mvududu, 2010).

Noonan (2007) refers to this listening and hearing as encountering diversity by understanding and interpreting our experiences via a culturally sensitive pedagogy where "students, teachers, and subject matter open up to difference and pluralism through guided self-study, which serves as seed work for our personal and social transformation" (p. 9). By internalizing how personal culture shapes identity as well as thoughts and relationships, Noonan challenges leaders to consider the ways "institutions (family, government, the economic system,

education, religion) and dominant culture preserve the status quo advantaging some 'tribes' over others" (p. 9).

When parents and educators create mutual understandings of children's development as well as educational aspirations, it becomes possible to move beyond the cultural conflicts silencing some, while privileging others (Delpit, 1995). However, no simple solution to teaching other people's children exists. To successfully educate all of our children, Delpit encourages educators to really see and know the students they teach. To implement culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, educators themselves, must experience this kind of learning. Until schools and teacher education programs reflect the nuances of the communities they serve, few positive outcomes will occur (Adams, 1995; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Szasz, 1999).

For current intents and purposes, research supports enhancing the quality of interactions between school, family and community (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, n.d.). To accomplish this requires listening to the voices of Native stakeholders, which in turn necessitates the need for non-native stakeholders to embrace a culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive pedagogy will inform the study regarding the degree to which the Virtual High School respectfully honors and enhances the efforts of students to successfully complete courses and attain their high school diploma.

Summary

The review of literature described the evolution of Indian education, the current status of educational programs for Native American students, and theories that illuminate factors leading to undesirable or successful outcomes for students. Information abounds regarding why Native American students fail; however, few studies explain how students overcome these barriers and

find success. Studies regarding successful experiences in online learning were not found. There

is still much to learn about how Native American students navigate their high school journey.

This study sought to expand the body of research knowledge related to American Indian

students' success in an online program of learning, identifying the circumstances and factors

leading to their success. The methods adopted for this case study and details about participants,

data collection, and analysis appear in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I adopted qualitative research, implementing a case study approach, to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I selected qualitative research because I wanted to examine, within a real-life context (Yin, 2003), student experiences and factors influencing successful course completion. Compared to quantitative inquiry, a method focusing on a few variables across many cases, qualitative inquiry affords the researcher the opportunity to hone in on one or a few cases with many variables (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (1998) further described the reasons to undertake qualitative research: (a) the research question asks what is going on here; (b) the topic warrants further exploration as the variables are not readily apparent; (c) there is a need for a comprehensive examination of the topic; (d) the natural setting is the best option for studying the participants; and (e) the researcher's role is that of an "*active learner* who can tell the story from the participants' view" (p. 18).

Qualitative researchers attempt to analyze the data *with all their richness* (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) as closely as possible to their original form. The written results described in narrative form, include quotations to illustrate and describe the particular situation or worldview. The focus is on the process, rather than the outcome. Proving or disapproving a hypothesis is not the goal. "You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts" (p. 32). Meaning making is of the essence. "By learning the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research illuminates the inner dynamics of situations—dynamics that are often invisible to the outsider" (p. 32).

Because of these aspects and traits, I adopted the qualitative method to hear people's stories, listen to their illuminating perspectives, and understand the meaning they attributed to their success. Furthermore, "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (Merriam, 1998, p. 1). Next I describe case study as my qualitative method of choice, followed by a description of the research sample, data gathering and analysis methods, and researcher qualifications and bias issues.

Case Study Research

Using a case study approach, I investigated the experiences of five students and two coordinators involved with a virtual high school. I collected qualitative data to understand their perspectives and experiences regarding factors associated with their success as well as their interactions with instructors and staff associated with a virtual high school.

Case study research has a long-standing and well-known history across disciplines, especially when researchers are seeking to describe persons or situations in a field-based setting (Creswell, 1998; Hamel, 1993; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case study appears to be especially prevalent in studying educational innovations. According to Merriam (1998):

> A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research. (p. 19)

Merriam (1998) stated that case study "does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study" (p. 28). While case study reports focus primarily on narrative description based on direct and participant observation, document

review, and interviews, they may also include data from other methods such as surveys or quantitative analysis of archival data (Yin, 2003).

I used a descriptive, embedded single case study design (Yin, 2003) to collect interview and other data. The primary focus or main unit of analysis was the experience of the students completing coursework virtually and factors contributing to successful course completion. Sub or embedded units for analysis consisted of perceptions data from virtual high school applications, virtual high school coordinators, and others identified by the students as contributing to their success. The inclusion of these subunits in the data collection and analysis process expanded upon and enhanced insights into the student experience. Next I describe the setting, my research sample, and data collection methods.

Setting

The setting for this study involves four virtual labs located at each of Sherman (pseudonym) County School District's attendance centers, the district's administrative office as well as community and college centers, located within the boundaries of the reservation, where students access computers and the internet to work on their courses. Students, taught by on-line instructors who have been approved as on-line providers by the state's department of education, access their learning from the various sites listed above and/or from their homes. In addition to certified online instructors, coordinators employed by Sherman County School District, support students as mentors, tutors, advocates, and counselors as well as providing technology support of the on-line delivery system. The coordinators in most instances are community members, bringing their considerable expertise of the Indian reservation experience and life to the plate, thus making them "community experts."

Research Sample

In this section, I provide a description of each participant in the study. To derive a pool of prospective participants, I reviewed demographic information from 2008-2009 for students who were at least 18 years of age and had completed at least one course. There were 20 students who met the criteria. For coordinators, the requirement was having at least one student complete at least one course. Five coordinators met the criteria. Each person who met the criteria was invited to participate in the study. Five students and two coordinators agreed to be interviewed. Interviewees included two virtual high school site coordinators and five students, over the age of 18, who had successfully completed at least one course in the virtual school. First I introduce the five student participants. These introductions provide contextual information to describe the circumstances surrounding their enrollment in a virtual school. The four female students in the study are all Native American and the one male student is White. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant confidentiality. A description of students included in the study, appearing in alphabetical order by their first name (a pseudonym), follows.

Doris, the First Virtual Student

Doris enrolled in ninth grade at an off reservation public school on October 9, 2003. She successfully completed English I and in her interview, indicated that anything that has to do with reading and writing has been her strong suit. Doris's application indicates she left school because she was kicked out. As the first official enrollee for the virtual school, Doris enrolled on August 30, 2007, after being a dropout for over three years. During her first year, she unsuccessfully attempted seven courses, although she was able to recover the credit for one course during her second year. During her second and third years, she successfully completed 14

of 15 courses and she has successfully completed five of the 11 courses she is currently enrolled in, with ample time remaining to complete the others.

Katy, Gates Scholar

Katy enrolled in the ninth grade at a public school in a neighboring state at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year. Katy was home schooled for the 2007-2008 school year and dual enrolled as a home school and virtual school student her junior and senior years. Katy loves to rodeo and the combination of correspondence courses from home and the on-line courses from the virtual school afforded Katy and her family the means by which to follow the rodeo circuit. It also made it possible for her to travel with her mother who at the time was the state's Director of Indian Education. Katy graduated from the virtual school on June 10, 2010 with a 4.0 GPA as well as being named a Gates Scholar.

Mary, Mother and Graduate

Mary enrolled in ninth grade at a public school on a neighboring reservation at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year. The next two years, she was at a BIA Grant school on this reservation. Due to being pregnant, Mary attended the BIA school on a homebound basis for the first semester of 2007-2008. She enrolled at the virtual school in January of 2008. Mary had attempted 17 credits and successfully earned eleven credits upon enrolling in the virtual school. Mary graduated from the virtual school on June 10, 2010, five years after beginning her high school career. Mary credits her virtual school coordinator as being very instrumental in keeping her motivated and on track.

Mike, Computer Wizard

Mike enrolled in ninth grade at a virtual academy in another state at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year and continued in the program through 2007 and 2008. When he and his

family moved to a city in this state they searched for an on-line program and Mike open enrolled in the virtual school on August 14, 2009. Mike had successfully earned 18.5 credits upon his enrollment with the virtual school and after six years graduated on June 10, 2010. Mike's father travels extensively in his line of work and the on-line programs allowed Mike to accompany his father on many of his travels.

Penny, a Completer Despite Obstacles

Penny enrolled in ninth grade at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year at a private school on the reservation. She had successfully completed ten of twelve courses upon her enrollment at the virtual school on September 5, 2008. Penny successfully completed four of four courses during 2008-2009. Penny's mother and her virtual school coordinator offered encouragement and nudged her towards successful course completion. Lack of transportation, being forced out of their home and facing a move to a distant state are among the challenges Penny has faced. As of December of 2010, Penny had earned 10.5 of the 22 credits she needs to graduate.

Next I introduce the two people serving as coordinator participants. Both coordinators are female and live on the reservation. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant confidentiality. These introductions provide contextual information that illuminates the circumstances under which each coordinator arrived at their position as follows:

Corinne, Grandmother

Corinne is a White woman in her mid-fifties. Prior to moving to the reservation, she had been a lawyer in the city. Her husband is Native American and emulates traditional Native American values including taking as his own, his many grandchildren whose parents are unable to care for them. Corinne shares parenting responsibilities and was drawn to seek employment at

the virtual school in part due to watching her grandchildren struggle in and eventually dropout of traditional high schools.

Jolene, an Activist for Social Change

Jolene is Native American and appears to be in her thirties. She is a single parent whose son struggled in a traditional high school and dropped out prior to completing his freshman year. Jolene was involved with helping students in prior positions and is very passionate in what she envisions high school should look like for reservation youth.

I interviewed students and coordinators to learn about their participation in and experiences with a virtual high school. Additionally, to triangulate data and enhance reliability, I analyzed a variety of existing documents.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews

Yin (2003) suggests that informant interviews are an essential data collection strategy and source of evidence in a qualitative project. In a focused interview, "a respondent is interviewed for a short period of time . . . the interviews may still remain open-ended and assume a conversational manner, but you are more likely to be following a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol" (p.90) as well as asking additional questions based upon the informants' responses. In the current study, for example, the intent of the interviews was to corroborate and expand upon information gleaned from document analysis.

When determining which respondents to interview, the sampling strategy of stratified purposeful was utilized (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This strategy is used to illustrate the perceptions of subgroups and facilitate comparisons. In this study, focused on experiences and factors contributing to successful on-line course completion, I invited the 20 students who were

at least 18 years of age and had completed at least one course in 2008-2009 to participate in the interviews. These students each received a letter congratulating them on successful course completion and an invitation to participate (Appendix B) in the interview process. They also received a stamped return envelope and copies of the consent form and interview questions. One student responded to the invitation and follow-up phone calls resulted in four other students agreeing to participate in an interview. The five site coordinators who had at least one student successfully complete a course during 2008-2009 received an attachment via e-mail inviting them to participate (Appendix C). Two coordinators responded to the invitation and agreed to participate in an interview. This stratified purposeful sample allowed for the collection of perceptions data from two different perspectives and also provided for comparative data analysis among them.

I then contacted each respondent by phone and arranged a time and location to conduct the interview. I conducted two student and both coordinator interviews at the district's learning labs, as this venue seemed most likely to result in the subjects' feeling comfortable, being on their own turf. Per their request, I conducted two interviews at the attendance center where the graduation ceremony was held and completed one phone interview. Prior to initiating each interview, I reviewed the consent forms (Appendix D) with the interviewees and acquired their permission to conduct the interview as well as to audio tape the session. The research study was explained to participants using this protocol:

1. Each participant was provided with a brief overview of the study and data collection process. The consent form included a statement of confidentiality.

2. Participants were advised that pseudonyms would be utilized to ensure their anonymity.

3. All participants read and voluntarily signed the consent form. Before obtaining their signature, I asked them if they had any questions and also explained that they could stop the interview at any point and ask that any or all of their information not be used in the study.

4. In order to further ensure confidentiality, all handwritten records were stored in a locked compartment in my desk and electronic data was stored on my secured computer.

All participants voluntarily entered into the study, including giving complete informed consent and allowing the interview to be audio taped. I recorded the interviews using an audio tape recorder. Once I gained participants for the study, I adopted Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as my method for interviewing.

Appreciative Interviewing

Paulo Freire, a theorist of critical pedagogy, spoke of a "vision of education as an interactive, reflective, and dynamic process that incorporates and builds on the learners' own bases of knowledge and experiences" (as cited in Rohmann, 1999, p. 148). This vision advocates engaging students and those involved in their education in dialogue aimed at understanding and respecting their experience and perspective. Dialogue as viewed by organizational theorists (Ellinor & Gerard, 1999; Issacs, 1999; Senge, 1990) becomes a way to embark upon what is conceptualized by Clark (2001) as "authentic conversation." Essentially, dialogue implies a stream of meaning flowing among, through, and between participants and from which a new understanding can emerge (Bohm, 1989).

> The object of dialogue is not to analyze things or to win an argument . . . Rather, it is . . . to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. . . . It may turn out that the opinions are not really very important—they are all assumptions. And if we can see them all, we may then move more creatively in a different direction. (Bohm, 1989, p. 7)

There is a suggestive hypothesis that "the idea of positive change—that co-inquiry into the true, the good, the better, the possible will lead to faster, more democratic and energized change than will deficit-based inquiry into the broken and the problematic" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. xxix).

A recent phenomenon in the field of organizational development is a change theory known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Its overarching premise is that "in every organization something works and change can be managed through the identification of what works and the analysis of how to do more of what works" (Hammond, 1998, p. 3). With a "what is working" versus a "problem solving" approach, Appreciative Inquiry delves beyond explicit program goals and probes into what is most appreciated and valued. Engaging in dialogue through an appreciative lens is liberating, thus creating "a self-perpetuating momentum for positive change—a positive revolution" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 60).

Appreciative Inquiry is both theory and method. An essential premise is, "it is the questions we ask that count, the questions we ask do make a difference" (Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, & Kaplin, 2005, p. viii). Using an AI questioning approach (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney, et al., 2005), I asked students and coordinators to identify the features of their learning experience that helped them to succeed. Appreciative interviews allow an exchange of meaning and lend themselves well to identifying success factors from student and coordinator perspectives, which in turn leads to the "right questions" for an engaging dialogue, resulting in a comprehensive, via multiple theories and perspectives, understanding of the student experience. The focus interview questions were developed as "appreciative interviews" with the

questions serving as guidelines inviting interviewees to delve into and tell a story about their experiences (Appendices E & F).

