How Are the Aspirations of British Columbia Institute of Technology First Nations Students Defined by Their Indigenous Perspective?

by

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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

These stories of successful First Nations students, from a First Nations student technical staff and graduate student, allow for a unique Indigenous perspective to contribute relevant research to the field of Indigenous education. This research will contribute to an emerging body of scholarship that underscores the distinct form of knowledge that an Indigenous paradigm provides. Through qualitative research, this research provides a better understanding of the personal, educational and cultural factors that need to be present in a post-secondary institution for First Nations students to aspire to, enter, and then successfully graduate—in this case—from the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT).

My thesis asks the question: How are the aspirations of First Nations students at BCIT defined by their Indigenous perspective? I uncovered five themes that start to define an Indigenous student perspective: Family History, First Nations Identity, Culture, Work Ethic and Role Models. Findings of the research also provide the shared or individual factors present in First Nations students’ histories and experiences that helped them to reach a level of success in post-secondary education; inform post-secondary institutions on ways to improve First Nations students’ retention and graduation rates; provide qualitative research which will benefit the population of First Nations students who are considering entering post-secondary education; provide recommendations for further research in the area of Aboriginal education in school districts and post-secondary institutions; and explore the use of narrative and an Indigenous paradigm in Aboriginal research.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Communication, Education, Indigenous, First Nations, Narrative Inquiry, Post-secondary students, Post-secondary institutions
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A Note on Terminology

When discussing the Indigenous people of Canada, a First Nations person refers to an individual who is registered as a status Indian within Canada under the Indian Act (Indian Act, 2013). A First Nations individual that is not registered as a status Indian under the Indian Act is referred to as non-status First Nations person. In Canada, there are also the Métis and Inuit people who are indigenous to this land, so the more inclusive term Aboriginal is commonly used by Canadian governments and institutions serving diverse Indigenous populations. The term ‘Indian’ could be used more commonly depending on the individual(s) discussing it. For example, a First Nations person may be comfortable in referring to another First Nations person as an Indian, but may feel that is a derogatory remark coming from a non-Aboriginal person. The term ‘Indigenous’ is now used to mean that knowledge system that is inclusive of Indigenous peoples worldwide (Wilson, 2003). As a researcher, the Indigenous perspective has guided me and underwrites the protocols I follow, and, as such, I will use the term Indigenous to cover all aspects of Aboriginal perspectives.
Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the traditional territories of the First Nations interviewees. I also acknowledge the Coast Salish and Carrier (Dakelh) Territories my research took place in and where my family in Vancouver and Tl’azt’en Nation reside—Hych’ka and Muschio.

Thank you to my grandparents on the Joseph and Musgrove side, who direct my thoughts and are always with me. Thank you Rose Point, for providing guidance in work and play.

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This is dedicated to my daughter Ila, a young First Nations learner of Dakelh, Norwegian and Irish descent. You are the smartest, most beautiful girl in the whole world.

This is also written for Darry Oundendag, who helped so many kids in education and life, including Ang, Max, Maddie and I.
Introduction

My father, a member of Tl’azt’en First Nation, never knew what he could have turned out to be with an education, as that opportunity was taken away from him by being placed in the Lejac Residential School. It was not his fault and he has strived during his lifetime to take adult courses, learn from Dakelh language and culture, the Tl’azt’en Nation community and in his work. My mother, a descendent of European settlers, is a retired district principal for Aboriginal Education in the Comox Valley. She was raised in West Vancouver and lived in Vancouver while studying at the University of British Columbia for her Bachelor of Education degree. She met my father when he was presenting on First Nations politics in her First Nations Studies class in 1970. My parents have shaped who I am as First Nations person who is learning and working in the mainstream education system.

I am now writing my thesis to accomplish my Master of Arts in Professional Communication at Royal Roads University (RRU). I can look back and reflect on what influenced me to be in the place I am in today and to ask a community of First Nations graduates of technology certificate, diploma and degree programs to assist me with my research into what it takes for First Nations students to successfully embark on and complete their post-secondary education. My goal in this research is to tell the students’ stories in their own words, to offer insight into their educational success and motivation and to inform educational institutions and the people that work within them how to communicate with Indigenous students. In what follows, I have shared the students’ paths through unedited, narrative inquiry, according to the principles inherent to Indigenous research paradigm, which I discuss below. I begin to define what factors lead to their collective success in education from an Indigenous student perspective. I intuitively place myself in the story to show respect for my Elders and youth and allow
community(ies) to locate me (Kovach, 2010, p. 110). I reflectively place myself in this research so as to be able to provide a context for my ability to truly present an Indigenous perspective. With initial guidance from my mother, father, my aunt Bernie, and Ed John (external thesis committee member), I discussed Dakelh tradition and they reiterated the importance of becoming a narrator for First Nations and allowing the First Nations student voice to be heard directly through this thesis. Kovach mentions that critically locating self gives opportunity to examine our research purpose and motive (2010, p. 112). The connection that I received in turn from the First Nations students confirmed this positionality and I hope to reciprocate their trust in me by retelling their stories and making sure these stories are continuously visible in the study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.7). Before I share their stories, first allow me to share my own.

**My position as an Indigenous person**

I am a status, First Nations man born in Victoria and raised in Vancouver as well as often spending time in the Tl'azt'en Nation traditional territory, a First Nations reserve community in Northern British Columbia. My mother and father separated when I was around three years old. After their divorce, my mother would drive 14 hours from Vancouver to the Tl’azt’en Nation every summer for my sister and I to visit with my father. My time there was spent on the land, packing my half brother around on my shoulders and exploring the Middle River and Stuart Lake communities with my father, grandfather and extended family. I enjoyed the remoteness of this isolated reserve and the freedom to explore. At the time, I didn’t think too much of being exposed to my First Nations culture, but my mother made sure I was connected and she knew I was absorbing their way of being. It balanced my experiences of living in Vancouver, where Eurocentric and otherwise non-Indigenous cultural notions of family, values and education were more apparent.
Balancing both sides of my heritage and growing up in Vancouver was challenging. First Nations culture sometimes could be seen more from others than myself, because I grew up in a very Caucasian area(s) in my high school and elementary years. I was often faced with racism, two different worlds was my reality, but having my father in Northern B.C. while I lived with my mother and sister in Vancouver, I followed my mother’s lifestyle more naturally. I went to regular secondary school until Grade 10 and then into alternative schools on the west side of Vancouver, before walking across the stage, without graduating, from an alternative school in East Vancouver. While working in Vancouver nightclubs and restaurants from 20-25 years of age, I started upgrading courses in order to receive a Dogwood diploma. After contacting my father and forming a relationship with the Education Coordinator in Tl’azt’en Nation I was able to get Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (now Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada) funding for my post-secondary education and took out a student loan in order to devote myself full time to accomplishing my diploma. I had to continue the last years with a part-time schooling and part time work schedule.

As part of my undergraduate degree, I worked and lived in Tl’azt’en Nation. This work opportunity gave me a much deeper understanding of the community and opened me up to traditional ways of communicating with family, community members and the Elders with whom I worked. I experienced the isolation of such remote, reserve life, including separation from Internet-based communication technologies—technologies that for many Canadians have become central to their daily interactions. This lack of access to communication technologies was then simply a fact of life for these reserves. My career and life goals shifted drastically from this experience and I was motivated to find ways to improve the lack of communication that people living on many reserves have with the outside and to find opportunities for improving
access to all levels of education and for the development of sustainable futures with organizations and industries.

Currently, I live in East Vancouver and became an employee of the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) in Burnaby, B.C., Canada in 2008. My official title is Advisor within the Aboriginal Services Department. At the same time, I am completing my Master of Arts in Professional Communication at Royal Roads University and raising my five-year-old daughter. I have an active relationship with my father, Tl’azt’en Chief and Council and a family/community who call me by my full name, Zaa Derik Gammel Joseph. Zaa is after my great aunt’s husband Zaa Williams from the Tahltan Nation surrounding Telegraph Creek, B.C.; Gammel is after my grandfather Gammel Joseph. We called him Aba (‘father’ in Dakelh language). My relatives call me by my namesake Zaa, because this is the name I used until I entered school when I was 5 and they used it when they would take care of me when I would visit as a child.

My role as advisor in the BCIT Aboriginal Services is to help connect Aboriginal students with resources and services available to them in the Lower Mainland. BCIT has 46,464 students currently enrolled of which 17,263 are part-time students and 29,201 are full-time (BCIT, 2012a). 1,326 students self-identify as being of Aboriginal descent (see Appendix A) (BCIT, 2012b). A big draw to BCIT is a 78% employment rate for technology certificate and diploma program graduates and 94% employment rate for technology degree program graduates (BCIT, 2012c).

The most important aspects of my role are my relationships with all Metis, Status and Non-status First Nations, and Inuit students at BCIT and my personal interactions with the First Nations communities around B.C. and Canada. These relationships sparked my research into
First Nations students' success in post-secondary education, because I knew the struggles that we face along the way and working with BCIT Aboriginal students has allowed me a unique vantage point to witness the emergence of our various strengths. Joanne Stone-Campbell, the Coordinator of Aboriginal Services, has been a mentor for me in my career at BCIT and she also aligned with Indigenous epistemologies, which allow the students’ voice to be heard in a non-fragmentary and holistic way (Atleo as cited in Kovach, 2012, p.130).

**Research Question**

My primary research objective is to provide a better understanding of the personal, educational and cultural factors that need to be present in a post-secondary institution for Indigenous students to aspire to enter and then successfully graduate, in this case, from BCIT. My working thesis question is: How are the aspirations of graduated First Nations students at BCIT defined by their Indigenous perspective? Sub-objectives of the research are as follows: provide the shared or individual factors present in First Nations students’ histories and experiences that helped them to reach a level of success in post-secondary education; inform post-secondary institutions on ways to improve First Nations students’ retention and graduation rates; provide qualitative research which will benefit the population of First Nations students who are considering entering post-secondary education; provide recommendations for further research in the area of Aboriginal education in school districts and post-secondary institutions; and explore the use of narrative and an Indigenous paradigm in Aboriginal research.

An Indigenous research paradigm (which I elaborate on further in the literature review below) recognizes the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and people and respects cultural upbringing, family and community relations; it allows the stories of these students to be retold from a reflexive, First Nations perspective (Wilson, 2003). As a First Nations, BCIT technical
staff person and graduate student, I feel honoured to be able to contribute relevant research to Indigenous education by narrating the stories of successful First Nations students at BCIT. This qualitative research was done in partnership with students who had successfully graduated from culturally mainstream post-secondary programs. From these interviews, I have uncovered five major themes of weaknesses and strengths that exist in the life stories of these BCIT First Nations technology students, their cultures and their experiences in educational systems. These are: *Family History, First Nations Identity, Culture, Work Ethic and Role Models*. This work is also guided by the academic world and the fact that “insights into how Indigenous students experience the demands of learning while navigating complex intersections on a range of levels, is a much needed area of investigation” (Nakata, 2006 as cited in Nakata, Nakata & Chin, 2008, p. 141).

