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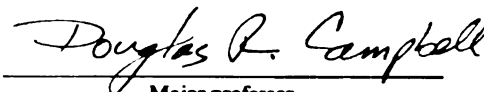
Balancing the Circle of Life:
Athabascan Women at the University of Alaska
Fairbanks

presented by

Wendy Rosen Esmailka

**has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for**

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**BALANCING THE CIRCLE OF LIFE:
ATHABASCAN WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS**

By

Wendy Rosen Esmailka

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

BALANCING THE CIRCLE OF LIFE: ATHABASCAN WOMEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

By

Wendy Rosen Esmailka

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the diversity of experiences and the range of responses to their experiences among Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as they pursue baccalaureate degrees. The stories of six women are told; all were juniors and seniors in 1990-91. In-depth, interactive interviews were collected, and the stories were compared and contrasted to each other. Almost all of the students are the first in their families, and sometimes their villages, to acquire a four year college degree. Yet there is wide diversity in the students' home environments (e.g., cultural traditions and subsistence activities). There is also a range of K-12 school experiences; some of the students went to boarding schools, others attended village schools and then urban high schools. Additionally, the women have culturally bound assumptions about the relative importance of college, the notion of leaving college or dropping out, the nature of goal orientation, and the meaning of success or failure in terms of college graduation. For example, education is one of many commitments the women have, but often family, community responsibilities, or work take precedence. At the same time, leaving school for even ten years does not hold the same negative connotation as it does for university administrations.

This study's unique focus is on the students who are near graduation, rather than those who have departed. While most studies on retention of college students conclude that the students who persist all share a common set of characteristics (e.g., goal orientation), this study indicates that there are few, if any, common factors among these

Athabascan women. In fact, many of them women possess most of the characteristics of students who typically leave the university, and they possess few of the characteristics of those who stay. The author contends that both sets of characteristics are inappropriate for Alaska Native/American Indian students and do not adequately describe their experiences or their intentions. By eliciting the diversity of students' experiences, universities will be better able to create policy, develop programs, and provide support in ways that meet the needs of Athabascan students as well as other students of color.

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1994

This study is dedicated to women throughout the world who are walking their own paths, creating new images, and producing new meanings. It is also dedicated to my friend, Steven A. Kirsner, who died on December 5, 1992. Steven was consummately devoted to the struggle for human rights and democracy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the six women whose stories are told here, for your willingness to disclose parts of your lives so that others may learn from you;

To all twenty-one women whose stories I collected, for your courage and strength;

To Athabascan people throughout the Doyon region, who have profoundly changed my life through your generosity, intelligence, resilience, and humor;

To my mother, who continuously demonstrated through your own life how women can change the world, and who never stopped telling me that I could accomplish whatever I set out to;

To my dissertation director, who provided unconditional support and guidance throughout every phase of my dissertation, and who has been an exceptional mentor and role model;

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To the women I have known throughout my life, who have relentlessly encouraged me to express who I am and what I think, and who have embodied the woman I would like to become;

And finally, to my daughters, Eve Nicole and Lauren, who have endured my graduate work and professional life, and who continue to provide me with hope, joy, laughter, and perspective;

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Chapter 1

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

The evening before I left Alaska in August, 1991, having collected all of the data for my dissertation on Athabascan women who persist in college, I received a phone call from one of the women I had interviewed, a woman I had known for over thirteen years. "My mom wanted me to remind you of something she thinks you might have forgotten," she said congenially. "She wanted to make sure you remembered that education is on-going, just like everything else in our circle. It's just part of the circle of life. It's not the same as for you." As I pondered the significance of what she had said, she quickly ended the conversation.

I couldn't sleep. I wanted to call her back and ask what that statement had meant. Yet I knew that was neither appropriate, nor was it likely to yield me the direct answer I was looking for. But as I drove the 3,000 miles from Alaska to Michigan, it came to me. This was a reminder that I should not try to frame the experiences or intentions of Athabascan women in my own cultural terms. Education, for interior women, is just one part of the circle of life. It is not an end in itself. It is generally not for personal gain and certainly not for personal recognition or status. Education is one among many, many pieces of Athabascan women's lives, and sometimes it is the smallest, least salient part. That last phone call I received in Fairbanks turned out to be the most wonderful gift the woman and her mother could have given me: a focus for this study of Athabascan women who persist in college.

Whereas at one time Alaska Natives could support themselves and potentially even increase their standard of living by working very hard at hunting and fishing, that is not possible today. Additionally, with a depressed economy nationwide, and in Alaska in particular, there is less wage employment in the rural villages as well as in the urban areas that have experienced earlier boom times due to the pipeline construction, etc. At the same

time, with the onset of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), more and more qualified Alaska Natives are needed to work in professional and semi-professional positions in the Native corporations. With all of this change, Native elders, political leaders, as well as many parents, are urging their people to get a college education.

Alaska Natives and American Indians have long been reputed to have the lowest college retention rate in the country (Astin, 1982; Browne and Evans, 1990; Tijerina and Biemer, 1988). In fact, they seem to complete college at half the rate of white students (Kerbo, 1981). However, exact numbers are difficult to substantiate for two reasons. First, there continues to be controversy regarding who qualifies as an American Indian; indeed, some universities do not require students to verify their tribal affiliation. Second, there is not a consistent definition for the term "retention," in part because many students, at some later point, return to the university where they began or transfer to another one. Needless to say, universities struggle with the fact that the college dropout rate remains stable at about 40-50%, and American Indians fare even worse. According to Hoover and Jacobs (1992), while as many as 64% of those American Indians who complete high school enroll in some form of postsecondary education nationwide, as many as 75-85% leave before graduating (Tijerina and Biemer, 1988).

The University of Alaska Fairbanks continues to serve the greatest proportion of Alaska Native students and particularly Athabascans. According to Kowalsky (1989), although the Alaska Native population has increased from 13% to 17% of the state, the University of Alaska continues to enroll Alaska Natives at only 7% of the total student population.

Kleinfeld (1991) states that the first Alaska Native graduated from the University of Alaska in 1935 with a degree in home economics. Since that time the number of graduates has continued to increase. There were "58 Native graduates from 1976-1980, 90 Native graduates from 1981-1985, and 161 Native graduates from 1986-1990." However, college graduation among Native students peaked in the late 70's (Kleinfeld,

Travis and Hubbard, 1982). This peak coincided with the development of special programs for Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks such as Rural Student Services, the Alaska Native Studies Department, and the rural, field-based university programs. The leveling off of degree attainment is accounted for, according to Kleinfeld, Travis and Hubbard, by the limited academic preparation (i.e., low ACT scores and low high school GPAs) of Native students attending college recently. However, they offer a caveat that this leveling off may also be due to an increase in competent Native students attending colleges outside of Alaska.

Alaska Native women are currently attending University of Alaska campuses at the rate of about five times that of Native men; however, in 1960 the ratio of women to men was almost 50/50. Additionally, Native men leave the university at higher rates than the women do. Some people speculate that this is because men have more work options; others believe that men are experiencing more despair. Unfortunately, there is no data available to consult on this topic.

Kleinfeld, Travis and Hubbard (1982) argue that we should not be so quick to assume that just because someone has left the university there is an indication that the student has failed or that the institution has failed the person. They contend that college experience, even without receipt of a degree, may serve Native people well in terms of helping them to obtain employment (p. 3).

While Kleinfeld et al. make a useful argument in pointing out the dilemma of student departure, there may be other points of consideration as well. First, we may need to reconsider both the meaning of college attendance within diverse cultures and the cultural roots of the language that we use to describe the meaning of college within a student's life. For example, as I stated at the beginning of the chapter, Athabascans don't seem to think of themselves as either successes or failures in terms of their college education. Rather, I believe that most Athabascans see people as having multiple options or paths in life or as walking many paths simultaneously, but neither careers nor education

seem to be the most important indicator of one's value as a person (or one's self-esteem). I am quite convinced that for Athabascans there is not one single indicator of success. However, if there were one, I suspect it would most likely be how generous, modest and gracious a person one is. Therefore, university educators and researchers might use less culturally grounded, value-laden terms to describe students' participation in schools (e.g., "failure") since the meaning of college attendance is likely to differ for Alaska Natives and others. Benjamin, Chambers and Reiterman (1993) state:

We further believe that a distorted view of student strengths and needs relative to persistence is obtained when an inappropriate ethnocentric model is used as a reference point in examining persistence...At issue, we believe, is whether behaviors which enhance persistence and which are valid in minority cultures are recognized, supported, rewarded, and valued by the dominate culture. To the extent that this occurs, persistence is enhanced (p. 38).

One way to understand such differences is to elicit the students' voices. Again, Benjamin, Chambers and Reiterman (1993) concur:

In this manner, individual and collective testimony was gathered to narrow the gaps of knowledge not addressed through statistical evidence (p. 26).

There have been few studies of Alaska Native/American Indians' experiences in college, despite their slowly increasing numbers at universities nationwide. Even less is available on Alaska Natives, and Athabascans in particular. The Athabascan profit corporation, Doyon, Limited (formed as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act), is beginning to collect data on college attendance patterns among students from the region. Additionally, the Athabascan non-profit corporation Tanana Chiefs Conference, Inc., (also formed by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) is collecting college attendance and completion statistics on the same population. However, statistics only tell a small part of the story. Benjamin and Chambers (1989) agree with Abi-Nader's (1990) assertion that we need to focus on how students "manage to succeed in spite of the psychosocial pressures they endure" (p. 42). Yet, Holm (1988) cautions us:

Academic success should be defined in terms of meeting students' needs, rather than solely in terms of student retention. Meeting students' needs, goals and expectations is an essential feature of higher education, even if it means lower enrollment and retention figures (p. 110).

While little data has been collected on Alaska Natives or American Indians, even less has been written specifically about Native women (Bowker, 1992; Green, 1983, 1992; Medicine, 1988). Until recently, all information about women had to be extracted from data that was not specified by gender. Medicine (1988) claims that this is because of the overzealous tendency to talk about the "pan Indian problem" without regard for either specific tribal differences or concerns specific to women. This is particularly unfortunate since in the continental United States a little over half the college population is female (Kidwell, 1976). In Alaska it is even higher. Medicine (1988) argues for additional research on Native American women because their experiences are different from those of Native men:

Research on the Native American female experience in professionalization, as well as other research on natives, needs to be placed in a framework that takes into account the varied contexts, roles and commitments that comprise the experiences of their lives (p. 92).

Kraft (1991) contends that it would also be helpful to have women's perspectives on their experiences that do not have preconceived answers, such as those in surveys and questionnaires. There is definitely a need for rich, descriptive data where women talk about their experiences with educational institutions. According to Bateson (1989), "The process starts with the insistence that there have been great achievements by women and people of color. Inevitably, it moves on to a rethinking of the concept of achievement" (p. 5).

Biklen (1985) claims that this is particularly important because women describe their lives with respect to education and work differently from the way men do. Bateson's research, again, corroborates:

Fluidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we (women) live. Women have always lived discontinuous and contingent lives, but men today are newly vulnerable, which turns women's traditional adaptations into a resource. Historically, even women who devoted themselves to homemaking and childcare have had to put together a mosaic of activities and resolve conflicting demands of their time and attention...As a result, the ability to shift from one preoccupation to another, to divide one's attention, to improvise in new circumstances, has always been important to women (p. 13).

Bateson finds her own life to be a case in point:

Because of the conditions of my life, I have had to learn something many of my academic colleagues don't seem to know: that continuity is the exception in twentieth-century American, and that adjusting to discontinuity is not an idiosyncratic problem of my own but the emerging problem of an era...If your opinions and commitments appear to change from year to year or decade to decade, what are the more abstract underlying convictions that have held steady, that might never have become visible without the surface variation (pp. 14-15)?

For all of the above reasons, I have focused my dissertation research on the elicitation of Athabascan women's voices about their college experiences. The purpose of the study is to celebrate both the strength and the diversity of Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. From the students' perspectives as well as my own, I explore their individual educational histories, including how they have managed to persist in higher education over long periods of time, and despite multiple obstacles, nearing completion of baccalaureate degrees. Bateson (1989), who also told women's life histories, sums it up best:

Once you begin to see these lives of multiple commitments and multiple beginnings as an emerging pattern rather than an aberration, it takes no more than a second look to discover the models for that reinvention on every side, to look for the followers of visions that are not fixed but that evolve from day to day. Each model, like each individual work of art, is a comment about the world outside the frame. Just as change stimulates us to look for more abstract constancies, so the individual effort to compose a life, framed by birth and death and carefully pieced together from disparate elements, becomes a statement on the unity of living. These works of art, still incomplete, are parables in process, the living metaphors with which we describe the world (pp. 17-18).

In the following chapter, *Who Are We and Do We Still Live?*, I review the relevant literature. Beginning with mainstream studies on attrition and retention of college

students, I demonstrate that the body of work is largely constrained by its reductionistic nature, as well as its lack of attention both to students of color and to women.

Subsequently, I review the limited collection of studies on Alaska Native/American Indian students and those of women. Finally, I examine both feminist theory and three critical educational theories. After rejecting social and cultural reproduction theory as well as resistance theory, I utilize production theory to explain the circumstances and choices of the women I interviewed.

In Chapter III, *Oh Woman, Remember Who You are*, I discuss the methodology I utilized for this study. I begin with an intellectual autobiography, highlighting significant experiences in my life as well as the history of my thinking about this particular study. Next, I recall the history of my data collection and provide a rationale for the methodology used. Finally, I discuss how I analyzed the data, and I examine some of the limitations of the qualitative methods I employed.

The data chapter, *The Fight Was Won, And By a Woman*, is a compilation of six stories of Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Each story is compared and contrasted to those told before, yet each story also stands alone, illustrating a unique and powerful journey.

The final chapter, *We Are All Related*, provides a summary of the six stories showing how they are both alike and different, a summary of the relevant findings, a set of shortcomings of the study, and a preliminary discussion of the implications of this dissertation. In the end, I come full circle with personal reflections of what this study means in my life.

Chapter 2

WHO ARE WE AND DO WE STILL LIVE?¹

Introduction

Alaska Native students and American Indian students in the continental United States have, as a group, experienced a history of exceedingly high attrition at the college level. In fact, attrition rates are reputedly higher than for any other ethnic group in the country. Many explanations have been advanced: lack of cultural congruity, low socioeconomic status, inadequate high school preparation, inadequate high school counseling and encouragement to attend college, and lack of adequate goal orientation. Most of these arguments place the blame for students' poor academic performances on the students themselves, assuming, for example, that if students were more committed to acquiring a college degree they would seek the resources they need in order to graduate from college.

Literature on college attrition and retention abounds. Yet, most of the studies do not specifically address issues particular to students of color, and Alaska Natives/American Indians in particular. Those studies that do address specific race, culture or ethnicity issues have rarely attempted to capture the perspectives of the students themselves. This is due, in part, to the fact that most of the studies utilize demographic data or survey questionnaires. Few studies have used in-depth, open-ended interviews or other naturalistic, descriptive qualitative data that make room for the students' perspectives on their education or other experiences.

Further, studies that focus specifically on women are rare. This is an area of research that is particularly in need of further work, as the needs of Alaska

¹This phrase is from the poem "Long Division: A Tribal History" by Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwak).

Native/American Indian women seem to be unique. To the extent that women are discussed, they are treated as if they were culturally homogeneous, assuming universality of values, as well as meanings. This certainly trivializes the diversity of experiences and interpretations of their experiences that women have.

Most of the attrition and retention studies are positivistic and reductionistic, in that they contend that there are specific characteristics or orientations that "successful" students possess. My study, however, indicates that these predictors are not universal. Furthermore, many of the indicators have culture specific interpretations. Alaska Native students may, for example, interpret the meaning of goal orientation quite differently from mainstream researchers. The same could be said for women and students from lower SES groups.

In this chapter I review three major bodies of literature that have informed my work: mainstream studies of attrition and retention, studies of Alaska Native/American Indian students, and research on women of color. In the final section of the chapter I review various feminist and critical theory perspectives, arriving at production theory which seems most clearly to explain the diversity of responses Athabascan women have to their lives and, specifically, to their educational experiences.

Mainstream Studies of Attrition and Retention

According to Smith (1981), colleges and universities first became concerned about high rates of attrition in the early 1900's as more and more youth graduated from high school and chose to continue in school instead of seeking full-time employment. Even while four year institutions became more selective, there was a noted increase in student attrition. Naturally, the number of dropouts increased as institutions of higher education admitted a broader range of students (both culturally and socioeconomically) and adopted open admissions policies in

the latter half of the century. However, despite the changing population at colleges and universities, the attrition rate has remained relatively constant -- around 50% (Astin, 1975; Canada, Patty and Wilson, 1982; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Mingle, 1987). Furthermore, Canada, Patty and Wilson found in a review of the literature that only 40-50% of all college freshmen will graduate with a baccalaureate degree after four years; an additional 20-30% will receive theirs later, leaving 30-40% who never graduate.

Kramer, Moss, Taylor and Hendrix (1985) contend that there are two distinct bodies of literature on student persistence in college: studies that assess the effectiveness of particular programs that are implemented to improve retention, and studies that associate particular characteristics or variables with staying in or leaving college. I have focused on the latter, primarily because most of the first group of studies is institution specific and is not generalizable to other colleges and universities. Further, Kramer et al. assert that colleges and universities should focus on why students stay, not on why they leave. Although the pattern seems to be changing, most of the older literature has focused on the latter, providing us only half of the story, at best.

Although an extensive body of literature addresses the nature of student attrition and the causes, there has been no consistent agreement. Part of the reason for the lack of consensus, according to Tinto (1987) and Tierney (forthcoming), is that there isn't a single definition for the term "dropout." Is a student considered a dropout if he/she is asked to leave by the university for academic or other reasons? Is a student who transfers to another institution considered a dropout? In the case of the latter, most institutions do not have a data base that would track students who leave the institution unless they return within a certain period of time. According to Tierney, Tinto argues for the term "departure" instead of "dropout" because it is value neutral, but Tierney contends that even the term "departure" is

culturally defined and value laden. Recently, researchers and university personnel have used the term "stopout" to describe those individuals who leave the university but return later to continue their education. At what point, then, would any student be considered a dropout? As the reader will note in Chapter IV, some of the women I interviewed returned to the university after a decade or even two!

Cope and Hannah (1975) claim that institutions don't know why most of their students leave, despite what they say. This is due, in part, because the reasons are multicausal (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1987; White, 1988) and because few studies go beyond demographic data to determine student responses (White, 1988).

The highest rate for student dropouts seems to occur in the first year (Astin, 1975; Astin, 1977; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Smith, 1981; Tinto, 1987). According to Smith (1981), in an extensive literature review, women and men seem to drop out at similar rates but for different reasons. Astin (1975) and Knepper (1989) found that women completed baccalaureate degrees in four years more frequently than men did. Astin also determined that non-traditional age students drop out at higher rates than younger students do.

Among the reasons most widely cited for why students leave college is financial aid (Astin, 1975; Nora and Horvath, 1989; Sandoval, 1978; Smith, 1981), although the research results have been controversial. Some studies have included the relationship of family income to students dropping out; others have only included the student's ability to secure funds to attend college. Certainly the students I interviewed had a range of family incomes, as well as a range of financial resources available to them. Needless to say, there was ample evidence that finances were not necessarily a direct determinant. However, as Nora and Horvath (1989) point out, although inadequate financial aid may not be a primary reason

why a student leaves college, adequate financial aid may make it possible for more low income and cultural minority students to remain in college.

Many studies have indicated a direct relationship between a student's family socioeconomic status (SES) and the student's performance in elementary, secondary and postsecondary school (Anyon, 1981; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Connell, Ashendon, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; MacLeod, 1987; Mingle, 1987; Tinto, 1987). Yet even though SES is a likely predictor, all of the students whose stories I tell in Chapter IV come from families whose income was in the lowest SES bracket while they were growing up.

Prior academic preparation for college is also a widely established indicator of attrition (Mingle, 1987; Sandoval, 1978). This includes both ACT scores and grade point averages (GPAs), but Astin (1975) claims that standardized tests are poorer predictors than high school grade point averages GPAs. Surprisingly, Cope and Hannah (1975) found that those who voluntarily leave school often have higher GPAs than those who graduate. There does not appear to be as clear a relationship between college grades and attrition (Smith, 1981).

The most widely discussed study on college dropouts is Tinto's Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (1987). Using Durkheim's (1966) theory of suicide, Tinto claims that the "lack of fit" between the student and the institution causes the student to commit academic suicide by leaving the institution. He uses six criteria to determine the fit between students and the institution: intention, commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence and isolation. Tinto readily admits, however, that his theory does not necessarily account for differences among students related to gender, race or social class status.

Tinto postulates that a student's pre-entry attributes (i.e., family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling) affect his or her

postsecondary intentions, goals, and commitments prior to entering a higher education institution. Departure prior to degree completion occurs when there is an incongruency between the student's pre-entry attributes, intentions, goals and commitments and the campus environment. This incongruency becomes evident during the student's integration into the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution. Thus, the experience of integrating into these systems becomes a new influence on the student's postsecondary intentions, goals and commitments to persist or depart (Pavel and Padilla, 1993, p. 3).

Tinto defines individual intentions as either career or educational goals. He claims that generally there is a greater likelihood that students will complete college if they have specific goals prior to attending. He concedes that many students are uncertain of their goals upon entering, and many change or develop their goals during college. However, if the students remain uncertain throughout college, there is greater likelihood that they will leave.

The second criterion is commitment. Commitment is defined on two levels: commitment to the student's career or educational goals, and commitment to the institution where the student is seeking a degree.

Adjustment to college is Tinto's third criterion. Obviously every student experiences some difficulty in adjusting to a college environment. However, Tinto does not directly address the particular difficulties women, working class students and students of color might have. Additionally, non-traditional students and first generation college students likely experience more difficult transitions.

Tinto's fourth criterion is difficulty with academic work. Tinto claims that the measure of prior academic performance is not necessarily a good predictor of the skills needed in college. This is because students also need to learn new skills in order to perform well in college. Study skills that seemed adequate in high school may not be adequate in college. However, he acknowledges that students of color may experience greater difficulty in college because of lesser quality high school experiences, making it more likely that they will leave.

Incongruence, either academic or social, is a fifth predictor of student attrition. Tinto defines incongruence as the difference between what the individual needs or prefers and that of the college or university. However, he claims that if students do not perceive themselves to be mismatched with the university, either academically or socially, then this probably will not affect their ability to persist in school.

Finally, isolation is considered a major factor by Tinto. He defines isolation particularly in terms of the extent to which students feel connected to faculty. Students who work off-campus or have extensive outside family, work, or social responsibilities may feel more isolated from the faculty or university at large.

All of the factors listed by Tinto have been assessed by various researchers. For the most part, they have corroborated his assertions in two year colleges (Grosset, 1989) and four year colleges (Edington, 1988; Ethington, 1990; Holm, 1988; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In fact, even earlier studies such as Astin (1975; 1977) indicate very similar findings; motivational factors like degree aspirations, drive to achieve, commitment to an educational goal, and conditions of employment were important characteristics. However, some scholars, such as Colert (1984), who studied non-traditional students, found Tinto's criteria to be not so clearly indicative of college persistence.