Yin (2003) suggested case study research may be challenging as "there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes" (p. 110). Once data collection starts, "you should think of yourself as an independent investigator who cannot rely on a rigid formula to guide your inquiry" (p. 63). Yin advocated for thinking about interviews as guided conversations rather than highly-structured queries. "As such, they are subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation" (p. 92). Therefore, Yin recommends corroborating interview data with information from other sources such as historical documents and observation. I followed this process, examining documents related to student motivation and achievement.

Historical Documents and Observations

The study also included data collected through document analysis. Existing records, including demographic information, enrollment applications, student notes written by coordinators, and student cumulative files were examined. Prospective enrollees offered their opinions regarding attending a virtual high school in their application forms as part of an application process and these responses were analyzed. The documents reviewed were written responses, required as part of the application process (Appendix G), to questions posed in an appreciative manner, what appeals to you about a virtual school, when was a high point in your education, and how do you learn best? I reviewed the response to the first question to gain insight into why students were applying for enrollment in a virtual school. I compared these responses to participant responses as both groups responded to the question.

I also accessed and reviewed various district and school level records to analyze and understand qualitative data, including student enrollments and rosters, course enrollment and completion numbers, and high school transcripts. The sources of this data were the state's virtual school database, the district's student information system, the district's web-based data system, and provider data-bases. Additionally, I accessed and analyzed narrative data from a variety of sources including student progress notes written by coordinators; e-mails from providers, coordinators, the high school registrar, state officials; and other public documents such as the high school feasibility study, virtual high school meeting minutes, and school board meeting minutes. The document analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process and was used to understand various contextual factors relevant to the case study, thus informing and bringing to attention factors known to me in conducting interviews.

While attempting to learn more about what factors contribute to successful course completion, I found it necessary to become a participant observer. My desire to learn more about particular activities moved me to reciprocal interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). These interactions, while informal, were extremely informative. When coding interviews and reviewing historical documents questions would arise, I contacted participants through emails, phone calls, instant messaging, or visits with staff members in person to verify or clarify findings. Other examples included attending meetings where virtual high school staff presented, taking notes and later contacting participants to ensure my notes were accurate. I also had informal visits with students; however, the coordinators primarily kept me updated on the status of graduates pursuing postsecondary education. Information regarding students who left SCVHS for another school was also obtained and I later contacted reservation high schools to obtain their graduation rosters. These interactions helped me follow my investigation of student success, and when

utilized in concert with interviews and historical documents, facilitated an analysis attentive "to

all the evidence" (Yin, 2003, p. 137).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

"Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise

recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a

study" (Yin, 2003, p. 109). With the aim of keeping this end in mind—learning about the

participation, experiences, and factors influencing successful virtual high school course

completers—analysis of the data happened simultaneously to its collection. Simultaneous data

collection and analysis assists in maintaining focus and facilitating the identification of emerging

categories and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The rich and detailed description, including

multiple and interacting variables, that emerges from a case study is a hallmark of the qualitative

research paradigm (Merriam, 1998).

Yin (2003) urges an awareness of the specific analytic strategy prior to collecting data so

that the data will be analyzable. According to Yin:

> The first and most preferred strategy is to follow the theoretical propositions that led to
> your case study. The original objectives and design of the case study presumably were
> based on such propositions, which in turn reflected a set of research questions, reviews of
> the literature, and new hypotheses or propositions….the proposition helps to focus
> attention on certain data and to ignore other data…to organize the entire case study. (p.
> 111)

The theoretical propositions strategy informed analysis of this study. The overall

theoretical proposition was to gain an appreciation regarding the most important factors

influencing course completers to support their success. This process involved gaining a

sense of their participation and experiences through interviews, observation, and

document analysis. Additionally, I examined the factors coordinators identified as they

reflected critically on the underlying assumptions and values influencing their "mentoring

practice," thus strengthening the analysis by triangulating or synthesizing data from multiple sources.

Once the interviews were completed, the audio tapes were reduced to a verbatim electronic record of the interviewee's remarks. I added my observer comments as I transcribed the tapes. I also transcribed applicant survey responses so they would be available electronically for coding purposes. Initially, I analyzed these transcripts for significant concepts and themes (Yin, 2003). From there, a coding system which involved searching for recurring words or phrases was utilized to further illuminate themes and sort descriptive data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Simultaneously, as I was uncovering what was important and what was yet to be learned, I reviewed existing documents and engaged in participant observation. Bogdan and Biklen describe data analysis as "the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others" (p. 153).

Throughout this initial process, I was perplexed because student interviews did little to enhance my understanding of the factors influencing successful course completion. Those who consented to an interview had either completed multiple courses or had graduated; no single course completers consented. This discomfort moved me to the theoretical framework I had constructed for the study. "Unlike traditional [positivist] theories that are empirically grounded in an attempt to generate increasingly accurate descriptions of the world as it exists, critical theory tries to generate a specific vision of the world as it might be" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 27). I expanded this lens to include critical pedagogy as it alerts the researcher to the notion that some instructional methodologies are liberating for oppressed populations (Freire, 1970). This

included culturally responsive pedagogy, a way of teaching academic knowledge and skills through the students' cultural and experiential filters (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

I sorted data, identified common themes and analyzed the data, adopting the categories of deciding to go virtual and the virtual experience. These categories allowed me to describe how at risk students benefitted from an alternative educational program using the lens of critical theory (Freire, 1970) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). An additional and ongoing filter for the study is "Red Pedagogy" (Grande, 2004) because its basis is hope and it views "culture as conditioned by material forces and of schooling as a site of struggle" (p. 26). Red Pedagogy, as a theory, "engages critical, feminist, indigenous, and Marxist theories of education and Native American perspectives, exploring the tensions and intersections between them" (Grande, 2005, para. 10).

Validity and Reliability

According to Golafshani, (2003) "reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality in qualitative paradigm" (p. 604). For case study research, Yin (2003) emphasizes the importance of attending to these concepts throughout the study, not just at the start. To achieve validity and reliability, eliminate bias, and increase researcher truthfulness when representing a particular phenomenon, triangulation is utilized (Denzin, 1978; Golafshani, 2003; and Yin, 2003). Creswell and Miller (as cited in Golafshani, 2003) define triangulation as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (p. 604). Yin (2003) further clarifies convergence as "when you have really triangulated the data, the events or facts of the case study have been supported by more than a single source of evidence" (p. 99). Yin (2003)

cited the following evidence sources: documents, archival records, open-ended interviews, observations (direct and participant), structured interviews and surveys, and focus interviews.

To lessen the threat of selecting only data that legitimized my theoretical framework, I triangulated data by: utilizing multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources, incorporating both a positivist and critical theoretical perspective, and incorporating multiple data collection methods (Patton, 1987).

Ethical Considerations

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state that, for researchers, "ethical issues take different forms when they arise at different stages of . . . the research process" (p. 55), they extend beyond the field and ethics are understood in terms of their lifelong obligations to the people who have touched their lives" (p. 55). Because I conducted the study using appreciative inquiry, I believe participation in the study was viewed as a positive experience. The research study was explained to participants using the protocol previously described, paying special attention to the ethical principles of protecting participant identity, treating participants respectfully, and being truthful when writing up and reporting findings Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Because participation was voluntary and interviewees were at least 18 years of age, I minimized any potential harm and followed the guidelines for human subject research recommended by the Institutional Review Board.

Summary

In this chapter, I first explained the rationale for using the qualitative research paradigm and case study approach. Next, I detailed the data collection methods used to triangulate research data for reliability and also explained the methods of coding the data. I then described theory adopted for data analysis and present the findings from data analysis in subsequent

chapters. The next chapter presents the factors involved in making the decision to enroll in a

virtual school, including participant experiences and perceptions, and also describes influential

programmatic factors.

CHAPTER FOUR: MAKING THE DECISION TO GO VIRTUAL

American Indian students exhibit the highest dropout and lowest achievement rates in the United States (Grande, 2004, p. 17), requiring educators and policy makers to embark on more effective educational strategies for this population. Historic barriers to American Indian high school graduation rates can be attributed to poor attendance rates (Cleary & Peacock, 1998; NWREL, 2004), early leaving due to teen pregnancy (Freeman & Fox, 2005), and geographic and social isolation experienced by students living in remote rural areas and reservations (St. Germaine, 1995). The majority of barriers identified were social or demographic in nature. Attending schools in a virtual setting reduces these concerns because of reduced opportunities for competing interests and the elimination of travel concerns.

The purpose of my study was to identify the experiences and factors contributing to *successful course completion* for students attending a virtual high school. How might historic rates of early leaving and low student achievement be combated through successful course completion while attending in a virtual high school? Several models of data collection regarding this question were employed at various stage of the project, beginning with a review of documents describing how the virtual high school evolved.

Evolution of the Sherman County Virtual High School

In September of 2006, the district's superintendent was interested in and concerned about the number of eighth grade students who did not go on to successfully complete high school. She contracted with an educational service entity to embark upon a study regarding the feasibility of establishing a public high school on the reservation. The initial activity was to gather information about students who completed eighth grade in 1999-2002 and track them through 2003-2006 as either dropouts or high school graduates. The feasibility report found that

only 145 of 495 or 29 percent of students who transitioned from the district's PK-8th grade

system between 1999 and 2002 graduated from high school. The students who did not graduate

were surveyed regarding why they did not graduate. There were 49 responses. Gang

involvement was the most mentioned reason for not graduating. Of the 49 responses, 11

specifically referred to gang involvement. By category, numbers and reasons for not graduating

included: 15 indicated gang involvement or getting in trouble; 14 mentioned becoming a parent;

seven listed family reasons; and seven did not like school or lacked motivation. Other reasons

for early school leaving included a lack of transportation or a place to stay, a job, moving

constantly, and no positive role model. The stories of the dropouts included being bused long

distances, academic frustration, moving from a school where they knew everyone to a school

where they were outsiders, being dropped for poor attendance, becoming parents, being exposed

to risky behavior, failing to see the relevance of staying, and a variety of other reasons.

The above information was presented to the school board on February 5, 2007 and

resulted in board action (Appendix H) to continue the work and proceed with certification

of a high school and to develop policies accordingly for implementation of a virtual high

school by September, 2007. An outcome of the study was a proposal (Appendix I)

delineating the development of a high school. The proposal outlined consultant services

as well as defining the project phases. Phase I of the proposal is summarized as follows:

1. Spring of 2007, attain state approval for K-12 accreditation

2. Summer of 2007

    a. Make application to the state to utilize its virtual delivery system

    b. Develop the Sherman County Virtual High School District Policy

    c. Publicize and inform the community

3. Fall of 2007

    a. Establish learning labs and hire coordinators

    b. Recruit and enroll students

As it turned out, the superintendent tendered her resignation which delayed the spring implementation. The search for a new superintendent resulted in the hiring of the lead high school feasibility consultant as superintendent. In early June, I was directed by the superintendent to pursue accreditation as a PK-12 system, with the high school being identified as a year round system. This restructuring proposal was presented to and approved by the school board in July, with ensuing involvement with the state department of education and official notification of PK-12 accreditation in August. At this time, I was designated, along with other duties, high school principal. I developed the high school policy manual/handbook, position descriptions, marketing materials, and newspaper announcements. Staff and student recruitment began immediately and simultaneously. The first students enrolled on August 30, 2007 and the first coordinator came on board on September 10, 2007. Existing district level staff assisted with enrollment fairs at the various sites and the Sherman County Virtual High School (SCVHS) was birthed.

Year One

The review of existing documents next moves to responses to an initial survey administered to prospective students applying for admission to a virtual high school. Prospective enrollees offered their opinions regarding attending a virtual high school in their application form to be accepted in the new school. A thematic analysis of their responses to questions regarding their school career and performance offers a window into the educational experiences

 and perspectives of American Indian students who had left brick and mortar high schools without attaining a diploma.

As part of the virtual high school application process (Appendix F), prospective students were given a writing assignment. One of the questions was what most appeals to you about the concept of virtual high school? Table 1 shows themes that emerged from 73 responses from the first semester of the 2007-2008 school year.

Table 1

Most Appealing Aspects of Virtual Learning

Online Factors	Number of Responses
Flexibility of doing work on your own time or pace	32
Computer based online coursework	24

Personal Factors	Number of Responses
Behind in or another chance to finish school	23
Quiet learning environment	15
Easier than traditional school for young parents	12
Less apt to experience fighting	4
More one-on-one time or help from teachers	4

Note. Student responses may have fit into more than one category so the total number of responses is greater than the number of respondents

The flexibility of on-line classes versus the constraints of traditional high school schedules was the most appealing factor cited by 32 prospective students. They liked the flexibility of being in control of the pacing as well as choosing when and where to do the work. Regarding pacing, responses ran the gamete from alleviating the worry of being left behind to

getting a quality education quicker than at a traditional school. As far as when and where to do the work, students liked setting their own schedules. Reasons included not having to wake up early, not having to go every day, being able to work from home, having time for other things, and similar statements around flexible scheduling and location. One student liked that she could schedule her course work in the morning while her oldest daughter was at school. Another appreciated the convenience of being able to complete the work either at home or while traveling. Multiple start dates for courses appealed to a student who knew that she needed to be in school, but due to an illness would be starting two weeks late at a traditional school. Lori's response reveals the challenges of managing a personal family concern and her own educational needs:

> The Virtual High School is a better and more efficient way for me to receive my high school diploma. While staying at home to do school work, I can have time to help my dad who has cancer. It would give me more bonding time with him. Also, my dad and grandma would have a greater chance of seeing me graduate.

The second most appealing factor was doing courses online. Twenty four students reported that they enjoy working on the computer and were attracted by the convenience of online classes. In describing what about online was appealing, students indicated they were experienced working with computers, enjoyed computer classes, and thought they were more apt to experience interesting things from all over the world when working on the Internet. Additionally, one student was savvy with regards to the accessibility of information such as locating homework assignments via e-mail and having the internet as a resource to retrieve assignments, lessons, and doing web searches to enhance learning and responses.

The virtual school was viewed as chance to finish high school by 23 students who, for varied reasons, had fallen behind and left high school. These young adults, many

older than traditional high school graduates, not only aspired to getting back into school and getting their high school diploma, but also to entering college, having more opportunities in the future, and making relatives proud. A theme that emerged was the realization that completing high school would open doors for opportunities for success in the future. There was an air of confidence and optimism with regards to the virtual school being a means to better and further educational and vocational aspirations.

Virtual schooling appealed to and opened what was perceived to be a closed door for 12 applicants who were or were about to become parents. Whether due to policy, practice, or perceptions; being pregnant was a barrier to attending a traditional high school. Eleven young parents had already made the decision to leave the traditional school and for them, online learning allowed them to reengage in their schooling while being at home with their children. Mary, a 2010 graduate commented that "I was able to stay home with my son and finish high school at the same time."   The flexibility of on-line classes versus the constraints of traditional high school schedules was evident in the responses of young parents.

