The Impact of Higher Education on Alaska Native Students’ Cultural Identities

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We would like to acknowledge the members of our community advisory board: Amber Christensen Fullmer, Cheryl Turner, Edna Standifer, Eva Gregg, Brian Walker, Scott Larionoff, and Sheila Randazzo
Abstract

University systems may clash with the cultural identities of Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) students, resulting in depression, social withdrawal, and/or academic disengagement. This qualitative investigation sought to identify elements within the university that impact cultural identity, as experienced by AN students. Seven focus groups were conducted with 20 AN students. A transformational grounded theory framework was used to analyze the focus groups. Factors that supported cultural identity included social connections, engagement in and learning about AN cultures, and access to Indigenous spaces. Lack of representation, discrimination and stereotyping, difficulty engaging in culture, and the Westernized university structure conflicted with cultural identity. Programs aimed at cultivating AN students’ cultural identities should consider providing Indigenous spaces that promote opportunity for connection and cultural engagement. Increasing AN representation among students and faculty, employing culturally responsive teaching methods, and reducing discrimination may also promote cultural identity.

Keywords: Alaska Native, cultural identity, university, qualitative research
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Introduction

Cultural Identity

A strong Alaska Native/American Indian (AN/AI) cultural identity supports psychological health, contributes to overall well-being, and promotes academic success (e.g., Brown et al., 2016; Powers, 2006; Snowshoe et al., 2015). Indigenous cultural identity consists of multiple elements, including identification (e.g., tribe, self-perception), connection (e.g., kinship, ancestors, and land), and culture/spirituality (e.g., language, values, worldview, stories, and practices), and is associated with engagement in traditional cultural and spiritual practices (Kulis et al., 2013; Markstrom, 2011).

However, it may be more or less difficult for AN/AI young adults to develop a strong cultural identity depending on the context in which they live and the systems they must navigate. For example, AN/AI cultural identity is impacted by significant migration to urban areas and interactions between different Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in these settings (Kulis et al., 2013). Some AN/AI youths have described difficulty finding ways to establish or connect them with their cultural identity in urban settings, while urban adults and youth have perceived a lack of opportunities for AN/AI young people to engage in cultural events and learn about practices within their cultural worldview, such as subsistence (Brown et al., 2016). At the same time, urban spaces are Indigenous lands and are occupied by many who have found ways to maintain authentic cultural identities (Bang et al., 2014).

AN/AI cultural identity is further complicated by educational systems, which have played a role in cultural identity loss among AN/AI people. For example, starting in the early 20th century and into the 1970s, AN children were sent to boarding schools away from their families
in an attempt to force assimilation into dominant non-Indigenous U.S. culture (Barnhardt, 2001). In these institutes, children were often forbidden from speaking their language or engaging in their cultural practices. Accounts of boarding school experiences are diverse, with some viewing their time in these institutions positively and others reporting experiences of trauma and abuse. Students have described boarding schools as directly contributing to loss of culture and the creation of identity conflicts (Hirshberg, 2008). The impact of these institutions on AN people and their cultures has been seen across generations (La Belle et al., 2005; Lewis, et al., 2014).

**Alaska Native/American Indian College Students**

A portion of the AN/AI people have migrated to urban areas specifically to attend higher education institutions (Kirk & Starn, 2009). Many seek to attend university in an effort to gain certifications and skills they need to contribute to their families and/or communities (Waterman, 2012); yet, AN/AI college students have the lowest university enrollment and retention rates among any cohort in the U.S. (Guillory, 2009). Universities have a unique ability to impact cultural identity (Huffman, 2001) through exposure to other cultural groups (Schwartz et al., 2010) and by the cultural structure of universities, which are predominately Eurocentric/Western (Battiste, 2002; Waterman, 2012). Culturally-based learning practices, communication styles, and cultural values held by ethnic minorities may be discontinued within educational systems as a result of its deep-rooted Westernized worldview (i.e., cultural discontinuity hypothesis; Tyler et al., 2008). Research also indicates that AN/AI students face many challenges within the university setting, such as feelings of isolation from their families and ancestral lands, separation from cultural traditions, exposure to racist encounters (Tachine et al., 2017), and classroom hostility, such as being called out in class based on Indigenous identity (Stewart-Ambo, 2020).
AN/AI university students have expressed worry that their cultural identities and values are at stake in university settings, with many fearing they have no choice between assimilating into mainstream culture and disconnecting from their cultural identities, or dropping out of a university to maintain their cultural identities (Huffman, 2001). According to Huffman (2001), such cultural conflict (“a notion of some discrepancy between the values, behaviors, or political/economic power of those of the dominant status and those of the minority status,” pg. 3) is the largest contributor to poor academic achievement among AI/AN students. Strategies to reduce cultural conflict have been discussed across various ecological levels. At the individual level, literature has focused on enhancing motivation, self-efficacy, bicultural identity, and cultural identity in order to promote AN/AI students’ achievement (Brayboy et al., 2012; Fish & Syed, 2018). AN/AI students with secure cultural identities draw on their identities and values for support, are better able to navigate university, are less likely to experience cultural conflicts, and are more likely to complete their degrees than those with less secure cultural identities (Huffman, 2001). Other AN/AI students who relocate for university may return home regularly for family and/or cultural events to maintain connections to their cultures, communities, and homelands, as well as oppose historical policies of assimilation and removal from home (Waterman, 2012).