**First Nations and Aboriginal People in Canada and Their Relationship to Education**

Statistics from the recent Canada Household Survey are used as evidence that post-secondary institutions need to be ready to admit and support this growing population. In 2011, 637,660 First Nations people reported being registered Indians, representing 74.9% of all First Nations people, 45.5% of the total Aboriginal population and 1.9% of the total Canadian population with 49.3% living on reserve and 51.7% living off reserve (note-not including 36 of 863 unsurvey reserves & multiple Aboriginal identities and Aboriginal identities not included elsewhere) (Statistics Canada, 2013a, Statistics Canada, 2013b, Statistics Canada, 2013c). In 2011, 851,560 people identified as a First Nations (status and non-status) person, representing 60.8% of the total Aboriginal population and 2.6% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2013a). The Aboriginal demographic quick and continual growth is an important factor for institutional planning in Canada and Ministry of Advanced Education (MAVED), British

Aboriginal children aged 14 and under made up 28.0% of the total Aboriginal population and 7.0% of all children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013d). Non-Aboriginal children aged 14 and under represent 16.5% of the total non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2013d). This growing demographic subsequently should be strongly reflected in post-secondary graduations of reserve and off-reserve Canadian, First Nations (status Indian) people. Yet, there has been widespread acknowledgement of the unique struggle for First Nations students with the transition into post-secondary education. This research acknowledges determination and differences in cultural upbringing and a willingness to have traditional knowledge maintained, as discussed by Garrod and Larimore (1997). I am interested in the students’ lives in regards to their educational experiences, family dynamics and community relationships. I intend to reflect on their responses about the effect their higher education had on their relationship with their culture, home communities, family and friends. There is little published research related to the experience status First Nations students have in post-secondary institutions located in urban locales such as Vancouver. This research is a first step in filling that gap in the literature.

**Indigenous Student Perspective**

Just as I previously discussed my history of my family and Dakelh community, it is with great respect that I introduce the students now (as I have introduced myself) to start seeing this research through their eyes. Aboriginal voice is an integral part of the public post-secondary education system (MAVED, 2012a). Following an Indigenous paradigm, questions of axiology (research commitments and relationships) and intersections with Indigenous worldview and constructionist dialogues, one finds that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason,
emotion, and morality reside, but in relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Hart, 2010). This intersection states that knowledge is holistic and cyclic and dependent on relationships and connections to living and non-living beings and entities (Simpson, as cited in Hart, 2010). My commitment to conducting research from my own Indigenous perspective means that the students must speak for themselves, although I am following BCIT’s ethical process of confidentiality of students and will not refer to their name, First Nation band and/or program of study. Here, and throughout this study, their interview contributions will be italicized and their names have been changed. What follows next is an introduction of the students’ paths from high school to BCIT, in their own words. I offer this so that the reader is able to understand where they are coming from, that is, their perspective as self-identified First Nations students.

**Abby M:** Nothing, nothing motivated me to complete high school. Rough time to complete, got into a lot of bad things. BCIT was my second post-secondary option. I went to another Lower Mainland post-secondary for a professional certificate and then worked in the field for nine years. Due to cutbacks I lost that position so I looked at what I was passionate about and started talking to people and an acquaintance at BCIT. My mom supported me financially and mentally with my start at BCIT. Everything changed when I got into college the second go around. I had already graduated from one post-secondary so band funding was not possible. So I had to work and pay for school, a hard transition to work all-day and go to part time classes at night. If my band did support me I would have done full-time. I also worried if I could get a job with a part-time certificate versus a diploma.

**Matt:** I did not succeed in high school, for the most part not necessarily any family influence. I applied when I graduated from high school as I got straight F’s and C minuses. There was one teacher I had in grade 12 and he gave me 100% and that was the only reason I did not get kicked
out of school. In my first year at BCIT I think I had the highest-grade average in my class the first year. I was dealing drugs on the island so I decided to leave the island and when I first decided to move over here I was homeless. BCIT was starting so I just needed to come over here and start going to school. I had a place to begin with in a trailer. I was staying with a weird guy I met off the internet and I was paying $300. No money was coming in so I moved out and I was living out of my locker for the first few weeks and did not have any cash.

Cands: I wasn’t very big in high school, tall and skinny, but my dad taught me to box at a young age so I could handle myself if I were in a tough spot. I didn’t go out and look for it but if I were cornered I’d swing my way through. I don’t know what my motivation was to go to high school and graduate other than my parents pushing pretty hard for me to be the first in the family to graduate from high school. I think the one person that really stood out in high school for me was my math teacher. We established a pretty good relationship and I think that made it a lot easier for me. I was the first in my family, my immediate family, to receive a diploma in post-secondary education. I had no idea what I wanted to do in post-secondary, so I moved to Victoria after graduating and enrolled myself in (1st) post-secondary and finished there. I found a career in that field but didn’t really enjoy it too much. I worked with a company doing a two and a half to three-year project and the project manager suggested I go back to school and study my program through BCIT.

Anna: Well, I had to first go and redo my Math 11 because I had Intro Math. That was fine because I got 93%—which is another story because in high school I took Challenge Math so I did three years in two. I finished Math 10 in Grade 9, so in Grade 10 I went to Math 11 but I felt so out of place in Grade 10 and everyone else was older. So I just dropped that and went to Intro Math 11 and finished that with a good mark. The next year I took Math 11 but had a very boring
teacher so I just doodled in class and failed. So the next year same thing, I had the same teacher and I failed again because I just really didn’t go to class. I had my Math 11 credits so it didn’t really matter to me. So I tried to apply for BCIT and I needed my Math 11 so I had to retake it. Then when I applied for (1st choice option), I didn’t qualify for that. I didn’t know that I could’ve right away applied for (2nd choice option) and could have gotten in for 2001. So I reapplied for the next year and got in in 2002. BCIT didn’t tell me I could apply for (second choice option). I didn’t find that out ‘til later on down the line I could’ve started a year earlier. That was about five years after high school.

**Shiree:** High school I hated really bad up until about grade 11. I found that I was better in programs not related to my field until my Grade 12 year. I actually had a lot of support in high school from my First Nations support worker. She was great and she really pushed me to do what I wanted to do. I actually graduated with five B’s, two C’s and an F. Straight out of high school, my mom pretty much forced me to apply to (Lower Mainland post-secondary) and I was miserable. I finished that program and moved back home and ended up getting a job with a company and my boss there actually was talking about how she graduated from BCIT. I researched and looked up BCIT and found the program enticing and the benefits from it when you graduate. Going from a town of 50 to Vancouver was a big change. I was actually a hermit while I lived down there and I didn’t have a whole lot of friends. It actually wasn’t bad, I had a lot of support from my family, my cousin, while I was down there. He was at another Lower Mainland post-secondary and he really helped me out with a lot of transitioning. It wasn’t so bad not being thrown into a roommate situation with people I don’t know.

**Sara:** I guess I was younger, like around 16, when I was first able to get a job. I started in my field doing certain projects for my First Nation. I did that for like seven years and then I decided
to continue my education. I did drop out of high school for a year then went back because that’s when I wanted to do the education. My mom is always pushing education and I didn’t want anything to do with it, I just wanted to go to work. In my field I would see some management decisions not being very beneficial and then of course the strong connection with First Nations and to the land. Well it’s not just First Nations, it is everybody. I dropped out of high school to work and the motivation was to be able to move up in the world but my lack of education was holding me back from succeeding in higher paid positions. So the motivator was to prove that I know how important my field is to First Nations and not only First Nations but also all people, that was my biggest emphasis. I wanted to get that piece of paper to prove to people I know what I’m talking about. I had to do some upgrading in Math and English mainly because I need a certain mark to actually get into BCIT in the first place. So I went through another post-secondary and did some upgrading there and that gave me the foot in the door to get into BCIT and do the Technology Entry program which helps you get into the actual programs that they provide.

L’nu: Well I am not your average student so my path is a bit longer. When I was around 20 I found a job and the guy I’m working with, we worked about the same but he got a $.25 more raise than I did and I got upset. I asked my boss, “Why did he get $.25 more than me?” Well because he’s going to college. That weekend I looked in the newspaper and they had an ad for adult education, it went to Grade 9. I knew I needed to do some things, but I knew I was just as smart as the guy going to college. So I saw the number, didn’t look at the classes, called them up. Okay what’s the fee? Wednesday at ten o’clock and bring two Number 2 pencils and its $20.00. So I go there and sit down and they hand me this assessment. Finished the test got up and handed it to a person. They opened a draw, pulled out this template, or answer sheet I guess, put
it over, looked at it, did a couple things and then took it and put it in another folder. Then reached out, pulled out another piece of paper and took out a stamp, stamped it and then handed it to me and I looked at it and it was a high school diploma. So I guess I tested for a high school diploma instead of going to classes. (Many years later) coming from out of Canada in the work field, I was an assistant manager, so I actually started downgrading myself to work in Canada. I went from assistant manager to a lower position and from there lower, still working, but more of a physical thing then it was mental. I finally went to a BCIT information session and talked to an instructor and I told him what I wanted to do and he said yes you can do that and we’ll show you how to do that and so then I applied. One of the biggest things when it comes to First Nations and education is after you get that acceptance letter you have to notify your band to start the funding process and I did. I applied at BCIT, was excited and got accepted, and then I had to apply with my Band. I ended up sending family members down in support to the (out of Province) education (Band) office and they funded me. That’s what got me into BCIT.

**Ricky B:** My parents were all about education. My dad was in the fishing industry, when it was full board and everything, but then he jumped out of it I guess at the right time where he was able to get his education and was able to use it pretty fast. Education was also key to my grandfather, even though he is a carver, he still took a class and got his mechanics. He still carves, but he does both and he knows the importance of education. I wasn’t too motivated with the classes that they teach in high school. They were generic. They didn’t hold any interest. I wasn’t interested in English, poetry, or grammar. Once you get to BCIT they teach you about the communications part of English and that’s really what kept me into it because it was so focused and I knew I could apply it.

**Lilith:** In high school, nothing interested me, that was the end of the story. I hated high school
and I did my very best not to go and did everything musical I could do except for choir. Basically failure was not an option but I didn’t study, I didn’t do homework and I skipped a lot of classes. So it wasn’t so much that I was motivated to do well as I just kind of did. I always got honour roll standings on my finals, I did well in a lot of courses, but stuff that came naturally to me. I did really well, I guess I test well. My final marks were really good so I don’t know. My dad is a retired teacher and post-secondary education has always been very important to both my parents. I guess for many, many years I just didn’t quite know what I wanted to do, so I just kind of worked, went back to school, and went to another post-secondary in my mid-20s. I was going to be in a different field and it was whole lot of schooling and I hate school, so after two years I dropped out of college. Since I didn’t have a plan I went back to work. I kind of just sat myself down one day and I needed to get myself back to school. I heard BCIT was very focused on getting you into the work environment. So I was roaming around on the BCIT website and when I saw my field of study it totally spoke to me. That’s what I wanted to do, be very precise in my field. So I applied and got accepted and two years went by like that. Well the transition into BCIT was brutal, I had been out of school for so long that it was crazy intense. I had kind of heard that about BCIT prior to going in. They load you up with as much information as they possibly can, basically so that you’re job ready for a whole swack of jobs. I don’t need to study and do homework. I may have underestimated this a little. Yes it was pretty intense and it was very rough given where I was in my personal life, so I didn’t have a good support system there. Sink or swim and fortunately I swam.