The learning environment was cited as the most appealing aspect of online learning by 19 applicants. It was perceived that fewer interruptions and distractions would enhance concentration and not worrying about the social aspects of a traditional school would facilitate a focus on academics. For example, one student had this to say: "What I like most about the idea of going to Virtual High School is that I only have to worry about my academics and myself . . . no worries about friends who bother you." Not surprisingly, being able to avoid fighting and conflicts with peers was cited as an environmental benefit. Also, was the perception that teachers in traditional schools do not

provide the individual assistance that online teachers would. Students were keenly aware

that they struggled in the traditional school system and that the virtual learning

environment is much different than going to a crowded school every day.

Even though these responses are from the fledgling first year of the virtual school,

students were hearing from their friends and others that it was a good program. They

were also thinking that it would be easier and a quicker way to graduate. This quicker

and easier aspect of why the program appealed to students was not validated as will be

documented as course completion statistics are presented.

During the 2007-2008, 218 students enrolled in the SCVHS. Of the 218 enrollees, 128

enrollments rolled into 2008-2009. Table 2 shows enrollment information and Table 3 shows

successful course completion information.

Table 2

2007-2008 Enrollments

Grade Level	Earned Credits	Age Range	Number of Students	# Passing >= 1 Course	Range of # Passed	Average # Passed
9th	<6	15-23	101	15	1-5	1.33
10th	7-12	16-23	83	8	1-5	1.75
11th	13-16	16-23	15	5	1-5	2.00
12th	>16	17-24	19	3	1-2	1.33

Notes: Grade placement was based on credits earned upon enrollment.
Minimum number of credits for graduation is 22 or an equivalent of 44 courses.

Table 3

2007-2008 Successful Completers

Grade	Age	# Who Passed 1	# Who Passed 2	# Who Passed 3	# Who Passed 5	% Completing >= 1 Course
9th	15 & 17	2 & 2				4/31 = 12.9%
9th	16	5	2			7/24 = 29.2%
9th	18,22,23					0/24 = 0%
9th	19 & 21	2 & 1				3/14 = 21.4%
9th	20			1		1/8 = 12.5%
10th	16		1	1		2/7 = 28.6%
10th	17	1		1		2/12 = 16.7%
10th	19,20-22					0/44 = 0%
10th	18	1	1			2/18 = 11.1%
10th	21 & 23	2				1/2 = 50%
11th	16,17,20-23					0/6 = 0%
11th	18	2			1	3/6 = 50%
11th	19			1		1/3 = 33.3%
12th	17,20,21					0/11 = 0%
12th	18,19,24	1, 1, 1				3/8 = 37.5%
Totals		21	4	4	1	30/218 =13.8%

Notes: No students earned a year of high school credit (at least 5.5 credits or 11 courses)
One student, who needed to complete one course with a passing grade, graduated in 2008

With regards to course completion, 46 of 351 courses or 13.1% of the courses were completed with passing grades. There were two providers, one based in the state and the other being a national provider. For the state provider, 6 of 105 or 5.7% of the courses were completed with passing grades. The district dropped this provider early in the school year due to their practice of enrolling students and then not having enough students for a course to start. For the national provider, 40 of 246 or 16% of the courses were completed with passing grades.

While no students earned a year of high school credit; one student, Carolyn, completed five courses. Carolyn did not want to participate in an interview; however, a review of existing documents and having observed her interactions with traditional schooling and on-line learning yielded information relevant to her successful course completion. Carolyn started and completed her freshman year at the reservation's private school. For her sophomore year, she attended both the private school and a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school. Between semesters, Carolyn received serious injuries in an automobile accident and was not sufficiently recovered to start the second semester. The private school would not allow her to return mid-semester and so she finished the year with the BIE's Alternative program. Due to frustrations with some credits not being allowed to transfer from the private school, and thus being retained as a sophomore, Carolyn enrolled with the Virtual School in October of 2007. It didn't hurt that her mother works with the school district and her sister was the coordinator at the site she attended. Carolyn wasn't all that impressed with the online courses, finding them to be little more than glorified worksheets. There were also challenges around attending the center where her sister was the coordinator. She continued through the summer with the Virtual School, but transferred in early September of 2008 to the BIE School and graduated in 2009.

Next, I reviewed the enrollment history for each of the 101 students who were enrolled as ninth graders during 2007-2008. For the most part, I did not have access to enrollment histories after students left the virtual school. However, of the 101 students, 13 remained enrolled or returned to the virtual school in 2010-2011. This would have been the graduating year for traditional four year graduates. Of the 13 students, nine remained classified as freshmen, and two students are currently classified as sophomores. One of the sophomores, Doris, has previously been introduced and her perspectives will be included in the next chapter. One student, Tessica, attained her GED in 2010-2011 and another student, Brandon, left and returned this year as a junior. His mother is one of the program's coordinators.

The data suggest that students were drawn to the Sherman County Virtual High School because it offered a second chance to earn a degree; it was more flexible than a traditional school due the on-line anytime, anywhere delivery system; it offered young parents the opportunity to stay at home with their children while earning their diploma; and it offered a more self-paced and quiet learning environment. As evidenced by the completion data for the first year, these aspects in and of themselves were not enough to move students very far in the direction of graduation. Additionally, the cost of the program, which was mostly tuition and salaries, was more than $250,000.00 for the first year. To put this in perspective, students progressing at a normal rate complete about 11 courses each year. In total, 46 courses were successfully completed, equating to approximately four fulltime students at an average cost of $62,500 to educate one student. The average cost to educate a student in the state during 2007-2008 was $7,520.00 (SDDOE, 2008).

Prior to SCVHS, *the reservation was without a public high school*. Each year since the inception of SCVHS, the state department of education has placed increasingly more restrictive

guidelines upon the district with regards to what constitutes a fulltime student to increase

financial performance, and maximize the probability that enrolled students are carrying a full

course load. At the beginning of 2009-2010 state financial officials established "new guidance on

reporting % of day enrollment:"

> ARSD 24:17:01:07 For the purposes of reporting day enrollment, a full-time
> student or 100 percent enrolled student is any student who is carrying a full course
> load. The term, full course load, means any student who is enrolled in at least five
> courses or is scheduled for a full school day . . . If any student is enrolled in less
> than five classes . . . the student shall be reported based on the percentage of
> classes taken or the portion of the full school day that the student is in school.

For 2010-2011, a state financial official had this to say:

> I am under the gun to get the enrollment counts right and also be vigilant and
> accountable for the student counts that I provide. . . . The Virtual School catches
> my attention going from 112 to 142 and almost 50 enrollments starting the day
> before the count date and 100% of them 100% enrolled – which means enrolled in
> at least 5 classes. . . . [Were] all 142 students were signed up and receiving
> services for all 5 of their virtual classes on 9/24/2010? . . . I will be questioned on
> this and I need information . . .

Prior to this requirement, students were initially enrolled in one to two courses to allow

them time to adjust to the online 24/7 mode of schooling. Also, since compensation to the

providers is on a by-course basis with very stringent unpaid withdrawal criteria, enrolling

students initially in one to two courses provided the district with an opportunity to determine if

the student was serious about doing the work. However, given funding implications, SCVHS

started enrolling students in a full course load for 2010-2011. Without the district's knowledge,

the department restricted full course load, as described above, to include the start date for each

course. If students had not started the course, that course was excluded. The principal attempted

to explain to the state officials that while students were enrolled in the required number of

courses as of September 24, 2010, some sections had yet to open, especially with a brand new

primary provider. The count decreased from 142 to 95 amounting to a funding loss of about

$250,000. While the district accepted the revised enrollment, the decrease in count and funding represents less revenue for an already costly program.

After eliminating adequate funding and the appeal of virtual schooling as obvious explanations for successful course completion, I next searched for other factors associated with successful course completion, such as family and programmatic supports, self-discipline, and the distinguishing characteristics of the online providers. I analyzed how differences in these personal and programmatic factors may have influenced successful course completion and I report my findings in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE

The purpose of my study was to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I examined their experiences and identified the factors that influenced their successful course completion. Student stories of what attracted them to a virtual high school and the factors American Indian students identified as contributing to course completion revealed that aspects such as gang influences, pregnancy and parenting, and the failure of traditional schools to keep students motivated led them to seek another chance at the virtual school.

A preliminary Pennsylvania State University Study reports a 2005 graduation rate of 30.4 for Native American students in Midwestern (Young, 2010). These numbers are similar to those commonly reported in print media and those found in the high school feasibility study completed for the district. Although some Native American students enjoy a rewarding experience in a traditional high school setting, most experience disillusionment, failure, and end up leaving early. Elementary students have practiced for high school for eight to ten years and it would seem they would easily transition to and complete the next leg of their journey. Unfortunately, the elementary safety net is replaced with the reality of high school. Several elementary schools feed into each high school and comfort and familiarity is replaced with fear and trepidation surrounding how to handle unfamiliar faces, settings, and expectations.

To introduce this chapter, I first describe the student population, and then conclude with the experiences of the virtual school students, coordinators, and programmatic factors. Three themes emerged from the analysis of data with regard to the students' experience: (a) students saw the virtual school as a second chance to graduate, due primarily to (b) the availability of school 24/7 through the use of technology and (c) students identified "special people" who

contributed to their success. These three factors contributed to the students' feelings of self-worth and success.

In reviewing enrollment data for both 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, most enrollees in the Sherman County Virtual High School (SCVHS) were dropouts or early leavers from traditional schools. SCVHS was not up and running until late August of 2007. There were no age appropriate ninth graders enrolled by September 15th and so every enrollee for 2007-2008 was either an elementary drop-out or an early leaver from another school. For 2008-2009, there were 20 age appropriate enrollees by September 15th. Of these 20, three students started their age appropriate high school career at SCVHS. All others, or more than 98% of the enrollees, were drop-outs, early leavers, or transfers from another school. Table 4 shows this information.

Table 4

Enrollments by Age Appropriate

2007-2008 Age Appropriate =	9th 14-15	10th 15-16	11th 16-17	12th 17-18	Totals	Percent of 218
Age Appropriate	20	10	5	7	42	19%
Started Year	0	1	0	0	1	.5%
Old for Grade	81	73	10	12	176	81%
Started Year	7	3	0	1	11	5%
2008-2009 Age Appropriate =	**9th 14-15**	**10th 15-16**	**11th 16-17**	**12th 17-18**	**Totals**	**Percent of 202**
Age Appropriate	17	9	11	4	41	20%
Started Year	7	5	5	3	20	10%
Old for Grade	88	45	20	8	161	80%
Started Year	43	28	8	6	85	53%

Notes: Started the year means enrolled by September 15
There were 218 enrollees in 2007-2008, 42 age appropriate and 176 older
There were 202 enrollees in 2008-2009, 41 age appropriate and 161 older

Given that students were enrolling at the SCVHS after unsuccessful experiences at other schools, I embraced "the idea of positive change—that co-inquiry into the true, the good, the better, the possible will lead to faster, more democratic and energized change than will deficit-based inquiry into the broken and the problematic" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. xxix). I interviewed participants with an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney, et al., 2005). Rather than ask what went wrong at the other schools, I asked students to identify the features of their virtual high school learning experience that helped

them to succeed and for coordinators, what features of virtual schooling helped the students succeed. See Appendices E & F for the appreciative interview questions. The first theme that emerged was that of seeing the virtual school as a second chance to graduate.

A Second Chance to Graduate

As reported earlier, 23 of 73 applicant survey responses indicated having another chance to graduate was the most appealing factor of the virtual high school. With these responses as a baseline, I sought to learn about the experiences of the study's participants from a success versus a failure perspective. To get at this, using an Appreciative Inquiry method, I asked the interviewees about what inspired them, beginning with their goals, enrollment, and experience as a virtual high school student. Altogether, five successful course completers were interviewed. Three of the students interviewed were recent SCVHS graduates and two had successfully completed coursework, but had not earned a diploma. The graduates were looking back on their experience; the non-graduates defined their beliefs about what would help them move towards graduation.

Similar to responses from the applicant survey, an overarching goal was high school graduation. For two of the interviewees, Katy and Mike, graduation was easily attainable as parental involvement was very strong and at the time they enrolled in SCVHS, they only needed to complete a few courses to graduate. Katy had been home schooled and Mike was a prior virtual student who moved into this area. However, for Mary it was about being able to stay home with her young son and finish high school at the same time. Her response spoke to what the SCVHS meant to someone who had been given another chance:

> I was a teen mother who could not go to a regular high school because I had just had a baby. After having my son, I didn't think I would be able to finish high school until I heard about Virtual High School. I have been attending Virtual High School since then, the year of 2008, and recently graduated in the summer of 2010. My goals were to complete high school in any way that I could so that I can be financially able to support my son in the future. I also want to become a nurse so I am now taking classes at [Community College] until I can get into the . . . nursing school.

For Katy and Mike, more than a second chance to graduate, it was being able to graduate in a non-traditional manner. Katy who completed her freshman year in a regular high school, was initially hesitant about on-line courses, but ultimately found it to be the best choice she could have made since the flexibility of the program allowed her to travel with her mother and enhanced their already close relationship. She said, "I wanted more freedom to do what I wanted and still graduate from high school, that's why I enrolled." At the time of the interview, Katy's mother was the state's director of Indian Education. Regarding the state's decision to implement a virtual school model, she had this to say:

> From a state prospective, we're just really thankful that there is something out there for the kids because it gives families another choice. We all know what happens sometimes on reservations schools, our kids drop out left and right. The Virtual High School welcomes them back and provides a support system through this process and pretty soon you have high school graduates and that's what we want at the end of the day for our kids. If we didn't have this where else would the kids go to get a high school diploma?

Mike came from a virtual learning back ground and was adamant in his desire to stay away from public schools. Being able to enroll in a new virtual school, after his family moved to the area, was the motivating factor for him. Similar to the graduates, traditional school had not met the needs of the following non-graduates.

Doris, the very first SCVHS enrollee, wanted a better life for her kids and knew that in order for that to happen, she needed to complete school. Her grandmother wanted a better life for her and encouraged her to enroll in the virtual high school. Doris was

excited to learn of the SCVHS as it gave her an opportunity to do what she had been wanting to do, but hadn't been able to do because of pregnancies and needing to care for her children. Doris liked the idea of getting a diploma rather than a GED. [Doris has not yet graduated and will "age out" before she can graduate; however, the skill levels she has attained via SCVHS will serve her well should she opt for a GED.]