In the next section I examine whether the above findings apply specifically to Alaska Native/American Indian students. Needless to say, regardless of the fact that they are reputed to have the most difficulty in acquiring baccalaureate degrees, as a group they have received less attention in the professional literature. Among the studies that have been done, there is little agreement on the causes of attrition among the students.

Alaska Native/American Indian Students

As I have stated earlier, Alaska Native/American Indian students reputedly have the highest rate of attrition in the country. Bowker (1992), in a review of the literature on American Indian dropouts, concludes that there is great disagreement on the reasons American Indians depart from colleges and universities, and she further asserts that almost all of the reasons presented have been disputed by other studies. Benjamin, Chambers and Reiterman (1993) concur.

Kleinfeld (1978) claims that college success of Alaska Native freshmen most neatly correlated with the level of academic preparation students acquired in high school. Goal orientation, however, was not important. Additionally, Native students experienced racism and prejudice at the university (Tinto's social difficulty and/or isolation), but this did not seem to adversely affect their ability to persist.

Pavel and Padilla (1993) reviewed Tinto's model to see if it would fit the Alaska Native/American Indian population. While they initially found a weak fit between the population and Tinto's model, they eventually agreed that

...the most important variables/constructs that directly and indirectly affect postsecondary outcomes include family background, postsecondary intentions, and academic integration. Among the pre-entry attributes, family background had the largest and most consistent influence on postsecondary intentions prior to pursuing a postsecondary degree (p. 14).

In a study of Alaska Native high school students, Silverman and Demmert (1988) found the following characteristics to correlate with success in school: positive experiences in school; support received from some family members, most often mothers; support from an outsider (friends, teachers, etc.); family from a high SES group; positive relationships at home; student has both immediate and long term goals; student believes there are opportunities, real or perceived; student has close friends. Silverman and Demmert note that some successful students don't fit

all or most of the characteristics they have outlined. They urge future studies of these students to see what contributes to their success.

Kerbo's (1981) research demonstrated that Native Americans, like other racial and ethnic groups, showed a high correlation between high educational aspirations and postsecondary educational success. However, he also found that family SES was not as effective a predictor of success at the college level as it was in the elementary schools. Additionally, Kerbo found that students who attended elementary and secondary schools that were racially mixed seemed to persist longer in college than those from racially segregated schools. The latter point may concur with Tinto's categories of social adjustment, or perhaps social isolation.

In a review of the literature on Native Americans in college, Browne and Evans (1990) found that students need assistance in three areas in order to persist: "1) applying unique linguistic and cognitive styles to learning and other academic tasks, 2) assistance with clarifying their cultural identities, and 3) assistance in learning how to deal with cultural conflict" (p. 281). These special needs may correlate with Tinto's criteria of adjustment, difficulty and congruence. Browne and Evans (1990), Hornett (1989), and Arellano-Romero and Eggler (1987) seem to concur with Tinto's notion that students need to feel connected to faculty. They claim that success is dependent upon individual staff members' willingness to work with students to achieve the desired results.

In a study of the interventionist Rural Alaska Honors Program (RAHI) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Kowalsky (1989) claims that RAHI increases the likelihood that a student will graduate. Alaska Native students are selected from rural village high schools in their junior year to attend a summer workshop at UAF. The students generally come from poor families, they are not academically well prepared through their high schools, they are likely to become first generation college students, and they may not have made a commitment to either college or a

career. Yet the RAHI summer program offers students an in-depth college orientation, a set of intensive skills development courses, and an opportunity to interact with faculty, staff and students at the university. Students who attend RAHI are more likely to persist in college than those who don't, according to Kowalsky.

Hoover and Jacobs (1992) conducted a survey of members of American Indian Students in Engineering and Sciences (AISES) and found the traditional predictors for non-retention do not seem to apply. Hoover and Jacobs suspect that it is because AISES students receive more support services than other American Indian students. However, the students, like most American Indians, reported poor high school counseling and guidance for college.

Criticizing Tinto's model, Tierney (forthcoming) points out that American Indians may not present as neat a match with the six stated criteria. Additionally, he claims that Tinto's analysis is a "positivist framework where law-like generalizations are possible and the implicit assumptions and beliefs of both the researcher and the researched is irrelevant" (p. 16). What is needed, Tierney argues, is naturalistic, descriptive research that focuses on the perspectives of the students themselves. Without the students' cultural interpretations of Tinto's criteria for retention, as well as their views on their experiences at the university, the criteria themselves are meaningless.

Pottinger (1989) appears to concur with Tierney. He gives an example of a Navajo man who explains his college experiences through his own world view. The story is similar to the one I tell of the circle of life in Chapter I. Pottinger argues that we need a different explanation for how Alaska Native students view the experience of college. He calls for a "model that would be consistent with a generative and dynamic theory of resistance....a strategy of resistance grounded in traditional identities" (p. 342).

In discussing Alaska Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Scollon argues along the same vein as both Tierney and Pottinger. Scollon's (1981a) research demonstrates that cultural differences in communicative styles and a lack of co-membership between students and faculty create problems for students. Additionally, students talk about their experiences differently from the ways the institution seems to describe their experiences. For example, students use phrases like "going home" and "trying something else" instead of "dropping out," attributing different meanings and values to the concepts. Yet, despite the fact that Scollon disputes Tinto's positivist model, it appears as if his category of incongruence could be similar to Scollon's notion of cultural differences.

Students also express differences in their perceptions about the purpose of the university. Hornett (1989) warns us:

Institutions must understand that Indian students, for the most part, do not want to become part of the Anglo mainstream. That means that they do not want to relinquish their Indian entities in order to be successful (p. 12).

Scollon concludes that if faculty think otherwise, they may unwittingly characterize students negatively, simply because they do not understand the students' values, beliefs, perceptions or actions.

In a second article, Scollon (1981b) argues for "increasing the domain of human knowledge of institutional members (Alaska Natives)" (p. i) as a way of understanding the problem and not blaming the victim. Benjamin and Chambers (1989) concur with Scollon:

In its extreme, research on ethnic minority students which focuses primary attention on those who fail can project the prejudicial, ethnocentric attitude that certain cultural groups are inherently deficient in their ability to persist in the college environment. Such a focus, apart from its racial overtones, can foster lowered expectations on the part of college teachers and administrations, and lowered aspirations on the part of minority students themselves (p. 7).

Benjamin and Chambers continue:

At issue, we believe, is whether competencies which are valid in minority culture are recognized, supported, rewarded, and valued by the dominate culture. To the extent that this occurs, persistence is enhanced (p. 22).

Much of the literature discussed in this section seemed consistent with my findings among Athabascan women at the university. First of all, there were few, if any, characteristics that all of the women I studied shared in common throughout their educational careers. Many of the criteria fit the women for certain periods in their lives, but at a certain point they chose to disregard them (i.e., not having adequate financial aid), or they made different choices. In Chapter IV I deal with these characteristics more specifically.

In the last section of this chapter, I focus on women, and more specifically, women of color. While a very small subset of the attrition and retention literature focuses on Alaska Natives and American Indians, they, for the most part, do not address issues of gender.

Women of Color

"Today, women constitute 52 percent of all people enrolled in college in the U.S. and nearly 55 percent of the minority enrollment" (Carter, Pearson and Shavlik, 1987, p.98). Yet, it is surprising that despite the statistics, there are still few studies of women who attend college. Little of the current research is attending to both the differences in the experiences of women of color, as well as the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

Early feminists such as Gilligan (1982) forged new ground in examining the differences in the ways women think and act. Gilligan opposed Kohlberg's widely accepted theory of moral development, claiming that women utilize a different set of criteria for making moral choices. While Gilligan's work was revolutionary, she

made claims as if neither cultural differences nor social class differences among women might also affect the criteria for making moral judgments. Sidel's (1990) study of women's thoughts about family, work and gender roles is more recent, but she, too, only gives nodding reference to women of color. She writes as if most women think in the same way about the American Dream and their opportunities to achieve it. Even in a study of Black and white women in two southern universities, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) claim that none of the women opposed the dominant gender hierarchy; they were oriented first and foremost toward romance. Again, one is left with the impression that women of various ethnicities and income levels experience college in this way. Yet I'm not sure the same understandings would be true for Athabascan women, as they do not seem to place the same values on marriage and romance as white women seem to.

Interestingly enough, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) criticize both Kohlberg and Piaget for their attention to the developmental stages of men only. However, they, like Gilligan, ignored the impact of race and social class on women's thinking. They claim, for example, that women feel they do not have a voice and that they are powerless in many domains. I don't think many Athabascan women experience most of their lives like that, at least not with respect to Athabascan men. My impression over the years is that women (who are not abused) often feel validated and listened to and feel they do have a voice, at least within their own communities. While I don't have empirical evidence for this, my sense is that Athabascan women place different values on gender roles and attach different meanings to them than other women do.

Recently, feminist theorists such as Buss (1985), Harding (1991), Lutrell (1989), and Luke and Gore (1992) have acknowledged that not all women experience knowing in the same way; it is mitigated by class, race and gender. Lutrell describes the struggle she confronted in her writing about working class

women: "In analyzing all of the interviews, I tried to balance between identifying persistent themes across the interviews and treating each woman's narrative as a unique text" (p. 37). Luke and Gore, in rejecting grand theories about women or others, claim that this recognition of differences will have serious (positive) political consequences for marginalized groups. They point out that they are not attempting to make "totalizing claims to unity here, but (rather to) acknowledge the differences of position and voice among the women" whose stories they published (p. 12). Oakley (1981) also writes that there is a balance between identifying consistent themes and treating each woman's story as unique. I found myself in a similar dilemma with this study, and I repeatedly hesitated to make grand sweeping generalizations about the women whose stories I tell. I believe that it is because of their differences, as well as their commonalties, that the stories I tell are so powerful. Luke and Gore (1992) agree:

These very differences are what unite us across local sites in a shared theoretical and political re-visioning toward pedagogies that are consistent with our poststructuralist feminist standpoints (p. 12).

Both Oakley (1981) and Malveaux (1979) wrote that Black women seem to have different experiences than those of white men and women and even Black men. Malveaux, writing about Black women's experiences in college, reported that the women felt isolated (including from Black men), and they felt the effects of racism and prejudice. The women stated that they thought whites assumed they were speaking for the entire Black race, which they did not want to be responsible for.

Oakley also wrote about Black women's experiences in college, stating that the women felt responsible for holding their families together, and thus they had to adapt to many adverse conditions just to survive. Huston (1979), in a study of women in six Third World countries, concurred that the women feel responsible

for the welfare of the family and improvement of the community. Again, I found strong similarities with the women whose stories I tell.

Alaska Native/American Indian Women

In her most recent writing, Green (1983; 1992) claims that there have been two basic portrayals of American Indian women in the past -- that of the desirable Indian princess and that of the savage squaw. She states:

Native women have neither been neglected nor forgotten. They have captured hearts and minds, but, as studies of other women have demonstrated, the level and substance of most passion for them has been selective, stereotyped and damaging (1983, p.1).

Tsosie (1988) agrees that the dichotomous portrayal of American Indian women is false. Albers and Medicine (1983) claim that Indian women need to break the stereotypes imposed on them; they emphasize that because of past portrayals as well as their current situations, the women face not only sexism but also racism and classism. Green (1983) cautions, however, that while their concerns are similar to those of Third World and other women, Native women think about their struggles and their aspirations in culturally different ways:

Indian women recognize their concerns are similar to those shared by other women, though they would insist, like other Third World women, that they are doubly bound by race and gender. But beyond a rhetorical recognition of the similarities, their writing and public presentation bear little resemblance to conventional feminist analyses of the status and circumstances of women's lives. As an aside, I should also note that the lives of Native North American women have drawn much less scholarly attention from feminists than on any other group of Third World women, perhaps because Native women have not revealed themselves to be sympathetic to a feminist analysis any more than to any other kind of analysis. In that spirit, feminist rhetorical consciousness is used, only in part, by Native women to be explanatory and activating, but not to encompass the sum total of interest or concern. Areas of debate such as Marxist, lesbian, socialist, feminist are entirely missing, and I cannot imagine a time when such variants would ever be a part of Indian feminist discussion, or a welcomed discussion between Indian and non-Indian

women. In fact, given the hostile climate for discussion of any theory applied to Native people, I doubt that feminist theory of any stripe would be well received. For Indian feminists, every woman's issue is framed in the larger context of issues pertinent to Native peoples (pp. 13-14).

Bataille and Sands (1984) also contend that cultural differences play a major role in the kinds of things women talk about, the values they hold, the meanings they employ, and the manner in which they speak:

American Indian women's autobiographies tend to be retrospective rather than introspective, and thus may seem understated to those unaccustomed to the emotional reserve of Indian people. There is little self-indulgence on the part of Indian women narrators; events occur and are articulated in words conservative in emotional connotation. Even moments of crisis are likely to be described without much intensity of language, or emotional pitch may be implied or stated metaphorically rather than directly. Such understatement is not an indication of repression or absence of emotional states but often evidence that the narrator simply takes that state for granted (p. 17).

According to Green (1992), only in the past ten years have historians attempted to discover more about Native women through oral histories and their stories (e.g., Allen, 1989). She urges historians not to limit their studies to those Indian women who have achieved notoriety but rather the range of women as individuals and as a group. Bowker (1992) agrees; there has been almost no research on American Indian women's "attitudes, achievements or perceptions" (p.9). Tsosie (1988) argues that there is a diversity of women's roles, powers and adaptive behaviors. There is a need, therefore, for women to talk about their own lives. Similarly, Cruikshank (1979) found there is a tremendous diversity in the lives of Athabascan women of the twentieth century.

Alaska Native/American Indian Women in College

Carter, Pearson and Shavlik (1987) indicate that American Indian women are often torn between their racial identity, their gender specific roles and their roles as contemporary college students in the dominant culture. Since they often

have such extensive "responsibilities within the extended family system of tribal culture," they must make tough choices in their daily lives. Additionally, they "often must assume behaviors in the classroom that are foreign to their experiences in their own cultures as women. These women come to the university with strong cultural prohibitions against questioning authority and speaking up in public" (p. 101).

Given the value that Native women place on family, Kerbo (1981) agrees that the choices are difficult:

The greatest pressures on Indian women may be those associated with traditional Indian values toward home and family, the role of wife and mother being difficult to combine with that of full-time college student or full-time professional. But some women are combining those roles successfully and hopefully more will do so in the future. The Indian woman in higher education has a commitment to her family and community, and to herself, to develop her own potential skills and talents most fully so that she can participate most fully and effectively in her community, be it one of students in a university setting, or community people, or a community of Indian professionals working in government or professional organizations. The need for that commitment is not unique to women but to Indian people generally (p. 36).

In a recent study of almost one thousand American Indian women in five states, Bowker (1992) concluded that, despite the literature, no one characteristic fits all the women who dropped out or the women who graduated. However, among those who succeeded, there seemed to be support within their families, particularly from their mothers and grandmothers. For those who graduated from college, the family support extended well beyond the nuclear family. The girls indicated the need for support from somewhere, though it could be a teacher, a relative, or a friend. Other common, though not universal, factors associated with women who persisted in school were: homes with distinct rules for behavior, parents as good role models, absence of alcoholism, high value for education, parents who may have gone to college, and parents involved in their lives both in

and out of school. However, she clearly states that each woman's situation is unique and each woman's response to the situation is different. This is exactly what I found in my research on Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Toward a Feminist Critical Theory Perspective

The notion of applying theory, particularly a feminist one, universally to Native women is offensive and antithetical to Green (1983) and presumably to other Native women. However, I have chosen to discuss this body of critical theories because I have found it helpful in thinking through and organizing the data.

Social and Cultural Reproduction Theories

Reproduction theory, emanating from the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976), rejects the achievement ideology and equal educational opportunity rhetoric of the schools, claiming that the major purpose of schools is to prepare people for a stratified labor market. That is, schools differentially prepare students for positions in a hierarchical workforce that requires different social and technical skills for different jobs. Bowles and Gintis contend that both the formal curriculum and the authority relations in classrooms socialize students for particular categories of work.

Anyon (1981) provides empirical evidence for reproduction theory, showing how teachers' expectations for students and students' expectations for themselves serve as reproductive mechanisms in the development of skills and dispositions for that part of the workforce they would be entering. Anyon's study shows how working class children, using the same texts as middle class children,

are taught different cognitive processes and are socialized for different places in the hierarchy of roles in the labor force.

Bourdieu, a French social theorist, adds the notion of cultural capital to reproduction theory, defined as "the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition and skills that are passed from one generation to the next" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 12). According to Bourdieu (1977), the cultural capital passed on among working class families is different from that passed on within middle or upper class families. This would not be inherently problematic if one weren't valued more highly by both the schools and employers. However, schools operate within the middle class milieu, requiring cultural competence (including linguistic competence, interactional competence, and a particular knowledge base) that favors the dominant classes. Children socialized in middle and upper class homes, therefore, are at a decided advantage in school because the expectations are more consistent with the home and the school, and rewards are doled out on the basis of these competencies and expectations. Concurrently, the cultural capital of working class or cultural minority students is devalued, and students are accordingly penalized through lower grades, lower academic tracks, etc. (Erickson, 1987). Again, this would not necessarily be problematic if schools distributed cultural capital equitably among students, regardless of their ethnicity or social class. According to MacLeod (1987):

In addition to cultural capital, Bourdieu employs the concept of habitus...Put simply, habitus is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of those inhabiting one's social world. This conglomeration of deeply internalized values defines an individual's attitudes toward, for example, schooling. The structure of schooling, with its high regard for the cultural capital of the upper classes, promotes a belief among working class students that they are unlikely to achieve academic success. Thus, there is a correlation between objective probabilities and subjective aspirations, between institutional structures and cultural practices (between structure and agency) (p. 13).

One of the problems with this theory, however, is that there is an inherent assumption that social class is the determinant of school success or failure, thereby ignoring the effects of race, gender, or other factors that could affect the dissemination of knowledge, skills and particular dispositions. In other words, it is likely that within the same school middle class Native children are receiving a markedly different education from working class Native children. Similarly, it remains an empirically untested question whether or not Native students in urban school systems such as Fairbanks assimilate the same amount of cultural capital as non-Native students in urban areas or as Native students in rural areas. In Alaska it is commonly believed that the boarding schools for Native students, such as Mt. Edgecumbe and Chemawa, provide the necessary cultural capital for some Native students (or perhaps even most students) such that they would be adequately prepared for college.

Bourdieu adds to the criticisms of human capital theory by arguing that who holds a diploma, in part, raises or lowers the value of it (due to gender, race, social class and the cultural capital thereof). Bourdieu contends that some people will be at a decided advantage without a diploma, while others will be at a disadvantage even with the diploma. In other words, even when you go beyond your immediate environment (from the home to the school) to get cultural capital, it may not be as valuable (Bourdieu, 1977).

Reproduction theory, historically, has served the purpose of calling into question the structure of equal educational opportunity, the meritocracy in schools and, implicitly, human capital theory (see Schultz, 1963). It assumes that peoples' roles and opportunity are pre-determined, pre-destined, in a sense. How is it, then, that any Native students manage to achieve at the university, if the system is reproductive? Under what conditions might this occur? Does social reproduction exist at the village level as well as at the societal level? That is, do middle class

students in a rural Alaskan village receive a different education from their working class counterparts? Does race supersede class issues? Bowles and Gintis leave these questions unanswered.

By studying Athabascan women college students and their struggles, we can learn more about the influences of human agency on structures. I suspect that the relationship between agency and structure for Alaska Natives is different from what Ogbu (1987) describes for African Americans. The corporate structure provided by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the influence of the legislative Rural Caucus in ever-increasing preferred Native hire policies, and the financial aid available from both the federal government and the Native corporations undoubtedly create some leakage in a strictly reproductive system, as described by Bowles and Gintis. Of course, it is also possible that students have a strong belief in the opportunity structure available to them, like the Brothers in MacLeod's (1987) study. Even perceived opportunity provides opportunity for human agency in actually gaining entry into different levels of the labor market.

Resistance Theory

Since Bowles and Gintis' explanation for school failure among working class students, several ethnographies have been written that underscore the importance of resistance, a step beyond social reproduction (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; Everhart, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977). While resistance theorists agree that schools often work to reproduce social class divisions in the labor market by preparing students differentially in schools, they reject the economic determinism of reproduction theory. They emphasize how working class students participate actively and independently from structures, resisting the authority relations of the school and rejecting the achievement and meritocratic ideologies. Resistance theorists illustrate the importance of a peer

culture that is often in conflict with the school culture and serves as an oppositional socialization agency. Both Connell et al. and MacLeod emphasize the importance of the family in helping to shape students' responses to the culture of the school.

Like Ogbu (1987), resistance theorists contend that the students' reactions to and interactions with the school are, in part, a response to their understanding of their chances in a stratified labor market and the ways they perceive the relationship between hard work in school and the pay-off in the marketplace. In other words, students who resist, realizing that they face discrimination, do not necessarily believe that success in school will have equitable exchange value in the competition for jobs. Therefore, the students choose to opt out of school, or at least perform very poorly there.

Resistance theorists have, as yet, been unable to articulate specific conditions under which student resistance is detrimental to learning, and under what conditions it may be an unavoidable consequence of unequal social relations in school but may not restrict students' access to knowledge, skills or rewards. Additionally, with the possible exception of MacLeod (1987), resistance theorists have focused exclusively on the students who actively reject the culture of school. MacLeod attempts to explain the differences among two groups of students from the same low-income housing project who respond quite differently to schooling and perceive their opportunities in the labor market as unequal. The two groups have disparate experiences in the job market, and there is some divergence in beliefs about schooling among their families, which may contribute to groups of students' differential aspirations.

Recently, feminist theorists have begun to challenge the limitations of resistance theory in providing adequate explanations for, particularly, women and students of color -- specifically those who manage to break out of the cycle of

anticipated failure (or even of resistance to the system). We know very little about those working class students and students of color who achieve quite well both in school and in the labor market. In fact, the very notion of success or failure is normative and culturally laden. While the dominant culture places a high value on education and white collar employment, many Alaska Natives, for example, place a higher value on other activities, such as family and traditional subsistence practices. This quite likely creates conflicts for Alaska Natives as they struggle to make decisions about their own futures. Perhaps a broader range of resistance behaviors needs to be documented.

Production Theory

According to Weiler (1988), reproduction theories of social, class and gender relations do not account for "agency and the production of meaning and class and gender identities through resistance to imposed knowledge and practices" (p. 3). In other words, reproduction theories do not account for the actions of oppressed individuals. Neither do they allow for the socially constructed meanings that people make of their situations.

Weiler distinguishes between the social reproduction of class structure and the cultural reproduction of class cultures, knowledge and power relations. As a feminist theorist, however, she adds the influence of gender relations. She claims that critical educational theorists have not adequately addressed the effects of gender relations on social and cultural reproduction. Similarly, I would argue that neither critical educational theorists nor feminist theorists have adequately discussed the effects of race and ethnicity on social and cultural reproduction. For working or underclass Athabascan women in school, the effects of social and cultural reproduction are magnified for that of working class white males, for example, specifically because of the combined effects of class, race and gender.