Ira: I think I had that positive direction in Grade 11, but moved back home (out of province) for Grade 12. There was no motivation to do much other than go to work, not even that, mostly partying. There were definitely a lot of people that believed in me along the way, one being my
mom for sure. But male influence was always big, because my dad passed, right. I sought good male role models, luckily found some. My old principal in Vancouver and a couple of my principals back home when I went to school took a liking to me, so I didn’t give up. That kept me above water, like I said I was in my last semester and my path wasn’t looking very good and I wanted to change that. I didn’t want to give up on life or be a nobody. I wanted to make a difference in my community. Hockey as well, it was a team sport that teaches you a lot of things like dedication. So I had that in my soul, I just didn’t have direction to go. So my mom offered direction and I took it. That passion kind of heated up in my heart and soul, kinda rolled with it. That’s how I finished in Vancouver Grades 10 and 11. I moved from back home (out of province) for Grade 12. Acceptance was really going out on a limb, moving to Vancouver is how I got in. There was a science course I took there which was higher than a Grade 11 science, Grade 11 Physics but I didn’t take it and I needed Grade 12 Physics. So luckily I moved backed to (province), didn’t take Physics, of course thinking I didn’t need it. Might have been the last semester I was looking at schools and I knew what the prerequisites were but just managed to take all the courses I needed in the last semester and sure enough got in, which was great. It was my mother's idea to check out BCIT. I had no real direction in Grade 12, wasn’t thinking about my career too much. I was thinking about playing hockey. I probably could have done anything really. My mom did a program at the (out of province college), she liked it. She worked with professionals in my field and she knew me the best. I took her advice, checked it out, got down to serious business and finished my diploma there in the first two years right out of high school, which was a big accomplishment.

The students’ narratives describe self-determination as well as generations of family members and individuals whose influences shaped the 10 students’ educational decisions. The
path to BCIT was difficult and their educational start in high school was not easy and in many cases they did not find high school courses relevant or inspiring. In some cases, knowing one person within the school system made a huge difference and changed the student’s path to one of success in school. Other narratives focused on the influence of family members and the value they held for education. Many realized, by the time they reached Grade 11, the importance of graduating and furthering their education. Entering post-secondary programs, and specifically choosing BCIT, provided these students with a much needed focus and goal. Once they had each entered their programs of study, they share the importance of the relevance of the certificate, diploma or degree courses and their increased opportunity to enter the work force in their chosen field.

Discovering these common motivators for all 10 students provided a positive way to launch into their narratives, knowing that they all graduated from BCIT. Sharing their stories with full text allows the reader to sit down and form a relationship with these 10 First Nations students, which is invaluable knowledge for post-secondary staff awareness and future students’ interaction with educational institutions and life paths.

**Literature Review**

Tierney’s study of Indigenous students shows that for every 100 students entering Grade 9, 60 will graduate, 20 may enter into post-secondary education, and three will obtain a post-secondary degree (as cited in Garrod & Larimore, 1997). A body of work within the Indigenous paradigm involves research into the lack of understanding among First Nation’s students, cultures and the educational systems that address Indigenous communities (Maina, 1997). There is a lack of agreement concerning what it takes to successfully complete an education in a post-secondary environment (Maina, 1997). Maina (1997) argues that, to understand the meaning of
culturally relevant pedagogy for First Nations in Canada, it is necessary to first look at the landscape of contemporary First Nations cultures. First Nations reserve communities are more likely to contain individuals who have maintained a traditional way of life, while other individuals outside of reserves who are connected through heritage have successfully adopted the way of life of the larger Canadian society (Maina, 1997). As Garrod and Larimore (1997) discuss, Native Americans are faced with an academic world that promotes the notion of ‘walking in two worlds’, but without taking on the ‘burden’ of the Indigenization of its knowledge’s, programming and support services. In Canada, as well, the post-secondary environment generally does not support First Nations students to success because it places the burden of assimilation solely on their shoulders, while demeaning their identity and cultural spirituality (Garrod & Larimore, 1997).

In both of these works, there is an acknowledgement of the First Nations student’s struggle with the transition into post-secondary and how there is potential for work to be done that acknowledges individual determination, differences in cultural upbringing and the degree of a student’s willingness to have traditional knowledge maintained as part of their studies, career and family life. Garrod & Larimore (1997) were specifically interested in the students’ lives before college in regard to educational experience, family and community relations. Garrod & Larimore’s (1997) goal was to allow students’ narratives to positively reflect the transition from home and community into college. As well, they were concerned with the effect students’ education had on their home communities, reporting on ensuing cultural clashes that provided a good starting point for understanding where some of the challenges lie (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). The students’ general motivation to succeed to graduation varied but they generally portrayed a desire to help their community’s cultural survival, as well as disprove racist
stereotypes about alcoholic, underachieving, and unintelligent Native American people (Garrod & Larimore, 1997).

It is important to note that Garrod and Larimore’s study is of students in an American college, while Maina discusses education in a Canadian context. The factors that may differ in the context of these two countries are funding models, cultural activity and geographical/cultural relationships to home communities. However different these factors are, it is still the case that Aboriginal students in both contexts face similar challenges in being recognized for their distinctive cultural background and having their Indigenous understanding of the world acknowledged and accepted. Hamme (as cited in Maina, 1997, p. 299) discusses the cultural differences among First Nations groups in Canada, as well as the complex and continuously evolving relationship of First Nations people with Canadian mainstream society, which has resulted in a great diversity of cultural orientations of members within a First Nations group. Garrod & Larimore (1997) found that, in being at college for the first time, Native American students experience that their coming from a specific tribe or clan is not acknowledged or recognized and means nothing to anyone else around them. One of the Dartmouth students also stated that the core values of their traditional education—the interconnection between mind and heart, body and spirit—are not to be found at college (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). Similarly, Maina’s frustration with how post-secondary ontologies are incommensurable with indigenous ontologies/epistemologies is evident:

“It is important to note that none of these aspects of culture are static. To assume that First Nations people can live in such a society would be refusing to acknowledge the harsher realities of their modern existence. Cultural patterns are continuously changing and evolving over long
periods of time, particularly so for First Nations cultures that have had to contend with the dominant influences of Canadian society, some of which are not mutual” (Maina, 1997, p.300).

As an Indigenous writer/researcher employed in a post-secondary institution to support Aboriginal students, I will incorporate this belief of interconnectedness, which is intentionally offered to Aboriginal students by our First Nations staff, and look at how it influences student achievement and sense of belonging outside of their First Nations community.

How does interconnectedness figure into an Indigenous approach to research? Wilson describes how the research paradigms may be compared in terms of four dimensions of knowledge: ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology (2008). Within an Indigenous research paradigm, these four dimensions of knowledge production are connected in a cyclical manner and form a relationality or connection with each other, not separate but together. Smith (as cited in Hart, 2010) states the need for the Indigenous research paradigm within academic research contexts and of Indigenous research meeting the need of projects that resist the oppression found within research. Wilson argues that relationality stands as the guiding principle of this paradigm and is central to its ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology, such that they are all acknowledged as being in relationship to one another and to Indigenous knowledge as a whole. He characterizes Indigenous ontology as the relationship that one has with the truth, where importance is placed, not on the object itself, but on one's relationship to it (Wilson, 2008, p.73). Indigenous epistemology is linked and has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves (Wilson, 2008, p. 74). Indigenous epistemology includes entire systems of knowledge and relationships with the cosmos and concepts such as interpersonal, environmental, spiritual relationships with ideas, our
cultures, our languages and our histories (Wilson, 2008, p.74). These systems of knowledge constitute Indigenous theory, and for Indigenous people, theory is vital, as it helps make sense of reality and enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world around us (Smith, 2012, p. 40). Indigenous theory contains methods for selecting and arranging, prioritizing and legitimating what we do and see (Smith, 2012, p. 40). Indigenous axiology is built upon the concept of relational accountability; the importance of the relationship, of fulfilling one’s role and obligations is paramount. An Indigenous research paradigm can also protect this knowledge system because, within it, there is a way of putting reality in perspective (Smith, 2012). Smith has recently argued that new ways of theorizing by Indigenous scholars are grounded in a real sense of, and sensitivity towards, what it means to be an Indigenous person (2012, p. 38). This literature aids and guides my research as an Indigenous man, it not only guides me it has directed the voices of the students to speak to the audience directly.

Nakata, Nakata, Keech and Bolt discuss how an Indigenous perspective suggests a teaching approach for students understandings of analytical tools that can make sense of the complexity Indigenous peoples confront in post-secondary education (2012, p. 120). Since the mid-1980s, in Australian universities, when Indigenous populations began to rise, knowledge and understanding ‘about’ Indigenous peoples has sat in uneasy tension with higher education (Nakata et al., 2008, p. 1). The presence of Indigenous students, staff, academics and researchers in Australian universities ensured support of Indigenous experiences and traditions, or lack thereof, through the knowledge, practices and conventions of the disciplines that underpin teaching, learning, and research activities in faculties (Nakata et al., 2008, p. 1). The aim is to encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, practitioners, and researchers to explore our own assumptions and thinking as well as our own practices and positions (Nakata et al.,
Those of us who are Indigenous seek to make our presence felt in the interest of working more productively with and between both sets of understanding (Nakata et al., 2008, p.1). While we may contest and dismantle the thinking of others, the aim is to produce forward motion in our own thinking and production of knowledge (Nakata et al., 2008, p.1). An approach to Indigenous academic skills support that equips Indigenous students with tools for managing their engagements with the content of Western disciplines is for the benefit of the all parties (Nakata et al., 2008, p. 137).

Lintern et al. (as cited in Nakata et al., 2008, p. 137) states the economy of broader student attrition for universities largely drives ‘mainstream’ developments in changing approaches to academic support developments in post-secondary. McInnis (as cited in Nakata et al., 2008, p. 137) mentions post-secondary support, teaching and learning developments are also an acknowledgement of increasing student diversity and the need to accommodate and respond to this diversity. Indigenous students might be more disposed to learning by engaging in open, exploratory, and creative inquiry in academic post-secondary environments while building language and tools for engaging with them (Nakata et al., 2012 p. 121). This approach engages the politics of knowledge production and builds critical skills — students’ less certain positions require the development of less certain, more complex analytical arguments and more intricate language to express these arguments. (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 121)

As I interviewed the graduated First Nations students from BCIT I began to engage with a shared Indigenous perspective and did not ask why it was happening, but allowed it to happen. Why would we not think more about how we lead students into interesting intellectual and practical engagements by expanding their understandings of the world of human ideas and systems of thought (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 135)? Indigenous knowledge may simply mean
‘experience’ of the world as an Indigenous person, it may mean historical understanding passed down, it may mean local knowledge, or community-based experience, or traditional knowledge, all of which can be represented in post-secondary course content (Nakata et al., 2008, p. 138).