Penny, the second non-graduate student, enrolled in the program during 2008-2009 and has been continuously enrolled since. For ninth grade, Penny attended the reservation's private school. While she earned 5 credits, her grades were low, which Penny attributed to having a "form of autism, to where I can't handle a lot of people and virtual was perfect for me." Penny worked from home and in spite of personal challenges, regularly completed courses. Penny's goal as a virtual student was to graduate.

Each student interviewed described graduating from high school as their primary goal. Students who consented to interviews were clearly on a route to success, three students were 2010 graduates and the other two had experienced more than minimal success in the program. Out of 20 prospective interviewees, I only located five students; the contact information for the others was no longer valid. Four of the five were interviewed and while the fifth could not be reached for an interview, she did graduate in 2010. The fifth interviewee, Penny, turned 18 after the letters were sent and was recommended by her coordinator. After analyzing interview data and completion information from participants, they defined success as either graduating or passing considerably more than one course with high school graduation as a viable goal.

Using Technology 24/7

A second recurring theme centered on using technology 24/7. For the students who had

internet access at home, school could be accessed 24/7. Katy really liked SCVHS and made the

following observation:

> The 'classrooms' were very professional and easy to take . . . The school
> environment is very different. Being home schooled and doing VHS, I don't
> regret it. It was an amazing opportunity. I liked the flexibility of hours; I could
> get my homework done in the morning and go ride my horses and rodeo after that.

Mike, who had internet access at home and on the road, wasn't into routines and the

flexibility of being able to "do school" any time, any place worked for him. His family traveled

a "lot for jobs" and their consensus was that virtual learning was the way to go as it allowed

them to be together as a family.

Compared to traditional schools that provide structure, schedules, and the expectation

that students are in attendance daily at specified times, the virtual school largely relegates these

decisions to the student. Consistently, whether accessing course work from home or at a center,

students reported that the flexibility of virtual schooling actually enhanced their ability to do the

work. Mary was able to do the work when her son was sleeping or "throughout the evening

when [she] had people to watch him."

Penny and Doris did not have internet access at home, so did their work at centers located

at the elementary attendance centers or community centers. Even though they were attending a

center, they utilized the 24/7 availability of coursework to compliment their learning style.

What worked for Penny was picking a "class for the day" and "doing all the work [she] could for

that day and then doing the same thing the next day." Doris had a similar strategy:

> Basically [I] just set up an organizer, what to do, how to do it, like a calendar. I work on one subject one day and get caught up as far as I can and the next day do the same thing with a different subject then the next day some other subject and so on depending on how many courses I have . . . It got me through all the semesters that I have been here.

There was a keen awareness with students and their families of the importance of keeping track of classes and making time for them. Katy commented that "you have to make time to do it; if you keep putting it off you won't do it" and her mother expanded the notion by stating that online learning has "been really good training for college." Penny honed in on the need for self-discipline as well. She indicated that when she was there, "I did the work, I didn't procrastinate or dilly dally, I got the work done on time."

The coordinators who were interviewed corroborate that SCVHS is good training for college. Since its inception, 10 students have graduated. Corinne shared that eight of the graduates have gone on to some sort of postsecondary education and that the other two are considering it for this fall. Jolene mentioned that not only does SCVHS prepare students for college, but there are a number of students who have left SCVHS and returned to other schools and have graduated from them or attained a GED.

While 24/7 availability worked well for the students I interviewed and prepared them for high school graduation or postsecondary opportunities, this type of success has been the exception rather than the norm. To better understand the nuances associated with success, I searched for other factors such as family and programmatic supports, self-discipline, and the distinguishing characteristics of the online providers. I analyzed how differences in these personal and programmatic factors may have influenced successful course completion and I report these findings next.

Mentors

When asked what explained their success, the students validated the importance of "special" people. Katy credited her family and having time to do the assignments; Penny said her site coordinator, Jolene, "was the best;" Mike attributed his success to his parents; and Doris said it was the personal support she got, not just her grandmother, but the staff at the elementary school as well as the virtual learning center, friends, relatives and even her boyfriend and his family. She said the biggest part of her success "is when I feel like giving up, they push me to keep going." Mary credited self-motivation and discipline, her family members, and people from the virtual school such as Corinne. She said that Corinne "was the instructor that I had always worked with and [she] helped me a lot with my school work [and gave] me encouragement, motivation, and support."

The stories of the two coordinator participants reveal not only programmatic information, but also the passion and commitment they brought to the program. Corinne was a lawyer prior to moving to the reservation and incorporates these skills and tenacity to enhance life on the reservation. She and her husband Andre, a respected Elder, volunteer their time, talent, and resources to institute and support various projects to help the People in economic, political, and community development. Her vision for SCVHS, in spite of myriad obstacles, is students using technology 24/7 to attain their high school graduation and life goals.

In her adult life, Jolene has worked with the community and youth in a variety of capacities. Working with reservation youth as her life's calling came as a result of her experience attending high school on the reservation and being faced with many obstacles. Jolene tells of a peer counseling program in her high school and the lady who helped her overcome so "many little things:"

It not only was a class, but also training. We all had to be alcohol and drug free and we were assigned two students . . . We hung out with them and did the peer counseling and we were required to do monthly workshops on different issues . . . we had to provide the meal and get our [materials] together . . . anything that happened in the school, you had to be there. You were never able to just sit and be quiet.

Jolene has envisioned replicating this experience for others and as the program has evolved, sees SCVHS as a viable place for it to happen. In addition to graduating, Jolene's vision for SCVHS is providing young people with a "safe and healthy environment so they can open their minds and learn."

Both coordinators were disillusioned with the reservation's high schools, in part due to high school experiences of their close family members and had mental pictures of what might work better. Corinne had reached the conclusion that she was dissatisfied with the progress and experience of her grandchildren in their high school programs.

They were dropping out . . . things like bullying and fighting and a very long bus ride were the main reasons they didn't want to go to school. I started thinking [how] they loved to be on the computer. I noticed they would have no trouble staying, for an unlimited number of hours, on the computer . . . I had an idea of creating my own school where I could have my grandkids and others that were just like them . . . that weren't in school . . . could come in, use the computers, they didn't have to do school work all day long.

Similarly, Jolene was attracted to SCVHS because:

My son had a really hard time with high school . . . He was so frustrated . . . and would not go back to high school and he was angry and lost . . . being a single mother, I felt helpless and hopeless . . . I tried to get him into online classes in [the city], but was told I had to pay for it and . . . could not afford that. When we moved back to the area, I saw the job advertisement . . . I had always had respect for Sherman County School District as being professional, getting things done, there was always follow-up . . . When I saw the position, I felt it was so badly needed.

Corinne has repeatedly talked about her respect for Sherman County as well and when she heard about SCVHS, she thought: "Oh, My God, someone else has thought the same things I had been thinking and this is so exciting because it's Sherman County and it's right here . . ."

Corinne and Jolene have greatly impacted the quality of the SCVHS program in a variety of ways, a very significant one being how they connect with and understand the obstacles students face and needs that were not met in the regular school. Before sharing these pieces, I set the stage with a story that illuminates the transition to high school for reservation students.

Sherman County's superintendent asked for a focus group interview with eighth grade students regarding what they would like him to talk about at their continuation ceremony. These 13 students, from a public school with a total population of about 170, will decide which of three high schools they will attend. Graduation addresses typically offer students encouragement; tell them they can succeed at anything they choose; and perhaps tell a story of someone overcoming adversity. The superintendent addressed one group in that manner and saw students fidgeting and not seeming engaged, thus the request to check with the students. Based on data reported to the superintendent and shared with me (M. B., personal communication, May 13, 2011), what this group wanted to hear was a bit different:

- What is it like in high school, academically as well as socially?
- Does it really matter which high school we go to?
- Why do people not go to high school?
- Is it really that hard? Two of the students will be the first in their family to go on to high school.
- How can sports help me in school?

One student said that he was really afraid not of going to school but being in a place where he did not know anyone, neither staff nor students. He also shared that he had never been off the reservation, except to a border town and on school field trips. Similar stories, stories of safety and security needs, are common and illuminate factors contributing to leaving early or never starting high school.

As reservation residents, Jolene and Corinne understood this and utilized this awareness as they connected with and supported students. Jolene lamented:

> Living in the poorest county in the United States is tough enough without having to fight in a place of education. Today our young adults are afraid to go to school and I am proud to say that our students [SCVHS] do not feel that way when they come in. The incoming freshman often quit school because of violence in their previous school. I have a freshman this year, who did not attend anywhere else, who is afraid to go to a traditional high school because of fighting. He seems to be doing well, but it is issues at home that are affecting his work overall.

Corinne stated that students fresh out of eighth grade are used to going to school. She explained that for most SCVHS students it was different. They had attended another school and were "dropouts for at least one to two semesters and are out of the habit of learning and being in school." Most successful students did not start out that way; they have to grow into it:

> [They] have been enrolled for over one semester, have really grown in their self-esteem, and have been able to overcome their child care issues, family issues and the like . . . a one to two semester adjustment period to really get a handle on how to accomplish on-line learning, be more organized, and become more self-disciplined. [Several who] have developed over the course of a year, are now quite successful, but would have been dropped from a regular school I'm sure.

Similar to student responses, coordinators recognized family support as the first and most important factor contributing to student success, indicating they are more likely to access classes on a regular basis. While neither expounded on the topic, they both spoke of the importance of establishing a personal relationship with students. Corinne said, "Those with whom I have been able to develop a relationship are doing far better than the others" and Jolene cited as a key

success factor, "being able to establish a connection with the students, especially for the non-traditional student" and that "the first thing you need is to have empathy, patience, and understanding and all that before you expect anybody to work with you."

Corinne, in relating to the experiences of her grandchildren and Jolene for her son, identified reasons some do not stay with the program. For Corinne,

> I'm just going to share with you from my heart . . . my grandkids that were attending were not good enough readers in my opinion to grasp the material with the level of independence that you sort of need in a virtual school. You need to be a little bit more on the independent side and that fact plus special needs in the reading area were just too big of a combination for my grandkids.

Jolene also cited low reading levels as an issue for incoming students that really needs to be addressed. She has found that after students have been with SCVHS for a couple of semesters their reading and comprehension levels "drastically improve." As noted earlier, her son, Brandon had an unsuccessful experience in a traditional school, enrolled in SCVHS, experienced success and returned to the regular school:

> [At SCVHS], he did math, English, and world history and what the English class requires is a lot of writing. I don't know if it was the on-line quizzes or writing [or] automatic feedback, [but] after he went back to the regular school, he became the most talented writer and a straight A student. He accelerated in math also.

While the student data portrayed the importance of a second or different chance to graduate and the advantage of being able to utilize technology 24/7 to complete coursework, coordinator data illuminated factors impeding student success. SCVHS students would not be immediately successful, an adjustment period precedes success. These findings support the necessity of moving beyond traditional theories describing the world as it exists and "traditional" academic expectations for immediate student progress. The program appeared unsuccessful in the short term, with few course completions or graduations. However, I allowed myself to experience the discomfort associated with the traditional theory. This uneasiness served as a

motivating factor to pursue the real story, a story found after adopting a critical and culturally responsive lens.

After discovering that different theoretical perspectives yield different results, I continued my analysis, shifting my focus to: the program as it might be, liberating instructional and programmatic methodologies that spark the students' cultural and experiential interests. I report these programmatic priorities in the next section.

Programmatic Priorities

The barriers to American Indian high school graduation have been previously discussed from the students' perspective. However, the coordinators offer considerable insight regarding how students experience a virtual school in their struggle to graduate. Jolene shared that some students have many barriers to overcome and need a "wrap around type of service" addressing the various areas, especially in a reservation economy that doesn't have much to offer. With an estimated eight out of every ten residents being jobless (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2003), it is easy to understand why students question the relevance of continuing their education so they can obtain a better job. While not stated as such, Jolene and Corinne embrace a Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2004). They, themselves, live in a culture "conditioned by material forces" (p. 26) much different than mainstream society and they have experienced firsthand, school as a "site of struggle." This world view is reflected in their professional lives, relationships with students and staff, and the ways in which SCVHS is evolving.

SCVHS has a very active Building Leadership Team (BLT), which meets monthly to evaluate and monitor progress towards meeting their school improvement priorities of academic, student, and parent engagement; course access and completion; and transition. For the purposes

of this study, course access and completion fit nicely with academic engagement and I report these findings next.

Academic Engagement: Course Access and Completion

Coordinators described the problem of academic gaps experienced by students in their learning history and also the need for skill acquisition. They saw this problem initially with family members and understood how this served as a barrier to student success. The delivery system and characteristics of the online learning supported active student engagement and student success. Three predominate factors were found to influence student rates of success within the theme of academic engagement: (a) student incentives, (b) provider flexibility, and (c) coursework, I begin with student incentives.

Student Incentives

As previously noted, the SCVHS Building Leadership Team meets monthly. A review of their meeting notes shows that they surveyed students regarding the impact of various projects. Of interest in the area of academic engagement are results indicating that 85% of the students believe that weekly student incentives for keeping up to date on assignments and maintaining at least a 70% average have a positive effect on student learning. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine if there is a correlation between student monetary incentives and course completion; however, given the economic status of the reservation, it may be a factor.

Provider Flexibility

The initial purpose of my study was to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I examined their experiences and identified the factors that influenced their

decision to enroll in the virtual school and successfully complete courses. Simultaneously, I

analyzed quantitative course completion data. Although some students experienced success and

completion rates improved over time, for the majority, the completion statistics remain dismal

unless data gathered over a four year history is examined.

As previously described, a student needs to complete 11 courses per year to earn one

year's credit. Table 5 provides an overview of completion compared to enrollment rates.

Table 5

Completion Summary

Year	Students Enrolled	Student Completers	Per-cent	Courses Enrolled	Courses Completed	Per-cent	Average # Of Courses
07-08	218	30	13.8%	351	46	13.1%	1.6
08-09	202	47	23.3%	356	87	24.4%	1.8
09-10	206	44	26.7%	697	151	21.7%	3.4
10-11	97	44	45.4%	227	127	55.9%	
In Process	154			696			3.7

Notes: Student Completers refers to the number of students successfully completing at least one course.
Courses Completed refers to courses completed with a passing grade.
For 2010-2011, 97 students have completed courses and the other 154 have courses still in progress as the primary provider leaves courses open for one full year.