Resistance theorists illustrate how some groups fight the determinism of social and cultural reproduction (Everhart, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977). Taking resistance theory a step further, Weiler (1988) claims that production theorists such as Giroux (1983) and Simon (1983) take into account the active social construction of knowledge as individuals create their own meanings in historical, social, cultural and interactional contexts. Production theorists, therefore, "are concerned with the ways in which both individuals and classes assert their own experience and contest or resist the ideological and material forces imposed upon them in a variety of settings" (p. 11). Individuals and groups, however subconsciously or consciously, are actively working toward political, social and economic change. Production theorists explain the actions of those who resist by rejecting the school, as well as those who excel in school despite the ideology of social reproduction.

Recent production theorists (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; Simon, 1983) have noted the importance of the influence of gender relations and have emphasized "the interaction of family, school and work in the constitution of consciousness" (Weiler, 1988, p. 23). These most recent assertions are particularly important for my work.

As I will show in Chapter IV, through the stories of six Athabascan women, social and cultural reproduction did not occur. Each of the women grew up in relative poverty (although several of them might not describe their lives so). The prognosis for poor women of color to acquire four year college degrees (especially in the case of the last five, who are the first in their families to complete college) was very unlikely. Yet they have each discovered ways, despite unbelievable obstacles, to overcome the odds of reproduction.

In one sense, one might argue that the women resisted. Yet, resistance theorists, to date, have referred only to those who reject the system and resort to

antisocial behaviors. However, rather than resisting in ways that might be harmful to them (as well as predictable), such as turning to alcohol, each woman created a new vision for herself. While each of the women did stop out of school for periods of time, each one made decisions about her life that did not, ultimately, stand in the way of college completion.

Each woman, in her own way, chose a different path from what she was told or encouraged or expected to do. Each woman, through her own means, managed to construct her own meaning for what was true and possible for her. Each individual, through her unique initiatives, produced her own sense of possibility, and in a transformative sense, forged a virgin path. Each actively integrated the influences of family, community (an extremely important factor for Alaska Natives), school, and work in order to pursue a college education. In this sense, production theory provides a framework for the stories.

While reproduction or resistance theorists might argue that the women still are reproducing the current social order, through agency, I argue that this is not likely the case. In many cases, the women whose stories I tell here (as well as most of the others I collected) are the first in their families or even their villages to acquire college degrees. In most cases they are the first Native teachers in their villages, the first Native social workers, business managers, anthropologists. They will likely bring different orientations to the organizations they work for, specifically Athabascan women's conceptual frameworks. I suspect that the impacts they have on the organizations, their families, and their villages will help to create a different social order, and they are producing new meanings in work relations and policies.

Chapter 3

OH WOMAN, REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE¹

Intellectual Autobiography

As a teenager I remember our dining room table spread thickly with index cards that my mother called her dissertation. There were no personal computers then; I don't even remember an electric typewriter in our home. While I can't specifically recall her life as a student, I can still hear her telling other adults that she was being harassed by various members of her department (perhaps her committee). Apparently they were questioning her as to why she wanted a Ph.D. and what she thought she could possibly do with it. The implications were that women had no business getting Ph.D.s (even in education) and that somehow there was something wrong with her for pursuing it. Even her family did not seem to actively encourage or assist her in her quest. But she was not easily deterred.

I remember my oldest brother buying a frame for her diploma -- long before she received it -- saying that the frame would most certainly hold her diploma one day. He believed in her ability and her determination, and she seemed to believe in herself, despite what anyone told her and despite her lack of financial resources or role models.

I remember that it was a very, very long process for my mother. She used to talk about how hard it was to "get back into the data" once she was away from it for awhile. Supporting five children as a single parent and working as an elementary teacher or teacher supervisor, there was little time or energy to devote to writing a

¹Taken from the poem "The Blanket Around Her" by Joy Harjo (Creek), found in Green (1992).

dissertation. I still don't know how or why she stuck with her original goal, but she did! My mother received her Ph.D. in 1974, ten years after she began.

Now I spread my own dissertation out on that same dining room table which she gave to me some years before I entered a Ph.D. program, and it is more than symbolic that my work space is her old work space! As I am the sole support of my two daughters, I must also work, and I have struggled with finding the time, energy and motivation to devote to the writing. As days of sick children, their concerts, and ball games dissolve into each other, and as I fixate on my teaching at the university, I, too, find it extremely difficult to focus. It has, indeed, been a battle to maintain any continuity in working with my data. But I have not lost sight of completing this Ph.D. over nine years. While our motivations, struggles, strategies, and even our goals may have been different, there is a sense of oneness I feel with my mother now as I draw this arduous process to a close. She has certainly been an inspiration to me, but perhaps even more significantly, she has inadvertently shaped the very content of my work.

It was my mother's interest in the civil rights movement and the women's movement in the '60s and '70s that drew my attention to inequities in education. During high school I helped to start an interracial youth group in which a few students from my all white, relatively affluent suburban high school began interacting with some students from an African American, poor, urban high school. The differences in the kinds of opportunities we had, our aspirations and the way the African American students were treated by my white neighbors made a significant impression on me, but I didn't have a sense, at that time, of how I might work for social change. I became even more frustrated as an exchange student in Brazil during my senior year of high school, where I saw what appeared to be even greater inequities between blacks and whites, and between whites and Native Americans.

When I returned to the United States in 1969 and began college, my commitment to working for social and political change solidified.

Since high school I have been a fairly atypical student. While my family was education-oriented and my oldest brother did exceptionally well in school, I had an average in the low 70's. I was uninterested, unmotivated and, in my estimation, I was treated by teachers and other school personnel as if I was not likely to succeed, particularly compared to my older brother. In fact, I was denied high school graduation upon my return from the year as a foreign exchange student in Brazil; my high school principal did not think a year abroad was equal to a year of American high school. But my mother knew the alternate route -- a high school equivalency diploma. Again, she taught me not to give up on what I wanted, regardless of the way other people perceived my intentions or abilities.

After six years of college, working for various political and social justice causes and traveling, I completed a teaching certificate and began teaching elementary school in Clyde, New York, a small farming community where many migrant families arrived in the fall to pick apples. Although I was a dedicated teacher, I was intrigued, once again, by the differences in the perceptions, beliefs and communication patterns of the Caucasian resident families and the African American families who had come up from Florida. After just a couple of years of teaching, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study cross-cultural communication and qualitative research with Dr. Frederick Erickson. He opened up a critical window for me and has significantly shaped my work ever since. I began to understand that cultural ways of perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting are significantly different; therefore, we cannot use our own cultural norms for interpreting the lives of others.

In 1978, I was offered a faculty position through the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I began working for the Cross-Cultural Education Development Program (X-CED), a program specifically designed to help certify Alaska Native teachers.

During the five years I worked with the X-CED Program I became aware of the role of the professional literature, the media, and university faculty in proliferating the idea that Native students were not as goal oriented and were less skilled than Caucasian students. Descriptions or discussions about Native American populations tend to focus on high drop-out rates, high suicide rates, low standardized test scores and poor work habits. However, the descriptions did not accurately portray many of the Alaska Native women I was working with in higher education. For the most part I found the teacher education students to be highly motivated to learn and complete courses (although the degree often took a very long time to complete). The women, like my mother, were rarely in a position to be able to devote themselves full time to a college education. Subsistence, extended family, community and often political and church responsibilities subsumed much of the women's time. But people pushed on, and many people did complete their degrees. Like my mother, the women I worked with in University of Alaska Fairbanks programs had little support from the university community; their families had little, if any, prior experience with higher education; and money for school and the family was, most often, very difficult to come by. This set of contradictions -- between what I heard and read, and what my own experience led me to believe about Alaska Native women -- fueled my interest in telling Athabascan women's life histories, particularly with respect to education.

Research is an expression of the self (Krieger, 1991), shaped by our own interests, experiences and what we want to know more about ourselves (Peshkin, 1985). According to Bateson,

Women today read and write biographies to gain perspective on their own lives. Each reading provokes a dialogue of comparison and recognition, a process of memory and articulation that makes one's own experience available as a lens of empathy. We gain even more from comparing notes and trying to understand the choices of our friends. When one has matured surrounded by implicit disparagement, the undiscovered self is an unexpected resource. Self-knowledge is empowering (1990, p. 5).

Although I didn't realize the attraction, I was drawn to the life stories of women who were forging paths where few Alaska Native women had gone before. And in so doing, I have come to better understand the choices my mother had made and the difficulties she faced, as well as my own. Neumann concurs,

What I hear of another I can only know in terms of who I am and what I know. And as I retell the experiences of others, I am there as well. It is through my eyes and ears and mind and heart that the story has sifted. The story I tell of the other is as much -- maybe more -- a story of me...It is this knowing, and what I've learned from it about how people know, that casts who I am, what I do, what I reach for, what I remember, and what I tell (1992, pp. 14-15).

These stories that I am trying to tell here help me to understand the difficulties women and people of color face, the complexities of their/our lives. The stories have helped me to understand the pain I felt for my mother in order to appreciate the incredible strength she has -- and that she passed on to me. And, they have validated the tremendous respect and admiration I have for the struggles and victories of women everywhere.

Rationale for the Methodology

As stated in the previous chapter, most studies of Native American college students are quantitative. Even those that combine quantitative analysis with "interviews" actually use surveys that are non-interactive and researcher-driven. The studies, as described previously, seem to be reductionistic, resulting in lists of characteristics presumably possessed by those who graduate from college and those who don't. Yet, the women I had worked with in Alaska did not seem to fit the criteria assigned to them. Such positivistic, cause and effect studies allow for neither the complexities of the women's lives nor the richness of their voices. Alternatively, I wanted to obtain the voices of the students, to display the individuality of narrative voices, as opposed to reducing their experiences down to grand explanatory theories

that did not adequately express the diversity of their experiences and perceptions. Most importantly, however, my hope is that by providing a forum for the stories of strong, capable women to emerge we will begin to transform the overly negative images of Native Americans and other people of color in college and other social institutions, and we will, in the process, begin to change the ways both institutions and individuals relate and respond to people.

Women's oral history...is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewer is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women's experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity which has been denied us in traditional historical accounts (Gluck in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1989, p. 136).

Although this dissertation is not a full scale ethnography, I have been influenced particularly by critical ethnography (Brodkey, 1987; Rosaldo, 1989; Simon and Dippo, 1986). The interviews were collected with the express purpose of social analysis (Rosaldo, 1989). Furthermore, "To work within the theory (critical ethnography/negative critique) is to presume...that the point of research is both to identify hegemonic practices and to articulate contradictions in the social system that would make those practices vulnerable" (Brodkey, 1987, p. 68-69). Simon and Dippo state:

For ethnographic work to warrant the label 'critical' requires that it meet three fundamental conditions: (1) the work must employ an organizing problematic that defines one's data and analytical procedures in a way consistent with its project; (2) the work must be situated, in part, within a public sphere that allows it to become the starting point for the critique and transformation of the conditions of oppressive and inequitable moral and social regulations; and (3) the work must address the limits of its own claims by a consideration of how, as a form of social practice, it too is constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions (1986, p. 197).

Critique is inherent in the analysis, and part of the purpose of the project is to disseminate the stories widely to Athabascan and other communities as one way of

providing role models and accessibility of stories to other students following these women. Of course, my assumption that these stories need to be distributed and doing that, even with the permission of the women, is hegemonic. Mills cautions us, "...we must ask for *whom* we are translating and to what end? Are we sure our 'others' want to be heard in the arenas where it will count for us?" (1990, p. 13). However, my hope is that widely distributing positive studies of Native Americans could, in small part, begin to transform the overly negative images and stereotypes portrayed in the media and other public spheres. Additionally, I hope that the stories will provide encouragement to current and future students to continue in the very difficult quest of a college degree. Third, I hope that university faculty, staff and administrators will begin to change their stereotypic conceptions of Native American/ Alaska Native students. Finally, I hope that my listening to the women's stories will provide them with some encouragement and enthusiasm to continue in their degree programs.

This dissertation is a collection of life histories, or, more specifically, educational histories, which involves a collaborative effort between the researcher and the women interviewed (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1989), or "a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). They are collaborative in that the text is co-produced, with the researcher interpreting the stories of the storytellers. In fact, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett suggests that the researcher always use the first person, such that it is clear that the text is authored by someone other than the storyteller. Denzin adds:

In fact, we create the persons we write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices....And, as readers, we can only have trust or mistrust in the writers that we read, for there is no way to stuff a real-live person between the two covers of a text (1989, p. 82-83).

The study is an attempt to explore Erickson's notion of 'what is happening here?' (1986, p. 121) among Athabascan women attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Despite the plethora of negative studies, Alaska Natives seem to be

graduating from college, yet they seem to be going about it in ways not easily recognizable by the institution or the public. I wanted to find out how the women I studied made sense of their own experiences with educational institutions. My hopes were to portray a more empathic picture of Athabaskan women in college. I was not searching for universal characteristics of the women I interviewed. Rather, my intention was to explore the diversity of their experiences and the ways they talked about them. According to Miranda Wright (interview #3, 6/5/91), there are "preconceived ideas about what the Native people are" that lead people to make erroneous judgments about what Native people are doing. In fact, it has been my experience that most Athabascans are very hesitant to make generalities about others and will almost invariably answer that they cannot speak for the other person, their experiences or the other person's perceptions. Scollon continues:

There is only one generalization I am now willing to make about Athabaskan people and that is that they are extremely uncomfortable with generalizations. After some years of trying and mostly failing to say something in general about them -- first feeling that it was an inadequacy of information and then coming to see that it was an inadequacy of the research paradigm -- we have mostly stopped trying to say anything. In any event what we have learned from Athabaskans was something about ourselves (1988, p. 27).

Of course, qualitative studies presume, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) point out, that "Data in themselves cannot be valid or invalid; what is at issue are the inferences drawn from them" (p. 191). And while I have drawn several inferences from the data, I am continuously plagued by the gnawing sense that I really do not adequately understand Athabaskan culture in order to infer from the stories of Athabaskan women. I am sometimes comforted by Geertz's belief that "It's not necessary to know everything in order to understand something" (1973, p.20), although I, like Scollon (1988), am increasingly less sure of what I know of Athabaskan culture the more time I spend with Athabaskan people. Hammersley and

Atkinson seem to assume that what little we can conclude holds great utilitarian purpose, as well as the transformative purpose of critical ethnography:

Of course, there are in no sense pure descriptions, they are constructions involving selection and interpretation, not mere unedited recordings of sounds and movements. But they involve little attempt to derive any general theoretical lesson. The 'theory' remains implicit and largely unorganized. Of course, such accounts can be of great value. They may provide us with knowledge of ways of life hitherto unknown and thereby shake our assumptions about the parameters of human life or challenge our stereotypes. Herein lies the interest of much anthropological work and of sociological accounts revealing the ways of life of low-status and deviant groups (1983, p. 176).

Peshkin confirms the utility of the researcher's interpretation without providing *carte blanche*:

When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries (1985, p. 280).

Yet, Denzin warns us:

...we must remember that our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those that have shared with us. And, in return, this sharing will allow us to write life documents that speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the dreams, the lives gained, and the lives lost by the people we study. These documents will become testimonies to the ability of the human being to endure, to prevail, and to triumph over the structural forces that threaten at any moment to annihilate all of us. If we foster the illusion that we understand when we do not or that we have found meaningful, coherent lives where none exist, then we engage in a cultural practice that is just as repressive as the most repressive of political regimes (1989, p. 83).

In sum, I find myself continuously struggling with the tension of wanting to tell the stories of Athabascan women on the one hand, while simultaneously seeking understanding of my own history. Furthermore, I am always concerned that my own culturally bound interpretations of life are, however subconsciously, coloring my

understanding of what Athabascan women tell me in their stories. Perhaps this constant gnawing is as much the construct of a good ethnographer as it is that of a good Jew!

Data Collection

My initial data collection plan was to identify and interview all Athabascan women who were juniors or seniors at UAF during the 1990-91 academic year. I limited my study to Athabascan women because I had spent much more time in Athabascan communities, since 1978, than I had in other Alaska Native communities (i.e., Yupik or Inupiaq). I anticipated that my familiarity with many of the communities and families and some of the cultural values, beliefs and appropriate ways of interacting would assist me in both acquiring and interpreting the stories. I chose to focus exclusively on women for two reasons. First, there are many more Athabascan women attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks than there are Athabascan men. Secondly, my experience in Alaska led me to believe that Alaska Native men face vastly different circumstances than the women do. I decided that it would be inappropriate to try to interpret the stories of Athabascan men and women together; their family/community roles and their historical situations are simply too dissimilar.

I decided to interview only juniors and seniors because I anticipated that they had accumulated enough credits to be able to "see the light at the end of the tunnel." That is, I assumed that they were seasoned veterans of higher education, they would be fairly confident that they would graduate, and they could readily reflect back on their experiences.

Negotiating entry is discussed in depth in the qualitative research literature (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Erickson, 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Ives, 1974; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Spradley, 1979). However, since I had already

been living among and working with Athabascans in the Doyon Region (interior) of Alaska for almost thirteen years, I presumed that negotiating entry would be fairly perfunctory.

Although Agar (1980) claims that those who talk to researchers first in ethnography are usually "professional stranger-handlers" or deviants, he was presumably referring to researchers who are unknown by a community. I had assumed that I would know all or most of the Athabascan juniors and seniors attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks, or at least their relatives. Further, I presumed that my history in the region would probably provide a significant shortcut to developing the trust that usually takes a long time between Alaska Natives and "outsiders." I surmised that people would be less reticent to commit themselves to participating in the project and to speaking about their experiences if they knew and trusted me already. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) agree that the development of a friendship/relationship between the researcher and participants is necessary in order for narrative inquiry to work collaboratively.

I had assumed that some place at the University of Alaska Fairbanks I would be able to obtain a comprehensive updated list of the "eligible" participants and their current addresses and/or phone numbers. However, this proved not to be the case. In fact, even if there were such a list, it appeared that many students (and particularly Alaska Natives, according to Kathy Mayo, Director of the Doyon Foundation) move frequently, making it difficult for university offices to keep updated addresses and phone numbers. Even lists with outdated addresses seemed difficult, if not impossible, to acquire. I was most often given a list of potential participants off the top of people's heads. I was never certain whether a list of Athabascan students at UAF did not exist or whether it was simply not made available to me, perhaps for privacy reasons, although that was never stated. Since many of the people I tried to get names and addresses from were Athabascan, I wonder now if their hesitance was a more

culturally appropriate way of holding me off and protecting people's privacy by not presuming to volunteer names of students as potential participants, particularly for those that they did not know intimately.

Armed with bits and pieces of information on about twenty Athabascan students, I prepared a flyer for an organizational meeting and dinner at which I hoped to informally discuss the project with prospective participants. The flyers were posted throughout the UAF main campus, distributed to students personally at Rural Student Services (RSS) and at the Doyon Foundation (the educational arm of the Athabascan profit corporation), and/or mailed to those students for whom I had obtained an address. I had decided to offer an informational dinner for the potential participants, held at Rural Student Services (the on campus "village away from the village"), and offering several traditional foods from the students' villages. It is common knowledge that Native students are more likely to attend a university function if they feel welcomed and comfortable, and sharing food is an accepted way of helping students feel more at ease.

To my surprise and disappointment, only four students showed up. I did discuss the project with each of them, and perhaps they spread the word to others that it looked interesting. Additionally, each of the students gave me a short list of other potential juniors and seniors whom I could contact for interviews. I am still not sure why more people didn't attend the dinner/meeting. In retrospect, it may have conflicted with people's night classes or the very limited time they have to spend with their families. Since many people rely on public transportation, there may have been some hesitancy to take the bus to and from the UAF campus at night. Additionally, because I didn't actually know as many people as I thought I would, there may have been some reluctance to participate in a project with an unknown researcher. The legacy of insensitive researchers who gather information, leave the area and publish unflattering, untrue portraits of Native Americans is strong!

Throughout the fall semester I continued, informally, to gather names of individuals as potential participants. Many of the people I eventually contacted turned out to be either sophomores or freshmen. I had already decided not to interview freshmen and sophomores because of my time limitations and because their more limited college experiences would not allow them to tell stories as complete as those nearing graduation. Other potential interviewees declined to participate (perhaps five or six), could not be located at a current phone number or address, were unable to schedule a mutually agreeable time for the interview, or were out of town for various purposes (e.g., working for a senator in Washington, DC as part of a college internship).

I continued to send letters of introduction to each person identified, but the mailed letters gleaned little response. In fact, later, when I discussed the project with people face-to-face, most stated that they had received the letter. Many had not read it, but most simply stated that they did not respond. I did not know how to interpret this, so I simply accepted it at face value. Perhaps people were simply too busy. Throughout the fall, spring and summer semesters I continued to locate women who qualified for my study; to date, I am sure that I never identified all Athabascan women who were juniors or seniors. At this point, I believe there were at least fifty such women at UAF during the 1990-91 school year. During the seven months of data collection, I located twenty-one women who were both "eligible" and willing to participate.

Having located a group of willing participants was just one in a set of hurdles to overcome. Because, in fact, I did not know many of the students personally, it was difficult to convince them that I was a trustworthy individual. As a rule, Athabascans do not seem to trust outsiders very easily. So I asked a friend and graduate assistant, someone who is an Alaska Native college graduate and well known to many of the students, to attend some of the initial meetings and interviews. I do believe that in

several cases, having an "insider" there not only helped convince the student to participate but also increased the depth of response.

There was great difficulty finding mutually agreeable times and places to meet for the interview. One of the greatest frustrations I experienced during data gathering was the frequency of no-shows and last minute cancellations. It seemed that for every interview I collected, there were two or three cancellations or no-shows. I am not sure what to attribute this high rate to, except that the women were extremely busy, the interview probably was not a top priority of theirs, and there may have been a conscious or subconscious fear of the interview itself, particularly the first one. I think, perhaps, many people were giving me the culturally polite indicator that they did not want to be interviewed without directly stating such. Most people canceled at least once. Several didn't show up at the times or places that I thought we had agreed upon. Fortunately, I had been working in Alaska long enough that I had gotten used to that; although, again, I really don't know how to interpret it. I would usually call people that afternoon or the next day to try to find another time to meet. Perhaps because I believed in the importance of the project so strongly, I simply chose to ignore these subtle messages. I waited for people to tell me literally that they did not want to participate. Sometimes, after trying to schedule someone seven or eight times, or being in a holding pattern for a month or two, I would stop calling and asking the person. I think I must have been quite a pest!

I encouraged each of the women to choose a comfortable interview site and a convenient time. Several of the women were interviewed in my office at UAF; several others preferred to be interviewed in their homes; some were interviewed at their places of employment; some were interviewed in the Rural Student Services offices; one was interviewed in a university cafeteria. My schedule as Interior Campus Director was flexible enough that I could meet when the students wanted to most of the time. I told people that they could bring their children. I figured that family

obligations could be a deterring factor, and I was used to working in a teaching environment with children and other extended family members present.