**Methodology**

To support framing my research within the Indigenous paradigm and my use of a narrative analysis method, I am drawing on two works of literature: *What is an Indigenist Research Paradigm?* (Wilson, 2007) and *Theory and Craft in Narrative Inquiry* (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2007) to make the case for situating my research within an Indigenous paradigm. In order to use the Indigenous paradigm, the researcher must firmly put themselves and their work in a relational context (Wilson, 2007). The researcher cannot be separated from their work, nor should the writing be separated from that of the individual belief system (Wilson, 2007). Earlier I described my personal connection to my family and the land as an indication of my awareness and identity with the belief systems of First Nations people. The relationship that is formed with belief systems—about environment, families, ancestors, ideas—shape who the researcher is and how they will conduct the research, good Indigenous research begins by describing and building on these relationships (Wilson, 2007). By sharing my story and hearing students share theirs, I have felt a personal transformation as a result of this research process and I could see it as well in the students I interviewed.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative analysis is ideally suited to Indigenous research, as it assumes multiple theoretical forms and finds the methodological diversity to be flexible yet systematic (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2007). Narrative inquiry allows examination and development, as well as the gathering and analyzing of narratives (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2007). As such, it lends itself well to
an Indigenous research framework. I have placed the stories, recorded during the interviews with students, in the modern context of succeeding in their post-secondary education. Narrative is aided by the texture of modern life and is increasingly defined by weaving together separate generations, cultures and social and political ideologies (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2007). Understanding these life systems through narrative inquiry adds context to daily life and can help with issues such as education, designing equitable intervention and assessment programs and formulating policies focusing on the development and well-being of individuals (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2007). I hope that the reader will agree that, by telling their stories, the students who I interviewed were able to articulate and divulge their influences, offering numerous insights that can inform our service delivery to better meet their needs.

Daiute and Lightfoot (2007) mention that narrative analysis may be a method for interpreting spoken or written, narrative discourse. Using narrative inquiry within the framework of the Indigenous research paradigm, I have been able to move forward with a method that is commensurable with an Aboriginal way of knowing. Narrative analysis is appealing as an interpretive tool for my data, as it is designed to examine phenomena, issues, and people's lives in a holistic way. The literature describes methods that I used to properly direct this research that pertains to the lives of First Nations students who have graduated from the British Columbia Institute of Technology. They have interpreted their own lives to me during the research; I will further interpret these shared narratives to inform my inquiry and determine the factors that have led to their success in my findings.

Narrative inquiry presents a methodological approach that aligns well with an Indigenous research framework, because it embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through the attention to methods for analyzing and
understanding stories lived and told, it can be connected and placed under the category of qualitative research methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher approaches narrative inquiry based on their own experiences as well as their participants’ narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In essence, narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**Qualitative Interviewing**

The accuracies of narrative accounts are not in their representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present and future (Riessman, 2006, p.189). They offer storytellers a way to re-imagine lives (as narratives do for First Nations storytelling, First Nations forming collective identities) (Riessman, 2006, p.189). Qualitative/narrative interviewing allows access to an individual’s attitudes and values, which cannot be found in standard questionnaires (Seale, 2010). Looking at the ways in which the former students construct their experiences through story offers insight into the social world of which we are both a part of and have co-created. The interview itself is used as a resource and topic for what the students say about their lives and experiences as well as how they communicate their stories (Seale, 2010). From an Indigenous perspective, the open-ended interview method of data gathering allows for the co-construction of deeper relationships between me and the students whose stories comprise the data for this study.

Qualitative/narrative interviews offered the former students the following benefits: the freedom to respond in a flexible setting and timeframe; a venue in which to vent or experience a form of release about school and family; a safe place in which to discuss sensitive personal
issues; and, the opportunity to reflect on their life journey(s) and the challenges they have overcome (Seale, 2010). My use of open-ended questions allowed for varying response times—the longest interview lasted two hours and 15 minutes and the shortest was 46 minutes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for interviews was received from Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board and the British Columbia Institute of Technology Research Ethics Board, Research Ethics for Human Participation Policy #6500, certificate number 2013-04. I followed the process of ethical review at BCIT after completing an ethical review at RRU: “The BCIT REB applies the principles set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) "Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans” (BCIT, 2011).

**BCIT as Third Party**

The BCIT Institute Planning and Analysis Office (IPAO) was invaluable as my third party recruiter of First Nations students. My letter of invitation to participate in interviews was emailed out to students from a list of 161 First Nations graduates of Technology part time/fulltime certificate, diploma and degree programs (See Appendix B) (IPAO, personal communication, Mar. 13, 2013). Based on the removal of duplicate information and blank email addresses, the total count in the cohort was 139 individuals (IPAO, personal communication, Mar. 13, 2013). The IPAO generated a list of First Nations students that had graduated between 2006 and 2013. The final outcome resulted in a selection of interviewees that had graduated between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012; the total number of eligible graduates was 149 (without removal) within this timeframe (IPAO, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2013). There were 451 self-declared, First Nations students total in trades and technology programs at BCIT in 2011/2012 (See Appendix C)(IPAO, personal communication, Jul. 22, 2013).
Recruitment

For the interviews, recruitment involved interviewing 10 participants from a group of students who are First Nations (status Indian), female and male, and who had graduated from a technology program at BCIT. The genders were to be equal if possible so as to not bias the selection. I ended up with 12 interested applicants and informed 10 that the criteria involved having equal gender representation, if possible. Five women and five men from different programs were eventually selected. Their ages at time of graduation were (in no specific order): 21, 22(2), 23, 28, 31(2), 32, 37 and 48. This recruitment was done through the IPAPO after I cleared the RRU and BCIT ethical review process.

Creating an Ethical Space for the Interview Process

The data was collected in audio-recorded interview sessions, which were used to allow an open and honest interaction. I asked the students 20 questions relating to family, life, traditional knowledge, traditional language, direct and indirect communication and Indigenous research (See Appendix D). 20 questions allowed a relationship to be formed and I had no negative responses about questions or depth. I found that the flow of the questions was perfect and allowed a comfortable conversation. This followed closely with the research’s guiding principle of relationality, the quality of knowledge that is built on a collective, group, community and interconnections that bind a group (Wilson, 2008, p.80). The connection is also through the relationship with land, in a way that is not only physical but spiritual as well (Wilson, 2008, p.80). I mention relationship with the land in a physical and spiritual way because I interviewed students in programs that cover BCIT’s technology programs, which are hands on programs that are specialized to each field. The relationship with their field was not only as professionals but also with a relationship to the land and its elements. I had met four of the 10 interviewees before
through Aboriginal Services. How Indigenous communities work and how well I have connected with others in the community in the past did play a role with these students as we had met and this added a level of ease to the interviewing process (Wilson, p.81). Due to the sensitivity of the students’ private information and BCIT’s ethical process I made it very clear to my work environment that I was using a third party for recruitment, as I do have access to student databases. Following Kovach’s recommendations from conducting ethical Indigenous research, I placed myself in the world of the BCIT First Nations alumni, I found it possible to look at my place and feel comfortable with it. I was accepted into my research by BCIT and formed my reflexivity in an indigenous perspective from this work. I allowed myself to participate, as in narrative inquiry, as co-constructor of knowledge in specific and defined ways relating to land, the environment and education (Kovach, pp.110-111).

**Cultural and Ethical Protocol**

The names of First Nations bands and areas that each student came from was not mentioned, for two reasons: to respect the confidentiality of the students under the ethical process; and, to respect the confidentiality of the First Nations that the students came from due to the diversity of culture held within each of those communities. The names of each student were changed with names the interviewees supplied. I have included the ages of the students for further research considerations, but could not link the students directly to their age for ethical purposes. The interviews were held in locations chosen by interviewees across B.C. and Canada, in order to assure participants’ comfort level with the process. These locations included community halls, hotels, BCIT campuses or student’s house. I drove over 3,500 kilometers, not including flights, to make it to the interviews. This was a journey that I loved doing and is relevant to showing respect by travelling to the communities where the students are living and
working. Being face to face was more comfortable and provided a feeling of safety, which was paramount, especially because I was recording it. In terms of Indigenous protocol, it was important for me, as a First Nations researcher, to travel to meet students personally and develop interpersonal relationships in their day-to-day environment. I feel I follow cultural and ethical protocol to represent 10 academics, following a truth/respect/trust relationship between the speaker/storyteller and listener/reader, bringing to life principles of oral tradition through an Indigenous educational perspective (Archibald, 2009, p.20).

**Data Analysis**

I transcribed audio recordings of the interviews into electronic word files. There was no Indigenous language translation required other than traditional names of students and a few other words—these were translated by the interviewee. For the transcription of the interviews, I used Apple text and dictation for Mountain Lion OSX as well as Dragon Dictate for Mac. Both of these were very helpful, but the process still took weeks of work as I went through word-by-word corrections of text. I set out to do this as part of my analysis as it allowed me to review my conversations with the students and hear text that I had not necessarily heard before.

I first coded and placed the narrative into themes using the qualitative software Nvivo 10. This was extremely helpful and allowed for a much-needed visualization of themes displayed as nodes. With these nodes I was able to text search and further code themes relevant to word count and frequency. The major themes that emerged are: *Family History, First Nations Identity, Culture, Work Ethic and Role Models*. I will expand on what comprises these themes in my Findings. I will also comment on some other factors that affect student success in the Discussion section.

I had a lot of transcribed material; without a program for coding, such as Nvivo10, it
would have taken a lot of additional time. Though I can say that this process was instrumental in my knowing the participants and feeling their narrative through text, it also was a transformative, academic process for me. It also brought forward the importance of keeping the text as raw data. Mita (as cited in Smith, 2012) mentions “We have a history of people putting Maori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define” (p. 61). I wanted to let the students define the perspective to the audience and not have my interpretation interrupt.

Finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report is a major component of narrative inquiry. Narrative analysis emphasizes a dialogical process between teller and researcher (Riessman, 2006, p.188). In First Nations cultures, both the storyteller and the receiver of the story participate in relationality, the co-creation of the narrative, which builds or strengthens a sense of community (Wilson, 2008, p.86). Indigenous stories, which are mainly based on oral retelling, have implicit meanings, which conflict with the academic literate and ‘Western’ traditions (Archibald, 2008, p.7). I wanted to shift the interviews interest to storytelling as a process of co-construction, where the interviewee and I looked to create meaning collaboratively (Riessman, 2006, p.188). Stories of personal experience, organized around the life-world of the teller, were inserted into a question-and-answer exchange (Riessman, 2006, p.188). The themes that emerged through this analysis will meet my objective to better understand the personal, educational and cultural factors that need to be present in a post-secondary institution for First Nations students to thrive. I further discuss themes and my analysis of the interviews in the findings and discussions section.
Findings

I began the narrative analysis procedure with coding and putting each of the students’ transcribed text into themes. I start to describe the themes and how they were sorted to support my research questions and objectives (see Table 1). These five themes are cyclical and interchangeable and begin to form what constitutes an Indigenous student perspective from the narratives gathered from 10 BCIT First Nations technology graduates.

Table 1 Five Themes forming an Indigenous Student Perspective

Drawing on each student’s story, I have included strong examples of dialogue focused on the four main factors affecting student success culminating in their graduation from BCIT—family history, First Nations identity, culture and work ethic. Once the graduates finished their story of graduation from BCIT, I referred to each of them as a role model, which led to the emergence of fifth theme, and their thoughts as to how they may be able to advise other Aboriginal students who have dropped out of high school or are struggling with post-secondary transition and/or life paths. Listening to the history of each interviewee allowed me to form a relationship with each
student. As we spoke of our family histories, a shared Indigenous perspective revealed itself and, although my relationship with each student was unique, they all held similar feelings of openness and welcoming. I was open to listen to every story of their lives, which was powerful and emotional and helped the forging of a common bond between each individual interviewee and myself.

I also invite the audience to form their own opinion and their own relationship with these participants, as these are stories each reader could interpret differently. I conduct the research, but I am retelling, not interpreting, what I think the participants mean to say. By offering up their statements, my intent is to create a way for the students speak to the reader directly. The students’ voices are grouped into the themes related to my research question and objectives. This grouping was challenging, but I felt that paraphrasing the students would deflate the material, as it would mute their voice. Each of the ten students has a chance to tell their story in this format and speaks directly to the themes. This raw data is the conversation students have with themselves, the interactions with me and lead to a detailed understanding of challenges (themes) in students' learning engagements and detailed knowledge of how students attempt to manage these challenges (Nakata et al., 2008, p.141). I purposely stay away from research that Indigenous communities could portray as a continued construction of Indigenous peoples as the problem, by allowing the students to speak and then reply with common themes (Smith, 2012, p. 96).

Below, I will discuss each finding from the themes in order to answer my research question: How are the aspirations of graduated First Nations students at BCIT defined by their Indigenous perspective?
Family History

As the students talk of their childhood in the stories that follow, we hear recurrent themes of the lasting, intergenerational effects of residential schools, being the first in a family to graduate, feelings of loss or gain of culture, the affects of addictions, and the importance of bloodline and family dynamics that are so familiar to First Nations cohorts that come through BCIT.

**Abby M:** We do not know who my grandfather is. My father grew up on reserve in (province) in the 30s. He is one of six children put into the nuns (residential) care. He fled at age 11 and lived on the streets by himself. His mother was a severe alcoholic and there was abuse towards the children. When he was born, the nuns took care of him, a lot of abuse there. He met my mom when she was 18 or 19 years old. He was 17 years older than her. My father and mother had a volatile relationship with my dad being a severe alcoholic and to this day we are seeing long-term effects. He never grew up with a family structure so he fended for himself. He now has no ability to be empathetic with people or have any attachments, he lives in a bubble. He has no grasp of reality, he does not have the ability to care for me because of the alcohol abuse and the way he grew up. He has no way to connect. My parents split when I was three, he took off with me in a car one day after heavy drinking.

**Matt:** On reserve my mom was a stay at home mom, my dad was a truck driver. So, I mean, you see a lot of that on reserve. There was seven of us and plus we had a few adoptions living with us in a one bedroom mobile home. We were basically sleeping in the hallways, packed house, leaking roof, mold on the walls, fireplace that almost burns down every day. I’m not close with my siblings or my dad for the most part, not as close as a lot of families. I’m mixed blood. My
dad was on the road for two or three months and then home for one day, so you’re basically raised by your mom your whole life.

**Cands:** My grandfather on my mom’s side didn’t grow up with any part of his heritage or culture. So I can tie that back to my great grandfather having disenfranchised himself from his heritage so my mother didn’t have it. On my father’s side of the family, my grandmother was a residential school survivor, so she had her language removed and so my father didn’t grow up with any part of it. In turn I have two direct bodies from my mother and my father not having understood the importance of our heritage, our culture and it wasn’t until I graduated from BCIT that I had an opportunity to reach back to a member within my community who studied First Nation art. I had the fortunate experience of having two worlds while I was growing up. I spent my first five years on and off the reserve but my mother’s side of the family was very tight knit so the grandparents were of great importance. All the grandchildren were always dropped off there, as the grandparents would have traditionally, where the grandparents take care of all the grandchildren that was the case with us. I think that’s how my grandparents kind of grew up, so we had that for our first five years. I spend a lot of my time on the reserve but I also had the opportunity to work with a lot of non-native people so I was right in the mix of everything. I wasn’t my father who had grown up as a residential school survivor. Having been through what he’s been through made him who he is today. My mom wasn’t a residential school survivor, but she was a reserve survivor, if I can call it that. So I had two worlds collide, I am full blood First Nations. My dad is a status member and my mom’s parents are status members and my grandfather is a status member. I think having to be responsible for my actions and myself really I had to be a young grown up. I think if I can define it, I missed out on a little bit of my childhood and I wouldn’t say that I would change any part of it.
Anna: Start with my Grandmother, she came from a reserve in my community and at a young
age she moved to Vancouver and never looked back. She was in a residential school, she married
and had six kids. She married my grandfather who was white and so when she married him they
took away her status. She was an alcoholic and that's what my mom and her sisters grew up
with. My mom decided after having me when she was young to go back to school, not going to
repeat the cycle. She was with my dad and had a very, very rough relationship because they were
both young which I witnessed my whole life. So when I was younger we were poor, but as I got
older more money was coming as they were doing better at work. The circumstances which we
lived in never really played too much of a role but now it does, it makes more sense. Not that I
was sheltered but my parents really did try and shelter me. If I had bad friends, it was like no you
are not hanging out with them. I had a curfew I had to stick with, I had chores I had to do, and I
had to babysit my sisters a lot. I was allowed freedoms, like when I was 16 I got my driver’s
license and could take our car. They provided a lot for me and they did a lot to help me succeed.

Shiree: I grew up in a single family with my mom. I hate to say it but I grew up white, I did grow
up on reserve. My mom is First Nations and my dad is French English. He left when I was five
and I did have a really good relationship with him. I still do have a good relationship with my
dad. My grandparents went to residential school and they never talked about our history or our
traditions. The most traditional thing that happened in my family was that my grandpa would go
hunting and we would go mushroom picking and that was about it. My step dad and I didn’t have
the best relationship and I think that's where a lot of my confidence levels and my self-esteem
levels were down because me and him just fought all the time. Although he also really didn’t
push me to go to school but he was actually really proud that I went to college. My mom pushed
me so hard, she didn’t like the fact that I was procrastinator. I still am most of the time and I am still trying to work on it. She really pushed me with everything that I did.

**Sara:** Well my mom and dad they just split after dad found out I was born. Mom was pregnant and I was raised very family orientated. I was raised that’s your dad you know, phone him if you need help and I’ll help you with what I can. My mom and dad have never been together in my life right. So I accept that and I love my dad and I love my mom and that’s the strong values like my grandma too. She taught me a lot about unconditional love and you can’t give people ultimatums. People do what they do and you can influence them and you always support each other. She was the type of person that would give you her shirt off her back you know. If she can help you in anyway, even if it’s something so small and that’s all she can do she’ll do what she can to help you. I grew up in town until grade four then we moved out to the reserve. I found growing up in town I had a lot of fun, I enjoyed the town. When we moved out onto the reserve, the new school was a little bit challenging and we were on one side of two different reserves. So I grew up in town and out on the reserve and I think that’s where a lot of my life changed too. Yeah it was two completely different lives, living on the reserve as opposed to living in town. It seemed like in town was like a happier place and then going onto the reserve you could feel a lot of the hurt with the different people that came around.

**Ricky B:** Family stuff is important but if you can’t make it because of work, keep on with work. Everybody loved to grow up in a fishing town and it’s really like self sufficient what we did fishing. Some people still fish and everybody does know, that education is a key. There are some things you know people don’t really approve of but when you do good everybody’s proud and it feels good when they congratulate you for it. When you do they congratulate you more. With friends they’re like wow you did what, and you’re like oh yeah its nothing.
L'nu: My mom and dad both are residential school survivors. My dad graduated from residential school at the age of eight and my mom was pulled out of school at the age of four. I’m one of 13 children but I actually was a high school drop out. I dropped out of school in ninth grade to help the family at that time. My mom was a self-confessed alcoholic and with that relationship growing up my dad was in and out because they’d get in a huge fight and she would kick him out. He would leave for six months then would come back, stay for a year or two, then get kicked out for six months. So he was in my life periodically, so during that time he was gone I actually had to go and start working. (Skip ahead in narrative) I had an Elder come in and I was his helper (traditional name used), it gave me my sense of culture. One of my biggest highlights that I could say that I’ve done so far is hosting a spring ceremony in our community, which was open to the public. By this time my mom had passed on. She died of cancer, lung cancer, a moderate smoker, roll of the dice. After my mom passed my dad became a shell of a man. He was a residential school survivor so he would go to church when he absolutely had to and so with her gone she was his anchor. I saw this man wither before my eyes and I couldn’t understand it. So then when we hosted the spring ceremony it was the renewal of life. We survived a winter and my dad came down. I convinced him and dragged him down and I brought a friend of mine. So my friend spoke the traditional language and so did my dad. They shared a car home and they decided not to say any English words for 12 hours. In that language a school bus was the yellow canoe that took kids. When my dad got home he was more how I remembered him. I remember the first teaching circle that we had and to see him after the first sweat I can only describe it as if it was a withered, dehydrated leaf all of a sudden get infused with life again. I could actually see in him the spiritual growth that was happening where I could see him get fuller and fuller. That changed me, to see that in my dad, because he had lost that focus.
Lilith: Raised in Vancouver, we moved here when I was three so it's the life that I know. I was partly raised in my home town, but don’t remember that. My parents both raised me, they were together until I was 19.

Ira: Until I was fourteen I grew up on the reserve. We lived in a town close by a few times but we’ve always been on the reserve. At fourteen we moved to Vancouver, culture shock. Growing up we didn’t have much money. I don’t remember my dad ever having a solid job. My mom was always a hard worker so that was the rock that really kept us going. My dad was a drug dealer, which was our main income. I don’t think it really affected us as kids, maybe my sister because she was wiser and older at the time. I always remember my dad being solid and people looked up to him, like a businessman, wise. That’s definitely where I got my nature, from my dad. I’m half blood, my mom is full blood and my dad is white.