Nevertheless, such strategies to maintain or encourage cultural identity and “succeed” at university inadvertently require students to adapt into established education systems rather than asking these systems to change to better fit for their students (Fish & Syed, 2018). Universities may fail to understand differing worldviews, perceptions, and values held by AN/AI students (Brayboy et al., 2015). For example, university settings may include elements – curriculums, behavioral expectations, educational styles – that unintentionally devalue the cultures of
Indigenous students and conflict with students’ cultural identities, leading to feelings of isolation, depression, and eventual disengagement from school (Huffman, 2001; Larimore & McClellan, 2005). Efforts to explore and transform university systems to be more consistent with AN/AI cultures and identities have been encouraged throughout related literature (Brayboy et al., 2012; Fish & Syed, 2018; Shield, 2004), such as the importance of establishing AN/AI support services, providing Indigenous spaces, hiring AN/AI faculty (Lopez, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017), and providing more culturally consistent curricular and co-curricular opportunities (Reyes & Shotton, 2018) in order to enhance academic persistence, encourage a sense of belonging, and promote cultural identity. Moreover, programs (e.g., Keene, 2016) can aim to cultivate Indigenous students’ cultural identity, confidence, and connection to community prior to university. To date, however, limited empirical research has been conducted on the ways in which aspects of universities impact students’ cultural identities, particularly within Alaska.

**Context of the Present Study**

Indigenous communities and cultures within Alaska are tremendously diverse. For example, there are over twenty distinct Indigenous languages and eight overarching cultural groups (Kirk & Starn, 2009). While many AN people reside in rural villages and small hub communities, significant migration to urban locations has occurred, partially for educational, employment, and health care purposes. Roughly 40 percent of the AN population resides within an urban setting (Williams, 2009). Due to the size of Alaska, traveling between communities often requires substantial time and expense. Throughout this paper, we use the term ‘urban’ to signify metropolitan areas (i.e., Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau), ‘hub’ communities to indicate large villages within rural areas that serve as an economic, health care, and social services center for the area, and ‘rural’ to refer to all other smaller villages or communities in Alaska, both on
and off the road system. While these terms are imperfect and there is great variability within categories as well as between them, the terms are meaningful to the context of Alaska.

The present study was conducted at an urban, public university where AN/AI students represent 10% of the student population. The setting serves as an urban center for smaller communities across the state; therefore, the AN/AI student population represents diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. The university has a number of programs aimed at supporting AN/AI students across academic and co-curricular settings, including academic advising, connecting students to community resources, and offering students a space to be with other AN/AI students. However, the university experiences low AN/AI student retention rates, which has been attributed to a number of challenges, including students feeling homesick, experiencing racism in the larger community, and being labeled and/or singled out for cultural norms (e.g., being ‘too quiet’) (Boeckmann, et al., 2017). Therefore, the goal of this study was to identify elements within the university that promote and conflict with AN students’ cultural identities. The knowledge gained from this analysis can inform universities of systematic changes that could be made to further support AN students’ cultural identity development, a critical component of psychological health, well-being, and academic success.

**Method**

**Research Team**

The research process was overseen by a Community Advisory Board (CAB), consisting of AN people: three university students, a university faculty member, a university student support staff member, and two community members. The research team consisted of an AN graduate student (first author) who studies cultural identity and internalized oppression and a non-Native, White assistant professor (second author) who studies the enactment of culture in
connection to emotional/behavioral health of people who have experienced cultural oppression. The team engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process via preparing and revising statements of positionality over time, consistently examining what they know and how they have come to know it, and reflecting on their responses to the research via journaling and discussions with one another and CAB members (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). For more information about the authors, please refer to the researchers’ biographies.

**Design**

The study is based in transformational grounded theory (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework. The adopted epistemological stance maintains that knowledge is subjective, and lies within relationships and the human experience and seeks to forefront Indigenous voices, values, knowledge, and worldviews (Simonds & Christopher, 2013). The decolonizing framework entails acknowledging the reality of colonialism and its impact, while seeking to identify and reject perceptions of Western superiority regarding research methodology (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). Data were approached inductively and used to develop theory from the bottom up (Rasmussen et al., 2016). Such theory can be used to challenge systems to promote positive changes. This framework allowed for the exploration of connection between the individual and the systems in which they live (Yuan et al., 2014). The research was approved by the University of Alaska Anchorage Institutional Review Board and was overseen by the project’s CAB.