During the spring semester I began collecting one hour in-depth, interactive interviews. My original data plan was to collect three taped interviews of each of the eligible women. I tried to construct a relatively informal questionnaire that utilized Athabascan interactional style, as I understand it, to try to elicit the most genuine stories from students. It has been my experience, and I have been told directly by Athabascans, that it is considered impolite to ask direct questions. It seems to be considered an invasion of privacy and puts people on the spot, making it less likely that one would get a genuine response. Therefore, I specifically constructed questions that were more indirect and open-ended. Additionally, I tried to go with the flow of the conversation and fit questions in where they seemed appropriate. In Goetz and LeCompte (1984), Denzin suggested, "General questions to be addressed and specific information desired by the researcher are anticipated, but may be addressed during the interview informally in whatever order or context they happen to arise" (p. 119).

By the beginning of August, 1991, I had collected two or three interviews from almost all of the twenty-one women who agreed to participate. I collected only one interview from a couple of women whom I could not locate again after the first interview, although I am quite certain they continued in school that semester. Their reluctance to meet with me a second time could have been due to any of a number of factors: not enough time to fit the interview into an already busy schedule, shyness, discomfort with me and my "nosy" questions, or discomfort with talking about the past as well as the future (which is often considered to be bad luck in Athabascan culture).

With all of the participants, I tried to spend almost a half hour before the formal interview helping them to feel comfortable by talking about family, school in present day terms, daily life in Fairbanks, various events that were coming up, or

political events that were of mutual interest. Many Athabascans seem to prefer and expect an initial socializing time before the formal business takes place. I tried to balance this cultural style with people's busy lives and the fact that they might have to hurry off to a class or might have small children or other family matters waiting for them after the interview. Of course, establishing co-membership and comfort through informal conversation is not limited to Athabascans.

The dangers of neglecting the effects of time are particularly great where reliance is placed upon a single data source, especially interviews or documents. Where interviews are used alone it is wise to give over some interview space to casual conversation about current events in the interviewee's life. Indeed, this may be a useful way of opening the interview to build rapport (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 194).

Developing rapport is widely discussed in the qualitative literature (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Spradley, 1979). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) state that when the interviewer does not know the interviewee, time is needed to develop rapport. When the interviewer and interviewee know each other well, you can get right into the business (p. 135). However, I found the opposite to be true. When I did not know the interviewee, little time was taken for small talk as the person seemed nervous and anxious to get on with the business and get it over with. My experience in Athabaskan culture leads me to believe that in most cases, when you know someone well it is polite to talk for a rather lengthy period of time about other things before you ever address the business at hand. I tried to respect this, even after the first interview with "strangers." Sometimes, particularly if I was interviewing at a person's work site, the interviewee would break the informal talk off by saying something about getting the interview going because they only had a limited time. I believe that this was out of politeness and respect for my need to get the project done, rather than the preferred interactional style. Perhaps because the conversation usually took place in an institutional setting the rules for behavior changed. In people's

homes, there was most often fish or other food present. This seemed to create a less formal atmosphere.

As per Ives (1974, p. 40), people seemed more relaxed talking to me when they knew I had already interviewed people familiar to them. Also, many of the interviewees mentioned that they enjoyed telling someone their stories; it gave them encouragement. Several people mentioned that this was the first time anyone had asked them about their experiences (other than their advisor at RSS). Everyone agreed that it would be valuable to print short versions of each of the stories for students coming after them, as a form of encouragement and role modeling.

During many of the interviews, the interviewee's children were present. This became a challenge for me to focus intently on the interview. However, I believe that there was something culturally significant occurring that I do not have a thorough understanding of. Children are very often present with Indian women, except, perhaps, in class (although even there I have seen small children). Their playing did not appear to distract the adult, even if it became quite noisy (to me). I believe this speaks to both the women's high level of concentration and their abilities to participate in multiple tasks simultaneously.

Schatzman and Strauss (1973, pp. 83-87) discussed five factors that significantly affect the results of an interview: expected duration of each interview, number of interviews, setting, identities of individuals involved and their relationships, interpersonal styles and the way the interview is structured. I took each of these factors into account as I constructed my interviews.

Once the formal part of the interview commenced, I discussed the purpose of the dissertation, the process, and the timeline. As per Spradley (1979), I had to experiment with several versions of the explanation of the project, what a dissertation entailed, etc., until I came upon one that was short and understandable to the participants. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form and fill out a

demographic data sheet. Further, I obtained an academic transcript for each person interviewed.

During the interviews I put aside the formal questions to try to put students more at ease and to create an interactive process (Denzin, 1978; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, Ives, 1974). Patton (1990, pp. 280-290) suggests three types of interviews: informal conversational, general interview guide approach, and standardized open-ended interview. But mine was part of each of these, as Patton, himself, recognizes the utility thereof (p. 287). I had structured questions in advance, taking into consideration the actual wording (standardized); I used them just as a guide and did not take them in any particular order (general interview guide), but I also allowed the conversation to stray from the course considerably, asking new questions of participants as it seemed appropriate according to the situation (informal conversation).

The strength of the informal conversational approach is that it allows the interviewer/evaluator to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be individualized to establish in-depth communication with the person being interviewed and to make use of the immediate surroundings and situation to increase the concreteness and immediacy of the interview questions and responses (Patton, 1990, p. 282).

The latter I did especially with people I knew well or with whom I could establish quick co-membership and commraderery.

I tried to ask truly open-ended questions (Ives, 1974; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1990). As I mentioned earlier, I was hesitant to ask "why" questions because it had been my experience with Athabascan students that I generally did not get the kind of response I was hoping for. So I attempted to construct "questions in language that is meaningful and clear to the respondents" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 127). With the exceptions of Scollon (1988) and Patton (1990), none of the research I have read focuses on the phrasing of questions in a culturally appropriate

manner. However, as hard as I tried to construct questions that did not ask pointedly, during the actual interviews I lapsed into my own ethnocentric interactional style, asking direct questions; to my surprise, students answered them. For example, I asked the question, "How do you think the presence of alcohol in your family influenced the kind of person you are today?" While I assumed people would consider that an invasion of privacy, they answered the questions in some detail. Only occasionally did someone ask me not to use what she had said in the printed dissertation.

After I had interviewed five or six women, I began to notice some patterns in what they were saying. For example, several people mentioned that they had spent a lot of time reading as children. So I added a question about that in the subsequent interviews. This was similar to Patton's notion of "using illustrative examples in questions" (1990, pp. 317-318). It seemed to produce good results. I also asked some role playing and simulation questions (Patton, 1990, pp. 319-320) during the third interview, when I asked people how counselors could help Native students or what they would tell young people coming in to the university.

Taking notes during the interviews (Ives, 1974; Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1979) was something I debated over and over, but I finally decided against it because it seemed to make people nervous and was generally associated with outside, white researchers. I assumed that my not taking notes would allow people to feel more comfortable and less "invaded," even though I knew I was losing valuable data. Of course, I will never know if this was the case.

There seemed to be great reluctance by the women I interviewed to compare their own experiences to others, regardless of the individual circumstances, particularly if I asked a direct question. For example, I asked the question: "In what ways is your experience alike or different from others who have not persisted in higher education." The response I typically received was, "I don't know. I couldn't speak for anyone else." Fortunately, this kind of response signaled a "bell" inside me

that reminded me that Athabascans usually do not presume to speak for another, including a description of another person's experience (Scollon, 1988). However, I was able to rephrase questions that would not force such presumptions. For example, I stated: "Other people mentioned that their parents did not take them out of school to go to spring camp. Was this true for you?" This strategy proved much more effective.

Finally, I was able to interview the directors (who are Athabascan) from two agencies that provide support services to university students from the Doyon region: Rural Student Services, a comprehensive support system for Native students on the UAF main campus; and the Doyon Foundation, the educational foundation of the Native corporation in which the students are shareholders. I also interviewed one of the counselors from Rural Student Services who has been working with Athabascan students for well over a decade at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Each interview was tape recorded, with permission from the participant, and lasted about an hour. As Ives (1974) mentions, this is approximately the length of time both the interviewer and the participant can sustain. Because many of the interviews were done during people's lunch breaks from work, in the presence of their children, or between classes, the length of time seemed perfect. About three quarters of the interviews have been transcribed. For the rest, I have written a couple of pages of notes describing the interviews. I sent the six stories presented in the dissertation to the women for their edification. I plan to send the transcripts and my versions of their stories to all of the women, for their own use as well as for their comments. Eventually, I hope to have a book published for distribution to Alaska Native villages, among other places.

Data Analysis

While I was collecting data I began creating a mental construction of some of the similarities and differences among the participants. Obviously the original interview questions were based on a set of assumptions about what I was likely to find. However, as I listened to the participants discuss their lives, new categories emerged. As stated earlier, I used the new information to generate new questions and, in the process, my mental construct was continuously in a state of change.

I was able to hire a couple of individuals to transcribe the majority of the tapes. About three quarters of the interviews have been completely transcribed (Ives, 1974). For the rest, I constructed a rough transcription or set of notes about the interviews. From the transcriptions and the demographic data sheet each participant filled out, I was able to construct a chart of categories on which to code some of the data. From the chart I grouped the information to determine similarities and differences among the participants. The themes that I used on the chart were based, in part, on questions from the interviews, in part on the categories that had emerged from positivistic studies like Tinto's Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (1987), and in part on my own emergent themes that arose during the interviews.

From the group of twenty-one women's educational histories, I chose six stories that seemed the most compelling. The main reasons I selected these particular stories are:

- The stories seemed to be the most comprehensive individually. They were rich in detail and had an emotional impact that came through forcefully.
- The women's lives, as described, seemed to be among the most challenging. That is, the hardships the women faced in pursuit of their education contributed significantly to the power of the stories.

- There is a wide range of school experiences and backgrounds among the women, providing evidence that the traditional criteria of dropouts and persisters don't necessarily fit.
- The six women were in several different majors at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

I began taking long walks and listening to one or two interviews of the same person at a time. I would listen for consistent themes, trying to cross-reference the different women's stories. The extended time outside of my house seemed to help me focus on the salience of each story. Upon return home I would make notes about what parts of each story I wanted to tell. Eventually, each story was written up separately, and I compared and contrasted the educational histories to each other.

In the process of pursuing categories in which people's experiences might be similar or dissimilar, I utilized Erickson's (1986) notion of discrepant case analysis. That is, I searched for disconfirming evidence. This actually led me to the conclusion that, while there are some similarities among the stories, the most important point is that each person's educational history is strikingly dissimilar from the rest.

While several qualitative authors speak of the advantages of triangulation of data (Denzin, 1978; Erickson, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), I was unable to do this with the data I had collected. I tried to obtain records from various sources (i.e., several University of Alaska Fairbanks programs that serve Alaska Native students, the UAF Office of Institutional Research, the College of Rural Alaska, and both the profit and non profit corporations of the Athabascan people), but there is little or no qualitative data available. Furthermore, the quantitative data from UAF does not distinguish Athabascan women from other Alaska Natives, making it difficult to utilize the data effectively. Perhaps if I had collected qualitative data other than just the interviews, I would have been in a better position to triangulate.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the data analysis was that I continuously found myself trying to make cause and effect inferences from the

interviews. I had collected qualitative data, and intellectually I knew that the cause and effect relationships I was searching for were misleading and inaccurate. Yet, I had to keep reminding myself of this.

Limitations of the Methodology

There are several limitations of the qualitative methodology used for this study. First, and perhaps most importantly, is the interpretation of meaning. As Neumann (1992) points out, we can only understand another's intended meaning through our own experiences. She questions: "How much of the other's experience can we know? How far can the empathic imagination stretch?" (Neumann, 1992, p. 5). Denzin concurs that there is no ultimate truth, and meaning itself is never static:

Derrida (1972) has contributed to the understanding that there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification. And language, in both its written and spoken forms, is always inherently unstable, in flux, and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning (1989, p. 14).

As stated earlier, my experiences helped shape the focus of my work. However, even after thirteen years, my limited understanding of Athabaskan culture and communication style, as well as the limited time I knew each woman I interviewed, undoubtedly affected my ability to tell her story. Scollon (1988) agrees, stating that after twenty years of work with Athabascans in Canada and Alaska, he now knows how little he actually understands!

And so after two decades of trying to say something in general about people and failing, we have come to see that a generalization about a person is really a failure to come to grips with a much simpler level of reality, my relationship with the person about whom I am trying to make a generalization (p. 28).

Neumann pushes the point one step further, in claiming that we continuously struggle to understand ourselves as we work to understand others:

And it means that I try to learn in being with others -- in reaching to know what they are, what they feel, what they know -- even though I realize that, ultimately, I cannot assume their minds. I wouldn't want to for to assume the mind of the other is to eliminate the distinction between self and other, and thereby, to destroy one or the other or both. I have come to believe that to have anything of the life of the other requires that I have my self first, my difference, the other's difference, but that despite the other's difference -- despite the veils of time and space and self -- that I strive to know the difference. That is what I mean by empathic imagination -- that the self that tries to reach the other is as integral to knowing as the other to be known (Neumann, 1992, p. 11).

Of course, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) point out, the researcher, particularly in ethnographic research, has a direct influence on the interview itself, particularly because of the types of questions that are asked and the way in which they are asked. In interviews, the very structure of the interaction forces participants to be aware of the ethnographer as audience. Their conceptions of the nature and purposes of social research, and of the particular research project, may, therefore, act as a strong influence on what they say (p. 188). At this point, I am unsure if my relative familiarity with Athabascan interactional style helped to mitigate my effect, although I am certain that there was an effect. According to Patton (1990):

Interviews are interventions. They affect people. A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee. The process of being taken through a directed, reflective process affects the persons being interviewed and leaves them knowing things about themselves that they didn't know -- or at least were not aware of -- before the interview. Two hours or more of thoughtfully reflecting on an experience, a program, or one's life can be change-inducing. Yet, the purpose of a research interview is first and foremost to gather data, not change people (p. 353-354).

I hope that the effect has, at least in part, been a positive one -- to provide people with encouragement to keep going. In fact, several students that I interviewed stated that directly. However, I am continuously haunted by Simon and Dippo's notion of cultural hegemony:

We view all modes of knowing and all particular knowledge forms as ideological, hence the issue is not whether one is 'biased'; but rather, whose interests are served by one's work (1986, p. 196).

My original intention was to interview all Athabascan junior and senior women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1991. I have to wonder what the constraints are in drawing generalizations about wider populations when I have interviewed only about half of the Athabascan women. In fact, although I could not locate all of the women, I wonder, as I mentioned earlier, if some of the others selected out because they did not trust my ability or sincerity to tell their stories in a positive light.

This study is problematic for many reasons. The kinds of questions I did and did not ask, my inability to stick with an interview style that was more Athabascan, as well as my regulation of the timing of the interview clearly directed the focus of the women's stories. Secondly, hanging the stories on a theoretical perspective because of the imposed academic structure of a dissertation affected the final presentation of the stories. Thirdly, I did not collect critiques of the stories (after I wrote them) by the women interviewed, which may have provided more authentic cultural interpretations and decreased the possibility of my own ethnocentric interpretations of their stories.

Finally, I am frustrated by limits of my time, resources and ability to tell the whole set of stories I collected, that is, the full set of twenty-one stories told to me and all of the implications thereof. Yet, I am comforted by Neumann's father's statement about his ability to tell what happened during the Holocaust, "There is not enough ink in the world...to write what it was there" (1992, p. 5). Ultimately, I know this is true of all life histories.

Even so, I have been profoundly moved by these stories, during the actual data collection as well as every time I have listened to or read them. I am quite convinced that despite the challenges described above the stories are well worth

sharing. I only hope that the six women whose lives are described in the next section will see the value in sharing their stories widely, even if I did not completely capture their realities.

Chapter 4

THE FIGHT WAS WON, AND BY A WOMAN¹

Introduction

From the earliest days of my work in Alaska I noticed something strikingly different about the students. In the rural, cross-cultural teacher education program through the University of Alaska Fairbanks, typical students in the program were women, between 25 and 45 years old, with two or more children. Many of the college students had been aides or bilingual teachers in the schools for years, or they held other jobs such as village health aide; all were involved with seasonal subsistence practices; many held political offices in their villages; some had substantial church obligations; all were part of an extended family network with which the students spent a substantial amount of time in various roles. In short, the time students had available for study was limited, and that time could neither be regulated by a rigid schedule, nor even predicted. When there was work to be done, the women were needed. When there were medical or other emergencies, the women responded quickly and selflessly. When there was a village celebration or observance, or if the village or a neighboring village was hosting a political or cultural event, the students were usually intimately involved.

In the beginning, I did not understand what was going on. I frankly found it hard to accept their priorities. I questioned what importance they placed on college degrees they were pursuing. And at that time it never occurred to me, despite the focus of my Master's degree on cross-cultural education and communication, that the students might think differently about their college degrees, their careers, their futures, than I thought about mine.

¹ Taken from the last line of the story "A Woman's Fight" by Pretty Shield, found in Allen (1989).

Simultaneously, I began noticing the way many people on the main university campus, in the professional literature, and in the popular media referred to Alaska Natives. The focus always seemed to be on the negative: the inordinately high drop-out rate among both high school and college students, the low standardized test scores of Alaska Native youth, the disproportionately high rate of alcoholism and suicide. In short, explanations generally focused on blaming the victims. And while I did not purport to understand the manner of prioritizing the multiple responsibilities my students had, I almost invariably found them to be articulate, skilled, and committed to providing quality education for children in the villages. They had a great deal to say, when meaningfully engaged, and they thought long and hard about the problems and solutions in schools that influenced their children. In fact, while their attendance at the university did not look like that which the university typically expects, the students' engagement in courses and their determination to persist in college, despite their circumstances, seemed to surpass that of students I have encountered elsewhere, both before and since.

At the same time, there seemed to be a "lore" of what the typical "successful" Alaska Native college student looked like. Those most likely to graduate from college: were purported to have gone to Indian boarding schools (such as Mount Edgecumbe or Chemawa), as opposed to regional or local high schools; came from functional families who imparted traditional Native values, as well as supporting western education; had good study skills, reading skills and standard English skills; and were goal oriented.

Most of the studies of student persistence in college have been quantitative. These have focused principally on the characteristics of dropouts. A few more recent studies of Native Americans (Lin, 1990; Bowker, 1992) have involved questionnaires given to those who persisted in college. Even the latter have reduced the experiences of students to lists of achievement characteristics. Reading the literature and participating in conversations at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, one gets the sense that there is a relatively clear dichotomy between those who are considered to be successful, i.e., who acquire college

degrees, and those who are considered to be failures -- who leave college and do not complete degrees. My experiences with Alaska Native students told me that the dichotomy was false on several grounds, and my study provides evidence of this.

According to Bowker (1992), in a study of almost one thousand American Indian female high school and college students, dropouts and graduates, it is impossible to lump all or even most of the women into a mold that shows the characteristics of those who persist and those who do not. She claims that the range of characteristics that the "persisters" possess are too diverse to provide a single profile. For example, students come from all different income levels. Some are from alcoholic, dysfunctional families; others come from homes where social drinking was permitted; still others come from homes where drinking is strictly prohibited. Many of the women are from one parent families, but some are from two parent families; many have lived all or part of their childhood with relatives. Some grew up in foster homes, sometimes multiple foster homes. Some women describe their parents as being supportive of education; others claim that there was no verbal support of education. And the list of differences among the women goes on.

The Athabascan women I interviewed also do not fit a single profile. Most are first generation college students, but not all of them are. Some are the first to graduate from their villages. Most described themselves as strong students in school as children; others did not. Almost all of them have been avid readers but for different reasons and at different periods in their lives. Some remember strong, memorable supporters; others remember few, if any. For some, traditional seasonal subsistence practices played a major role in their youth, perhaps they still do today; others had little or no subsistence responsibilities or experiences at home. Some practice traditional Native cultural traditions and values; others do not describe their families as such; still others have learned these from people outside of their immediate families. For almost all of the students religion has played a major role in their lives; for some it has not. Many of the students were goal

oriented from early in life; others developed goals later, sometimes out of tragedy or necessity. Most students went to college right after high school. A few persisted continuously, without ever leaving, but they are clearly in the minority. Some of the women didn't start college or even think about it until much later in life. Some started out but left after a brief time, returning many years later. Most made repeated, regular attempts over a decade or two. Each of the women had a different set of reasons for pursuing a college education; often the reasons changed during the college years or in the intervening years. In short, the women I interviewed, like the American Indian women Bowker interviewed in the continental United States, managed to persist through college despite the fact that they possess many characteristics of those who do not. Given the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among Athabascan and other Native American women in college, it is important to elicit their stories. Each has a unique story to tell about her school life, her ambitions, motivations and struggles, exemplifying the range of both similarities and differences.

Out of the twenty-one women I interviewed, I have chosen six stories for my dissertation. I have commenced with the story of a woman who, perhaps, most neatly fits the profile of someone who would be likely to persist through college. Although as you will see, it was not an easy or straight course for her. I used functionality of family as a way of ordering the women's stories, starting with someone who came from a two parent family, replete with strong Athabascan traditions and values and relatively free from the effects of alcoholism. I chose functionality of family (or lack thereof) because it seems to be the characteristic that is most used in reference to Alaska Natives, and most people presume that their "lack of success" is due to alcoholism and dysfunctional family life. Clearly that is not the case with my study (or with Bowker's). I am not trying to draw any more conclusions about alcoholism and its relationship to student persistence than I am drawing conclusions about any of the other characteristics I describe. Rather, I have simply chosen it as the dimension on which to order the stories. The main point is, as I

stated above, that the women came from a diversity of experiences that are not easily categorized, quantified, or even sequenced in order of their importance.

Miranda Wright

On the surface, it would appear as if Miranda possessed all or most of the characteristics "needed" for successful completion of a college education. Miranda grew up in the village of Nulato, an Athabascan village on the Yukon River of about 350 people. Life in her family revolved around seasonal, traditional subsistence practices. However, her father was employed as a construction worker. Her mother has often been described as the kindest person in the village; yet, there were strict rules that all of the Hildebrand (Miranda's family name) children were expected to follow regarding school, subsistence and other work for the family, church and social activities. The family could easily be described as fully functional. That is, the family consisted of a two parent home, where there were clear expectations for behavior, clear values taught, and an absence of alcoholism among the parents, etc. Miranda described her parents in this way:

(My mother) was very sure to give her family shelter and all the things she lacked as a child. My father also was very determined. They always said it was the old Indian way of survival, that you had to be strong, and you can't be lazy. You have to have a lot of self-determination.

Miranda was an excellent student; she attended the Catholic elementary school in Nulato. Since there were no local village high schools in the early 1960's, students in Nulato had to attend boarding schools either elsewhere in Alaska or outside of the state. Miranda attended and graduated from Mount Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska, as an honor roll student and editor of the yearbook. Mount Edgecumbe is well known throughout the state for setting high standards for Alaska Native students and maintaining them. She described herself as always having been a good student, in fact, feeling almost over prepared at Edgecumbe. Additionally, Miranda maintained an active interest in

reading as a child because of a long standing interest in learning about other places; however, she was careful to mention that subsistence and other work required by the family took precedence over reading.