The completion summary (see Table 5) provides an overall, albeit incomplete picture of

the program. *What it does not show is the impact of the program over time for a*

significant number of students. In its first year, the program had one graduate; in the

second year, there were two graduates; in the third year there were seven graduates and

for 2010-2011, as many as eight students may graduate. Eight of the ten graduates are pursuing post-secondary education and the other two anticipate enrolling in the fall of 2011. Additionally, twelve students who have left the virtual school have graduated from another school in 2011. The coordinators, and I as an observer, attribute the increasing success rate in part to online provider flexibility.

As reported earlier, SCVHS started with two online providers, one based in the state and the other being a national provider. The state provider had a practice of enrolling students and then delaying the start of the course until enough students had enrolled. This left already apprehensive students in limbo, not knowing when they could start school. The district dropped this provider early in the 2007-2008 school year due to this practice. This provider is no longer state approved (SDDOE, 2011b).

Zenith Learning (pseudonym) has been an online provider since 1999 and has served more than a million students in 4,700 school districts, within 50 states (A.L., 2011). An account specialist charged with oversight of online learning policies and agreements monitored provider policies regarding online learning. Procedural aspects that were beneficial during 2007-2008 for SCVHS students included teachers responding to student questions within one school day and scoring assignments with feedback to students within three schools days. There were also multiple sections of most courses with ongoing start dates, generally weekly, during fall, spring, and summer semesters with the option of a new section with a minimum of five enrollees. Teachers received compensation for both enrollment and successful completion and were monitored on a daily, weekly, and semester basis by the provider's instructional team. Parents could see weekly progress reports, and for 2008-2009, coursework was further enhanced with

features such as audio for language arts and mathematics classes, and accommodations to support different learning styles and skill levels.

In June of 2010, Jolene described the provider as "helpful and open to everything that goes on here . . . be it the weather or other things." She said that although a few teachers were "strict," everything was "easily fixable."   Additionally, she noted how courses had evolved from online textbooks to being a "lot more engaging" with, for example, videos on the topics being covered. Jolene gave as another example, a fundamental math class that while requiring a lot of "worksheets," also included online tools, math games, and links to different sites. She couldn't recall anyone failing and described it as a "self-confidence booster." Other provider supports for courses included online tutorials, diagnostics, study guides, and access to the online instructor. Additionally, SCVHS coordinators served as mentors and tutors. However, as coursework became more difficult, for example Algebra II, these forms of assistance were not always enough and Jolene indicated this was an area the program needed to address.

Coursework

As noted earlier, student enrollees frequently lacked the reading skills needed to be successful in online coursework. The reading levels for most courses with this provider are at the sixth grade and as previously mentioned, students who had been at SCVHS for two semesters had drastically improved reading and comprehension skills. Jolene pointed out that "reading is just something they have to do. Some just say they won't do it and more often [than not] we recommend[ed] they go back to the traditional school." In thinking about SCVHS in terms of high academic expectations; the rigor of the coursework became apparent as there were many instances where students left SCVHS, returned to a regular school and graduated, some with honors.

The coursework at SCVHS has served students well, increasing their academic standing as well as moving them closer to graduation in terms of credits earned. Corinne and Jolene have been with the program for four years and are keenly aware that as more students choose SCVHS as their first school, not their second chance, coursework must be complemented not only with student and parent engagement, but with transition activities that move students towards postsecondary education and/or employment. I briefly describe one transition project next.

Transition

Corinne reported that one of the state's projects, Career Cruising, "has proven very helpful and beneficial" to the students regarding employment opportunities. Career Cruising is a component of the MyLife Network (SDDOE, 2011a) and its features include interest and skills assessment, ability profiler, career profiles, multimedia interviews, college and financial aid information, My Portfolio, and Resume Builder. As reported earlier, eight of ten graduates have pursued post-secondary education and the other two anticipate enrolling this fall. Corinne and Jolene both credit Career Cruising with introducing students to possibilities they had never considered, offering them motivation to complete their degrees and pursue post secondary options. For example, one student went to school to become a chef, an occupational choice brought to fruition in part because of these activities.

These transitional activities are well received and utilized by students; however, as documented by completion statistics, course completion remains the exception rather than the norm. *Provider flexibility, coursework enhancements, and transition planning are not in and of themselves enough to keep students engaged in academic work.* In adhering to school improvement priorities identified in the SCVHS comprehensive needs assessment, I describe student and parent engagement activities next.

Student and Parent Engagement Activities

Students, in the student survey previously mentioned also identified engaging activities that they believe help improve student learning. An example they mentioned that is already occurring is off-reservation field trips. As noted earlier when discussing eighth grade perspectives, for some students, these field trips may be a student's first experience off the reservation for other than shopping. Students also offered other ideas that they felt would help improve student learning. Examples included having their own food program, sports, later or weekend hours at the learning centers, after school activities, coordinators in each community, even more positive feedback, and student laptops that could be taken home. These student suggestions inform actual program revisions and enhancements which I describe next.

Enrichment Programs and Opportunities

In a report to the Tribal Education Committee, Corinne highlighted how additional enrichment programs and opportunities sparked student interest and involvement. These programs offer a more comprehensive approach to student engagement and learning by encouraging them to participate in competitions or engaging in authentic learning activities. Next I present descriptions of some of these projects.

In the area of fine arts, SCVHS students have been engaged in Exposures, a cross-cultural program that creates opportunities for youth to utilize the arts as a means to share perspectives, experiences, and artistic skills with other youth from communities around the country. Participants learn how to document their cultures and communities with photography. They also respond to the creative works of others via an online gallery and forum. SCVHS students have been involved with students from Chicago and Vermont and this summer these youth will travel to the reservation to explore, photograph, and learn about the reservation communities and

geographic nuances. Together, the youth will create photo-based projects with a culminating presentation highlighting time together on the reservation.

Another activity offered to SCVHS students was the opportunity to participate in a science fair sponsored by the local community college. For their entry, students created a desktop sized "Ames Room" which creates an optical illusion that makes one of two identical objects appear to be much larger than the other. This idea was birthed during one of the off-reservation field trips when students visited the Cosmos Mystery Area, where this natural phenomenon occurs. The students won first place with their entry and in addition to having their entry showcased, each team member who participated in all or all but one of the work sessions received an I-pod shuffle, all participants received a Certificate of Participation.

SCVHS is in the process of developing a service learning program, utilizing National Service Learning as its model. Once fully implemented, students will be able to earn credits by completing service projects. Interest was piqued for students after hosting students from Eagle Rock School in Colorado who were involved in a service learning project on the reservation. These students were helping to refurbish a room for Birth to Five services in the building that houses one of the SCVHS learning centers.

One of the SCVHS priorities is parent engagement. Parents are able to access student progress reports for many of the courses offered by online providers. Additionally, SCVHS coordinators provide updates to parents and often times make home visits when students are falling behind in their work. Because many of the students have left home and live on their own and some are parents themselves, parent engagement also refers to engaging students who are parents with activities. For example, SCVHS staff partner with the Tribal Parenthood Project

to facilitate weekly parenting classes. These classes are open to students who are parents and/or the students' parents.

The previously mentioned activities are but a few examples of the types of projects SCVHS has become involved in to enhance student engagement. A final area that fits under this theme is that of incorporating Tribal language and culture. Referring again to results from the student survey, 90% of the students believe that activities, which strengthen students' Tribal identity, have a positive effect on student learning. I discuss Tribal language and culture next.

Incorporating Tribal Language and Culture

The SCVHS Accreditation Plan has an objective under its school effectiveness goal that states: "Evidence of [Tribal] language/culture will be visible in all district facilities and lesson plans."   While specific language and cultural activities vary depending on the site and the site's coordinator, coordinators concentrate on this objective and report activities and progress at their monthly meetings. Some activities are consistent across the program and I describe two of them next.

SCVHS has committed to go to each sacred site each year at the time of the year when traditional holidays are celebrated. For example, SCVHS students and staff joined with students and staff from other reservations to celebrate the Tribal New Year and welcome back the Thunder Beings. As previously noted, off-reservation field trips are highly regarded by the students and these particular events also introduce and reinforce Tribal culture and values.

Each quarterly SCVHS Newsletter devotes one to two pages to Tribal language and culture. The language section includes fun activities like crossword puzzles and word finds. The cultural pieces are informative and include stories of current and past

leaders, elders, and traditions. Additionally, the newsletter provides a venue to inform students of current reservation happenings and special events.

In addition to program-wide activities, each site has its own Tribal activities. For example, one site devotes each Friday afternoon to activities such as learning how to make head roaches, playing hand games, and bringing in speakers from the community to speak about various aspects of the culture. The SCVHS's commitment to enhancing the students' Tribal identity is evident; not only with student activities, but in the way adult interactions take place. After attending a seminar conducted by a spiritual leader and his wife, the traditional way of seating has been incorporated into staff meetings to help create order and understand Tribal protocol.

The preceding evidence supports that the SCVHS program espouses liberating instructional methodologies and scheduling options as well as incorporating activities to spark students' cultural and experiential interests.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter I identified three themes relevant to the student experience: (a) a second change to graduate, (b) the availability of school 24/7, and (c) mentors. Among the special people identified by the students were Corinne and Jolene, the two coordinator participants. The information provided by Jolene and Corinne illustrated the passion and commitment they bring to SCVHS as well as its effect on enhancing the student experience, both before and after SCVHS enrollment. Additionally, the coordinators offered considerable insight and information with regard to programmatic priorities, this chapter's final theme.

After analyzing various documents including the SCVHS Accreditation Plan, the school improvement priorities of academic, student, and parent engagement and transition emerged as

programmatic categories relating to increasing student success. Factors impacting student success within the category of academic engagement included student incentives, provider flexibility, and coursework. Enrichment programs and activities enhanced student and parent engagement as did incorporating and integrating Tribal language and cultural opportunities. SCVHS is at various implementation points in each of these areas and in the next chapter I summarize the findings of the study, discuss implications for student engagement and success, and recommend topics for further study based on my conclusions.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I conducted a case study of the perspectives and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school and virtual high school coordinators to understand and analyze the factors associated with successful course completion. Students were primarily attracted to the school because of 24/7 online access to courses and having a second chance to graduate. An analysis of historical documents portrayed gang influences, pregnancy and parenting, falling behind in or failing courses, and the failure of traditional schools to keep American Indian students motivated as the primary reasons for early leaving or dropping out. Most of the 618 enrollees were early leavers from traditional high schools and already older than age peers for their grade placement upon enrollment. The data revealed that while a virtual delivery system worked well for the five student participants, it did not, in and of itself, explain successful course completion for the majority of enrollees.

The availability of school 24/7, seeing the virtual school as a second chance to graduate, and mentors were the critical factors associated with successful course completion for the five student participants. Coordinator interviews, participant observation, and historical documents expanded the critical factors to include the themes of academic, student, and parent engagement; and transition planning. SCVHS students successfully completed coursework and graduated when rigid academic expectations for immediate and continuous progress through coursework were replaced with provider and programmatic flexibility and engagement activities.

Student incentives, provider flexibility, and coursework surfaced as factors impacting academic engagement. Analysis of data pertaining to the impact of student incentives was based on survey perceptions and 85 % of the students believed monetary incentives had a positive effect on student learning. As the virtual program evolved, the average number of completed

courses per student as well as the completion percentage for enrolled courses increased each year. Data analysis suggests that ongoing course start dates and extended completion timelines were positively aligned with students remaining in the program and completing courses. While course completion information for 2010-2011 is incomplete, preliminary results show that the number of students successfully completing courses has almost doubled over previous years as well as the number of courses successfully completed (see Table 5). In monitoring these statistics since the completion of data gathering, the percent of courses successfully completed increased from 55.9% on May 22, 2011 to 57.5% on June 11, 2011, a substantial gain in less than one month's time.

Coursework was a factor where two almost contradictory features emerged. The first was that enrollees frequently lacked the reading skills needed to be successful in online coursework. For the study's primary provider, reading levels for most courses were at the sixth grade level, allowing students to experience success while improving their reading and comprehension skills. On the other hand, the coursework was more rigorous than what students had previously experienced and for those who left SCVHS to return to a traditional school, their confidence and skill levels allowed them to excel and move towards or graduate. SCVHS had three spring graduates and three other students are on target for summer graduation. Twelve prior SCVHS students graduated from other reservation schools in 2011. *SCVHS has provided these graduates and those approaching graduation with transition assistance*.

The coordinator participants credit Career Cruising and the MyLife Network, their transition and career planning program, with introducing students to possibilities they had not previously considered. The programs provided a structure for identifying skills and abilities needed for career success and also identified promising career opportunities. The SCVHS

program has improved as evidenced by course completion and graduation statistics. My analysis also revealed that while provider flexibility, coursework enhancements, and transition planning were important components in successful course completion, something was missing from the academic, student, and parent engagement triad.

In analyzing student success from a critical and culturally responsive perspective, incorporating Tribal language and culture emerged as a key factor linked to student and parent engagement. Student survey data informed programmatic enhancements, such as off-reservation field trips implemented by SCVHS. Planning for these and other enrichment programs and opportunities expanded student horizons as did embracing Tribal language and culture in the activities offered. For example, Exposures, a cross-cultural photography program, allowed students from other cultures to experience the reservation and reservation students to experience other cultures. It is evident that the SCVHS team carefully planned engaging activities to include cultural connections both at the program-wide level and also for the individual sites. They also honored the Tribal language and culture in the SCVHS newsletter and by visiting sacred sites at the time of year when traditional holidays are celebrated.

Parent engagement looks different for SCVHS as many students are parents and frequently live independent of their family of origin. SCVHS co-sponsors weekly parenting classes open to students, student parents, and students' parents. Childcare was an identified need. I describe this need and others in the recommendation section.

Implications

Although findings from case study research are not easily generalized, several significant implications emerged. First, while there is considerable support for improving learner outcomes for Native American students within the school district and the state, financing aspects place a

sense of urgency upon the program to drastically increase course completion and graduation rates. With the cost of educating one student for one year at SCVHS being approximately ten times greater than the state average, district leadership constantly scrutinized the feasibility of continuing the program. From the state's perspective, the SCVHS student population is considerably larger than they had projected and constitutes a new expenditure they were unprepared to fund. The implication for other entities considering virtual schooling is to be cognizant of legislative priorities and regulatory guidance.

While the per-student expenditure for SCVHS is considerably higher than the state's average, per-student expenditures run 1.5 to three times higher for any school serving a large population of Native American students (SDDOE, 2011c). School districts with high Native American populations likely identify more students as in need of special education, thereby raising expenditures for serving yet another poverty-impacted population. Serving a poverty impacted clientele situated in a remote rural area with vast distances between schools reduces opportunities for cost saving, increasing per pupil costs.