**Participants**

Participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: self-identify as AN, be currently or formerly registered as an undergraduate student at the university, be over the age of 18, speak English, live in the university’s surrounding community, and agree to have the focus
groups audio-recorded. The sample consisted of 16 women and 4 men (total \( n = 20 \)), all of whom were current students at the time of the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 51 (\( M = 26.1 \), \( SD = 9.94 \)), consistent with the AN student population on campus. Students’ location of upbringing, cultural group affiliation, major, minor, and year at university can be seen in Table 1.

**Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling procedure (Etikan et al., 2016) in partnership with a university program aimed at supporting AN students in academic and co-curricular activities. A recruitment letter was displayed in the program’s office and sent through their email listserv. Participants were asked to contact the research team directly to enroll or submit a completed form to the program’s office.

The research team held seven focus groups across a 6-month period in private locations on the university campus. Two to four participants attended each focus group. In order to reach saturation, focus groups were conducted until no new information emerged for two focus groups (Fusch & Ness, 2015). All focus groups were facilitated by the second author, with the first author taking field notes. Written and verbal consent was obtained prior to each group. Focus groups followed a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that prominent concepts were reliably discussed in each group. The open-ended nature of the questions and probes allowed for the participants to guide the discussion. This study explored narratives around two questions:

1. What aspects of university life help support your cultural identity?
2. What aspects of university life clash with or challenge your cultural identity?

The second author regularly checked in with participants to assess for similar and dissimilar perspectives or experiences, and participants were provided notepads to record any information
they were uncomfortable sharing aloud. Each focus group lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and was audio-recorded. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire and were compensated for their time with a $25 gift card.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed transformational grounded theory methods (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). Focus groups were transcribed by a professional transcription service and uploaded into ATLAS.ti for analysis. Data were analyzed alongside data collection, allowing for the assessment of saturation. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, identifying information was removed, and field notes from the observations of the groups were added. The first author open-coded the first five transcripts individually, which involved assigning a word or phrase to each complete idea in order to capture its essence (Moghaddam, 2006). The second author reviewed these open codes and discussed them with the first author.

The research team then developed a codebook informed by the open codes, consisting of a code name, definition, and examples of code use. Team members independently coded each transcript using the codebook. Uncommon information not captured with existing codes was recorded in memos and new codes were created if the information emerged in more than one focus group. Previously coded transcripts were reviewed with the updated codebook to ensure that data was captured consistently. The team reviewed discrepancies and came to consensus on which codes best captured the data through discussion. The research team also engaged in individual memoing throughout the study to capture reactions and emerging findings. The team engaged in theoretical coding by examining associations between codes and fleshing them out in memos. The team attended to both convergent and divergent themes. The findings were then presented to the CAB to seek feedback and corroborate perspectives.
Results

Multiple university elements were congruent with and/or supported AN students’ cultural identities, including opportunities for connection, cultural engagement, and Indigenous spaces. Other elements conflicted with cultural identities, including prejudice, difficulty engaging in culture, lack of representation, and conflicts with the system and setting.

**Congruent and/or Supportive Elements of the University Context**

**Connection.** Students across all focus groups and contexts reported that the ability to meet, connect with, and/or be around other Indigenous students was supportive of their cultural identities. Students found connection through student support services, student organizations, classes, student housing, and university events. As Morning\(^1\) (G6, F, 23, Southcentral, Urban\(^2\)) explained, “*Being in classes that were primarily Alaska Native students that have very similar experiences and values and stuff was really nice. ... That really helped me solidify my identity in college and have my own perspective.*” Bun (G5, F, 51, Far North, Hub) described her experiences with university-arranged dances and potlucks: “*Amazing. That is a real boost of cultural connectedness. ... I'm fellowshipping, we're eating food and there's five dance groups, so it's just a night of enjoyment.*”

Connections with AN faculty and staff were also supportive of their cultural identities. Agnaksraq (G3, M, 26, Far North, Hub) explained, “*I've definitely realized that they [staff in a Native affairs office] do try to get you involved in current Alaska Native events. To try and get you engaged, and still be able to get involved with the culture.*” Connecting with professors of Alaska Native Studies courses was occasionally discussed. Kathryn (G4, F, 20, Southcentral, Urban) emphasized the importance of cultural fitness: “*I love the professors, and just having*

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\(^1\) This and all other names are pseudonyms and chosen by participants
\(^2\) Home location type was organized by the following categories: urban, hub community, and rural.
professors that are in tune with the Alaska Native culture, and hopefully they are Alaska Natives [that] teach about subjects like that.”