Her family was always very supportive of education, believing that it would serve the children well, as the subsistence economy (i.e., living off the land) in the villages changed to a monetary economy. Miranda stated:

I think they (her parents) were caught right in that transitional stage...Both of them...remember the difficult times they had in school. It was really very hard, and then just seeing the change that was occurring on the land and among the people, they felt that it was very important to learn the western way...to get an education.

Miranda was goal oriented from as early as elementary school. She repeatedly stated that she always knew she was going to go to college and that she would finish someday.

When I was in elementary school I remember that one of the teachers asked about students that were interested in going to college. I was one of those students that was always interested, and...I had a real interest in geography and I felt that going to college would help me become very worldly and go out and see the world. And I don't know why, that was such a young age...I remember that my mother used to tell me a lot of stories...I was sick and had to spend a lot of time in the house as a young child, and mom would always tell stories...I was always asking questions and she used to tell me about different places.

She maintained her interest in geography, but in high school Miranda decided she would rather study business. However, in 1964 Alaska Natives, and particularly women, were actively discouraged from attending college as business majors.

I was aware that there was a world outside of Nulato and I was always very curious about this and college sort of seemed like one way of getting out of the village and going on. And then in high school, I mean it was, it was obvious that...you had to go on to college. And trying to get employment during high school was, you know, nearly impossible. And then my decision of what to do was really hard...I was always interested in business. I mean, not because I was a Native woman, but I was always interested in business. But being a Native woman made it difficult. For one thing, maybe women just were not in business; Native people weren't in business....back then in the '60's. And all of my advisors in high school said, 'Oh, you're so smart, Miranda. You really should go into teaching.

Your people could really use a teacher.' Yes, but I don't want to teach. So they said, 'Well, take a couple years and go onto college and then make your decision.'

While she did begin college right after high school, Miranda described the difficulties she faced during a time when there were very few Native students attending universities, and there were no support services available as there are today.

So my freshman year I went to the University of Kansas. One of my advisors in high school was from Lawrence. And I lived on the Haskell Institute campus on a working scholarship. I was a housekeeper for my room and board and then rode the bus up to KU campus. And it was really strange. I mean like there was no support, there was, there was no networking with Native students who were in college. And plus being homesick and my first time any great distance from home. And you couldn't just call home; there were no telephones or anything like this. And then having no money. It was just, it was really, really difficult. And I was probably an average, C student. And a lot of it was just because I was very homesick and half of the time I didn't know what I was doing. The funding was virtually nonexistent...So after my freshman year, I figured well, 'I'm not going to make it out here, it's just a real struggle. I'm too homesick, life is too different. And though I want to be worldly, I don't want to be cramped into a place where I'm so financially strapped I feel like I'm suffocating. So I came back to Alaska for my sophomore year and there again it was a big struggle. And I remember Mr. Eichman with BIA so well. I literally had to get on my knees and cry in order to get funding. I was so humiliated.

Once she returned to Alaska, the dilemma of gender expectations versus her real interest reappeared. And even though she persisted for awhile, the difficulties eventually got in her way, and Miranda stopped attending college and chose an alternate route.

There was still this big thing of 'You've got to be a teacher.' And I said, 'No, I don't want to be a teacher; I want to go into business.' 'Well you're a woman, you'll never make it in business.' Then 'Be a secretary.' 'I don't want to be a secretary.' And there was never a support network where you could go to people and, you know, talk about these different things. It was, 'This is what you are going to be because you are a Native woman.' And after my sophomore year at the university I did very poorly. I mean life was just, it was hell. Emotionally, I was very upset, and like there was no one to turn to. So I went to a business college in Anchorage the summer after my sophomore year. I went to Alaska Business College and got an Executive Secretary Certificate. Everybody was very happy. I went to work and I figured, OK, this was it. So I went to Juneau...and I went to work for Governor Hickel...And it was nice, I mean I was working with Native people you know...and I enjoyed it.

Shortly thereafter, Miranda met Gareth Wright, and they married a short time later. Gareth was from Nenana. He was a well known dog musher in Alaska, and he had started his own business.

Life was hard, financially...You know, paying rent and I had a child. It was just, it was so difficult. So I moved back to Fairbanks and was trying to decide what I was going to do. I just was really not making it. And it was just a big struggle. And being a secretary, I knew I'd never, I'd never be able to survive. The money just wasn't there. And I was unhappy with that. That wasn't what I wanted. I think the thing that attracted me to Gareth so much was that he was a Native person who didn't take no for an answer. If he wanted to do something, he went out and found a way to do it. And he was a business person who had been up and down and had just gone through a big crash; he went bankrupt. He was just starting out again, just starting up in business. And five weeks from the day we met we were married, and that was like twenty-four years ago. But I mean all of sudden, it was 'Hey, Native people can be in business...' You know, somebody finally had the same convictions that I had...We incorporated and kept on going. And through the years, we ran our own business, and I'd take a few courses here and there, nothing real serious I just, I was real burned out with college. To me, it was just, ah, it was an avenue for white people, not for Native people. It just, there were too many doors that were slammed in your face.

Gareth and Miranda ran a family business for many years. After their daughter was grown, Miranda decided to return to school.

Gareth and I did go into business. By our own standards, at least, we were very successful. To me that was another goal; it was another challenge. This is something that I always wanted to be or to do. Yet there is always that place in the back of my mind where (I knew) I really could be a lot better in business if I had more education. We had our limits and we knew what our limits were. We stayed within those boundaries and, you know, kept it a small mom and pop type of business, and we were good at it. So when he decided he wanted to retire, I decided I was too young to just become a couch potato and found it a good opportunity for me to return to school. Plus, I wanted to be the role model for my daughter and of course now I have grandchildren...I decided well, I think I will go back. I had enough confidence in myself, and things had changed a lot. Native people can make it through college...Times have changed a lot, and when I went back to school, I mean, it was a real positive time.

She started back at Tanana Valley Community College, along with her daughter, Shannon. Miranda completed an Associate of Applied Sciences in both Accounting and

Business in 1988; Shannon completed an Associate in Applied Sciences in Accounting shortly after. But Miranda still had not lived out her original goal of acquiring a four year degree in business. She decided to return to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. But, once again, her direction changed.

(I decided) to go back to college because it's now a personal challenge. So I decided I want to get my bachelor's degree in International Business. And again, I think because of my (early) interest in geography, you know, and traveling...but in the background I've always had this interest in other people, you know cultural. Most of the people in the villages are walking history books. They could tell you who is related to who and where they lived twenty years ago or four hundred miles away. It's just, it's just part of them. So anyway, I'm out studying for an exam one day; I always study down in the Polar Regions level of the library. I needed a break, so I went over and pulled a couple of books off the shelf on Alaska and whatever, and started reading. Before I realized it, two hours had gone by. And I thought, 'My God, what am I doing? I'm supposed to be just taking a break, and studying for an exam and I'm so wrapped up in this stuff.' So I got to thinking. Why am I taking International Business at my age? At this stage in my life. I mean, we've had a successful business, and I'm going back to college as a personal challenge. Why not do something that is just fun and that I'm interested in? At my age I'm not going to be traipsing off to Tokyo, or New York, or London with international business.

By that point in time, services for Native students attending the University of Alaska Fairbanks had increased and improved dramatically. Miranda knew that the counselors at Rural Student Services (RSS) would assist her with whatever she needed.

So I started thinking about it and I went to our wonderful Sue McHenry in RSS, and I talked with her about my ideas. I wanted to go into anthropology or do something with Native culture. We bantered it around, and she said, 'Well, with the sparkle in your eyes, I can't tell you no.' She said, 'If you were nineteen years old I would probably would, because there isn't much money in that field.' But she said, 'If this is what you want, do it!' So she gave me names of people on campus that I should contact, which to me was just wonderful because in the sixties, there wasn't any of that. You know, it was, 'No you can't do this and that and that.' So I went and talked to a few other people on campus. It's just been positive and uphill ever since. It's been a year now since I've switched into Anthropology, and I love it! I'm a 4.0 student, and it's totally different. There is that network of people there that are so willing to help you, and maybe it's not only with Native students. That's just the angle that I've seen. Maybe the whole attitude of universities has changed. You know, where there is more help available for

people, and there's more networking through departments...and things for women have definitely opened up.

Miranda relinquished her intention to acquire a degree in business, largely because she had already achieved the goal of owning a successful business with Gareth. But rather than dropping out of college, she began to pursue another long term interest of hers: preserving the cultural heritage of Alaska Natives through the collection of stories.

It appears as if Miranda originally went to college for personal reasons. She had always had a thirst for knowledge, particularly about different people and places. While she did not encounter much in the way of support networks for Native students, she was not the first Athabascan woman from the village of Nulato to attend college and graduate. In fact, at least two of her sisters preceded her. She was goal oriented, wanting to enter the field of business; yet even when her goal shifted, she continued. But when she returned to college after many years of working in business with her husband, her purpose for attending school changed. Yes, she wanted to complete the degree as she had originally intended. However, she also wanted to be a role model for her daughter and grandchildren; she wanted to set an example for her people. She wanted to give something back to the culture that had provided such a strong foundation for her.

After a year or so in that (Business degree program) is when I decided that at this stage of my life I really don't need any more business. This is not what I want to do now. I would rather do something else. And my other desire or interest has always lied in the culture of our people and the heritage. So I looked at it and wondered how could I do something with it. It's not like I need to go out and get a degree to get a job. That wasn't my situation. So I decided to go into the sociocultural anthropology area, and I just love it! It's a natural. I mean it's something that is just ingrained in us! You know, I was fortunate enough to have a culture which a lot of people haven't had. To be able to look at it on a grand scale and see all the other situations throughout the world that you're studying...I think this is one area that is really moving me right now, to continue on toward my master's, which I've decided to do just this past three or four months. Our people never really had a voice in the academic world. We have it in education and different things, but as far as their culture and someone being able to speak for them (the elders), all of those perceptions that they have, have never really been recorded. That's where I feel I could contribute a lot for our people. I can remember growing up in that real paradox of being a Native and being proud of it, and then being a Native and being

ashamed of it. To see my parents go through it, and my grandmother also go through it, I feel that by creating a more positive image of our people and writing about the positive aspects of their culture, that it can help a lot of the young people with the image that they have of themselves also. That's been my biggest motivator.

In May, 1992 Miranda Wright was awarded the Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She is currently working on a Master's in Anthropology at UAF. One might say she finally achieved her goal of attaining a four year college degree, but in actuality her goals changed several times during almost two decades of attending universities. She realized many goals along the way, and not all of them were met through college.

While many university faculty and personnel might view Miranda as an ideal type of student and highly likely to succeed, she did not pursue a college degree in a linear fashion. Rather, she stopped at various points to pursue other ventures, sometimes because of the lack of support. Indeed, there have been many Athabascan women like Miranda who have pursued university degrees despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. One of them is Vera Weiser.

Vera, like Miranda, grew up in an intact family with a strong subsistence orientation; although Miranda was expected to participate in the subsistence work, Vera was not. Unfortunately, Vera had to cope with the presence of alcohol in her family when she was young; Miranda did not.

Vera Weiser

Vera grew up in Old Minto, a village of about 165 Athabascan people on the Tanana River. For the first eight or nine years of her life she lived with her grandmother, a common practice among Alaska Native people. When she was "old enough to do dishes" she moved back home with her mom, dad and eight brothers and sisters. In her early years her parents used to drink quite heavily, and this had a profound effect on her.

I always wanted to do well. And growing up and going away to school I thought to myself, because I saw a lot of drinking and the effects that it had on people in the village and how many people were dying because of that. I don't want to end up like that. I don't want to end up being a single parent and having to support a child and myself as well. I want to do something that would not let me be in that position that most of my relatives are in. So I think I excelled (in school).

Similar to Miranda's family, life in the Silas family revolved around seasonal subsistence activities, especially during Vera's early years. Although as the oldest girl with three older brothers, she was not expected to participate in most of the subsistence work. This left her with a lot of time, which she filled by reading.

I remember that I read a lot. I did more reading than the kids do now-a-days, and I think that it's because of the TV. We didn't have TV back then. We didn't have electricity, or if we did, it was just a bare bulb in a one room. And I remember reading, getting my book and holding it against the light and reading and mom would always say, 'You'll ruin your eyes.' And people would come and say, 'She shouldn't be reading like that,' but I would always be reading, and a lot of us read...My friend Irene, she's two years older than I am. And she liked to read, too, and she would always give me books to read and I would always read it...I always thought she knew the best books to read...And I practically read all the books there (at the school library in Minto).

Vera, like Miranda, described herself as a good student and quite competitive, particularly in mathematics. She was valedictorian of the 8th grade class in Minto and then went on to Mount Edgecumbe where she graduated from high school, on the honor roll.

Although it was rarely directly stated as such, Vera believes that her family and other community members in Minto were supportive of education. She recalled that her father never talked about education, although he always made sure that all of the Silas children attended school regularly. Vera described her mother's response to her interest in education:

Being the oldest girl, I didn't have that much to do. I didn't really need to be there (doing subsistence work for the family). So during my high school summers I went to the Upward Bound program (at the University of Alaska Fairbanks). And mom didn't object. In fact, she wanted me to attend them just so that I could, you know get a, further my head knowledge and I, and being other than in the village. So it wasn't like I needed to be home, that she needed me at home.

Other people in the village supported her quest for education as well over the years, but Vera stated that all of this was done indirectly. In other words, if she wanted to pursue an education, people supported her doing that. If she chose to do something else, she would have been supported in that choice as well. This seems markedly different from the way in which many middle class white children are encouraged or supported in going to college. For most, I suspect the encouragement would be more directly stated by parents.

I remember my first year in high school, my Uncle Richard told me, 'It's good that you're going to college. Try to stick it out, and don't be a quitter.' But of course I didn't stick it out, and I didn't go back. And I would say, I guess that he would be the motivator, somebody that I respected and pay attention to him when he talk...And I think Auntie Evelyn Alexander. She's sort of like the matriarch of Minto now, and what she say, you pay attention. And she encouraged, I would say her, too. But she was sort of like, she oversaw the village. She was the midwife there, so she felt like she could, she had a right to say things to you and to look out for you and encourage you.

Vera knew from the time she was in elementary school that she wanted to be a teacher, and while she was at Mount Edgecumbe she prepared for college entrance. She attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks the fall after high school graduation, but she not complete her first year.

When I did go to college I didn't do well my first year. I was asked to leave because I wasn't doing well. I guess that's one of the drawbacks of Edgecumbe is that they don't totally prepare for it. Because there was, like at BIA they take care of you, they do everything for you practically. They baby you. They tell you when to go to bed, when to get up, when to study, when to go to school, when to eat, and it's not like, you know, you're on your own. When I got to college it was like, wow, all this freedom. I can do anything I want, and I did. It didn't help me. But people encouraged me. There were others that went before me and didn't make it. I always thought, 'Well, I'm going to try my best.' But my best at that time wasn't enough. So I dropped out.

The paucity of Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the lack of support for village students coming into the city contributed to the difficulty that Vera

and others like her faced in the late sixties and seventies. Additionally, the racism and cross-cultural communication was often overwhelming.

Just coming from a small village that did not have a lot of contact with non-Natives, I guess with a mentality like, that, not mentality, but teachers coming in and they know, they say they know more than people that are in Minto because they got an education. People kind of looked to non-Natives as being smarter. So it was always like deferring to them, and that was a mentality that I had to overcome. That they weren't better than me. That I can do it. I can be as smart and even smarter than people that come into the village and, say, teachers...there was no support for Natives.

Although she did well at college the first semester, Vera did poorly in the spring. She went on peace marches and got involved in political activities. She was asked to leave the university, due to her lack of attendance and her grades. But in the fall she redirected her energy. Vera's persistence seems like Miranda's here, in the sense that they both readily chose different directions for themselves (either work or school or additional training), continuously exploring new options and opportunities. Additionally, both women sought postsecondary experiences outside of Alaska, although Vera attended a vocational program specifically for Alaska Natives and American Indians, and Miranda attended a university that had few Natives in attendance.

That next fall, though, I thought, 'I really should be doing something with my life.' So, I signed up to go to cook school in Arizona, which is a non-denominational bible school. So, I went there for three years, and in the meantime I took a couple of courses from Mesa Community College. The cook school is a Native American (school). So, there were students from North Dakota, Canada, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Michigan, Texas, there in Arizona, New Mexico. I had a wider view at that time. I did fairly well there, too. My only weak point was my writing. It's still my weak point.

Vera completed cook school and subsequently returned to Alaska, working in several different kinds of jobs over the years and eventually married Josh Weiser. They ended up moving to Chevak, a Yup'ik (Eskimo) village on the Kuskokwim River. She credits her experiences in Arizona and in Chevak as contributing significantly to her subsequent progress at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

It gave me a more cross-cultural perspective of things. It did. When I moved out to Chevak I was really afraid because it was the first time I had been to a village other than Minto. And knowing people from a small town, they're clannish. Especially, you know, my dad always talk about, saying, and my grandma talk about the wars they used to have with Eskimos. And that we're better than them, or they think they're better than us, or something like that. I always wondered about that. Like when I went to Edgumbe I went to school with a lot of Eskimos from the coast. But then living among them in their own environment kind of scared me. But I found out they were really no different from us. It's just a slightly different lifestyle...I got along well with the people there in the village.

As she gradually regained her confidence in her ability to achieve well in school, Vera contemplated returning to her original goal of acquiring a four year degree in education.

Well, I went back to work, and I think I didn't want to leave the security of a job and having an income. Forsaking that for school and wondering where I'm going to make my next car payment if I go back to school. And I didn't really want to borrow. I didn't want a student loan or anything like that. I guess just that, and being out of school I thought maybe I'm not smart enough. I've been out of school so long, how long would it take me to get back into the swing of study and being a student all over again? Learning how to be a student all over again. It scared me. And looking back at how many times I tried to go back to school, and I didn't really go through with it. Will I do the same thing again?

Vera and Josh returned to Fairbanks so that they both could attend the University in the summer of 1989. The following fall she was admitted to the College of Education.

It was only until I got married that I seriously thought about going back to school and getting my degree then...My husband, Joshua, encouraged me...In the meantime people (from Minto) were going to school, but they haven't ever really finished...I said, I have to do it for myself, not for anybody else, just for myself -- to prove to myself that I could do it!

In May, 1992 Vera Weiser graduated with a Bachelor of Education. She was the first person from the village of Minto to acquire a four year college degree. While the quest spanned two decades, she never really gave up on her dream to become a teacher. She is currently teaching in Angoon, Alaska.

The next student whose story I tell also came from a two parent family. Although her father was in the hospital through most of her early life, her mother worked hard to

feed the family and maintain a healthy family atmosphere. However, it was also necessary for the older Pitka children to do a lot of work in order to keep the family going. This strong work ethic seemed to persist throughout most of Antoinette's life.

Antoinette Pitka

Antoinette grew up in the village of Beaver, a village of about 65 Athabascans on the Yukon River, near the Arctic Circle. She described her family as being very poor. Her father spent a lot of time in the hospital when Antoinette was young, making it even more difficult for her mother. The family relied exclusively upon subsistence activities, including trapping, hunting, and fishing while the children were young.

My family was one of the poorer families and our father was always going out, so my mother would always be out trapping or hunting, or fishing. And when she wasn't doing that she was sewing beads. Because in those days they didn't have food stamps or AFDC or things that they have now. So we were, we relied on subsistence...And my father's favorite thing to do was to take us all to fish camp.

Perhaps one of the benefits of living a traditional subsistence lifestyle is that a strong work ethic is instilled in children from a very young age. Like Miranda, Antoinette participated in the work, along with eight of her brothers and sisters. She remembered how hard everyone worked when they were growing up, and she believed that it helped her later in life.

Maybe that's just from being so poor when we were growing, and I was always wanting things. If I just sat there and just wanted, and wanted, and wanted, it'd never happen. I have to make it happen. And so my dad, he told me 'Nobody's gonna do stuff for you. You get out. You get up every morning and start doing things. Maybe some day whenever you want, and want, and want, maybe it'll come true. But you have to work for it.' He used to always tell us that. So, I'd always try to make it. I'm stubborn. I wouldn't take AFDC or food stamps or anything because when we were growing up, we were really poor and we didn't have very much food, but we always worked. We always worked for our things...My mother had to really work hard for us. And she didn't have no assistance or anything. So maybe that's where I got it (determination) from.

The village of Beaver maintained one of the last Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools in the state, which Antoinette attended until she was fourteen. She, like the other two students, was considered a good student and was somewhat competitive, and she spent a lot of time reading.

Out of school I did a lot of reading because it was cold in the winter, and my father was out trapping, and sometimes we didn't have anything to do outdoors. We did a lot of reading...And maybe that's what helped me through high school because with my elementary background, I didn't think that I could go through high school. But I did, and maybe it was from the reading. Because this girl that I mentioned before, she did a lot of reading, and she had all these different books that she got from the city, and we were always reading her books. She belonged to a book club. We were too broke to afford books, but we got a chance to go back to the school during the summer. We'd go back and read books. It was pretty good...We did do a lot of reading. Everybody did. But that was before (television).

Similar to Miranda's family, Antoinette's mother spoke openly and directly at home about the importance of education. A teacher's aide in the elementary school in Beaver for many, many years, Antoinette's mother wanted her children to be able to get a better position and higher pay. She knew that education was the key. Unlike Vera's parents, Antoinette's mother sounded more like my own mother in her direct statements about the importance of attending college.

My mother preached education, and it was understood by our father...(She said,)'If you guys don't get your homework done tonight, you guys are going to end up being like me--just a teacher's aide.' But you know, stuff like that. She would tell us if we 'don't learn how to follow directions the right way, you guys will just give up and live on Two Street (where people go to drink).' It was just a favorite line, I guess. She always talked to us about education. She really wanted us to do something rather than just stay home and sew. She wanted us to sew and do all of that, but she said she really didn't think we would make our living doing that because of changing times...She said, 'If you guys just sit and listen, you'll see how things are done and maybe you'll make it through school.'

Because there was no high school in Beaver, when Antoinette was fourteen she was sent to Wrangell Institute, a boarding school in southern Alaska. After attending Wrangell for a year and being very unhappy there, she was able to transfer to Mount

Edgecumbe, where one of her sisters was in high school. Like Miranda, Antoinette felt pushed into vocational options, rather than toward professional programs.

I went to a BIA school all of my grade school years. I don't know. I wasn't ready for high school, but when I went away I must have learned something, because I fit right into my grade level when I went to Wrangell. I still don't see how though, after changing teachers like four times and every time a teacher would come we would have to learn all the basics all over again--stuff that we knew, and we never really got into college prep courses, never prepared for things like that. It was always vocational type things. I remember when we were small they said that the best type of jobs to get was secretarial jobs. You know, so we grew up believing that. And I never knew that Indians could go to college or be able to do things themselves without having to rely on BIA...But no, I don't remember Mt. Edgecumbe ever being any real preparation for college.

Even though she hadn't felt that the teachers at Mt. Edgecumbe adequately prepared or encouraged her to attend college, Antoinette's mother talked with all of her children about going.

Yeah, she talked about college because she took some courses at the University or something and she wasn't able to hack it and that really, it was kind of like a low spot in her life...So yeah, she really wanted us to have good things for ourselves, mostly because when we were growing up we didn't have food stamps, and things like that. We were always taught to do stuff for ourselves. So that's what I'm trying to teach my kids. Because of the way my Mother raised me that's why I'm trying to go after my degree. Because she's always saying that she'll be stuck at the same rate of pay forever because of her third grade education. And she didn't want that to happen to us.