However, a financial analysis of costs shows revenue exceeded expenses for SCVHS due to state aid generated on a full-time student basis and other forms of aid. This included Federal Impact Aid, a reimbursement to public school districts serving Native American children because no tax revenue may be collected from Indian lands, generated annually for federally connected students. Examining the per pupil costs ignores these other forms of financial assistance. The funds needed to advocate for alternative programming to counter the dismal achievement and graduation statistics plaguing Native American students are readily available to meet the costs of special programming. A cursory analysis by board members and state policy maskers may ignore *the real bottom line* – the funds provide sufficient resources to pay the

higher per pupil costs associated with alternative education for Native American students. A

reduction in services due to higher costs ignores the challenge associated with educating a

historically marginalized population.

For entities desiring to provide a second chance to graduate for early leavers and

dropouts, a second implication from the study has to do with the impact of this type of program

on graduation rates and district and school improvement status. Both of these factors are

intertwined. During a meeting between district administration and state officials, it was

suggested that *Sherman County should abandon the virtual high school if they had any hopes of

ever getting out of district improvement*. Their logic was that with graduation rates as one of the

NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) indicators, the district with their clientele could expect

to be forever in school improvement. Potentially, this scenario is a reality. When the criterion is

how many seniors graduate, SCVHS had a graduation rate of 7% in 2008, 16.67% in 2009, and

33% in 2010. Given that the school's first true cohort would graduate in 2011, these numbers

represent students who capitalized on their second chance to graduate.

To make AYP, the district's current year graduation rate must be an improvement over

the prior year and beginning with 2009-2010, the state adopted the four-year cohort graduation

rate calculation. Using this criterion the 2010 graduation rate was 4.9%. It is possible that the

2011 rate will increase and SCVHS will make AYP for graduation; however, to get out of school

improvement the rate must increase for two consecutive years. As SCVHS remains a second

chance to graduate for most enrollees, the four-year cohort graduation requirement places the

school at a distinct disadvantage. The district has been at the corrective action level for a number

of years and with each ensuing year, the sanctions become more stringent. The district routinely

considers disbanding SCVHS due to AYP and higher per pupil costs. The financial analysis

shows sufficient revenue exists to pay for these services. Eliminating an alternative educational program at Eagle Nest ignores the reality of what happens when students attend traditional reservation high schools or high school in communities outside of the reservation.

Another startling finding in this study involves the rapid decline of American Indian students as soon as they reach high school. Achievement, enrollment, and attendance rates steadily improved for pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students living on the Eagle Nest Reservation due to reform efforts initiated in 1999-2000. The status of students transitioning to high school also significantly improved as evidenced by high school entrance exam results and teacher, parent, and student testimonies. *In spite of this progress, students transitioning into feeder high schools on or off the reservation experience alarming dropout rates.* These statistics illuminate the moral imperative for Sherman County to not only continue their efforts in providing an education to students at Eagle Nest Reservation, but also to expand their high school offerings to reduce the alarming dropout rate.

Students leave Sherman County schools with heightened achievement levels, yet a tension exists with regards to what Indian education should look like. Historically, traditionalists tried to maintain their ways of living and rejected European forms of schooling. Progressives identified with the dominant social and economic systems of the European Americans. With regards to education, the connotation attached to these terms has reversed. Progressive is now seen as more desirable, educating the *whole child* via revamped cultural programming. However, this approach appears to deemphasize the academic rigor and grade level proficiency now realized and so long in coming. Thoughtful educators know the answer to these concerns does not involve cultural denial or giving students an inadequate academic program. Communities must balance this tension, providing a culturally relevant and academically strong

curriculum leading to academic success and a career. Parents expect and students deserve this.

While a respectful and engaging exploration of culture is critical, the school system cannot

afford to swing one way or the other on this balance point. Both academic rigor and cultural

engagement are required to give students a future and sustain the community.

Stereotype Threat

Assuming the educational program offers students an opportunity to value their culture

and find academic success, other "threats" to student success exist. The psychological and social

hazards and costs associated with being a member of a historically oppressed population may

also influence student achievement due the existence of stereotypes (Aronson & Steele, 2005).

Research with regard to "stereotype threat" reveals "a student need never encounter actual

prejudice or differential treatment … to be meaningfully affected by stereotypes" (p. 440).

Essentially, the threat of discrimination and the pressure associated with being judged as

a member of a marginalized group "contributes to the gap in performance between minorities

and whites" (Aronson & Steele , 2005, p. 441). Students experiencing stereotype threat use up

"valuable cognitive resources"(p. 445) in managing the threats in their environment. Anxiety and

a reduction of effort accompanies the experience of stereotype threat.   Stereotype threat often

has the greatest impact on those who most want to succeed or those who are intensely attached to

their gender or ethnic group (Aronson & Steele ,2005). All Indian educators will want to attend

to this concern as it impacts elementary as well as older students.

Career Education

Students living on a reservation with up to 80% unemployment may not be motivated

with the promise of a challenging career or a college education. The "sales pitch" for doing well

in school promises career or educational success. This claim clearly lacks authenticity for

students living on a reservation with high unemployment rates and sidesteps the issue of high school dropouts.

Clark, Dayton, Stern, Tidyman, and Weisberg (2007) studied the effects of combining career-technical education (CTE) and college-preparatory coursework approaches for students and concluded:

> We view the high school dropout issue as part of this bigger challenge: reconstructing high schools so that more students will find the experience meaningful and motivating, and so that more have a desirable range of postsecondary options when they graduate. (p. 2)

While they noted implementation challenges and "incompleteness of evidence that these strategies produce the desired effects" (p. 1), fears of reduced achievement and college-entrance rates were unfounded (Clark, et al., 2007). Their study noted the importance of "reconciling universal college aspirations with the realities of labor markets" (p. 86), requiring a continued and combined emphasis on academic programs and a career-technical curriculum.

As documented by Jolene and Corinne, eight of the ten SCVHS graduates pursued post-secondary education. While SCVHS does not have a CTE program, part of this success was attributed to Career Cruising, a program introducing students to career possibilities not previously considered. Quoting a tag line of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, "*It seems like such an obvious idea. Organize high school to maximize the number of students who graduate ready for college, work, and citizenship*" (as cited in Clark, et al., 2007, p. 2). The high school experience must make this empty promise real by utilizing student strengths and interests so that abilities and career options can be seen as intensifying, thereby paving the way to educational success, graduation, and employment.

Summary of Implications

Even if NCLB is revamped or replaced, funding, accountability criteria, the nature of Indian education, and the challenges associated with serving an historically marginalized population serve as critical considerations for entities looking to establish virtual schooling as an option for Native American or disadvantaged populations. *The conclusion: if districts provide alternative programming for very high-risk students with historically poor graduation rates, the district takes on uncharacteristically high risk and several penalties for the effort.* The incentive to support American Indian students with a potentially successful program takes place over several years with a high investment in continuous and costly programming. The ensuing rewards include enlightened high school graduates ready to assume their role as community leaders and experts.

Recommendations

While the primary focus of this study was to identify factors contributing to successful course completion, I also considered barriers to graduation for early leavers and dropouts. Reasons identified by students who did not graduate included bus rides, academic frustration, moving from a school where they knew everyone to a school where they were outsiders, being dropped for poor attendance, becoming parents, being exposed to risky behavior, failing to see the relevance of staying, and a variety of other reasons. SCVHS strived to reduce these barriers and also recognized that in order for a virtual school to become a stand-alone route to high school graduation for American Indian students, the online coursework must be enhanced with culturally relevant programs, projects, and activities. Unfortunately, their sustainability is at risk due to the funding and accountability restrictions previously described.

Given the obstacles facing SCVHS as a public school and the high dropout and low graduation rates attributed to traditional reservation schools, *my recommendation involves establishing a new high school on the reservation, attracting students using a variety of delivery systems and a comprehensive program of services*. SCVHS should seek funding to build the high school of their dreams for American Indian students. Corinne and Jolene, program coordinators, have envisioned this type of school and I offer descriptions of it next.

What would a dream high school for Sherman County students look like? Corinne said there would be learning centers at each of the four Sherman County elementary schools and small community sites within walking distance of each of the reservation's housing areas and communities. Jolene's would "include a beautiful building that would feel just as comfortable as home." Perhaps, the dream school is both, the virtual learning labs as described by Corinne with the beautiful building Jolene visualizes housing a centrally located full-service community school and career and technical education (CTE) institute.

For coursework not integrated into the CTE institute, students would access virtual coursework at their homes and/or learning labs. Computers and access to the internet would be furnished to each student for use at home. In addition to site-based coordinators, there would be one to two reliable substitutes to fill in when the regular coordinator was on leave or doing home visits. Transportation would be provided to the main school as well as to the learning labs for students who live further out in the country.

Services and features provided at the community school would include dental, vision, and health care; drug and alcohol counseling with out-patient and in-patient treatment options and on-going after care; social services; a gym with exercise equipment and a swimming pool; a dormitory for students needing housing with both single and family units; a youth shelter for

short term housing; a laundromat, convenience store, and gas station; and a day care facility. Students would help run the day care and staff the laundromat and convenience store as either a paid position or to meet volunteer hours required to receive state assistance.

The CTE institute would be totally devoted to hands-on or practical activities designed to prepare students for trades, occupations, or vocations. Students would be able to earn high school and/or college credits as well as enter into apprenticeships. There would be a placement office to assist students with transitioning to the work force.

New enrollees would attend an orientation camp with introductions to the virtual courses, CTE modules, and community and school-based services. An introduction to provider sites and courses, organization and study skills, and navigating the internet would also be provided to further prepare students for the online coursework. For both aspects of the school, on-line and CTE, students would start by creating a life plan and setting short and long term goals. These life plans would be informed by the students' participation in the MyLife Network and Career Cruising program which includes interest and skills assessment, ability profiler, career profiles, multimedia interviews, college and financial aid information, My Portfolio, and Resume Builder. Additionally, life plans would include training in life skills (e.g., car maintenance, cleaning, cooking, laundry, making appointments, and managing money), CPR and first aid training, and other identified needs or opportunities such as peer mentoring, tutoring, work study, and college preparation.

In the arena of social emotional skill development, school and mental health counselors would provider periodic seminars in areas such as building self-esteem and conflict management. The counselors would support and coach staff and also provide much needed support to students. Jolene expanded this notion by saying,

> I've learned that accountability, trust, responsibility, patience, and a good sense of humor is what helps when it comes to working with the youth of this reservation. More often than not, many of the students feel like they don't have anyone to count one. Issues at home are too much to handle, but there is nowhere else to go.

I would recommend that those screening and interviewing potential employees invest in developing position descriptions and screening tools to maximize the potential for hiring additional community experts of Jolene and Corinne's caliber.

Areas for additional development, research, and ongoing analysis of the current program include dropout prevention efforts, closely monitoring the impact of starting with one to three courses as opposed to a full course load, continuing with student and parent perception surveys; and tracking student achievement data. The data would include their academic standing and rate of course completion, and graduation or dropout status if they leave SCVHS.

Additionally, I would recommend that SCVHS staff expand their understanding of the factors students and families consider when deciding which high school to attend and to expand eighth grade transition and parent involvement activities. Through a very active building leadership team (BLT), SCVHS plans, develops, and implements a variety of academic, student, and parent engagement activities, many of which emphasize the Tribal language and culture. I recommend that this structure remain in place as each member has contributed significantly to developing and implementing the activities delineated in their needs assessment and prioritized in their school improvement plan.

Beyond my challenge to restructure the entire way education might be delivered to at risk American Indian students, I also recommend policy makers understand the substantial investment needed to help struggling students succeed. *Expectations regarding "normal costs," per course costs or completion rates within a standard four-year plan should be abandoned in*

favor of an individualized, comprehensive, and extended timeline. Viewing success through a positivist, the world as it exists, perspective might allow some to conclude the SCVHS program has had limited success. However, when a critical and culturally-relevant lens was applied, student success as shown by course completion and graduation rates improved.

The gift of time and a flexible program offered these at risk candidates a chance to graduate and follow their dreams. Topics for further study include: culturally sensitive pedagogy, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and enhancing the quality of interactions between school, family, and community. Rather than integrating culture into education, Ladson-Billings (1995) advocates a culturally-relevant pedagogy. Her vision involves three propositions, "committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment" (p. 160) with the potential to serve as a roadmap for SCVHS *as it might be*:

> Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (A) students must experience academic success (B) students must develop/maintain cultural competence (C) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

Thus, the cycle of Native American education comes full circle; students once again experience an "indigenous" education: education integrated into the tribe's community life.

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Appendix A

<table>
<tr><td>

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

REQUESTED REVIEW CATEGORY: **[X]** *EXPEDITED* **[ ]** *FULL BOARD*

</td><td>

IRB USE ONLY
IRB #: _B10-184-02____
DATE RECEIVED: _____
DATE APPROVED: _____

</td></tr>
</table>

1. **Project Title:** Virtual High Schools: Learning Communities for American Indian Students

   Application Type: [X] Initial Review   [ ] Resubmission/Revision

   If Resubmission/Revision, list original IRB # here: _____

2. **If Expedited, Indicate Research Category** *(see appendix for descriptions)*: #7: Research on individual or group characteristics or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

3. **Will This Research last more than one year?** [ ] Yes [X] No

   Project Period *(from data collection to project completion)*: 1/10__ through 6/10

4. **Name of Principal Investigator:** Vickie Grant

   University Department/School: Department of Leadership, Policy, and Administration

   Primary Mailing Address: 207 W 7th ST; Gordon, NE 69343_____

   Telephone: 308-282-1459 home; 605-685-8896 cell; 605-288-1921 work

   E-mail: vgrant@shannon.ws; kvgrant@gpcom.net

5. **Name of Research Advisor (if applicable):** Sarah Noonan, Ed.D

   University Department/School: Department of Leadership, Policy, and Administration

   Primary Mailing Address: 1000 LaSalle Avenue; Minneapolis, MN

   Telephone: 651-962-4897 office

   Email: sjnoonan@stthomas.edu

6. **Please list any Co-Investigators:**   NA

   University Department/School: _____

   Primary Mailing Address:

   Telephone: _____

   Email: _____

7. **Mark the appropriate category:**

[ ] **F**aculty or Staff Research (1)   [ ] **U**ndergraduate Student Research (3)

[X] **G**raduate Student Research (2)   [ ] **C**lassroom Protocol (4)

[ ] **S**tudent/Faculty Collaboration (6)

[ ] **O**ther (specify): _____

8. **Is this research subject to any other type of review?** [X] **Y**es   [ ] **N**o

If YES, specify:

[X] Dissertation or Thesis committee   [ ] Grant agency   [ ] Project site

[ ] Other IRB *(Specify Location/Source of Committee)*: _____

[ ] Other: _____

9. **Lay Summary**

Please complete each section in clear, easy to read language that can be understood by a person unfamiliar with your research and your field. Done correctly, sections of this summary can be used in your consent form by changing the voice to first and second person and deleting information your participants do not need.

a. **Purpose of the research:** Provide a concise statement of 2-3 sentences.