Generally, students with a stronger sense of cultural identity at the start of university viewed connection as a way to maintain their cultural bond. On the other hand, students who arrived at the university more disconnected from their AN identity described connection as supporting their identity development. Minnie (G5, F, 26, Southcentral, Urban), a student who recently learned of her cultural identity, reflected on her experience: “I don't have this big connectedness with my Native culture. ... There was a meet-and-greet [at the university] and everyone was really kind, and I felt like I learned a lot and I talked to other students who were Native. So, for me, it was like really enriching because it's where I'm coming from.”

Cultural Engagement and Knowledge. Students from all contexts reported engaging in and learning more about their culture and other AN cultures through student affairs and academics. Engagement in culture was commonly described as eating traditional foods and making traditional clothing or arts. Bun, quoted above, stated, “They [a Native student affairs organization] do beading, skin-sewing, they had carving classes, they also made the kuspuk, you’d learn how to make kuspuk there, and it's a general place to go and hang out with other Native students.” A few students commented on their ability to engage in subsistence via university-sponsored activities as vital to maintaining their cultural identities. Tun (G2, F, 22, Southwest, Hub) commented, “If you’re not home, you could still do the things sort of what you can do back home. Like berry-picking and fishing.”

Across focus groups Alaska Native Studies (a university department) classes were emphasized as a significant contributor to the development of cultural identity. Learning about the history of AN communities was stressed as a powerful mechanism through which cultural
identity flourished. In addition, several students reported that the ability to learn or practice Alaska Native languages in classes or programs was supportive of cultural identity. Napaaqtuq (G2, M, 19, Far North, Hub) explained:

“With the availability of language courses as well as other courses such as music and Alaska Natives and Indigenous people from other regions. ... These classes support cultural identities because it gives Native students in those classes and also the non-Native students more knowledge about the cultures.”

For students who previously struggled to accept their AN identity, knowledge gained from classes was particularly important. Yeesh Ka (G3, M, 22, Southcentral, Urban) recalled:

“The stereotypes were still heavily predominant. And in the [pre-university] curriculum that I was being taught didn't speak very highly of Native people, and if it did it was just a brief moment. ... So, it didn't really help me progress identifying as being Native, until I came here and met everybody and started taking Alaska Native Studies classes, and learning about the history. Then, that's really when I started owning it. ... Ever since then I've been identifying as Native.”

Students who arrived at the university with a more secure sense of identity also reported that Alaska Native Studies classes helped to further their cultural identities and create a sense of resilience. CJ (G1, F, 23, Southcentral/Far North/Interior, Rural/Hub/Urban) described her experiences with Alaska Native Studies classes, “It was sad class, but I feel like it was a little bit revitalizing to take it. 'Cause it made me go home and ask my dad and my mom a bunch of questions about my culture and I learned a lot of things...”

**Indigenous Space and a Sense of Home.** Aspects of the setting made students feel recognized and gave them a sense of home. Experiencing a sense of home was particularly
important for students from rural areas and hub communities, as several reported significant homesickness and disclosed thoughts of leaving school before completing their degrees. Butch (G7, F, 19, Southwest/Southcentral, Hub/Rural) stated, “And then after that [event through a Native student affairs organization], I was like okay, I only have less than a month here. I’ll be fine. I can get through it.” The Indigenous spaces created by some student affairs offices helped students to transition into an often culturally unfamiliar setting, providing opportunities for engagement in cultural activities and connection to other AN people. Students reported using these spaces between classes or when they wanted to get out of their university housing, especially when new to the city. Even students from urban backgrounds, such as Onyondao (G2, F, 51, West Coast of U.S., Urban) found the spaces to be helpful: “I like [a Native student affairs office] because at least I’m with Alaska Natives, so I feel at home there.” Other students described their cultural identities being supported by the university setting itself. Walter (G4, M, 31, Southcentral, Urban) explained, “It is cool – you go around, and you see little signs written in various Native languages, ... I’m being acknowledged.”

Conflicting Elements of the University Context

Prejudice and Stereotyping. For students from all contexts and across almost all focus groups, prejudice and stereotyping were discussed as major points of conflict with their cultural identities and the environment. These experiences occurred both on campus and in the larger community, including receiving negative looks while in public, being racially profiled by the police, and being looked down upon as evidenced by comments made by non-Indigenous people. Ali (G4, F, 18, Southwest/Interior/Southcentral, Rural/Urban) explained, “You have some type of people that are like, ‘What are you doing here? Go back to the village.’” Biracial students, like
Sou-ut (G2, F, 20, West Coast of U.S./Southeast Alaska, Urban/Hub) described experiencing prejudice against the multiple identities she holds:

“I’m initially part of like three different [cultures]. ... It was very tricky because when you’re part of more than one culture it’s hard to determine which one to identify as. ... I know a lot about the culture that I’m a part of, but my appearance may seem otherwise. So, people mistake me as just being White and they shame me for not looking Native.”