Antoinette didn't go home the summer after high school graduation at Mt. Edgecumbe. She went to Anchorage, and, like Miranda and Vera, she began college the fall after she graduated. She started out at Sheldon Jackson, a vocational school in Sitka.

I started drinking (immediately after high school). I don't even think I went home that summer. I was eighteen at the time; I just drank the whole summer. And by the time it was time to go back to school I didn't have no money, but I went to Sheldon Jackson. And it was the biggest mistake that I made, going to school there, because then they didn't have no counselors. No native counselors, and we were treated really bad. We didn't have no RAHI programs to help us through college, and I didn't know that if you, like you only had classes three times a week, and I figured if you only go once you'll know what's going on, and then I got into

that kind of routine. But I lasted there for two years. But I still can't figure out today how I did it, because when I got there, they were prejudiced. I mean, we didn't have Native counselors, or anybody to talk to...It was a vocational college, and none of my, or hardly any of my credits transferred (to a four year university).

Prejudice at Sheldon Jackson wasn't the only thing that made it difficult for Antoinette. Like Vera, she found it difficult to discipline herself after being pampered at Mt. Edgecumbe for four years.

We were on our own and it was really, really hard, because being at a boarding home school for four years, everything was, you know you had everything planned out for you and, at a college it was just a whole new thing. If you didn't go to class, you didn't go to class. You didn't get the grades for the day, but it just didn't work out. I thought about quitting, but then I had only one other year to go so I went back for that last year, which was a mistake. Maybe I should have transferred to Anchorage (Community College) or something.

After completing two years at Sheldon Jackson, Antoinette returned home to Beaver to try to get a job. She found that all of the positions available were already taken and that her two years in college just didn't pay off. So she decided to go back to Anchorage and enroll in Anchorage Community College.

This was back in '74. And I didn't have, I wasn't really ready to go, but then I thought I'd better at least take a couple courses. So I took English 111...then my major was elementary education. Because I always thought I was going to go back to Beaver and either work in the school or do something. I stayed there for one semester I think, and then the school (Anchorage Community College) went on strike or something. We got all our courses and stuff for the spring semester, but I think there was some kind of strike going and it just kind of shot everybody's dream or something. So I didn't go back that semester.

Like Miranda and Vera, Antoinette turned to work. She went to work on the Alaska pipeline and "thought about school for a couple years." Upon return to Beaver, however, she took distance delivered courses for several years through the rural University of Alaska Fairbanks programs. She eventually changed her major from Education to Rural Development.

I was working for the Beaver Village Council...And they run that office here in Fairbanks and we (the village of Beaver) don't have no say in what's going on. Like

we don't see financial statements since 1983...I don't know, they just never inform us of things like that. I think I was taking Pat Dubbs' course. That's when I decided I was going to do my, try the Rural Development (B.A. degree) program because of the work that I was doing in Beaver. That's when I realized that it was really important for one of us to be there so we could work with whoever was writing the grants...When we start asking them questions they get all excited and they start arguing amongst themselves you know. And pretty soon it's everybody in Beaver's fault. It's funny. I mean it's not funny, but it's really funny. You know, to see this happening in 1991, 20 years after the (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act), and we didn't even get one red cent from them...So I thought maybe if I went back to school and try to find out more about the corporation and how it's run, what kind of Alaska state laws that we would have to go by. Who's liable after they get charged with certain things, you know, like mismanagement of our money. It's just a lot of little things like that, that made me decide to go into the Rural Development program.

Antoinette eventually moved into Fairbanks to attend the University of Alaska Fairbanks on-campus program in Rural Development. She is currently a senior. During the two decades she has been working on her degree, she has had to battle her own alcohol problem. She quit drinking when her daughter was born, honoring her mother in a way, thinking back to the difficult times her mother had raising thirteen children; yet, her mother never drank while they were growing up.

And in Beaver I had to do something with my life. I started drinking, and once you start drinking, and you get into all this. Forget it! It was just a mess anyway, so I finally never remember Mom drinking. I don't know why I came to, but I did. I started thinking about it. After I had my daughter I really thought about it, you know. No, I don't ever remember her drinking. So I thought maybe if I start cutting back and doing something, then I'll be able to start doing what I want to do. Because it seemed like when I had my drinking problem every time I tried to do something I would start drinking, and then just blow (it off). But when I decided I was going to quit drinking, I did it on my own. I never let anybody tell me I was an alcoholic unless I thought I was. And I didn't think I was. Well, I'll prove you wrong...For my personal accomplishments I think I've done good, and I've started seeing myself how my mother raised me...But my mother played a very important role in my life. Without her I don't know where I'd be.

Antoinette will most likely be the first person in her family to graduate from college; she may be only the second person to graduate from the village of Beaver. She,

like Miranda and Vera, never gave up on her goal, even though her life took many paths. She had been taught to keep on going, no matter how hard it gets.

My father was 67 years old last year, and he passed away. Before he passed away, he said that in our old Indian ways we are not supposed to look back or anything. It will make you [inaudible]. He gave me a long lecture. But he made me feel good about myself. He really never preached education or Christianity, or anything like that. He was kind of a mellow person. He said once you make up your mind to do something, you should be able to do it. You don't have to, you don't have to go to church. He said you could always pray silently and just little things like that. But my mother was the real person that turned my life around...so I thought maybe I would try to pay her back before I get too old.

Unlike the previous three women, the next student grew up in a home environment in which alcoholism was present, having a significant effect on the family. While she did not talk very much during the interviews about the presence of alcoholism in her family and its effects, my previous conversations with her revealed how difficult the situation was for her. Additionally, the student grew up in a single parent home for most of her life. In spite of this, or, perhaps, because of it, she was able to emerge with a strong goal orientation and set of personal convictions.

Ava Edwardson

Ava Edwardsen was born in Tanana, a village of about 400 people at the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. When she was in second grade, her family moved from Tanana to Fairbanks, where Ava remained for almost all the rest of elementary and high school. From the age of nine she lived with her mother, the oldest child among nine brothers and sisters.

Well, I came from an alcoholic family. And it broke up our home, and so that's why I was an introverted person. Being the oldest in an alcoholic family, there's things that, they say the oldest is really the achiever and all that because alcoholic surroundings have a lot to do with that. So it was really a hard life. (I was) a loner--really alone, all my life...(But it gave me) inner strength...and I wasn't going to have no drinking in my house. I wasn't going to go through all that.

Because her family lived in the city, Ava, unlike the previous three students, did not live by the subsistence calendar (i.e., fishing in the summer or traveling to spring camp before the school year ended). However, she was still exposed to similar values in her home and through the extended family.

Well, (we were taught to) always do good for the other person. Take care of the land; take care of your family; take care of yourself. Just take care of people, and, in turn, you'll be taken care of yourself.

Ava went to part of first grade in Tanana, attended second and third grades in Fairbanks, fourth grade in the village of Nenana and completed the remaining six grades in Fairbanks. She described her self as having been "a good student because I got good grades," but she was very quiet and shy. Outside of school she did a lot of reading "because I could escape into reading and not pay attention to my surroundings."

Education was valued in Ava's home, by her immediate family as well as community leaders. Like Miranda and Antoinette, she remembered people talking about it directly, but it was also implicitly understood.

The only thing that I can remember being said is, 'Education is important. If you want to get a good job you have to have education. If you want to do good in life you have to have education. That's how it is today'...I don't remember specifics, but I know it was always implied or it must have been said that education is important--you have to finish school, get that piece of paper...I think that they knew that the lifestyle that they were fortunate to have was not going to be there forever, because there's limited resources, and more people coming in and being born and things. I think that they knew that it wasn't going to be like they knew it in their day. Their subsistence. They knew that you needed the written word...you needed to understand it.

Although the previous three students attended boarding schools and lived away from their families in high school, Ava attended Lathrop High School in Fairbanks. Unlike the Native boarding school situation, Native students who attended urban high schools in Alaska were in the minority and faced racial prejudice from other students.

(In) senior high the social group grew, because all of the schools came together at one school, so I had more fun. I got worse grades in school, sometimes didn't go

to school. And we were talking about prejudice. Then prejudice came out, and Natives were called names, and so we (Native students) all stuck together for the most part because of that. And there was none of the support systems that are in place now for the kids. I think they were just beginning in those days, so it was pretty difficult.

Additionally, according to Ava, Native students were pushed toward vocational courses in high school, rather than being encouraged to pursue the college track. Her experience was similar to Antoinette's in that regard.

I remember in high school something about the implication that Natives would go on to vocational school if we went any higher than high school. And I remember I was kind of offended because they didn't say something like 'Natives going to college, four year colleges,' and it was kind of like a second class citizen going to voc. ed. school. I remember that.

But Ava, like Miranda, seemed to be goal oriented in a different direction. She was determined to attend a four year college, not a vocational school.

I thought about it, I planned for it, but I didn't have definite plans. But all along I knew I would go, because it was part of the process of 'Get a good education, to get a good job, and to do better in life,' and all that stuff...I think all my life I saw myself going to college, how and why I don't know. It was just there. Because I guess, maybe because hardly anybody did it...I think I was just on my own path, and just going for myself and my family, and my people.

Ava began full-time at the University of Alaska Fairbanks right after high school graduation in 1969, but she did not finish the semester. She had to work nights while attending and found the balance of work and school difficult to maintain. Even then, however, she knew she would come back to the university at some point.

In 1974 she returned to her home village of Tanana, where she began working for the Tanana Native Council. At that time her cousin was a full-time student in the rural teacher education program in Tanana. Ava's cousin encouraged her to apply, just as the rural program diversified to include Alaska Native Claim Settlement Act Administration, or what is now called Rural Development. Ava was accepted into the distance delivered University of Alaska Fairbanks program the following year.

Yeah, I always had an end in sight for tribal government. So somehow I knew; work always needed to be done for tribal government. So I knew that that was naturally what I went to...How, I don't know, but it must be in the blood...Well, like they say, we have a path, you know and in the Indian way that, you just do what you're here for. And I believe that, too. You have to use your talents in the best way for your people, I think.

Ava spoke differently than all the other students about how she decided on her major in college. She believes in the old Native tradition that people are "chosen" to do certain things in life and the person then follows that path.

My extended family, aunts and uncles, cousins, spoiled me. And I was spoiled, so maybe all that love had lots to do with it, too. They had the faith in you because, I don't know, I think Native people just know. They know somehow that who, who you are going to be, and how you are going to be and stuff like that. Because my best friend said my brother told her that my Grandpa told him that I'm one of the people that people are going to look to for help. He said that I'll always be one of the people that people will look to. Which I didn't know until later on, not too long ago. So I think people know how you are and stuff like that...Yeah, I wasn't told directly; he didn't even know I knew it. My Grandpa passed away-he never said anything. So probably the old people talked about it; I'm sure, because they always talk about stuff...And then too, our family, the history of our family. We've been spokespersons throughout history. So maybe that, I'm sure, had a lot to do with it, too. Chiefs; there's lot of chiefs in our family.

She took distance delivered courses in Tanana for a couple of years and worked for the Native Council off and on as grant work came available. But when the opportunity to travel arose Ava left Tanana, and when she came back she had a family. This, of course, complicated the pursuit of a college degree, as it had for Antoinette, and to a certain degree for Miranda and Vera. However, in addition to her family responsibilities, Ava noted the fact that when Native people live in the village, they often have to "wear a lot of different hats" and perform many different functions in the community. Most of the other students I interviewed did all or most of their course work on the Fairbanks campus, or another urban campus, so they did not face the village pressure in the same ways Ava did.

I went back home and tried to go to school with a family and do community obligations which was, it interrupted my time to do school work and stuff...because, well, when I got home and people recognized my talents and stuff,

I guess I was elected to boards and, not like they pushed me or anything. I wanted to do it myself. So I got onto boards and committees and worked. And all of that takes a lot of time away from private stuff that you are trying to do for yourself, like going to school. And I just got caught up in all of the community things I had to do, and school work lagged, lagged, lagged. Before you know it the year's over, the semester's over, and there's incompletes (grades).

There were other factors that made it difficult in college. Like Vera, Ava found the most difficult part of the school work to be writing. Yet, she talked about the issue of writing, about personal things and writing in detail, in a cross-cultural context.

I did OK (in courses in Tanana). But the worst part was writing. It's still my worst part. Because I never could write lengthy papers, what they were looking for...I mean, I can do the correct mechanics of it, the correct English. I know all that. But the way I am, just if you have something to say, put it down. But you have to detail out everything. Every sentence needs a paragraph, and after awhile it gets old, I think...Because someone told me, Natives don't talk much anyway, and we don't talk about ourselves anyway, never. So that's been real hard, too. Maybe that, I think that have a lot to do with it. Just say what you have to say, and be concise, make a concise statement, and that should be good enough. But for papers it's not.

Ava described her course work as "frivolous; it's not work." What she seemed to mean by that is that she had, like Antoinette, always been taught to work hard, either in subsistence activities or at home for the family, or in a job, or doing service work for the community. She explained, "On the horizon there is a whole strata of responsibilities. You don't juggle. You just go with the flow." Finishing courses came last, not because she didn't think it was important but because she had family and community obligations to fulfill first.

Over the past decade and a half, Ava has been taking courses for her B.A. in Rural Development. Sometimes, it seems almost ludicrous to her, however, as she has always held positions in her field, such as working for the Tanana Native Council. It seemed that when Miranda returned to school in Business, she felt similarly. That is, she had already run a successful family business for many years, so why would she need a college degree in Business Administration? For Miranda, the best decision was to switch degree

programs, especially as she changed from an individual orientation to a sense of wanting to do something for her people. Ava, however, is committed to finishing what she originally started. She feels an obligation to herself and to her people.

I like learning anyway, so it's a good opportunity there. Plus, for my own self, I have to finish...For personal accomplishments, probably, I should do it. I'm sure that paper will come in handy somewhere, in terms of salary...But yes, the obligation is there, not only in the back of your mind but out in front of you. For the whole town, for everybody that's counting on the work that I do, to finish.

There is also a strong desire to be a role model for her children. This is something that was explicitly stated by Miranda and Antoinette, too.

I think they see me going on, and I hope they aren't the kind of person that is going to drag it out like I did...I have to finish before they get old and leave the house. I can say, 'Look, I did it. You can, too.' Already I've kind of ingrained it into them that they are going to college. It's a matter of fact.

Finally, Ava talked about Athabascan society as being matriarchal. She recognized, however, that with the land claims settlement and the development of Native corporations, men are often in public leadership roles with the dominant society. Yet the continuing quiet strength and leadership of Athabascan women seemed to give her additional strength of conviction to keep forging ahead on her own path.

I'll tell you that one story my Grandpa told me long time ago. When there was wars between different peoples, that the women were the first line of, what, volley you call it or something, the first line out. And so in our culture, women are the caretakers of the people. No matter what we're doing we're the strength of the people in Athabascan culture anyway...I know that women are the stronger of our people...In our society, too, it's the men who are the chiefs. I like to put it, the women are the chiefs in the kitchen, and that's how it is. It's not really a public factor. It's subtle, how do you say, strength from within. The talking about it and all that is not public. The power is not public. It's the men who are the speakers and who are put in the public positions of all of that. The men, too, they don't acknowledge, like what I'm saying now about women. That's not acknowledged by the men. Not until they get older -- really older...Yeah, it all takes time. You've got to build on what's there already.

Ava is currently working in Tanana, and she continues to be a part-time student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She is a second semester senior, just a course or two shy of her B.A. Although there have been several college graduates from the village of Tanana over the years, including her cousin who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education, Ava will likely be the first person in her immediate family to acquire a four year college diploma.

The fifth student is somewhat different from the previous four in that she did not have a very stable family life; that is, she did not live at home with either of her parents most of the time. Madeline was raised in different homes during the school year, often with people outside of her extended family, and sometimes even with a white family who lived in the village . Additionally, the presence of alcohol and its effects were very strong in Madeline's life, having a profound effect on her determination to have a better life for herself and her own children.

Madeline Ekada

Madeline Ekada was born at Bishop Mountain, and she spent the first four years of her life living in the woods, away from any village, with her father. When her father died, Madeline's mom brought her to her grandparents, who also raised her away from the village at seasonal subsistence camps. But when Madeline turned six and was of school age, she was left in Koyukuk, a community of about 100 Athabascans on the Yukon River just below the Koyukuk River. Every winter she lived with various aunts and uncles or others while her mother and stepfather went out to one of their subsistence camps with the six younger children. During the summer, Madeline joined them at fish camp, when school was out.

I was put into different families all while I was growing up because my parents went out trapping in the winter time, and the only time we spent together, most of the time, would be in the summer time, and so I was placed with a few uncles and aunts, even people that just moved into the village like David and Kay Henry (bible

translators). I stayed with them for a few years, too. That was before people start staying in the villages more often...I was the oldest, so there was just me that they had to leave. The other mothers stayed in town with their kids while the men went out hunting...So I don't have that close relationship with my parents.

Madeline experienced a very difficult childhood. This was due, in large part, because of the presence of alcohol in her family.

When they (Athabascans) started living in the villages (instead of in the seasonal camps) they started drinking more, you know, alcohol...My step dad was drinking everyday and he abused us, you know, in every way -- even his own biological kids. Mom, she didn't have any effect on us; she was so mellow, you know. She never gave advice. All she thought about was just surviving day to day, feeding the kids and getting the work done. And then after all the kids grew up, she just moved away. And my step dad's alone, all alone now.

Like the four other students described above, Madeline was an avid reader. Yet, like Ava, she attributed her interest in reading, in part, to an escape mechanism from her home situation.

I read a lot at home, and there was no electricity you know. We used gas lamps, and the lights had to be turned off at a certain time or my step dad just turned it off. So I used the flashlight under the blankets, and he still tease me about it today. He'd tell me why the batteries are always dead in all his flashlights, and he'd say that's the reason I had bad eyes. But he always tried to stop me from reading because he thought it was a waste of time...It was, like, something to do and escape or, you know, just interesting. I still like to read. I still go to bed with a book every night.

Despite her disruptive home life, Madeline was a good student all through school. However, unlike the previous four, she said that she just did well enough to pass; she didn't really excel. She attended first through seventh grades in Koyukuk and was sent to Wrangell Institute for eighth grade, the same school Antoinette attended. For ninth grade Madeline went to Chemawa, a Native boarding school in Oregon. She recalled that going to Oregon and living in a multicultural setting was a very good learning experience for her.

I had fun down there...I wanted to go where it was warm and different, you know, because it was so cold up here. When I first went down I was sick for about a week from the weather, I think, being too warm...I did real good and got along with the other students from different cultures real good. I really enjoyed it...(It)

prepare(d) us for high school in the skills that we didn't have, like in math and science and writing...They were real strict.

The following year, rather than going to Mount Edgecumbe, Madeline came to Fairbanks to attend Lathrop, the same high school Ava attended.

And then the next year I came up here, and I hated it at first. I was sick for the first two months and I didn't like the other students. They didn't like me, or I felt like they didn't like me. And in comparison to today, they're not as prejudiced as they were then. I know my kids are doing good over here. They get along good with the white students and the Black students. But when I transferred up here it was different, it was real hard.

She continued to do reasonably well in school, although she was quite sick for much of the time, until her senior year. She seemed to remember her high school experiences fondly.

I did a lot better in my senior year. I remember in my language arts classes I did real good. And socializing with other students. I think it's good for students to move away from the village to live in other cultures to compare their own. It's like we learn two cultures. With the whites that are living up here, they know only their culture; they don't know ours. But we know theirs plus ours.

While Ava did not seem to recall any support for Native students in the Fairbanks school system, Madeline noted a range of activities that sponsored Native youth.

Up through high school, I remember that there were a lot of counselors talking to us Native students. They even offered an orientation class at Lathrop for the Native students, and I still remember some of the people coming in talking to us about getting an education and things changing...If we said we never rode on a train before, they arranged it so all the native students were, they bring us all to Nenana, on the train. I think they helped us a lot. They had dances for us, Native dances, and they had a Native center downtown...That's where we went everyday; all the Natives gathered there...They had pool tables and then we go there everyday just to socialize, even if we didn't play pool. They had Upward Bound, but I never did attend...I just wanted to go home. I remember the hardest part for me was I missed my little brothers and sisters since I was the oldest. I missed all of them. Mom had six of them in six years and they depended on me, too. Mom depended on me in the summertime to take care of them while she fished.

Unlike the previous four students, Madeline didn't remember anyone from her family supporting her in her educational endeavors. However, there were other people in

Koyukuk and in Fairbanks who encouraged her. One of her supporters was a woman who owned the store in Koyukuk and was the postmistress. Another was the couple that raised Madeline for a few years, David and Kay Henry, the bible translators. Occasionally there was a teacher. But most of her initiative seemed to come from within; the same was true for her brothers and sisters.

I think there's too many negative things that went on, not positive things. I think the positive things, we were so poor and it made all of us want to try harder so things would be different in our family. I know my sisters are like that, working real hard and against alcohol, too...We didn't go through that cycle (of abusing alcohol ourselves)...I think just for desire to get away, to get out of that situation because it was real bad...When my brother and sister came down to Nulato to stay with me after my husband died, they tried their best. They graduated with honors, valedictorian and salutatorian. And they just wanted to keep trying after they finished high school, too.

Madeline graduated from high school in Fairbanks in 1968. She did not contemplate going to college at that time, but she did attend beauty school in Anchorage for one year. She discovered, however, that she "didn't really enjoy it. I only liked working on the wigs. They didn't move!" Soon after she went to work in the cannery at Chignik for two years, where she met her husband. They moved to his home village, Nulato, and started a family. Unfortunately, her husband died in a tragic accident on the Yukon River one year while he was fishing. It wasn't until after he died that Madeline considered attending college, in 1981. She hadn't been thinking about it or planning on it as a child or young adult, unlike the rest of the students whose stories I've told. In fact, it was thirteen years between the time she graduated from high school and began college.

I think it was only a few years after my husband died that I started thinking about getting an education and stuff, or I'll be just stuck there (in the village), you know, without really nothing to do (to support myself)...I think it's when I was an aide for Headstart. That's my first job, you know, after my husband died. It was low pay, the only income I had. And then I had my three kids and my brother and sister that I was supporting; it was an income for them. And then, um, I just wanted to do something, when you (the interviewer) knocked on the door. I was ready to start then...I was wondering how I was going to support my family. I didn't know anything about the social security and stuff. I was just sort of waiting for fishing to

come along, to pay all my bills and that...But I was talking to Winnie Sipry, she was the Headstart Director, and she said I should join ARTTC (the original rural teacher education program)...I wasn't planning on it (teaching) or anything; that's just the way it started.

The other thing that was unusual about Madeline is that she didn't find college to be particularly difficult. An avid reader, she consistently kept up with current events, and she also did not experience difficulty writing college papers.