The purpose of my study is to learn about the participation and experiences of 20 American Indian students, over the age of 18 and enrolled in a virtual high school during 2008-2009, who have successfully completed at least one course. I plan to examine their experiences as well as identify the factors that influence successful course completion.

b. **Background:** Provide 1 or 2 brief paragraphs to explain the importance of the research and how it fits with previous research.

The significance of my study relates to informing practicing educational leaders and policy makers about factors that contribute to successful course completion rates for American Indians attending a virtual high school. Reservation high school dropout rates hover at about 72% and the majority of the virtual high school's enrollees are included in this statistic. When looking at the 20 students from the 2008-2009 cohort who are at least 18 years of age and have successfully completed at least one course, 15 or 75% are now considered dropouts, one will age-out (i.e., be 22 when the next school year starts), two have transferred and are on target to graduate, and two are currently enrolled and completing course work. Many students (15 of 20) were not in school or did not successfully complete enough course work to advance to the next grade for the 2008-2009 school year. Currently, one student is on target to graduate within the traditional four

years, five students are in their second year without advancing; three students are in their third year, and eleven have gone four to eight years without advancing to the next grade. Most students are significantly older than the age normally attributed to their grade placement, two students are age appropriate for their grade, eight are one to three years older than their grade placement, and 10 are four to eight years older than their grade placement.

c. **Research Methods and Questions:** Specify your research questions, hypotheses, and present specific methods you will use to address these hypotheses.

I wish to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I plan to examine their experiences as well as identify the factors that influence successful course completion. Using a case study approach, I plan to investigate the experiences of five to seven students participating in a virtual high school. I plan to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to understand the perspectives and experiences of students as they consider factors associated with their success as well as their interactions with instructors and staff associated with the virtual high school.

I will use a descriptive, embedded (Yin, 2003) single case study design to collect interview data. While the primary focus or main unit of analysis is the experience of the students completing coursework virtually and factors contributing to successful course completion, sub or embedded units for analysis will consist of perception data from virtual high school coordinators and others identified by the students as contributing to their success. The inclusion of these subunits in the data collection and analysis process will expand upon and enhance insights into the student experience. The study will nest data collected through document analysis within qualitative data collected through interviews. The document analysis will be completed first and used to analyze and illuminate contextual factors relevant to the case, thus informing and illuminating the qualitative data gathered subsequently through interviews.

d. **Target Population:** Describe your target population *(e.g. seniors, children ages 9-12).* Provide reasons for targeting any special populations *(see question 10d)* or for excluding women or minorities *(as appropriate).*

Participants/interviewees will include site and field coordinators, and 20 students, at least 18 years of age, who successfully completed at least one course in 2008-2009. Participation will be voluntary. It is expected that similar numbers of male and females will be included in the student population; however, all coordinators are female. The student population at the high school is classified as "high poverty" since the county where the students reside is one of the poorest counties in the country. All students, regardless of poverty status who meet the previously described criteria will be invited to participate in the research. Additionally, all students regardless of ethnicity will be invited to participate; however, all past and current students are American Indian.

e. **Expectations of Participants:** State precisely what you will have participants do. Attach any surveys, tests, instruments, interview questions, etc. that you will use with participants. Also state the location of data collection and the expected time commitment of participants.

In the current study, interviews will corroborate and expand upon information gleaned from analysis of existing data and records. The sampling strategy of stratified purposeful will be utilized (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this study, focused on experiences and factors contributing to successful on-line course completion, I will invite the following individuals to participate in interviews: students, over 18, who successfully completed at least one on-line course in 2008-2009 and coordinators who have had at least had one student successfully complete a course. This stratified purposeful sample will allow for the collection of perceptions data from different perspectives and will allow for comparative data analysis among them.

The focus interview questions will be developed after existing records and data have been analyzed and perspectives warranting additional probing have been identified; however, the interviews will be "appreciative interviews" with questions serving as guidelines that lead the interviewee to delve into and tell a story about their experience [Appendices 1 & 2]. As suggested by Merriam (1998), I will conduct a pilot interview with one or two coordinators. The interviewees will resemble the actual participants; however, the coordinators for this interview will be chosen from the district's middle school pool and the pool of students, over 18, who successfully completed coursework during 2007-2008. This pilot process will illuminate questions that might be ambiguous or confusing and need rewording. It will highlight poor questions that do not elicit good data, and lead to other questions suggested by the respondent that might yield useful data. I will revise questions based on feedback from pilot respondent(s).

Prior to the scheduling of each interview, I will gather signed consent forms from all interviewees [Appendix 5]. I will conduct student and coordinator interviews at the district's learning labs to the greatest degree possible, as this venue is most likely to result in the subjects' feeling comfortable, being on their own turf. I will audio tape record the interviews. Estimated time for completion of each interview is 60 minutes.

f. **Analysis of Existing Data:** If you are analyzing existing data, records, or specimens, explain the source and type, as well as your means of access to them.

Existing records, including demographic information, transcripts, enrollment records, student notes written by coordinators, progress reports from the on-line provider and the students' cumulative files, and course materials and guidelines will be analyzed. As Director of School Improvement, Assessment, and Data Collection, I have access to this information on a routine basis and as part of my employment responsibilities with the school district. [Appendix 6]

10. **Anticipated Subject Population**

These are your best estimates based on the population you wish to study.

a. **Number** of Males: <u>11</u>   Females: <u>13</u>   Total Human Subjects: <u>24</u>

b. **Age Range:**   Youngest Subject <u>18</u>   Oldest Subject <u>55</u>

c. **Location of Subjects** *(check all that apply)*:

   [ ] University of St. Thomas campus

   [X] Elementary/Secondary school

   [ ] Hospital

   [ ] Clinic

   [ ] Long Term Care Facility

   [ ] Prison/Halfway house

   [ ] Other Special Institution *(Specify)***:** _____

   [ ] **None** of the above *(Describe location of subjects)*: _____

NOTE: If subjects are recruited or research is conducted through an agency or institution other than UST, submit written documentation of approval and/or cooperation. This document should use the agency or institution's letterhead and contain enough information to demonstrate the agency or institution's understanding of their role in your research. [Appendix 7]

d. **Special Populations**

NOTE: These groups require special consideration by federal regulatory agencies and by the IRB. In the Lay Summary *(question 9d)* you should have provided a rationale for focusing on special populations. **If women and minorities are to be excluded from the study, a clear rationale for their exclusion should also be provided in the Lay Summary** *(question 9d)*.

[ ] Minors (under age 18) - volunteers	[ ] HIV/AIDS patients
[ ] Minors -- patients	[X] Economically disadvantaged
[ ] UST Employees	[ ] Educationally disadvantaged
[X] Students	[ ] Hospital patients or outpatients
[ ] Pregnant women	[ ] Prisoners
[ ] Elderly/aged persons	[ ] Cognitively impaired persons

[X] Minority group(s) and non-English speakers *(please specify in question 9s)*

[ ] Other Special Characteristics and Special Populations *(specify and provide rationale in question 9d)*

11. **Recruitment of Participants**

    a. **Describe how subjects will be identified or recruited.** Attach copies of recruitment materials to be used *(e.g. advertisements, bulletin board notices, letters, emails, phone scripts, etc.).*

    All students at least 18 years of age who successfully completed at least one course during the 2008-2009 school year and who are not currently enrolled will be invited to participate. Students will receive a letter congratulating them on successful course completion and inviting them to participate. [Appendix 3] All coordinators who have had at least one student successfully complete a course will be invited to participate. Coordinators will receive an attachment in an   e-mail notice inviting them to participate [Appendix 4].

    b. **Specify who will make initial contact with subjects, and how that contact will be made.** Contact may be made through emails, phone calls, letters, etc. It is important that potential subjects have a choice to be in your study. Measures should be taken to eliminate potential coercion.

    I will make the initial contact and obtain consent. The consent form and letter or email invitation will make it clear that participation is voluntary. Additionally, I will assure that no one other than myself will know whether or not the students or coordinators decided to participate.

    c. **Will subjects be chosen from existing records?** [X] Yes   [ ] No

    If subjects are chosen from records, indicate who gave approval to use the records. Approval must be given by an individual who has the authority to release the records.

    Attach a signed letter of approval from that individual, preferably on letterhead from their organization.

    As Director of School Improvement, Assessment, and Data Collection for the district as well as being the district's designated Student Information Management System contact for the South Dakota Department of Education, I have access to all student records. I will however, request approval from the superintendent and high school principal for my study and request their consent [Appendix 6].

    NOTE: If records are private medical or student records, provide a clear description of how you will be securing consent of the subjects of the records and approval from the holder of the records. Attach written documentation of consent of subjects and approval of record holders.

d. **Will the subjects receive incentives before and/or rewards after the study?**

[ ] Yes   [X] No If Yes, describe these incentives and/or rewards. Include this information in your consent form.

e. **What is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and any cooperating agency or organization?**

I am an employee of the school district. By focusing only on the successful course completion aspect of the virtual high school, the potential for conflict is minimal. Additionally, the interviewees will not be enrolled in coursework during the 2009-2010 school year.

f. **What is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the potential participant?**

I am an employee of the school district; however, I do not supervise any of the coordinators, nor do I teach any of the students. By focusing on successful course completion and ensuring that participation is voluntary, the potential for conflict is minimal.

12. **Confidentiality of Data**

Please completely answer each question in clear, easy to read language. As with the lay summary, the information in this section should be used in your consent form. It is extremely important that all information obtained from your participants be kept as confidential as possible.

a. **In what format(s) will the data be created?** *(e.g. written notes, surveys, audiotapes, video tapes/DVD's, photographs, etc.)*

The format for data that will be created includes written notes from data analysis and interviews as well as audiotapes of interviews.

Answer the following questions for <u>each</u> form of data you create.

b. **Where will the data and records be kept?** Specify the setting where the data will be kept *(e.g. home, work, school, etc.)*, and how the data will be made secure *(e.g. kept in a locked file in a locked room, secured computer. etc.)*.

Existing records that are printed and handwritten interview notes will be kept at home in a locked compartment in my desk until they are transcribed to an electronic version which will be stored on my secured computer. The tape recorder will be kept at home in the same locked compartment. The electronic version of these interviews will be stored on my secured computer.

c. **How long will the data and records be kept?**   Specify the exact date when the data and records will be destroyed. If the data and records are to be kept *indefinitely,* specify how they will be deidentified (see appendix for details).

Data and records will be destroyed after my dissertation has been successfully defended, but in no case later than December 31, 2010.

d. **Will information from the data be transcribed?** [X] Yes   [ ] No

If Yes, please explain who will transcribe any information from this media and where it will be kept. If the researcher is not the person transcribing the media, attach a statement of confidentiality from the transcriber.

I will convert the audiotapes to an electronic format myself and erase the tape once the transcription process is complete.

e. **Who will have access to the data and records?** Will data identifying the subjects be available to anyone other than the principal investigator (e.g. school officials, research advisors, etc.)? List these people in the Consent Form.

No. If my research advisor needs to see data and records, subjects will be de-identified.

f. **Will the data be recorded in any permanent record, such as a medical chart or student file?**

[ ] Yes   [X] No   If Yes, Please explain below.

13. **Risks and Benefits**

a. **Does the research involve any of these possible risks or harms to subjects?** Check all that apply:

[X] Use of private records (medical or educational)

[ ] Possible invasion of privacy of subject or family

[ ] Manipulation of psychological or social variables such as sensory deprivation, social isolation, psychological stresses

[X] Any probing for personal or sensitive information in surveys or interviews

[ ] Use of deception as part of experimental method

[ ] Social or economic risk

[ ] Other risks *(please specify)*:_____

b. **Describe the precautions used to minimize risks.** This information must be listed here and on the consent form.

Educational records will be used to identify high school subjects and it will also be from these records that the corresponding coordinators are identified. The consent form will describe how participants are selected.

c. **Use of Deception:** If this research involves the use of deception as part of the experimental method, the method **must** include a "debriefing procedure" which will be followed upon completion of the study or subject's withdrawal from the study. Specify this method here.

NA

d. **Benefits to participation:** List any anticipated <u>direct</u> benefits for subjects that participate in this research project. This does not include statements like "add to the existing knowledge" or "assisting your school/agency/company, etc." If there are no benefits, state "None". List this information here and in the consent form.

None

14. **Informed Consent**

NOTE: Simply giving a consent form to a subject does <u>not</u> constitute informed consent. Consent itself is a *process* of communication.

a. **Prepare and attach a Consent Form for IRB review.** A consent form template may be found at www.stthomas.edu/irb. Information from these sections will be needed to complete this form:

    i. The Lay Summary (question 9)

    ii. Recruitment of Subjects (question 11 part d)

    iii. Confidentiality of Data (question 12)

    iv. Risks and Benefits (question 13, parts a, b, d)

    v. Special Concerns for Research in School Settings (question 16, part b, if applicable)

b. **Describe what will be said to the subjects to explain the research.** Do <u>not</u> say "see consent form". Write the explanation in lay language.

Hi. My name is Vickie Grant and I am a doctoral student studying the experience of students who have successfully completed coursework at the virtual high school. I am hoping you will agree to participate in my research as a review of educational records

indicates you have successfully completed coursework (or have supported students who have successfully completed coursework). I will be asking you to participate in an interview. I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way in my written study. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview and transcribe it myself. Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision either way won't affect your relations with the school district. Even if you say yes, you can still withdraw at any time up to and until December 31, 2010. If you start the interview and decide you don't want to answer any or all questions, you can ask to skip any interview questions or end the interview. No one else will know whether or not you decided to participate. The consent form gives you additional information. Do you have any questions for me?

c. **What questions will be asked to assess the subject's understanding of the risk and benefits of participation?** Questions should be open-ended – not "yes/no" questions.

What is this study about?
Can you explain what you will be asked to do in this study?
Please explain the risks involved in the study.
How will your information be kept confidential?
What is your understanding of the voluntary nature of this study?
What are your concerns about participating in the study?

d. **At what point in the research process will consent be obtained?** Be specific.