Students expressed various reactions to these instances, perhaps in an effort to lessen the conflict with their cultural identities. Some students disclosed attempts to avoid situations in which they may be subject to discrimination. Tutma (G4, F, 18, Southwest, Rural) described her experiences reaching out to others in the university:

“When I see them, I try and smile, but then they just look at me and just walk away you know. Like, okay, maybe I’ll ignore that person too. But it was like really hard, because at first, I didn’t really know anybody here like to talk to as well, and I just felt really homesick at this time, and I was saying, ‘Should I just go back, drop out?’”

Others, such as Agnaksraq, quoted above, actively attempted to change negative stereotypes to better fit with their cultural identities:

“Just the stigma of Alaska Natives... That some people have in their head. A lot of people that they see around here in [the university’s surrounding community], around the streets, are homeless people. And unfortunately, a lot of the homeless here are Alaska Native... Some people can carry that image with them all the time. Just trying to change their viewpoint as to what our people are. ... Tell like stories back home, and what we do. Our traditions.”
Lack of Representation. Students from all contexts reported a general lack of representation in both AN students and professors. For some, lack of representation conflicted with their cultural identities, mainly due to isolation of perspectives and insights into AN culture. CJ, quoted earlier, described an experience of being the only AN person in a class in which a non-AN person dispersed incorrect information: “There was this lady who was like ‘this is what Alaska Natives do,’ … It was just the most bizarre thing. … She was saying that we were talking to animals … I didn’t even know what she was talking about. … And [other students] believe that it’s true.” The desire to be represented through having more AN professors was discussed by several students, especially when it came to Alaska Native Studies courses. Kathryn, quoted earlier, recalled:

“I had a professor that wasn’t Alaska Native that was teaching a class and that was very odd. There was like a very big disconnect in what she was teaching. Like the class, it just felt odd learning that from someone who was not Native. … I would appreciate people more in tune or closer to the culture and material.”

In addition, several students described difficulty connecting to other students and feeling forced to be the voice of the AN perspective in their classes. Faith (G7, F, 25, Southwest, Rural) explained: “And I felt like I was being mainly the spokesperson for the Natives. … I felt shy sometimes and… I would at the end of the semester I remember saying ‘okay this is only my opinion…’ And I would say that was really, it was a difficult class.”

Students diverged on how they experienced lack of representation and its impact on their cultural identities. For example, Faith shared that connections with non-AN students helped to counter the clash with her cultural identity “because some of those students would just really look at me and actually listen to what I had to say. I felt heard and appreciated in that class. So,
I think that's honestly how I survived through that class. 'Cause it was difficult.” Other students, such as Morning, quoted earlier, felt that it was their duty to share their cultural identities and provide an AN viewpoint:

“To advocate for Alaska Native culture too, ‘cause you don't know how often I'm the token Native in all of my classes. It's not like I'm called upon to do this, I see it as my responsibility to do. To give the differing perspective than just the Westernized perspective that is leading and mainly the only conversation in perspective...”

Divergently, Onyondao, quoted earlier, described how lack of representation conflicted with cultural identity and lead to disengaging behaviors, even among other AN people:

“I don't attend Native events here unless I hear Tlingit or Haida because I still feel like I'm left out... especially if an Elder asks me, ‘So where are you from?’ It's just like I brace myself underneath. ... So, I don't go to Native events.”

**Difficulty Engaging in Culture.** Students described difficulties accessing their culture in the university and urban setting, which impeded cultural identity maintenance. This challenge was expressed primarily from students who lived in villages or hub communities locations prior to attending university and included limited access to traditional AN foods and subsistence lifestyles. Sunshine (G6, F, 20, Southwest, Rural/Hub) described her experience with having no AN foods in the campus eatery:

“It doesn't seem that bad, but then if you grow up eating Native foods every day, having soup made by your grandparents. ... We're used to the Native foods. What we crave, what we need, and it's part of ourselves. It's what our ancestors used to eat and stuff and having it all just taken away is really difficult.”
Another student, CJ, previously quoted, expressed other ways in which the environment conflicted with her cultural identity maintenance:

“I feel like here in [the university’s larger community], I’m so far away from everybody [that] I can’t really do what everybody else is doing. There’s things going on in [family’s village]. ... They’ve got like fish camps all the time, beading, and all these cool things. But here in [university’s larger community]... it’s just not the same. ... I don’t realize it but I forgot a lot of things about my culture. ... My dad notices it too, he’s like, ‘You need to spend more time with your family.’... but it’s hard ‘cause it’s school and work, every day for me.”