I was always good on writing, so it wasn't any problem. I remember our first, the first few years, I did real good. I did, you know, passed everything with A's and B's. And after a while it started getting harder. I started having a couple more kids and, yeah, those first few years, it was real simple. Like Cliff (an instructor) said, 'These first few years are the hardest years.' But for me it wasn't. Then he said, 'When you get your methods, it's all downhill from there.' It was just the opposite for me!

Madeline, unlike the others, took almost all of her courses at home in Nulato, through the distance delivered teacher education program. Like Ava, she was the sole support of her family, and because of subsistence and community responsibilities she was only able to take 3-6 credits at a time. However, she took classes off and on over almost a decade. During that time she held various part-time jobs, as well. She worked as the Headstart aide in Nulato and also as the library aide in the elementary school.

Well, you know, because of Nulato Stickdance (a powerful ceremony held two years after someone has died) I took a year off. And that's when my (youngest) kids started being born I took courses, but I had to drop them. Then after a while, I just quit. I remember once I quit for about three semesters. Then I started feeling really down, like, I did something wrong and something wasn't right, but then the University wrote to me, and they sent all this stuff to order books and stuff, and I just jumped back into it. But that wasn't the only time I quit, because after '85, I think I quit again. It was too hard with Sheena and Matt. They were young and I had to drop out. I got an F once because I didn't withdraw soon enough. But then I started feeling low again so I joined again. And I remember Claudette (a university instructor), or was it Claudette? Someone came down and they said you (the interviewer) told them, 'We have to get Madeline graduated.' They told me that.

Madeline always seemed to find the good in a difficult situation, as she never really stressed the hardships of pursuing a college degree as a single parent in the village.

Well, I could say raising a family (made it difficult) but now I think they were an asset rather than a hindrance. Because they gave me that reason to try harder. Even though it took me a long time because of them. I don't know. Maybe seeing other, other women and other X-CED (rural teacher education) students doing it...made me want to go on, not made it harder. I think it's (the difficulty of persisting) not having, you know, daily contact with the instructors. Because sometimes I could call them for days, and I wouldn't be able to get a hold of them. And I wouldn't be able to keep on working on my studies because I had to wait (for their help)...The best time to study, for me, was in the morning. But then, I did it at night, too, after the kids went to sleep. And sometimes I could do it when they were all awake. There would be a lot of noise in the house, and I still did it. I just got used to it. And, no, I didn't really have a schedule. Just when the time was right, even when I was cooking.

Madeline eventually moved with her children to Fairbanks in 1990 to complete her degree in Education on the UAF campus.

I moved up here in August, and this year was real easy. I took 12 credits my first semester, and it was easy with the instructors there, and having a deadline for our assignments. And then working with other potential teachers, you know, talking, sharing ideas, stuff like that, that was really helpful.

In May, 1991 Madeline Ekada graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree. She had not received financial aid but had chosen to pay her own way through college. While not the first person from Koyukuk, nor the first person in her family to attain a college degree, she acquired hers as a single parent of five children. She was motivated by the need to support her family, but she also seemed to have a strong desire to create a better life for her children than she had had as a child. There had been no expectation at home for her to acquire a college degree; in fact, people used to say about her, "Oh, she'll get married and have a whole bunch of kids" (and nothing more). Yet, although Madeline worried that she still had not acquired enough skills to be a teacher, she remained confident, "But once I get started, you know, start teaching, and get everything set up, I know I can do a good job!" She is currently teaching elementary school in the village of Minto. During the summers, she takes courses at UAF and returns to Nulato to run her own fish wheel and fish both commercially and for subsistence. I know of no other young

Native woman on the Yukon who has her own commercial fishing operation. Madeline is, indeed, an enigma!

The sixth and last student whose story I will tell grew up in multiple foster homes throughout her life. Her mother's alcoholism continuously affected her life in very significant ways. However, despite the most trying of circumstances, Alvina was able to emerge time after time, never giving up on herself or others.

Alvina Fowler

Alvina Fowler was born in the village of Nenana, a mixed Athabascan and Caucasian community of about 475 people on the Tanana River. She spent most of the first eight years of her life in Old Minto. Like Madeline, she lived in many different homes. First, she was adopted into a family as a baby. Then when she was five, a tumor was discovered, and Alvina had to spend three years in a hospital in Seattle, where she learned English; her first language was Athabascan.

Upon her return to Old Minto, Alvina was placed in the first grade, three years behind her peers. But she remembered that the teacher helped her to progress quickly, and Alvina soon caught up. However, life was very difficult for her. The family that adopted her eventually had children of their own, subsequently rejecting her as an adopted child.

I felt a bit of rejection from the family I went into. The family took me because they'd lost their daughter, and they weren't supposed to have any more children. When they took me they did end up having children. And I could feel the rejection from my father and mother after they started having their own, but then that was when my uncle took me. And once again my life changed. At first, it was painful because you couldn't talk about it. You felt it, but you couldn't talk about it because nobody talked about it. But then my uncle and I started doing things like trapping, traveling, and going to places and him buying my clothes, and teaching me how to hunt ducks and teaching me how to skin a beaver. I think I knew that all the pain I'd felt from my mom and dad was weighed and balanced by what my uncle taught me. So I think that's probably why I remember so much of it.

Her uncle, who was living in Old Minto, then took Alvina in as his own child and taught her the subsistence lifestyle and values. This was a very significant and memorable time for her.

In the winter time we lived on a trapline with my uncle and my extended family. I was taught at a very young age how to live off the land, how to read the land, to know how many beaver you can catch, what was on your trapline. You never take any more than you had to take...And it was the uncle that decided that he was never going to get married, and knew that he was never going to have any children. So I became his child, and he taught me everything. He taught me the respect of the land, respect of Elders, respect of other people, and I think it's that foundation that he gave me, that helped me to be who I am today...I remember the kind of things he told me. It wasn't so much what he said, it's how he said it when he showed me.

Unfortunately, her uncle died when she was eight, and Alvina returned to Nenana to live with her birth mother, who had started drinking at that time. Life was very, very hard for her, but Alvina tried as best she could to take care of her younger brother and three sisters.

There was a lot of things that he taught me. When my mother was drinking and wouldn't come home, I'd raised a little retarded brother and three sisters for three years on my own and I think it was the kind of things he did and showed me that made me know that I could chop wood, cook. I'm a lousy cook, I'm still a lousy cook...but it was things like that...And so those were the kind of things that I think made me know that when my mom would come home and be really be cruel and mean that I would be able to say 'Well, I don't like what she's doing to me, but that's OK as long as she didn't hit my three little sisters and my baby brother.' And I guess that's the way I feel today. Even today if you (the interviewer) were going to hurt me and her (the graduate assistant and Alvina's friend present at the interview), I'd make darn sure you wouldn't hurt her because she would come first and vice versa. If she was trying to hurt you, you'd come first before me. And it may sound weird, but that's the way I function.

Sometimes the only respite she seemed to have was in a book. Like Ava and Madeline, she turned to reading as an escape, in part, from the difficulties of her home life.

When my mom was drinking and she would get really cruel, sometimes reading was my way of coping. In the summer time I always had books around the house. In the summer time we had a real neat janitor in Nenana; he would open up the library for me and let me in. That's where I hid. And that's the way I coped with

being in a foster home and being in some real bad situations where I just knew that I would probably do something stupid or go nuts if I didn't have a book in front of me.

After sixth grade Alvina was sent into the social services system in Fairbanks and lived in foster homes until she completed high school. Not surprisingly, she found it difficult to concentrate on school work.

Once again, it wasn't that I didn't like school. It was, all of a sudden I wasn't with my family anymore. And even though my family was malfunctioning, it was still my family. So when I went into a foster home, I didn't do well in school. I don't think it was the lack of trying. I remember trying real hard. It just wasn't the same...There wasn't that many (Native children); I was probably the only Native kid in my class...And you didn't get to live in Native foster homes then; it was white foster homes...Once again, I think if you did real well (in school) you got attention, and if you didn't do well you were kind of swept aside and made to feel like you weren't as important as some of the other kids who were doing really well...I didn't want to be in a foster home. I wanted to go home to my real family, the one that I knew that was mine. And I probably, once again, felt the tension of not doing as well in school, being shoved aside with other white kids or the Black kids.

Alvina had many, many negative experiences, and it often seemed as if there was no one to turn to.

One real bad experience I had was that I was left handed, and if you are left handed person and you've never had to really write, you write the best way you can. And I had this one teacher that would tie my hands down to the chair. First she would hit them because I was the only Native kid in her class, only left hander in her class, and she would hit my hand really bad. And I couldn't tell the foster parent. The foster parent would say it was my fault. And she would tie my hands down. I had a real bad image of myself after that.

Finally, something happened that changed the way Alvina viewed the world and many of the people in it.

And then, I think the very first time that I ever felt that somebody cared was, it wasn't another adult. It was another child. We were in the eighth grade and this other young person, oh, I didn't dress like the other kids in school. We dressed in whatever the foster parents gave us, but Bernice would come and tie my scarf or fix my hair, or something like that. And at the time, it made me feel like, 'Hey, I do matter. Someone does care.' And so it was from there I started not just seeing the negative side. I saw the positive side. And it wasn't just seeing, I was beginning to

feel that 'maybe Alvina's OK.' And it was then that I started noticing that there were a few people that were nice, and I think it was just because someone said something nice, somebody helped me, somebody more or less like patted you on the head and said, 'Gee, Alvina, you're really doing great.' And I started noticing people in a different light, not just negative but positive. And so in bits and pieces there would be a person here (for me) sometimes. I know some people don't believe in God, but I always felt like God was always there, because when I was always feeling the lowest or the worst in my life, someone would come along. They didn't stay in my life very long. They didn't do any great thing or say anything; they were just there. Some people just gave me time enough to look at things in new ways again. There are ways that are really painful and hurting, and there are ways that, hey, maybe I could do something with it. So, in the years to come I had people like that. And I think that is what made me decide 'Gosh, there is something to you Alvina. There's something more to her than what she's thinking'...And that's probably what kept me together, those few nice people in my life and books.

Alvina began high school in Fairbanks. However, it was not a very positive experience for her, in part because of her home life, and in part because of the amount of prejudice toward Native students (something that Ava and Madeline, who also attended high school in Fairbanks, experienced).

It was that pattern. Part of it in high school was some of my doings, too, because from the time I left Minto, and went to Nenana and on to Fairbanks I kind of got the message that 'You're not smart. You're not really stupid, Alvina, but you're not smart either.' And so, therefore, I guess after getting the message, I started giving it to myself. So when I got into high school, part of it was my doings---part of it was the system's, and part of it was mine. Because I didn't have to be told I was stupid anymore, because I was telling myself that...There were very few of us Native kids, and it wasn't good to be Native then. It wasn't good to be Indian; it wasn't good to be Black; it wasn't good to be anything but white. And I noticed even though kids that were part white and part Native would never claim their Native part -- they'd always claim the white part...And so once again it was, it just gave me the feeling of, 'Gad, who are you? When are you ever going to see the end? How do you be accepted by society?'

Eventually, Alvina transferred to Sitka High School in southeast Alaska, and she pushed herself hard to graduate by the time she was sixteen. She performed well there, and she assumed that once she graduated she would return to Nenana to help her mother.

I thought if I got out of school I could go back and help my mom raise my three sisters and my brother. But my mom didn't want me. She flat told me that she

didn't want me around. So I left. I got a job in a laundromat until they found out how old I was. I liked the job because I could send all the money back to my mom. I didn't know she was drinking it away. I thought maybe she was feeding my brother and sisters and clothing them, but she wasn't. And when they found out -- once again, I wasn't old enough. This time I wasn't the right age. So I went through a period of hurt, a little bit of shame that I couldn't do something for my family again.

Alvina did find work again. In fact, she finally managed to find a nurturing environment where she felt validated and accepted.

There was a family that needed someone to take care of the kids while they were working. So I stayed there, and the family showed me that I could be anything I wanted to be. And so I lived with them, and they were a good family. They just made me feel good. So I thought, 'Hmm, what I want to do now is go to the University.' So I applied for it. In those days they only had so many scholarships they gave out. And my name came up, and they called me up there for an interview. They told me, once again, that my age made a difference once again. There were three other people that were older, and so by being older they appeared more mature, so therefore they gave the grants to them, and I didn't have money...(I was) just going on eighteen. So that was a big rejection, because in high school I knew that was what I was best at because I got really good grades. I knew that school was what I was best at. Then my life was getting a little bit scary again, because I was getting older, and I knew I wasn't always going to be living with this family. I was trying to find something, and that was what I found. Again, I got shot down.

Shortly after, Alvina met Larry Fowler, and "in a kind of way I got married because I felt that there was nothing else. And for twelve years I raised three kids." They lived in Oregon during that time, where Larry was working. In 1971 Alvina decided to take a couple of classes at a local community college.

Yeah, it was in 1971. I took a couple classes at a community college down in Eugene, Oregon, and I really liked it. I really enjoyed the idea of being able to get away from home and stuff like that. And it seemed like I had more to talk about when I got back home.

After awhile Larry decided he wanted to come back to Alaska. The family returned to Fairbanks, and Alvina went to work.

I came back, and all I could find was this little job as a nurse's aid. It was a fun job. I really liked it, and I really liked the people, but it couldn't support a family. So I

knew that the only other thing that was left for me to do was education...The idea of going to college was always there, but I think like what prompted me more was the idea that we needed another income, and the jobs that I was getting were just jobs that, that I knew I could do, but I wanted to do more. And so then the only way to get a job that would offer more, and my personal growth and financial growth was to go back to school.

But going back to school proved to be even more traumatic than Alvina had imagined. This was due partly to her lack of confidence in her abilities, her extreme shyness, and the difficulties she repeatedly faced in trying to get financial assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). It should be noted that at that point in history, the BIA was denying funding to those Alaska Natives who were married to whites, although they did provide funding to whites who were married to Natives.

And it was really hard for me at first in school cause I was so terribly shy...But it was real hard for me to go back because after all the things, I thought that nobody was going to give me any money to go to school. I didn't have any. Then someone told me, 'Go to BIA, Alvina; fill out these papers. You're a good candidate. You got real good grades in high school. You're older than the others.' So I did. I filled out the papers, went through three weeks of running back and forth, answering questions, making sure I was Indian, making sure I fit into the right little grooves that they wanted me to fit into. Then the guy called me and said, 'Alvina, all you have to do is come in and sign your name now. Everything's been accepted. Everyone knows you're Indian; everyone knows you're this and that.' And I walked in there and this guy Joe said, 'Alvina, you said you're married aren't you?' I said, 'Yes.' 'What nationality is your husband?' I said, 'He's white,' and I just knew. I just stood there. And he didn't even have the courtesy until I walked out. I was just so close to tears. There was this blond gorgeous white person standing there, and he said, 'I guess the grant's yours.' And I said, 'Wait a minute. This is BIA right?' He said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Isn't this a Native program?' He said, 'Yeah, right.' I said, 'She's white. She doesn't look like she had any Indian or Eskimo in her.' He said, 'That's right. But she's married to an Eskimo'...(That was) 1973. And after that I swore I would never ask anybody for anything, but I was going to go to school. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I was going to go to school. And I didn't know what I was going to be, but I was going to be somebody.

Alvina eventually began taking university courses at Tanana Valley Community College in Fairbanks in Fall, 1978. She worked full-time, took classes and maintained her family. In December, 1982 she was awarded an Associate of Arts degree in Paraprofessional Counseling.

Larry got a job, and I had my little old measly job, so we had enough for two classes. So I started going to school. I'd work all day and go to school at night. And that's how it got started. I got my first degree in '81. I got it done in 1981, but I had to challenge a couple classes, so they gave my degree in '82.

Alvina worked in the area of counseling and mental health. However, she always felt as if she could do more, and wanted to do more, than the positions she was getting. Again, she decided that she had to continue her education at the university in order to qualify for more challenging positions. During that time period Alvina and her husband divorced. However, he apparently remained supportive of her efforts to continue in school, and they eventually rejoined in marriage.

Then I started working on this one (degree in Social Work) four and a half years ago. And all that's been done with bits and pieces of money, a couple of grants, student loans that I'll probably have to pay back someday, but that's where it's at. But thank God for my children that were able to look at me and say, 'We don't like it when you're not home, but we know what you're doing---but we don't like it.' And Larry being real supportive. Eight years ago he and I got a divorce, but he was always there for me. And I not only got my degree, but I also got my husband back! It was tough.

Alvina persisted at UAF, despite the obstacles she faced. She found her advisor in the Psychology Department to be particularly unhelpful. She also felt uncomfortable at Rural Student Services, having gotten the impression that it was there to serve rural students in the city for the first time, not urban Native students. Eventually, however, she found the Director of Rural Student Services, who also had a degree in Social Work, to be encouraging and to push her in a non-threatening way. Ultimately, though, the initial inadequate advising cost her almost a year and a half of needless credits.

Each of the students whose stories are told (above) had one or two subjects that they struggled with. For some it was writing; for others it was math; for Alvina it was speaking.

My reading skills were real good because I was always a reader. Like, I used to use books to take something to alleviate some of the pain in my childhood away. And so I was a good reader, but I had trouble in English. I had trouble writing. I had trouble expressing myself. I usually have trouble expressing myself verbally.

That's what my main problem was. I was unable to communicate. A lot of it was just being so terribly shy. It's, the shyness was, I mean, it was a handicap. People don't realize that shy people, when I wanted to ask a question, I'd feel my heart rate go and I just, I thought my god, I wouldn't hear anything. That's how scared I'd be. I was scared...when I just actually had to ask somebody where the bathroom was. It sounds weird, but that's what shyness is. Shyness just isolates you. And having to ask somebody, it just takes a tremendous amount of courage and caused a lot of pain, too.

Despite her shyness, as well as her lack of self-confidence, Alvina was always a good student, including at the college level. In fact, it turned out to be a stabilizing factor for her over the years.

I love the idea of learning. It always excites me to learn something new. It may seem odd, but when everything got really bad in my world, my relationships, my inability to express myself, my inability to deal with the real world. The only thing I really did well is go to school. If everything was falling apart and I went to school, somehow that stabilized me to go back to deal with the other things I had to deal with. So I think that was one of the reasons I never gave up. Because I knew it was going to stabilize me and make my world okay again...I was a good student and I think that's what gave me the stability and the feeling of well, you know, if I was failing everything else at least I wasn't failing at school. I think that was what gave me this outcome that's the sense of security that I needed to deal with the rest of me, the rest of my world...Anything that I did well or did poorly in, I just worked that much harder. And I think because of my good reading skills, I had the ability to pick up the book. And if I could just get through the first stage of understanding what the professor wanted of me, there was no stopping me. I liked the idea that I've accomplished this thing. I was able to understand this person by listening and putting it down for myself where, 'Wow, Alvina, that was great! You know, you accomplished it!'

Alvina Fowler graduated from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in May, 1991 with a Bachelor of Science in Social Work. She is the first person in her family to acquire a four year degree. Currently, she is working at the Chief Andrew Isaac Health Center in Fairbanks, and she is planning to begin a Master's program either in Social Work or Counseling Psychology. Alvina attributes her strength and determination to the teachings of her uncle in her early life, as well as the extreme hardships she faced in life.

I asked myself why I never got angry. How come I flat never got angry? I think, once again, it goes back to with my uncle. It didn't pay to get really angry because

you wasted good energy that you could use somewhere else. And so I once again and looked at and said, 'OK, so I'm not the right color, I'm not the right size, I'm not what they want. I'll do what I have to do and go on with my life. And it wasn't easy...And another thing that kept me going was every time I turned around and things were really bad, there was no one there to pity me because if they'd sat there and pitied me I'd have not been able to pick myself up and go on. And I think there was always somebody there who was more needy than me, (like) my sisters and my little baby brother...Yes, it was hard at the time I was growing up, but I think it really helped me be who I am today. So even when I think about it, and it's still painful at times, still I can honestly say it's me. I'm who I am today and I feel good about who I am. And I don't think I would be the person I am today if I had grown up differently.

While each story told in this chapter is certainly unique, in the following chapter I draw out both the similarities and differences among them. I show how production theory helps to explain the meaning each woman made of her experiences. Cross-cultural implications are briefly explored. Shortcomings of the study are discussed, as well as the implications for universities and other social institutions that serve Native populations and other disenfranchised groups. Finally, I reflect on my own life and the impact this study has had on me.

Chapter 5

WE ARE ALL RELATED¹

Early last spring I was out walking. I had a personal stereo on, and as is typical with me, the volume was turned up to eight or nine. I must have been smiling, laughing aloud I think, when one of my neighbors yelled out, "You must be listening to some pretty good music! I see you walking by here every day, smiling and laughing to yourself. What are you playing?" I figured she wouldn't believe the real answer, so I said, "10,000 Maniacs." But for weeks I had been listening to the life stories of Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks -- stories as rich in humor as they are in human tenacity. They are stories of the incredible capacity of the women to adapt and change. They are stories of the fabulous endurance each woman has to manage multiple responsibilities for family, community, employment, subsistence, cultural and political activities, as well as for acquiring a college degree. They are stories of diverse responses to individual lives.

My original intent was to study the struggles or conflicts that Athabascan women face in seeking a college education. After almost three years, however, I have come to the conclusion that the women themselves rarely describe their lives in terms of struggles or conflicts. I suspect that an emphasis on struggle and conflict might be viewed by many Athabascan women as unnecessary and unhelpful whining or perhaps as simply too negative an outlook on life. In fact, all of the women I interviewed spoke of their lives primarily in positive terms and with great humor. As Bataille and Sands (1984) note:

¹Taken from a Lakota pipe ceremony chant, found in Highwater (1980).

Humor is a central characteristic of Indian women, both traditionally and in contemporary life, and that it tempers the burden of responsibility they bear individually and collectively (p. 19).

What I have finally come to recognize as the purpose of this study is to illustrate the diversity of experiences, the range of responses to their experiences, as well as the few commonalities among Athabascan women at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as they pursue baccalaureate degrees. Perhaps in understanding, accepting, even celebrating the uniqueness of each woman's life, we move toward the creation of a more tolerant society, an intellectual, social and political community that expects, respects, and provides opportunities for differences.

Summary

Studies prior to mine and Bowker's (1992) have differentiated students who are considered "successful" from those who are considered "failures." Students who are termed successful are generally those who graduate from college within a reasonable period of time after they begin (typically defined by universities as about six years). Failures are those who leave or fail. My study clearly demonstrates that this dichotomy is a false one. All of the women whose stories I tell here (and almost all of the twenty-one women I interviewed) stopped attending college for a period of time (or several periods) but later, often much later, returned to complete degrees in a wide range of fields. This, alone, has many implications for higher educational administration, counseling, and teaching.

Further, Athabascan women may not view education and careers as success in the way it is institutionally defined and supported in the United States. Therefore, the very terms "success" and "failures" are misnomers. Stories the women tell seem to indicate that they do not determine their success simply by attainment of a college degree. Likewise, they probably would not consider lack of completion as a failure. As education is

considered "just part of the circle of life," according to Ava Edwardsen, the women seem to place as much importance, if not more, on family needs and obligations, work for the corporation, and subsistence practices. Belenky et al. (1986) also talk of women who set aside personal goals out of deference or respect for the needs of other. In describing Vine Deloria, Sr.'s ideas, Bataille and Sands (1984) concur:

Deloria also points to a willingness among Indian women to sacrifice immediate goals for the well-being of family members, a willingness to defer but not forego personal goals, thus creating a pattern of attainment of personal satisfaction in maturity that is also characteristic of many of the narrators of autobiographies who endure considerable hardships but achieve an inner strength that leads to serenity and wisdom in later years (p. 19).