For students and coordinators, consent will be obtained, as a follow-up to the congratulatory letter sent by the district, in person prior to asking them to participate in the interview. If they give consent, they will then be asked whether they'd like to continue with the interview or schedule it for another time.

e. **Will the investigator(s) personally secure informed consent for <u>all</u> subjects?**

[X] Yes [ ] No If Yes, identify below the individuals who will obtain consent *(include job title/credentials)*:

Vickie Grant, Director of School Improvement, Assessment, and Data Collection, UST Doctoral Student

15. **Determination of Full Board Review** *(check all that apply)*

Checking either of the categories below qualifies this study for full board review under federal regulations.

[ ]   Research involving <u>more than minimal risk</u> to the subject *(see appendix for definition of minimal risk)*

[ ]   Research involving <u>children or vulnerable populations</u> *(see appendix for definitions)*

16. **Special Concerns for Research in School Settings**

    If you are conducting research on school children during class time, please answer the following questions.

    a. **Describe in detail the activity planned for children not participating in your research.** NA

    b. **Who will supervise non-participants?** Include this information in the consent form. NA

17. **Assurances**

NOTE: Inked signatures are required on the original application, to be submitted with the appropriate number of copies (4 copies for an expedited review, 12 copies for a full board review).
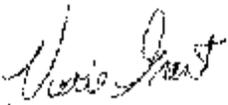
This research, once approved, is subject to continuing review and approval by the IRB. The principal investigator will maintain records of this research according to IRB guidelines. If these conditions are not met, approval of this research could be suspended.
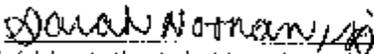
The signatures below certify that:

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the policies on research involving human subjects of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity, and privacy of all human subjects.

The information provided in this application form is correct.

- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior written approval from the IRB for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.

- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the IRB and to the subjects.

- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until _final written approval_ is granted.

Signature of Principal Investigator _____ Date March 10, 2010

Signature(s) of Co-Investigators _____ Date _____

Signature of Research Advisor _Sarah Noonan_ Date March 10, 2010
Student Research: As Research Advisor to the student investigator, I assume responsibility for insuring that the student complies with University and Federal regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research.

Signature of Department Chair, or Designee _____ Date 3/15/10
Faculty/Staff Research: As Department Chair, or Designee, I acknowledge that this research is in keeping with the standards set by our department and assure that the principal investigator has met all departmental requirements for review and approval of this research.
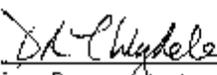
Appendix B: Student Invitation

[Identifying information removed or edited]

TO: Virtual High School Students from 2008-2009

FR: Superintendent

RE: Successful Virtual Course Completion

DT: January 18, 2010

This letter serves to congratulate you for successfully completing on-line coursework during the 2008-2009 school year and to invite you to provide feedback regarding the factors contributing to your success.

Vickie Grant, Director of School Improvement, Assessment, and Data Collection, is embarking upon a research study on the experiences of students enrolled in a virtual high school and the factors that influence successful course completion. She will be contracting you in the near future to provide more information about the study and to determine your willingness and availability to be interviewed.

If you have questions, Vickie can be reached via e-mail at vgrant@gpcom.net or by phone at 308-282-1459.

Appendix C: Coordinator Invitation

[Identifying information removed or edited]

TO: Virtual High School Coordinators

FR: Superintendent

RE: Successful Virtual Course Completion

DT: January 18, 2010

This letter serves to congratulate you for supporting students who successfully completing on-line coursework during the 2008-2009 school year and to invite you to provide feedback regarding the factors contributing to this success.

Vickie Grant, Director of School Improvement, Assessment, and Data Collection, is embarking upon a research study on the experiences of students enrolled in a virtual high school and the factors that influence successful course completion. She will be contracting you in the near future to provide more information about the study and to determine your willingness and availability to be interviewed.

If you have questions, Vickie can be reached via e-mail at kvgrant@gpcom.net or by phone at 308-282-1459.

Appendix D: IRB Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Virtual High Schools: Learning Communities for American Indian Students
IRB log number: B10-184-02

I am conducting a study about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed coursework. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because a review of student records identified you as a student who has successfully completed online coursework. If you are a coordinator or other person identified by a student, you support students who have successfully completed coursework. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Vickie Grant, Doctoral Student, University of St. Thomas, Department of Leadership, Policy, and Administration.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to learn about the participation and experiences of American Indian students enrolled in a virtual high school who have successfully completed at least one course. I plan to collect interview data to understand the perspectives and experiences of students as they consider factors associated with their success as well as their interactions with instructors and staff associated with the virtual high school. While the primary focus is the experience of the students completing coursework virtually and factors contributing to successful course completion, perception data from virtual high school coordinators will enhance and illuminate the student perspective.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

Students will be asked to:
- Participate in an interview that will take no longer than 60 minutes

Coordinators will be asked to:
- Participate in an interview that will take no longer than 60 minutes

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Educational records will be used to identify participants. To minimize this risk, only students who have successfully completed coursework and are not currently enrolled in virtual coursework along with corresponding coordinators will be asked to participate.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way.

Handwritten interview or records review notes will be kept at my home in a locked compartment in my desk until they are transcribed by me to an electronic version which will be stored on my secured computer. The tape recorder will be kept at home in the same locked compartment. The electronic version of these interviews will be stored on my secured computer.

Data and records will be destroyed after I have successfully defended my dissertation, but in no case later than December 31, 2010.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Shannon County School District or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until December 31, 2010. Should you decide to withdraw; only data collected prior to your withdrawal will be used. If there interview questions that you do not want to answer, you can ask to skip them during the interview.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Vickie Grant. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 308-282-1459 or email me at kvgrant@gpcom.net. My advisor is Sarah Noonan, Ed.D. and she can be contacted at 651-962-4897. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

I agree to participate in the interview portion of the study.   _____Yes   _____No

I agree to allow audio taping of the interview.   _____ Yes   _____ No

_____   _____
Signature of Study Participant   Date

_____
Print Name of Study Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Parent or Guardian   Date
   (If applicable)

_____   _____
Signature of Researcher   Date

Appendix E: Student Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions

The intended purpose of the interview is to provide an opportunity to gain insights and knowledge regarding the Sherman County Virtual High School, especially your experience as a student who has successfully completed online coursework.

1. Tell me about what inspired you, beginning with your goals, enrollment and experience as a virtual high school student.

2. What factors appealed to you when you chose to attend the virtual high school?

3. Describe your feelings regarding a safe and welcoming environment at the virtual high school center you attended. How might this compare to other schools?

4. What were the things you had to balance in order to have time to devote time to course work?

5. How did you go about doing the work?

6. What do you think explains your success?

7. How did your teachers help or hinder your success? What about the assignments?

8. Who or what else contributed to your successful completion of coursework? What difficulties did you encounter?

9. What is the most significant event that has happened in your life in the past six to twelve months?

Appendix F: Coordinator Interview Questions

Coordinator Interview Questions

The intended purpose of the interview is to provide an opportunity to gain insights and knowledge regarding the Sherman County Virtual High School, especially your experience as a coordinator who has had students successfully completed online coursework.

1. Tell me about what inspired you, beginning with your goals and experiences as a coordinator.

2. What factors appealed to you when you chose to become a virtual high school coordinator?

3. For students who successfully complete coursework, describe the underlying programmatic factors that support or deter their success. How do they overcome the detrimental factors?

4. How have the course providers and teachers helped or hindered student success?

5. Tell me about the relevance and difficulty of courses and ways they are engaging.

6. Describe your feelings regarding a safe and welcoming environment at your virtual high school center and how might this compare to other schools?

7. What are the most valuable ways you contributed to the program's success—your personality, perspectives, skills, activities?

8. Who or what else contributed to successful completion of coursework for students?

9. What significant events happen in students' lives that impact their ability to continue?

10. How have you grown personally during your time with the virtual high school?

11. From your perspective, what does the virtual high school value the most and why?

12. Make 3 wishes for the future of the virtual high school.

Appendix G: VHS Application

Sherman County School District

[Identifying Information Removed]

TO: Prospective Sherman County Virtual High School Students
FR: Vickie Grant, Principal; . . .
RE: Registration Process
DT: November 19, 2007

On the pages that follow is the Virtual High School Handbook. The application form and other forms that need to be completed and signed are included in the handbook. To get started, please:

____   Review the handbook

____   Request and submit an official high school transcript or if 8th grade was your last grade completed, submit a report card signed by your last principal and homeroom teacher indicating your were promoted to the 9th grade.

____   Read and sign Student Network/Internet User Agreement & Parent Permission Form, including parent /guardian signature unless you are emancipated

____   Read, complete, and return the Registration Form, Survey/Impact Aid Form, and Title VII Form

____   Read, sign, and return the Rules & Policies Form and obtain parent/guardian signature unless you are emancipated (18 years of age or older)

____   Review graduation requirements, compare them to courses you have completed and look at course offerings at

____   So that we can better serve you and other students, please respond to the following questions (1-2 paragraphs per question will suffice)

- o   What most appeals to you about the concept of Virtual High School?
- o   When was a high point in your education—a time when you built and maintained self-discipline and good things happened for you?
- o   How do you learn best—give an example of a time when you learned something very challenging. What contributed to your success?

____   You can either mail (e-mail: . . .) the above registration materials to:
Sherman County Virtual High School, % Registrar…

____   Or leave them in person at the Sherman County Administrative Office at … or at any of the Sherman County Attendance Centers to the attention of: …

Once we have reviewed your application and determined you are eligible for on-line course work, we will ask you to complete a pre-assessment, assist you in developing a schedule that meets [state] graduation requirements, and then we will help you enroll in the appropriate on-line classes.

Sherman County Virtual High School
Registration Form

Where did you hear about us?

_____   Date_____

NOTE: Official School Transcript mist be attached/submitted in order to be admitted

Personal Information

Full Legal Name *(as it appears on birth certificate)*

_____   _____   _____

Last   First   Middle

Date of Birth ____/____/____   Female ☐   Male ☐

Grade_____   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Ethnic: (check one)   American Indian   Asian   Black   White   Hispanic

Student's Address _____   P.O. Box _____

City _____   County _____   State _____   Zip_____

Social Security Number_____   Home Phone (____)_____ - _____

Have you ever been enrolled in a virtual course?   Yes ☐   No ☐

School Information

Last School Attended_____ Date Withdrawn_____ Grade at Time of Withdrawal__

School Address _____   Phone (____)_____ - _____

City_____ State _____   Zip _____

Is your transcript attached?   Yes ☐   No ☐

Parent / Guardian Information

Name_____ _____ _____

                    (Last)   (First)   (Relationship)

Phone Day (_____) _____ - _____   Phone Night (_____) _____ - _____

Appendix H: High School Feasibility Study

SHERMAN COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD SPECIAL MEETING

[Identifying Information Removed]

FEBRUARY 5, 2007

<u>MINUTES</u>

The Sherman County School Board held a special meeting on Monday, February 5, 2007 at […] School, for the purpose of considering a technical high school and to act on personnel recommendations. President […] called the meeting to order at 6:15 p.m.

Members present:	[Board President]
	[Board Member]
	[Board Member]
	[Board Member]
Member absent:	[Board Member]
Others present:	[. . .], Superintendent
	[. . .], Consultant

> All actions recorded in these minutes were by unanimous vote unless otherwise noted.

7163. Approval of Agenda

> . . . Motion carried.   (Attachment A)

7164. <u>High School Feasibility Study</u>

> Motion by [. . .], seconded by [. . .] to authorize the Superintendent to continue to work with the high school feasibility consultant to proceed with certification of a high school and work with a committee made up of staff, community and board members and prior students to develop policies accordingly for implementation of a virtual high school by September, 2007. Motion carried. . . .

Appendix I: High School Proposal

Sherman County High School Project 2/20/07
[Identifying Information Removed]

Consultant considerations by [. . .] for the implementation of a high school to meet the needs of Sherman County students are broken into four phases. Phase I looks at the immediate process for approval by the [State] Department of Education, enrolling students for enrollment as on-line students using the [State] Virtual High School delivery system, and beginning conversations about what the High School of the Future will look like with community input. Phase II finalizes the actual high school design, the start of the construction phase, and staffing considerations. Phase III focuses on the construction of the facility and the selection of leadership. Phase IV is the conclusion of construction, staffing patterns and the opening of the high school facility. The first phase consultant considerations for the number of days and specific costs are identified. Phases II, III, and IV are not specific as Phase I will determine consultant resources necessary.

Phase I
Spring 2007   **20 days**
K – 12 accreditation: State Approval
In order for a school to become accredited, they must be able to meet the following expectations, as well as offer a curriculum that meets the high school graduation requirements. (Some courses may be offered at least once every two years.) Public schools and those non-public schools receiving federal monies may have additional requirements, per federal regulations.
- Proper documentation of compliance with all applicable state laws and administrative rules shall be provided upon onsite visit in accordance with [. . .]
- Birth certificates are on file for all K-12 students.
- Immunization records shall be updated and on file for all students. Authorized by [. . .] Record of completed physical exams for all first-year staff shall be on file. Authorized by [. . .]
- A school calendar shall be submitted for all applicable attendance centers, and the on-line calendar updated on a regular basis to reflect actual instructional time. Authorized by [. . .]
- Course guidelines for the South Dakota academic content standards in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies should be adopted and implemented. Authorized by [. . .]
- Parents and guardians must be notified of their right to withhold certain information that could potentially be shared through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Authorized by 20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99.
- Criminal background investigation of current employees and student teachers should be conducted. Authorized by [. . .]

Summer 2007   **25 days**
- Virtual High School District Policy
- Community
- Publicity

Fall 2007   **35 days**
- High School of the Future
- Facilities
- Community
- Staffing
- Student enrollment

Spring 2008   **35 days**
- High School of the Future
- Student support
- Architect
- Legal Counsel
- Funding
- Staffing
- Facility
- Property acquisition
- Leadership
- Community

Phase I Proposed Contract March 1, 2007 – July 1, 2008		
	15 months	**115 days**
Part A		
Virtual High School		Days
Consultants	$21,500	43
Travel	$1,500	
Subtotal	$23,000	
Part B		
HS of Future		
Consultants	$36,000	72
Materials	$1,800	
Travel	$7,500	
Subtotal	$45,300	
Direct Total	$68,300	
Indirect	$6,079	@ 8.90%
Total	**$74,379**	

Phase II

Summer 2008	Spring 2010
- Facility - Staffing - Leadership - Community - Design	- Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support
Fall 2009 - Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support	

Phase III

Summer 2010	Spring 2011
- Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support	- Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support
Fall 2010 - Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support	

Phase IV

Summer 2011	Fall 2011
- Facility - Staffing **Construction** - Community - Leadership - Student support	- Facility - Staffing - Community - Student support - Transition