As the students talk about their family histories, I feel a strong sense of their determination to rise above the intergenerational affects of residential school and difficult adjustments to homes that were broken, crowded with family or of being raised in a single parent household. The narratives begin to tell how students adapted their own forms of communication to maneuver a mainstream social path in an Indigenous way.

Looking at “turning points” that fundamentally change the meaning of past experiences and consequently an individual’s identity is important within these stories (Riesman, 2001, p. 20). We have a better chance of acknowledging and building on the resilience of First Nations students who have made it as far as post-secondary education, especially as post secondary institution staff. The key insight I absorb from these narratives is that Indigenous students start as ‘thinkers’ in society soaking in their surroundings, and that they may need to get to know themselves better before they can obtain academic knowledge and become generators of their
own or of ‘new’ perspectives on knowledge (Nakata, 2007). What is remarkable is the resilience of these graduates in the face of real obstacles, including: parental separation; the reality of a higher percentage of First Nations families living in poverty; the historic loss of heritage, language and culture; the challenges of mixed-race relationships; and growing up on reserve and then moving to the city, being moved on and off reserve. The strengths students drew on to succeed involve one or more family member pushing for education and the students’ access to a strong culture that provides support and guidance. These are all factors that arose with the 10 students and are intertwined as pieces of the students’ history and identity.

**First Nations Identity**

Family history and dynamics shape who we are as people, but just like my father and mother pushed me forward in the world and the message I received was the importance of education and giving back to my family and community, so these 10 students are pushed forward by families and loved ones who helped to define their values and identity. This family and cultural support was integral to their success and that was a bond that formed with the students and I. It was based on our familiarity and respect for similar paths; as I shared my path with them, they continued naturally to share theirs.

*Abby M:* I grew up in a white home, as my mom is Caucasian. So everything that makes you the person that you are, I only had the influence from one side. It was just the two of us, which was rough at times. I was a handful when I was a teenager, went to the extremes and got in a lot of trouble. I would see my father at Christmas and birthdays sometimes. He doesn't have any contact with his siblings—the whole family is dismantled. I identify strongly with First Nations and anytime people ask me I am always very proud to say I am First Nations and where my band is. I even have a large tattoo in First Nation art because I am proud despite the lack of a father
that I had. Whenever I have the opportunity I talk about my status. I also like surprising people, as I am very white in my appearance. Yes I am status, I am half First Nations, from out of province. I look more like them, taller slender features.

Matt: Everyone is trying to figure out why no one is succeeding on the rez. Family are definitely an important part. Friends can bring you down, family can bring you down and at the end of the day the only person that is going to get you to where you are is yourself. That is my motto—the only person you can rely on is yourself. I mean you look at my dad, he’s 65 years old and he’s still working 7 days a week. The individual definitely has to be motivated. All these different things and all these programs to motivate people it is not going to do anything unless that person is motivated.

Cands: I am just doing what I’m doing. I don’t have any words to describe myself. I’m living life and I’m doing everything in my power today to embrace the idea of being a proud First Nations man, proud First Nations human being. I spent most of my life on the reserve, my young life, my young adult life, there’s a comfort zone there. You know your community, your community knows you and it’s hard to leave the nest if there’s no encouragement at all to travel the world. You get to see the world from a different perspective when you step outside of that tight knit community; well mine was a tight knit community. I got to see some of the worst of people who had been mistreated in the worst ways and (experience being) called a chug, but you don’t have anybody standing behind you, or giving you any form of comfort, or has stood beside you and stood up for who you are.

Anna: My mom is First Nation and Hungarian and my dad is Western European, so a mix of everything. I would honestly say I’m a bad native. I would describe myself as someone I would like people to aspire not to be but look up to. I want to set an example. I see myself as someone
people can look at and go, ok I have misconceptions about native people. I want to be the change because I don’t feel like there’s so much stigma, like all natives are alcoholics. You live your life like you’re not white but you’re not native either so people don’t accept you. I always get, what are you? It’s hard you really lose when you’re mixed race, you lose that identity, it’s very hard. It’s kind of embarrassing.

**Shiree:** It took me a long time to accept my Aboriginal heritage and it’s just been the last four years that I’ve really thrown myself into it. I want to learn more and I want to document everything so people understand. I don’t know, as a First Nations person it took me a long time to get where I am and it took me a long time to actually be proud of my heritage. Now I would really just love to influence other Aboriginal kids to pursue their education and whatever path they want to take. I would love for our people to become stronger and actually be considered part of this country because a lot of times we get shunned out. For me, I still have a lot of growing to do, I have a lot of learning to do and eventually I would actually like to just say I’m Aboriginal. That’s it because really I have no interest in learning more of my white side. I find a lot of people have a really hard time reading what I am just because I do look like my dad, I really do. I’m also brown so they don’t quite know where I stand heritage wise and a lot of times people have no idea until I tell them. I really had a hard time connecting with the kids here, they were really clingy to each other and they didn’t really let other people in and I found that a lot of the Aboriginal kids from here were really quite content with being here and not doing anything. I think out of my class there was five of us (First Nations graduates) and I think two of us went to college and I really wish more had gone. I’m proud of us two.

**Sara:** Back to forgiveness and unconditional love that I was engrained with from my grandma. I truly believe when you hear the old stories, you know even the old guys talking about their
stories growing up and how when settlers came like when Westerners came First Nations always welcomed with hands out. Always try to help somebody but there was still, depending on the situation help and you’re willing to give. They’re so spiritual I guess and that was a huge thing with the drumming and the sweats. Talking about your own pain inside and how you project that out with your energy and talking to medicine men and medicine women is just amazing. I’m starting to kind of understand more of that projection. Especially going through the pain I went through I notice I’ve taken it out on other people and I’ve noticed that you know my energy influences other people’s when you walk into a room or how you feel when you approach certain people. Those cultural ceremonies, those strong ties to what I would just call life. I’ve always believed in life, even the rocks are a form of life, the trees too, you know everything around you. That’s where giving back and taking when you’re praying for your deer meat and you find a your deer it’s because they are presenting themselves to you as a sacrifice. That’s where you have to thank them for what they have to offer. With the fish-and their cycle-of life, they come back and we have our food. When they come back every year they’re giving themselves to you.

**Ricky B:** I grew up in a town that is sort of rural and urban. I have friends that are going down separate paths. I have to be able to watch myself and make decisions as you’re faced with issues. How strict my parents were sort of gave me the right direction, a walkway to walk and that helped out. I have an older sister and younger brother. I didn’t really grow up around the cultural ceremonies but I went to them and I participated in some. Just recently I learned why some things are the way they are just because of my dad’s position. He’s always working in the community and is around for a lot of the events.

**L’nu:** I’m a traditionalist, this is who I am, this is how I identify myself. I follow traditional ways. How I feel about First Nations religion is that everyone has something different for them
and for me it’s First Nations religion. Honour your parents and your family. My biggest thing is honouring the earth. Teachings, that is why I grew my hair from a business cut to the length today. I sat down with an Elder one day and he sat there and said you cut off your connection. I could not understand what he was saying, his meaning was as First Nations people we are caretakers first and foremost of the Earth, that’s where our life comes from and that’s what sustains us. The biggest thing that messes us up most of the time is our head and what we need to do is get our head closer to the earth. So traditionally the men had their hair long, so they kept that closer connection to the Earth. I can say this, the connection with the Earth as a caretaker, if I don’t take care of it, who is?

Lilith: I grew up in Vancouver, we moved here when I was three, so it’s the life that I know. I was partly raised in (home town), but I don’t remember that. Unfortunately I didn’t learn very much about my dad’s culture being raised in Vancouver. I’ve only been to one feast, my first now that I think about it, a couple of summers ago.

Ira: My mom was always saying keep up the good (school) work but no real help though, it was always above her head. She couldn’t offer money so I’ve been independent really, which built my character. I’m definitely stronger for all of that. My goals before though were really community oriented, I really wanted to give back to my community, fight for Aboriginal rights, treaty rights, that’s what I wanted to do through the land. There was nothing really for me there (on reserve), nothing I could get into. That’s my genuine feeling, there was nothing really for me. I definitely needed to leave the reserve to gain the knowledge. Moving to a big city I didn’t have the freedom to go hunting, fishing, traditional stuff, was the main big thing. I always considered myself as a hunter, gatherer. I wasn’t too involved with my community, I don’t know if BC is different, but (province) reserve wasn’t really a community. It was a broken community because of residential
schools, drinking and drugs, which I want to see eliminated someday. Maybe that’s why I didn’t get too involved because there’s always that downer. I know everyone’s not like that but what I was exposed to, people I was associating myself with, I didn’t want to go down that path. I did move back there for a year and associated myself with other successful people, it was really nice.

This rich data demonstrates the challenges of being a First Nations student who is navigating the post-secondary education system. The students talk about how the non-native side of their heritage has influenced their upbringing, providing insight into the dominant culture. To be of mixed blood and connecting with other First Nations is hard when you are not raised near that side of your family. They share the common experience of having to stand up and be an individual as they transitioned into adulthood and learned to be self-reliant, even with racism. Some shared the importance of having culturally strong grandparents for guidance when reserve communities were broken and others talked about having the instinct not to follow their friends down the wrong path. These are all factors that have come from their upbringing at home that now defines them as a person. All of these students have different degrees of awareness, as I do, of who they are as First Nations people collectively and are aware of where they come from.

However, not all Aboriginal students share this same awareness; every student is different and it is so important to ask how he or she sees his or her culture, understands their traditional language, how they have experienced community and traditional ceremonies and how each of these has affected their life and educational path as they are unique. Opportunities for dialogue in a safe gathering place, having Aboriginal staff, Elders and peer mentors to confide in and providing relevant cultural workshops, sweats or talking circles would support this need to find common ground and the support to travel each day into the predominantly non-Aboriginal school environment.


**Culture**

Bin-Sallik (as cited in Nakata, 2007) describes that Indigenous students have been assumed as an academically under-prepared and culturally different, with support measures being developed and refined since the mid-1980s in higher education. As these supports commonly include cultural gatherings with Aboriginal staff, Elders and students I asked the students to define their cultural knowledge and discuss how this helped them navigate the societal system and achieve success.

**Abby M:** From the little bit of knowledge I have, I did use smudging when I was studying. I always had cedar or sage bundles in my room to help ground me. I have done a sweat lodge once, I know BCIT does have a sweat lodge but I really wanted an all female one for my own comfort level. I do find that very grounding and spiritual for myself. No traditional language, my father from eleven on grew up away, so I do not even know what language they would speak.

**Matt:** I am not really involved in any cultural ceremonies just because I am a Christian. To be honest I would love to learn the native tongue because it is part of my history. I am really respectful of my culture. I really wish I did learn more about it when I was a kid but it’s nice you know it’s part of your past. I should know it and I feel bad I never learned it.