Students, such as Yeesh Ka, quoted earlier, expressed difficulty accessing their culture due to limited university space and faculty: “I think it’s mostly just like the resources ... understaffed resources, because when I first came here, [Native student affairs office] was fully staffed, and they had lots people to help. For me going down there helped out a lot.” Students expressed that when the university appeared to prioritize academics to the exclusion of other aspects of life, they struggled to engage in their cultures, connect with others, and maintain their cultural identities. Others found the lack of academic programming related to AN cultures to conflict with cultural identities, as Agnatriuq (G7, F, 38, West Coast of U.S., Urban) explained, “They don’t have an Alaska Native Studies major ... or an Indigenous Studies major. That’s what I really wanted to major in and they don’t have it.”

**Conflicts with Westernized Systems and the Urban Setting.** Clashes between students’ cultural identities and the university’s Westernized system were discussed across almost all focus groups. Faye (G1, F, 19, West Coast of U.S./Interior, Urban/Rural) explained:
“It's hard to be Native and go to school. ... If you're raised and you have that Native experience, if you live your Native life, your ways ... it's hard, 'cause I am Alaska Native. ... It's hard to be that and then try to go into the White world and work. ... I know I need a future, obviously, so I'm just trying. ... It's just hard to know that I'm Gwich’in every day, and then go to school.”

Cultural conflicts came primarily from students who lived in a village or hub community prior to attending school in the urban area. One student, Algu Girl (G3, F, 31, Southcentral/Southeast, Rural/Hub) described challenges with the “fast pace of the university. The closed-offness of so many students, not everyone, but so many students.” Having the ability to share and communicate with people in the community were generally described as difficult, due to both the size of the city and social customs. Butch, quoted earlier, stated, “Just how big it is here. Even just the campus is so big. And it’s scarier here. 'Cause where I’m from everyone knows everyone and here it’s so big and you don’t feel like you belong.” Tutma, quoted earlier, discussed a similar experience: “I don’t really know much of the city, and I kept bugging people, like asking, “How do you do this? How do you do that? And then I forgot. Someone just like gave me that look, like, ‘She doesn’t know this stuff. ‘She should just go back,’ So, I just like shut myself, and so that’s why I’m really shy and quiet.” While this student disclosed a retractive response when aspects of her environment conflicted with her cultural identity, another student reported turning to her cultural practices to ground herself, thereby enhancing her ability to navigate both worlds.

Finally, the Westernized academic structure was described as conflicting with cultural identities of students from all areas. Morning, quoted earlier, shared:

“The conflicts are obvious. As soon as you step foot in one of the classrooms, you can feel the overpowering rhetoric that's happening. This Westernized mentality that you're
kind of expected to succumb to. There's not really a way of addressing that or fighting with it because that's what you have to endure to get a degree and to deal with the classes. That right there is the main thing that is a conflict and a struggle.”

Likewise, several students described Westernized teaching methods as incompatible. For example, one student expressed frustration with the expert stance taken by some professors and the power structure within the classroom. Another student, Agnauquq, quoted earlier, described the conflicts with common teaching methods in the university, such as reading and writing: “I'm not used to a lot of writing. I always feel like when we were growing up everything we did was talking. ... When the Elders would talk to us. When my Grandma would talk to us. Everything we learned was always verbal.” Verbal and experiential learning methods were seen as more culturally congruent. Agnauquq further described her experience when given the opportunity to learn in more culturally consistent ways: “I was working with the storyteller. ... He taught me just using oral traditions and I learned so much more from him. ... It felt more natural.”

Discussion

AN students from all contexts underlined the importance of social connections with other AN people, engagement in AN cultural activities and learning about AN culture, and the development of Indigenous spaces as elements that support and/or align with cultural identities. Past research has highlighted the importance of Indigenous spaces in creating a sense of home and belonging while helping students to navigate academia (Lopez, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017; Windchief & Joseph, 2015). As these findings suggest, such spaces likely foster students’ cultural identities as well. Consistent with research on cultural engagement among Indigenous youths in urban settings (e.g., Schweigman et al., 2011), this study found that cultural engagement supports cultural identity among AN students. It goes beyond the current literature
to highlight the importance of interpersonal connectedness with other AN people from diverse tribes and regions in supporting cultural identity among AN students. These elements appeared to foster the development of cultural identity among students who reported that they were previously culturally disconnected, as well as the solidification of cultural identity amongst individuals with a stronger sense of cultural connectedness. Therefore, these data suggest that programs designed to promote cultural identity need not target individuals separately, based on level of cultural connectedness or cultural affiliation.