As I have stated earlier, Tinto's (1987) study has generally been considered the model for assessing why students have dropped out of college. As this dissertation illustrates, however, none of the Athabascan women seem to fit Tinto's or others' views of what it takes to succeed. I did not intend this study to be a comparison of Tinto's. However, since his conclusions are so widely stated, I have utilized six of the criteria he cites as a lens through which to examine the results of my data.

One of Tinto's criteria is intentions or career goals, and he claims that the stronger the connection between career goals and that of completing college, the greater the likelihood that the student will complete college. Tinto notes that many students are uncertain of their goals when they attend, and he also states that many students change their goals or solidify their goals over time. However, Tinto still maintains that those with the clearest goals are the most likely to remain. Certainly in my study students' goals were very diverse, but perhaps more importantly the women's goals seemed multi-faceted. That is, none of the women seemed to be driven by a linear pursuit of education, career, or higher standard of living. Weis (1985) found, similarly, that Black women in an urban community college were not driven by career aspirations:

The desire to provide a better life for children constitutes a major reason why females attend Urban College...Women repeatedly suggest that they are attending school to make a better life for themselves and their sons and daughters...They illustrate not only the extent to which single women are raising children, but also the fact that the desire for a better life for these children is what motivates women, in particular, to go back to school (p. 22).

Miranda, the woman whose background seemingly best prepared her for college and who attended an out of state university for a year, returned to Alaska to pursue that which people had been pressuring her to acquire -- a secretarial certificate. She seemed to sublimate her own dreams and desires as the pressures on her mounted. From the perspective of any university, I am sure Miranda would have been tagged as a dropout. However, her story clearly indicates, as do the others, that she never gave up her intention of acquiring a four year degree. In fact, Miranda is currently pursuing a Master's in Anthropology, having recently completed a six week internship at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Her intentions were many: to learn skills, obtain a degree, work for her people, demonstrate that women and Natives could compete in the business world, and provide a role model for her daughter.

Half of the women (Miranda, Vera and Ava) said they were committed to going to college from an early point in their lives. The other half came to the decision much later in life. All six of the women were pushed toward vocational training, as that was what was expected of Alaska Natives and of women. Miranda went to secretarial school after her second year at a university, as people kept telling her that's what she needed to do. Vera attended a training school for cooks after her first semester at UAF. Antoinette attempted vocational school immediately after high school, but she found that she was not interested. Ava had been pushed toward the vocational track in high school, but she dismissed the possibility then and there. Madeline initially attended beauty school, but she did not like the work. Alvina was also pushed toward a vocational orientation, but her main obstacle to initially attending the university was securing funding from the BIA. Ava also had difficulty with funding, finding it impossible to both work and attend school full-time. All

six of the women attempted college or vocational training right out of high school, persisting for different lengths of time, but no one was able or chose to stay more than two years. All returned much later in life. No one whose story is told above went straight through college without interruption; each, in that sense, would have been considered a dropout by the institution.

Each of the women expressed different goals and purposes for pursuing a college education. Miranda's initial goal was personal, one of survival and independence, which later led to a desire to be in business and to give something back to her people. In a personal communication (February 24, 1994) Miranda wrote:

As a Native, who was raised in a traditional lifestyle, it was difficult to live with controls or constraints, as imposed by Western society (e.g., time clocks, structured classrooms, scheduled appointments). Consequently, I developed an interest in business based on the notion of independence and flexibility. These features were necessary for my own survival. Only by surviving in the changing world we were experiencing could I be of any assistance to my people...Success was a prerequisite for consideration of "giving back" something to my people. Being raised in the era of the 40's and 50's, it was considered presumptive or even "bragging" to think you were better than you actually were. Therefore, I had to "prove" my ability before I could "help my people." The notion of humility was still very strong when I was growing up. Therefore, any assistance which I have provided has always been done in a fashion that does not call attention to the action.

Vera wanted to be a teacher, and she thought she could do at least as good a job as those who had taught her. Antoinette wanted to give something back to her mother, who had worked so hard without a college education. Her mother wanted her to have a better life. However, Antoinette's goals grew to include an intense desire to make the land claims corporations work more effectively for Native people. Ava's goal has been similar, wanting, through tribal government, to improve life for Alaska Natives. Madeline did not even consider college until after her husband had died; she needed a means to support her children on her own. Alvina's goals also emerged over time; she wanted to go into counseling and social services, believing that she could provide infinitely better services to

Alaska Natives and others than she had received herself. Almost all of them explicitly stated the desire to create a better life for their children than they had had, materially or otherwise. All of the women wanted to be role models for their children (and grandchildren, in the case of Miranda).

Vera was first in her family and the first person from her village to acquire a four year college diploma. Alvina was the first in her family but not the first from her village. Antoinette and Ava will most likely be the first in their families. Madeline's sister completed her degree first, although her sister did not have children at that time. Miranda had two sisters who completed college degrees before her; the fact that three women in her family have college degrees is very impressive. Miranda has started a Master's degree program, and both Alvina and Madeline are planning to do the same. All of the women in this study seemed to balance family, work, and community or other responsibilities and were not as linearly driven by career goals as Tinto indicates. This may be true for many non-traditional women college students.

A second criterion of Tinto's is individual commitment. He claims that students who are most committed to the particular institution are most likely to remain there. While I did not ask specific questions about this, most Athabascan college students (from throughout the Doyon region) do attend the University of Alaska Fairbanks. This is due in part, I suspect, to the fact that it is physically the closest higher education institution to Athabascan villages. Many Athabascan people have extended family members who live in Fairbanks or who travel through there for medical or personal reasons, so it is a familiar city to most. Both the profit and non-profit corporation offices (Doyon, Inc. and Tanana Chiefs, Inc., respectively) are located in Fairbanks, so social and medical service offices as well as employment opportunities are there. Additionally, the University of Alaska Fairbanks houses Rural Student Services, a comprehensive support system for Native students. However, institutional commitment to UAF is probably less likely than the students' familiarity and comfort levels in the city of Fairbanks. At any rate, this would be

as true for those who leave college as those who remain or return. Tinto's criteria of individual commitment to the institution is just too simplistic to explain the circumstances of Athabascan women in college.

A third criterion has to do with adjustment to college. According to Tinto, those students who integrate well, both intellectually and socially, seem to successfully complete a college education. Native Americans are purported to be among the least successful in this endeavor (Astin, 1977; Astin, 1982; Tijerina & Biemer, 1988). Several authors have proposed that worldview and cognitive style among Native Americans may be at the root of the difficulties, and I comment on this in the next section of this chapter. At any rate, each of the six women had to adjust to college over and over again, as they re-entered. All of the students mentioned the challenges of dealing with racism among students and, often, faculty on the campus. However, they had been dealing with racism in high school as well. Tinto (1987) notes that those who have had prior experiences with adjustment have less difficulty in college. Again, this would apply to most Athabascans, whether they complete college degrees or not. All six women initially left the university, for a whole range of reasons, but they also returned for different reasons and remained for different reasons.

Half of the students (Miranda, Vera and Antoinette) went to Native boarding schools, Mount Edgecumbe, specifically. The other three spent all or most of their high school years in Fairbanks. Madeline attended Wrangell Institute for a year, went to Chemawa for a year, and then spent three years of high school in Fairbanks. Alvina spent most of her high school years in Fairbanks but graduated from Sitka High School. All of the students, therefore, had multicultural experiences before they attended college. Except for Ava, all of the women had to live away from home during high school. None of the students whose stories I describe attended village high schools. In fact, there were only a few regional village high schools at the time they were each attending. Today there are high schools in almost every village, due to state mandate. Nevertheless, Tinto's criterion

of adjustment to college does not seem to be an adequate criteria for Athabascans. I suspect that for most students of color adjustment is a very complex issue that merits further investigation.

A fourth criterion that Tinto cites has to do with difficulty of college work and the level of student preparedness. All of the students described themselves as good students when they were in grade school and high school, albeit with different strengths and weaknesses. Most of the students were not required to take college board exams to enter UAF (or to transfer or re-enter there), so it is impossible to use the scores as an indicator. Furthermore, I was unable to get high school GPA's on all of the students. However, it has been my experience with Athabaskan students in both the rural and on-campus programs that students enter the university with a broad range of preparation, particularly in writing and mathematics. Therefore, this does not seem to be an indicator for either completion or departure.

One of the most interesting and consistent findings of this study was that all of the students whose stories I tell described themselves as avid readers, although their experiences with reading differed. This finding was not true of all twenty-one women initially interviewed, and since I did not ask many questions about reading, I am unwilling to draw conclusions about its significance. Miranda was quick to note that reading was only an option when the work was done for home and for school. Half of the women (Ava, Madeline and Alvina) said that reading was, in part, an escape from the difficulties of their home lives. All claimed that their interest in reading seemed to help them in college. Additionally, they each seemed to have a love for learning, and most described themselves as strong students. Vera and Antoinette described themselves as competitive with others in school. Antoinette thought that she must have done well because she never got in trouble. Madeline hedged, saying that she did well enough to pass but never really excelled. Alvina was a good student, but often, particularly in the elementary years, her family situation got in the way of her being able to perform up to her ability. As time went

on, however, she found school to be the one area in her life where she could consistently excel. It seemed that she always had that to fall back on to help her transcend the pain of her childhood.

Incongruence is a fifth indicator of Tinto's. He claims that incongruence can exist when the student's skills and abilities are different from those demanded by an academic institution. However, he also mentions incongruence in values and social/interactional skills. Certainly the latter would likely be true for most students of color. Therefore, while it might account for the discrepancy between graduation rates of students of color compared to Caucasian students, it does not seem to account for differences among Alaska Natives, for example.

Tinto claims that lack of support or isolation from the external community (i.e., family) is a sixth predictor of student retention in college. Two of the women (Miranda and Antoinette) said that their families were openly supportive of education. Vera claimed that her family was supportive of whatever she wanted to do, although neither of her parents spoke directly about education. Ava found the Tanana community to be supportive of education, but it was never stated as such in her home. Madeline and Alvina found outsiders to be supportive of them, but there was no one at home, except for Alvina's husband, much later in life. Some of the cultural implications of the notion of support are discussed later in this chapter. However, it is clear that like several of Tinto's criteria, the notion of support is too simplistic, particularly in light of the cultural differences inherent in support networks and what that means in different communities.

In conclusion, while Tinto's criteria are widely touted as indicators of student success (i.e., graduation) in college, the women whose stories I tell do not seem to fit his model. The range of differences among the women, as well as the cultural differences in meaning (further elaborated in the next section of this chapter) are not accounted for by Tinto. The danger is that institutions that rely on narrow profiles of students probably do not provide adequate services for those who are different. Since the goal of universities is

to graduate as many students as possible, such institutions would benefit from taking a broader, more diverse perspective of students and providing an environment that more readily accepts and includes them.

Needless to say, regardless of whether they were the first in their family to graduate or not, each woman has traveled a path fraught with obstacles. Each woman had children of her own to take care of while she was in college, as well as responsibilities for extended family members. Each held a range of positions at home, at work, and, often, in the community. Each faced racism and prejudice in school. Yet each continuously pursued a college degree, over an extended period of time. Sometimes there were people there to encourage and support them. Often the courage, strength and conviction came from within. Each woman tells a unique story of struggle and perseverance.

Finally, I address two criteria that are not listed explicitly by Tinto, but they are widely touted in conversations in Alaska and elsewhere in the United States as strong indicators of success among Alaska Native/American Indians: the importance of having a "functional family" and the role of a subsistence lifestyle.

I had decided to order the stories around the concept of intact or functional family, as this is the criterion that is most used to criticize and describe Alaska Natives, and Athabascans in particular. As the data shows, half of the students come from intact families (Miranda, Vera, Antoinette). That is, they were raised, for the most part, by two parents who did not drink excessively. However, even in the case of Antoinette, her father spent much of her childhood in the hospital, so it was primarily her mother who raised her. Vera, on the other hand, was raised for the first eight years by her grandmother, and then went to live with her parents. Additionally, her parents drank quite heavily during her early years. The remaining three students grew up in alcoholic households (Ava, Madeline, Alvina). Ava lived in a single parent home. Madeline lived with her mother and stepfather during the summers only, and she lived with relatives or other community members during the school year. Alvina lived in many different dysfunctional family settings, including

foster care; the only supportive, consistent setting seemed to be the early years she lived with her uncle. Despite the family environments students lived in, however, they most often credited who they were (including, but not limited to, their ability to persist despite the odds) to their family backgrounds. For some, a functional family provided the strength to pursue their goals; for others, a dysfunctional family provided them the motivation to seek a better life and the strength to pursue their goals. The point is, students came from a broad range of family backgrounds, and they all actively pursued college degrees over time. Neither the effects of alcoholism nor a particular family environment were determinants in students' continuance in college. In the next section of this chapter I discuss differences in cultural meaning for the term "functional" family.

Most of the women were strongly influenced by the importance of a traditional subsistence lifestyle in their culture. However, again, there was clearly a range of involvement in subsistence practices. For example, Vera was not required to do subsistence work very often, although she was raised in a subsistence-based home. Ava, on the other hand, grew up in Fairbanks and was not exposed to subsistence practices on a daily basis, but she certainly acquired the requisite values from her extended family in Tanana, and she believes in them very strongly. Madeline did not speak directly of the influence of subsistence in her early years, but it continues to be an integral part of her life, even now that she is teaching full-time. Alvina was exposed to subsistence practices and beliefs only in her early years, but the lessons she learned from her uncle constitute the framework through which she approaches life. A similar effect seems to be true for Miranda, who grew up and actively participated in a subsistence-based home. It is difficult, however, to separate the values of a subsistence lifestyle from the actual practices. It has been my experience that most Athabascans are raised with the values and worldview of "traditional" Native life, no matter what subsistence practices were present. Therefore, it would be difficult to determine what effect this has on college completion.

Cross-Cultural Implications

One of the most important and interesting findings of the study is the difference in cultural meanings for Athabaskan students compared to those of mainstream researchers and higher education administrators and faculty. Following are explanations of two of the most significant value-laden concepts and the cultural differences in meanings. Benjamin, Chambers and Reiterman (1993) offer the possibility that cultural differences in perception of the world and ways of acting may be misinterpreted or not tolerated by university professors and therefore not valued or supported. While I do not have direct evidence to support this, this is a commonly held belief among Athabascans and many university employees.

I mentioned earlier in this chapter that I have ordered the six stories by the degree to which the students come from "functional" families. This is a term that I have not heard many Athabascans use; yet, it is a term commonly used by non-Athabascans in schools and other social institutions to describe Native families. Indeed, the image most often painted of American Indian families is that they are dysfunctional, due, in large part, to alcoholism. I suspect that Athabascans are more accepting of a range of differences among people in their families and communities, neither presuming to have the power to tell another how to live his/her life, nor evaluating decisions made by another. In the words of Highwater (1980):

It is just as my mother always told me: in the Native American experience all things are possible and therefore all things are acceptable. It is therefore desirable for our societal structures and attitudes to be bold and large enough to affirm rather than to deny, to accept rather than to reject. The tribal relationship of Indians is therefore never based upon the tolerance of others, but upon the experience of the self as an intrinsic part of others. 'We are all related' (p. 11).

Akin to the above concept of tolerance for diversity are the notions of success and failure within the Athabaskan community. As I have stated earlier, success is not singularly determined through career or educational attainment. I'm not sure that there is a concept

of success among Athabascans, at least not in relation to the success (or failure) of others. In any case, it is unlikely that a woman would determine her success on how well or far she achieved in higher education. And certainly one would not be considered a failure for leaving school. Such a personal decision would be honored (and be considered honorable) by the larger community. Not so in the university community. The university determines its success on how many people attain degrees -- and at what rate the degrees are acquired.

While I asked the students if their families were supportive of education, I realize now that the concept of being supportive is culturally laden. In my own culture, I would expect someone to be verbally supportive of education. My mother, for example, consistently mentioned her expectation that I would attend college, as well as the importance of performing well in grade school and high school. Most of the students I interviewed said that while they thought people in their families and communities were supportive of education, they did not necessarily speak about it. Sometimes the Elders or others would speak about the importance of education at community potlatches. Bataille and Sands (1984) report what a Pomo grandmother wanted for her granddaughter:

I think if she stayed home with me and made baskets that would be good. And I want her to go to school and learn something. That would be good too (p. 20).

Similarly, London (1989) collected life histories of fifteen first generation college students and found that they not only gain (support) but also lose; that is, they lose some of the closeness of their families and their roles in their environment (communities) change. I am unsure if this applies to Athabaskan women. This needs to be explored in greater depth before parallels can be drawn.

Whose Stories Have I Really Told?

One of the most troubling aspects of writing this dissertation has been coming to terms with whose story I have told -- mine or the stories of the six women. While I have, intellectually, reached the conclusion that I am telling both their stories and mine, I am still uneasy socially, culturally, and emotionally. I am thankful for Anna Neumann's continuous reminder (as a member of my committee) that it is academically "legitimate" to tell my story. What I am uncomfortable about is how effectively I have been able to tell Athabascan stories. What cultural values, interpretations, beliefs and implicit understandings have I misinterpreted from my own cultural framework? Indeed, this is the dilemma of all anthropologists, and for that matter, all qualitative researchers. And it is exactly the history of misinterpreted Native stories and cultures that haunts me. The rapport and credibility I have developed with Alaska Natives over the years is of the utmost importance to me. Since Native people are the primary audience I have in mind, perhaps this is why the tension is so great.

For Athabascans on the Yukon River, there is a cultural prohibition against presuming what other people believe; there also seems to be a superceding respect for individuality. I am quite certain that this made it difficult to collect the interviews. It also made it difficult to try to get the students to draw similarities (or differences) across their lives. Part of this, I suspect, is related to the incredible importance of modesty among American Indian women. According to Bataille and Sands (1984):

The quality of modesty has a direct bearing on Indian women's autobiography, since it suggests that those women willing to put themselves forward in order to record or write their narratives are atypical in calling attention to themselves. It also accounts for the frequent guardedness of narrators in focusing on their own emotions and private aspects of their lives (p. 18).

Another issue surrounding this study is the difficulty of applying the findings to Athabascan men, as well as to students from other cultures. Clearly, Bowker's (1992) work shows the similarities between Athabascan women and American Indian/Alaska

Native women attending other colleges and universities. Since there are not like studies of American Indian men available, I am hesitant to make generalizations. However, I am quite convinced that because Athabascan men are not graduating from universities at the same rate as Athabascan women, their experiences are quite different. Further work is also needed to compare the experiences of other women of color in the United States.

Finally, I interviewed only junior and seniors at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. I focused on the people who had returned and were near completion of their degrees. Similar interviews could have been collected on those who were no longer attending the university. Certainly university faculty and administrators would benefit from hearing the voices of those who have left.

Implications for the Future

Despite the plethora of research on recruitment and retention of college students, there are few studies that focus on or even consider Alaska Native/American Indian students. Further, few of the studies illicit the voices of the students themselves; most attend to the institutional point of view. Athabascans, as well as other Alaska Natives and American Indians considering college or who have attempted college but stopped out for awhile, will benefit from the stories of women who have managed to persist despite many obstacles. Perhaps the stories will provide hope and validation to those who come after them. The women whose stories are told here also serve as potential role models for students interested in pursuing a college in an array of fields.

Speaking of First Nations peoples in Canada, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), contend that the idea of empowerment is critical in order for people to actively and consistently participate in institutions of higher education. They claim that empowerment is not to be limited to individuals, but it must also include "empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as a people" (p. 14). Hornett (1989) continues:

First of all, institutions must understand that Indian students, for the most part, do not want to become part of the Anglo mainstream. That means that they do not want to relinquish their Indian entities in order to be successful (p. 12).

We need to collectively find ways to create school environments in which currently marginalized people not only gain empowerment but also have opportunities to create a power base for themselves. One of the ways to do this is to validate the experiences of Native people who are in higher education institutions. This study is one attempt to assist in this process.

Further work needs to be done (both study and action on the part of universities and colleges) to determine why students leave college, so that opportunities and support structures can be provided for students to return after indeterminate absences. Equally as important, however, is the need for additional descriptive studies of marginalized people who stay the course to acquire a college degree.

As I stated in Chapter 2, I used production theory to explain how Athabascan women are breaking the cycle of social and cultural reproduction. Additional studies of this kind are needed to explore the diversity of responses women of color (and others) have to their lives. Rather than continuously focusing on the negative (i.e., those who are typically viewed as failures) educational institutions will benefit from viewing and respecting the multiple ways Alaska Native/American Indian women and men respond to the conditions of their lives. Through human agency the six Athabascan women described here and countless others are forging new paths, creating new roles, and producing new meanings. Research should reflect the diversity of meanings, choices and roads taken. Studies such as Tinto's are reductionistic and overly simplistic in the cause and effect explanations of students' actions and intentions. More qualitative studies are needed that elicit the voices and meanings of the students themselves.

Additionally, elementary and secondary administrators, counselors and teachers who serve Alaska Native/American Indian populations would benefit from the stories of women who have persisted in school. While most of the students I interviewed talked about the lack of institutional support they received from their high schools to attend college, that seems to be changing, particularly in village schools. Teachers and other school personnel might be more optimistic about students' chances of completing college degrees if they read the stories herein.

Finally, funding institutions, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal grantees might consider adapting the guidelines for receiving financial aid. Given the circuitous and diverse paths that Native students seem to take in completing college degrees, as is evidenced here, the stringent rules for applying for and receiving financial assistance should be altered to best meet the needs of the population.

Epilogue

One day this spring I was giving a talk on recruitment and retention of American Indian students to the education faculty and staff at Antioch University Seattle, where I am currently employed. The talk was particularly pertinent as Antioch is currently designing a teacher education program for/with American Indian people in the greater Seattle area. After hearing a review of the literature, as well as the conclusions I had reached from this dissertation, a Puyallup woman on the faculty stated emphatically, "Wow! I thought you were talking about me!" The image of the circle of life emerged. In fact, I have shared parts of this dissertation with at least ten Athabascan women who are college graduates (in addition to the six whose stories I have told), and they have all remarked that the stories and conclusions seem to mirror their own lives. This lays to rest some of the lingering concerns I have had about the validity of this study.

Later that day I sat at the dining room table with my oldest daughter, a young Athabascan woman of twelve years. It was International Women's Day, and I asked her if

she considered herself to be a feminist. "What does that mean?" she inquired. "It's a term used to describe people who believe that women are not receiving equal opportunities or treatment at work or school or in other parts of life, and feminists are willing to work toward that end," I responded. She paused. "Yes, I think so," she said, explaining that she did not think women were yet treated equally with men in the workplace or in sports. She went on to state that she is willing to work toward that end in her life, and I smiled exuberantly. I thought about my mother's involvement in the women's movement when I was not much older than my daughter, and once again, the image of the circle of life emerged.

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