**Cands:** It wasn’t until I graduated from BCIT that I had an opportunity to reach back to a member within my community who is an artist and I love him dearly. I asked him one day to mentor me and he said yes and took me under his wing for six months and taught me some of the basics. I started my own print line in 2007 and I never really looked back. I embraced both fields and now my newly re-found respect for the art that brought me back to my heritage, my culture.

**Anna:** I really pushed the native culture stuff to the side. My grandmother, on my mom’s side, would take us to potlatches occasionally. Through my elementary school there was a program
we got to learn about our culture but it never really interested me, because growing up it was sort of embarrassing. So now that sort of still sticks with me, it’s always been sort of an embarrassment, and I try not to think like that, don’t think like that. My grandmother on my dad’s side finds it disappointing my sisters and I aren’t into our culture at all. She’s like you guys should really be more in touch with your culture but my mom is not really into it either.

Shiree: My grandpa did speak his language, but wouldn’t. I did have the opportunity to look over a language binder that was put together by the Elders and I would like to learn it. I would like to teach it as well and not just end it with me. I actually do have some of my language tattooed on me. I have ‘I really love you’ on my foot in my language and I have ‘grandpa’ on my ribs. It took me a long time to research and find the proper words for everything.

Sara: I used to go out on horseback hunting so we would get grouse for our food and we did a lot of trades. So a big part of the First Nations culture was there growing up even though I lived in town and lived on the res. When I was living in town and visiting the res it was a great time. It’s just like we would trade dried meats for vegetables because we had a garden at our house and we’d have homemade breads and jams made for us and dried meat. I used to go fishing every day down at the creek and I would bring out trout, so I would trade trout for moose meat. I think that’s what we’re missing in our culture is helping each other out without, you owe me, or it will cost you this amount of money, it really was just helping each other out. We would trade eggs and down the road my auntie they had rabbits, pigs, chickens, so they used to sell their farm eggs and they used to get their ham and bacon from the pigs and they used to go hunting. We’d do a lot of stuff. Another auntie too just lived down the road and she would always bring us homemade breads and jams. (Family member) would always go berry picking so she would give her a whole bunch of berries and then auntie would can a bunch of jars and give us that. We
canned ourselves jars too, because it was the trade right. It was never I gave you this amount of meat, so you owe me this amount of vegetables or whatever it was just like here’s what we had and here’s what we can help you out with and they would do the same for us.

**Ricky B:** Really the cultural aspect that I really loved was the art and to get to that I had to get an education. My grandpa told me that he’d teach me but I’d have to go to school. I did learn about it (language) and after a while it grows on you, when you hear it around and it’s something you just don’t want to hear it dies out. I did take language class years ago but that was really hard. I’m culturally aware I have a background in it. I know certain stuff to do, depending on different events that happen I have a general idea of what I should be expecting to do. Hard thing about that is my grandpa lives in Vancouver and I either carve or go to school, it’s hard to do both because both are pretty intense. Even now just because I’m not working on it, I’m still thinking about everything he’s taught me. He’s travelled around and listened to all these stories. Maybe I will travel and listen to stories and learn about different art backgrounds.

**L’nu:** That’s the thing that a lot of people get confused about when it comes to First Nations culture the animals can talk to you, the plants can talk to you, they always can, we just don’t listen to them. For First Nations culture it’s not so, this house, this culture, this is who my name is, there is no doubt, no gray area involved. That’s why I guess in First Nations culture there is never a goodbye, because it’s like there’s never an ending because that circle, the cycle, completes. So when it comes to First Nations culture, language is an essential part because that’s what made my dad come back alive. Unfortunately when it comes to our Elders in today’s society, they are just disposable, but they could tell you about how it was. How it was when they were growing up and what they did. You know if I actually had to hunt for my food I would have a difficult time because I haven’t had those life skills to go out and catch fish. I have never shot a
deer or elk. We’ve pushed the Elders aside, when we actually should be bringing them back into the family. It was a community taking care of the Elders because our Elders were our leaders.

**Lilith:** I don’t have a traditional name, don’t speak the language. I really was raised like a white person, which makes me kind of sad. I know that being a part of the little family at Aboriginal Services played a huge role in my success at BCIT, that’s not really ceremonial, that’s just everyday life.

**Ira:** I think before BCIT I didn’t have any cultural stuff, none that I can remember. The most cultural thing I remember was going to Pow Wows. I don’t really feel connected because I never was a dancer for Pow Wows, whereas with sweats I’m more involved. Hunting I’m getting more because I have the resources now to actually go hunting and partake in that part. Of the ceremony, hunting, bringing back the food, I always thought about that as a huge cultural ceremony for myself. Sweat lodge and hunting will never go away, it’s always a good rock to fall back on. Providing makes you feel a lot more wanted, more valuable. In my community I can’t think of anyone that’s fluent (traditional language), again I’ve never heard anybody speak traditionally. If you go an hour north off the highway, whole communities speak, sometimes nothing but and listening to those guys it’s like wow I want learn. Language is definitely important but was never there growing up. My mom is a grandma now I know she is a strong old, wise Aboriginal Elder. When I associate those traditional names I think of an Elder of mine that I look up to. I’m sure that it’s been just driven into us by the Catholic Churches, not to associate with those names.

The students spoke about how a little bit of cultural knowledge counts and wishing they could learn more, searching for a rediscovery of culture after education. They felt embarrassed about not being in touch with their culture because the language was not spoken by grandparents
or to their parents often. This loss of language relates back to the intergenerational aspect of surviving residential schools where traditional languages were forbidden. Many students talked of culture and traditional activities they remembered as kids as a favourite time growing up. For some, a grandfather carving helped balance life and there is a strong relationship with land, animals and elements. Elders were always mentioned or referred to as paramount and the unfortunate reality of not being forefront in today’s society. Finally, it moved me to hear how BCIT Aboriginal Services had created a sense of belonging, a family and a community where, for the first time, they were involved in cultural ceremony.

The students’ reflections on how they see themselves and in turn how they see culture are most informative for post-secondary institutions, particularly their reflections on the factors that have built their identity and strengths, such as determining connections with their roots and finding cultural pride and meaning. Again, it is important to note that to get to this point it is impossible to ignore the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism discussed by each student, something that is important for post-secondary institutions to keep in mind (Frideres, 2008). The inclusion of cultural awareness and competency training in staff professional development and the importance of collaborating with the Aboriginal staff within the institution, will contribute greatly to overcome this. Policies and procedures can be established that acknowledge territorial protocols and provide direction for curricular outcomes.

**Work Ethic**

The foundation of the various pathways that motivated and supported students to succeed is also linked to the personal attributes that form the work ethic that is also so essential to student success. Family, identity and culture set a holistic path with the students defining how they personally have navigated through society to get to BCIT and excel. Students work harder for
their goals and aspirations in post-secondary programs because of where they have come from and what they have learned.

**Abby M:** Working fulltime, with school and rent to pay on my own, I may not have been successful. So the benefit was staying at home with my mom who I have been with since I was little, I also felt like I had to be there to protect her. Moving out was one of the hardest things I could have done and when I moved in with my partner he was living in a not so nice apartment-scary neighborhood for women. Partner supported me after grad as he was living closer to campus, prepaid all bills and just had to worry about groceries.

**Matt:** Not going back to where I came from, that was the main one. If you are determined and you know you don’t want to go back to where you came from, it’s all determination right. (At BCIT) I had a course, I found the instructor was very good and I would definitely sign up for one of his courses again.

**Cands:** I had the unfortunate experience of failing a course so I had graduated one year later than the entire group. I got to know this group through a year and a half or so of study. I had to come back and study with a completely new set of students so when I graduated I didn’t attend the ceremony and maybe that’s one of the difficulties of having this grueling system. It was semi embarrassing for myself to have to admit to my family, my friends, my future colleagues that I had the unfortunate experience of failing a course and have to show my face again and have the new students I was studying with know that I had failed. It was tough to accept that I had failed at something and not be so proud about it, having graduated. Could have said this is too much. It’s funny, my girlfriend and I were just talking about that and we were saying if I failed that course it could’ve been just as easy for me to say no more, no thank you, I’m done! Instead I
stuck with my guns and continued on and graduated. I know it was somewhat of a proud moment to say I survived. I survived it wasn’t that it was life threatening but it was life changing.

Anna: Motivation to succeed, that’s sort of what you do. The motivation was what I felt was right. My parents said I didn’t have much of a choice. Long grueling days and the expectations, you really didn’t have a life. That’s the main one and the stigma that it’s an Institute of Technology. I feel a lot more confident about who I am now, at BCIT I was there to get an education. In that environment I didn’t feel as successful as I do presently, now that I’ve been working in the real world. I feel more confident in who I am and my abilities. I had one or two friends but they’re very judgmental people and now I’m a lot more confident in myself.

Shiree: At BCIT I found that the teachers were really great. I had a lot of issues while I was there and I just felt like they were really supportive. When I did fall behind they would give me a chance to catch up. Especially with my situation, it was a bad year in my life, the teachers were great and the head of our department was great. All the teachers were actually industry professionals, they weren’t just teachers. (Motivated) I was so proud that I did it (school project) on my own and actually accomplished putting something together without the help of the people that didn’t show up. I took it back to my school and I had it all edited and took it into my class and I presented it for one of my projects there. As my teacher was criticizing it, which is fine, one of the guys that was supposed to come out to help piped up and said you know half of her team bailed on her and she still pulled this all together. I was actually really shocked he actually stood up and said something because I wasn’t going to say anything initially. I took all his criticisms and I redid it. That’s what I need is the feedback to do better. I was just growing as a person on my own, not having my family constantly right there. My mom has always been a really big part of my life but my dad not so much, he’s always been there but not so much. My mom has always
really pushed me to do things, to actually get out and figure out who I was on my own and to be taking these classes and learning and doing things on my own terms which was actually pretty good. I had my cousin there and we would hang out occasionally and do things together but for the most part he had his own stuff and I had my own stuff. It was definitely a new experience because our community is small, everybody is literally involved with everybody.

**Sara:** I think we started out with 26 students and we ended up with 16 students during my actual program. With BCIT we’re all so focused on getting it. We all had a common goal and it was all hard work so there was no real personalizing or getting into that kind of thing where you feel like you’re either left out because you’re First Nations or you feel like you think a little differently. Everybody is individual and unique. We’re all on a common goal and all wanting to succeed, there was no looking at the differences between us personally. For BCIT because it's such a 9 to 5 with homework every day I actually quit thinking that I like to drink, go out, you know have fun with friends. Because it’s so strict I didn’t go out drinking. I didn't do anything and actually after a while, learning time management. After the first year I was so good at my time management that I was playing sports, getting my homework done, working out in the mornings and going to class and still able to do the 9-5 and getting everything done.

**Ricky B:** I got a little taste of something and I got drawn away from it. You leave education and you go back home and there’s a lot of culture and you miss the education so you want to go back to school. It’s just back and forth and it feeds upon each other, it’s good to have both.