While connectedness, cultural engagement, and Indigenous spaces emerged as separate themes, they were intertwined. For example, cultural engagement and connection appear bidirectionally related; forming connections with AN students or faculty promoted engagement in cultural practices while engaging in cultural activities fostered interpersonal connections. The interconnectedness among supportive elements suggest that intervening with one component will likely augment another. For instance, providing Indigenous spaces within the university may encourage students to learn about or engage in AN cultures, as well as support their connection with others, congruent with other findings (e.g., Tachine et al., 2017; Waterman, 2012). Participants discussed “study-only” Indigenous spaces as nonfacilitative of cultural identity and often described them as conflicting with their identities. Since the academic self is only one aspect of identity, a focus on academics in program curriculum appears to have limited power in its ability to enhance the wholeness of identity. Programs developed to facilitate identity should be evaluated in their ability to comprehensively support all parts of AN students. When aiming to promote cultural identity by expanding Indigenous space, focus should be placed on connection and cultural engagement. Examples of these spaces include the wǝɫǝbʔaltxʷ - Intellectual house (University of Washington, n.d.) and the First Nations Longhouse (University of British
Columbia, 2021). Leonard and Mercier (2014) additionally remark upon the importance of establishing Indigenous space in university settings that allow for the authentic discourse on Indigenous knowledge and scientific systems, as well as issues impacting Indigenous communities, locally and globally.

In regard to conflicting university elements, participants from all contexts spoke to lack of representation, discrimination and stereotyping, difficulty engaging in culture, and conflicts with Westernized systems. Consistent with literature (e.g., Huffman, 2001; Jackson et al., 2003), AN students reported more clashing than congruent elements, which may highlight a more conflictual nature of university settings for AN people. Unlike the supportive aspects, conflicting elements appeared less associated with one another. Thus, programs designed to prevent cultural identity conflict should be mindful in targeting each opposing element. The clashing components, however, appeared inversely related to supportive elements; in other words, increasing elements described as congruent with and supportive of cultural identity may also decrease conflicting elements. For example, developing Indigenous spaces may help to diminish the experience of lack of representation, because it creates the opportunity to be surrounded by other AN people. Notably, some aspects of the university could be both facilitative and obstructive, depending on implementation. For instance, while learning about AN culture through coursework was identified as supportive, it was simultaneously discussed as conflicting if it promoted stereotypes about AN people or was not culturally responsive.

The current results suggest that systematic changes can be made within the university to combat elements conflicting with cultural identity. Since AN coursework and student affairs provide an important opportunity for cultural identity development, lack of representation among faculty may impede cultural identity development by deterring students or hindering their ability
to learn about AN cultures from a genuine source. Therefore, adequate staffing of AN professors, advisors, and other staff may be essential in promoting cultural identity, a sense of belonging, and enrollment of AN students, as suggested by others (Leonard & Mercier, 2014; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). Efforts to increase student representation are also critical, as previous research (e.g., Hurtado et al., 1998) has demonstrated that lack of representation of minority students on campus can stimulate stereotyping and alienation.

Accounts of discrimination, racism, and stereotyping in higher education have been reported by diverse samples of Indigenous students overtime (e.g., Boeckmann, et al., 2017; Huffman, 1991; Jackson et al., 2003; Keene, 2016; Tachine et al., 2017). This study supports these accounts and expands the literature by displaying how discrimination may impact cultural identity. Due to the significant consequences of discrimination and stereotyping, universities should actively work to implement programs aimed at preventing such experiences. While not examined specifically with AI/AN students, programs such as the Multi-Racial Living Unity Experience (MRULE), which involves weekly meetings over the academic year to discuss and learn about racial issues, positively changes racial attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors among other racial groups (Muthuswamy et al., 2006). In addition, studies conducted with minoritized youths have found that maintaining a strong ethnic identity (a term often used interchangeably with cultural identity) was protective against the negative psychological effects of discrimination (e.g., Galliher et al., 2011; Romero et al., 2014). Although these findings are inconsistent across samples (Lee, 2003), efforts within the university to facilitate the cultural identities of Indigenous students, may mitigate adverse consequences associated with discrimination.

Difficulty engaging in Indigenous cultures within the urban settings has been noted (e.g., Brown et al., 2016; Friedel, 2011). In the current study, students from rural and hub communities
spoke more to these conflicts, potentially reflecting limited familiarity with ways to engage with their culture in a new environment or differences in the meaning of cultural engagement among urban students. Although homesickness, described by some students, can partially explain such conflicts, those attending university from other more populated communities reported fewer conflicts than those from small villages and more rural communities. Therefore, conflicts may more readily reflect the university and/or urban setting. While going home is one strategy to maintain cultural connection while attending university (Waterman, 2012), there can be limited opportunity in Alaska given significant distance and expense required to travel home. Therefore, these Indigenous spaces and programs are imperative in helping rural and hub community students to navigate the university and establish cultural resources within the urban context. At the same time, these spaces also appear to benefit students who were raised in an urban environment by supporting their cultural identity development.

Lastly, incorporating more culturally congruent teaching methods, such as oral and experiential techniques, may promote cultural identity and academic success. Suggestions for culturally responsive teaching methods have been discussed (Barnhardt, 2008; Burk, 2007; Guillory & Williams, 2014; Pewewardy, 2002), with one qualitative study indicating that socio-cultural teaching methods lead to the development and reinforcement of cultural identity among Indigenous youth ages 12-19 (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010). Moreover, Indigenous scholars (e.g., Barnhardt, 2008; Leonard & Mercier, 2014) have advocated for curricular shifts from simply teaching/learning about AN cultures to teaching/learning through these cultures.

As scholars (Brayboy et al., 2012; Fish & Syed, 2018) have discussed, literature often focuses on implementing changes at the individual level in order to help Indigenous students adjust to university settings. The current findings imply that systems-level changes could
enhance cultural congruency and identity, thereby lessening the historical push for Indigenous students to conform to a rigid Westernized education system. Such shifts may foster the well-being of Indigenous students along with their academic success. As an institution, the role of the university is to serve its students and community; therefore, university settings must seek to ensure that its structure and systems are reflective of and relevant for those it serves and their diverse cultures.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has several notable limitations. Although participants were recruited through a listserv that theoretically reaches all of the university’s AN students, it is possible that the study attracted individuals with particular engagement in Indigenous affairs or who were interested in cultural identity. As a result, students especially detached from their cultural identities may be less represented in this sample. In addition, 80 percent of the participants were female, while women make up 65 percent of the AN population within the university where focus groups were conducted.

Due to the nature and goals of qualitative research, the current findings are not fully generalizable to a large population. However, these findings are representative of participants’ contextual experiences and provide significant insight into their worlds. It is up to the reader to determine how the results from this study may be applicable in their settings and with their population. Similarly, the results from this study do not reveal a causal relation between university elements and cultural identity, as no elements of the university were manipulated and controlled for. Rather, the goal was to inductively identify the processes by which the university context affects cultural identity, as experienced by AN students. Finally, the use of focus groups for data collection brings certain limitations, such as being vulnerable to facilitator bias.
Likewise, discussions in focus groups can become unfocused and dominated by a few more outspoken participants (Omni Group, 2013). To mitigate these limitations, the focus group facilitator regularly checked in participants to assess for differing perspectives or experiences, and each participant was given a notepad to record any information they did not feel comfortable sharing aloud or could not incorporate into the discussion. Additionally, multiple team members independently analyzed the data, and the CAB reviewed all findings.

Future research should consider utilizing quasi-experimental designs to understand causal relationships pertaining to cultural identity development. Additionally, many participants shared bicultural experiences of being either part Indigenous or holding multiple tribal affiliations. Thus, research should further examine the bicultural experience of Indigenous students, and its relation to cultural identity development. Also, since the importance of Indigenous spaces arose throughout focus groups, future studies should continue to investigate the ways in which these spaces cultivate cultural identity. Such research may not only aid the development of university-based programs, but with Indigenous community spaces as well. Lastly, consistent with past literature, the current findings displayed more clashing elements than supporting elements. Therefore, forthcoming inquiries should focus primarily on the supportive factors to guide effective interventions.

**Conclusion**

Findings from this study dovetail with prior research around the globe in demonstrating that universities systems frequently present conflicts for Indigenous students in an Alaskan context as well. Although many systematic components of the university clash with the cultural identities of Indigenous students, the university setting appears to also hold the ability to support
and promote cultural identity, providing ideas for intervention and systems change to better support students. Bun (G5, F, 51, Far North, Urban Cluster) concluded:

“Every time that I’m here at [the university], at [Native student affairs], I find fellowship. ... I find acceptance, just being around of students who face the same struggles that I do as a Native student, and I think the best part for me was a [cultural identity development program]. ... I think for me learning to really accept the fact that I’m Alaska Native and it’s a beautiful thing.”
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Table 1. 

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<th>Male</th>
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<td>Urban setting</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yup’ik and/or Cup’ik</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haida, Tsimshian)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth or more</td>
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<td>Social Work</td>
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<td>1 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided/Unreported</td>
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<sup>a</sup> Participants are identified with pseudonyms they chose, the focus group number, gender, age, region, and location type in which they were raised (urban, urban cluster, or rural). For this investigation, urban includes large metropolitan areas (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau). Hub communities indicate large villages within rural locations that provide economic and health services to the surrounding areas (Utqiagvik in the far north; Koyukuk, Tanana, and Nenana in
the Interior; Nome and Kotzebue in the Northwest; Valdez, Seward, and Whittier in the Prince William Sound; Homer in Southcentral; Skagway, Haines, Sitka, and Ketchikan in Southeast; Dillingham, Naknek, Kodiak, Unalaska, and Dutch Harbor in Southwest; and Bethel in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region). Rural refers to all other smaller communities or villages throughout Alaska.

b Total does not equal 100%, due to two students double majoring in two subjects each.