**L’nu:** The instructors actually were very, very focused. It was tough when I went to college as I had no funding. When I got my degree and I worked and went to school full-time, that was half as hard as the first year or first semester at BCIT. I was one of the only students in my class that checked out equipment every weekend to practice. Not knowing how to use it but at least that
would give me familiarity with things, when it came to the school projects we were doing. The workload was unbelievable that first semester. If you are not prepared you will fall behind and you will fail. It’s so hard if you stumble because everything’s built on top of each other, which is an accelerated pace of learning. So that is like its greatest strength but also it’s like the Achilles’ heel. So if you miss something, you’re lost and you have to put almost three times the effort in, in order to catch up. I can’t, I would be lost if it wasn’t for all the practice that I did, because that’s what I do regularly I’m always practising and I still mess up but you know all those steps were there. You know, I guess you’d say that working with the group was one of the things for me to do to work well. What ended up happening was I was going to school with students the same age as my kids. You know I have life experience, decades of management that I’ve done, but it was okay, I don’t have to be upset about that.

**Lilith**: Basically, I was just determined to make a new life for myself and it was contingent on my doing well in school. It’s just that work ethic; if you put in the time and have the right attitude and the brains you get it done. Well, I think I did quite well and it’s not due to just my program but also counselling that you get for free at BCIT.

**Ira**: I wanted to be looked up to in my community, family, and by friends. Didn’t want to be a quitter, of course I liked what I was potentially going to get into. My field is a really good career for myself, it’s sort of what I am used to, the outdoors mainly and challenging environments. Work is face to face, education was face-to-face and that was a good thing to get used to groups, groups and groups.

Having to leave the comforts of home, not going back to where they came from, requires a student’s perseverance even through failure and finding confidence through success. I am struck here by how the students were always pushing forward as an individual and sacrificing all
personal life preferences to find a balance. This is where practice makes perfect. They often talked of asking for help, working in groups to share the load and learning from each other as well as receiving counseling when needed and not letting family down. By sharing the students’ passage through the system in their own narrative, they are now in a place to help us understand as they reflect on how they got to this point of success and have become role models. We can also reflect on the needs they had and personal strengths and resourcefulness they relied on. This could direct support services to provide advisors, academic tutoring, counseling and peer mentoring.

Ordering and sequence distinguish narration; one action is consequential for the next (Riesman, 2001, p. 6), and so it is with the themes that emerged out the student interviews. Embarking on this cycle of overcoming the lack of incentive in school, understanding family history and defining their identity, coming to terms with culture and language, living often bi-culturally and determining a strong work ethic brings each of the students to the point of success—graduation from BCIT. However, the students expressed to me that their story is not yet over and a new one is beginning.

**Role Models**

Post-graduation, the students are turning a corner that involves a transformation of their identity, and they felt that it was powerful to now step into the role of a BCIT graduate student. As life and family relations guide an Indigenous perspective forward, the students become ready to take on a role that is respectful to community and allows them to promote and share with prospective Aboriginal students a specialized meaning to the path of education.

*Abby M: The stereotypes are just as alive as they were 50 to 60 years ago. I did deal with alcohol and had issues with it. How people view that as if it was expected of you, you’re First*
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Nations, you are Indian, of course you’re going to drink. So to beat those stigmas and be a successful First Nations woman with a career is beating those stereotypes down. It makes me very proud definitely to be a grad. Lots of students don’t make it to post-secondary and don’t know what is out there for them or don’t know or have the support system to get them there. Maybe in the future. I’m not a star overnight and it is only as interim they have taken me on at my work place. Probably one of the few that had no on specific experience when my job required minimum three years, very rare and lucky. I think it is surreal when I reflect on myself. The type of job I have is very public and I find it funny when my family calls me a celebrity and get excited about the people I work with.

**Matt:** I think it is a good thing, because I hate to admit it but when I look at the First Nations community I have accomplished alot more than the other natives that I grew up with. I have been clean for a long time and I’m very respectful in my work community now. I was working for a company in my field and I applied for a business grant for First Nations and I worked for another company for eight years and then applied and did my own business plan. It took me a year and half, then I finally got the business loan and it’s now been a little over a year since I have been in business. So I mean it’s going good business wise. I was going to night school when I was working at my past job. Now basically I got my business loan from the First Nations with 40% forgiveness, could be dollar for dollar in the end. I’ve had my own company going and I have a couple guys working for me, it’s going good now. Kind of distance myself from all of my friends, basically just my wife and maybe two friends. When you grow up in a community where 99% of your friends deal drugs or are drug addicts, when you go into business you have to separate yourself from that. I mean that’s the problem, other people are just at a different
point in life and they are still partying and doing drugs and stuff especially when you are only thirty years old. The people I hang out with are people in the industry.

Cands: Honestly I would never have thought that that name, that description of somebody would be associated with who I am. I would never thought of myself to be a role model of any sort. Yeah I just wake up every day and do what I can for myself and anything to help anybody out. I would love to talk to our youth and talk of the importance of being an educated person. I have already established a career. I love that I have this available, my art helps me identify myself, it helps me. It’s encouraging to wake up every day and know that I can study more about myself, my ancestors and my family lineage. I’ve never been to my grandfather’s community but I have every intention to travel there and visit my mom’s side of the family. Just speaking about it, I just want to cry, it’s so emotional, life changing. Every part of this has been life changing.

Anna: (BCIT First Nations Role Model) Me! Even in my class, when I graduated from my program, I’m pretty sure I was the only native person in that program that year. It doesn’t matter how much money you throw at something, money doesn’t change things unless people want to change. The most important thing in culture is role models and that’s what’s going to change people. People (society) have to have something to look at and say hey I can be that and that’s always my biggest argument for role models. I want more people to be like me, I’m a very conscientious person and I try I try to live a life in a way that I am a role model consistently. It’s my choice to apply myself or not to apply myself, it’s always been very important to me to be recognized for being smart and achieving things. I do work hard because I want to be known for being intelligent. It does drive me when people say you’re just a weak female and native and can’t do anything. I never want to be seen as that, I always want to be known for just being a hard worker, not for being female or anything else.
Shiree: As a role model I feel like I’ve always been kind of thrown into that role even when I wasn’t a graduate. Out of my family I am the oldest of twelve grandchildren and even with just our grandkids, that’s a lot of pressure. I would really like to work with kids to be honest, as much as I don’t want any of my own. I find now that I have graduated people don’t look at me as much as a kid anymore. I’m actually an adult and I’m part of the community and getting more involved in certain ways and it is really helping me to touch base with my Aboriginal side which I actually didn’t think it would at first.

Sara: Just morals and values are the strongest things that I can describe myself as having. That’s kind of tough one, how to describe myself because I’m always changing with different situations. You always change a little bit of who you are from what you gain. Testing the skills that you’ve learned, everyone always changes, you can’t stay in one place. When I moved back here I did notice it felt like nothing had changed, like everyone is still the same mentality, the same routine, the same everything but I’ve changed. So to come back to the same thing is almost frustrating. I feel pretty good, I feel like I can influence some people to continue on with education and reach for whatever it is that they want to go for and not allow themselves to get in the way of their goals. That’s really what it is, even though you feel like it’s other people dragging you down or you feel like this teacher just can’t teach me. If I can influence someone to continue on, it makes me feel good because then I know that they’re on a path of their own happiness or their own calling or their own dreams. I was in an accident and so I was pretty much laid up for about nine months. I guess what it did was it made me feel fragile and useless right, that’s where I just threw everything out the window and today I’m still recovering from it. So for me to go back with that same motivation and same strength in my field I need to do a lot more self work.
**Ricky B**: I think of myself as somebody who could have the values they’ve grown up with, take school and then still have those same values intertwined with their education and be able to grow with it and expand on that and still keep those values they grew up with. I’ve never really had the opportunity to become a leader but I like being able to lead a group or lead a person because it lets me help them. I could sort out their deficiencies, help them work on the weaknesses, add onto them and make it so they can lead somebody else. Just make sure that everybody can excel.

**L’nu**: If you need help I’ll help you. Being respectful would be the biggest thing. As a First Nations BCIT role model I will do whatever it takes. If a student calls me and says I need help with this, okay I’ll help you with it but I’m not going to do your homework. I’ll make that clear. If you have difficulties with this, or with that or if you need help breaking into the industry there are some things you can do, but it’s not easy. What’s going to happen is people need to know who you are. You may see yourself as a First Nations person, but they see you as a human being first. I remember a few years back when First Nations in my own community did several documentaries. It was all negative, nothing was ever positive and so then growing up I never had a First Nations role model.

**Lilith**: It was an accomplishment, I’m very proud of myself. I guess working against the stereotypes you see successful native actors for sure, native kids in hockey doing well, but I don’t think you see a whole lot of First Nations doctors, politicians and lawyers. I think letting native kids know that these are options for them if they just stay in school, I think that is huge. In a sense I could be giving back and volunteer to help out kids who are currently in school and I’m interested in doing that if there is any need for kids who are currently taking BCIT programs.
**Ira:** Ever since I’ve had to take on more responsibilities with my dad dying, people say I’ve always been a solid person, and successful, that kind of mentality. I also kind of worked off it, the mentality that Ira’s always solid, he’s a rock, always-such a good kid. Everybody thought that so that’s how it came to be, whether school or just my personality brought it on. I think it was expected of me. I don’t really try and hold myself above anybody else. I don’t want to do that anyway, I want to be equals with everybody. I’ve always wanted to maintain a solid relationship with everybody, I don’t want to be different, I’m not sure really, I don’t really notice that stuff and I’m not one to brag. I think about all the people I have met at BCIT. I think about Gerry Oleman, what does it take to be at his level? If I can do it anyone can do it, you just have to be focused and work hard. I want to be a role model for the younger kids. I want to expand my knowledge. One day as chief or counselor and even to all reserves I can help with advice in my field. I know I’m not there right now but that’s my eventual goal and that’s what I am working up to right now. Right now I’m not directly working with my reserve or any reserves but in a few years time that’s where I want to be. I describe myself as an up-and-coming success, up-and-coming chief, and I definitely want to make a difference.

Role models break through the stereotypes and are able to stay clean and respectable in their careers. Many students spoke of returning to their culture through their career or in some cases art. Becoming a role model is the most important thing they can do to contribute to society. Also, they looked forward to having increased professional status with family and in community, being able to return to their First Nation and striving to one day becoming a chief or successful in business in their nation. Role models were described by students as people who respect Elders and teachers. They have the confidence to influence others to continue their education by becoming a leader and the role model some never had growing up and giving back as a result of
their education and experience. Resiliency, awareness of their identity and perseverance allows an educated First Nations person to enter the workplace and feel confident of where they came from and who they are.

**Discussion of Findings**

These themes are shown as being cyclical and interconnected as this is the holistic view of education held by Aboriginal people rather than just focusing on education as one unique area in each person’s life. So too is the concept of culture and community as defined by the paradigm, we are a light that is connected to a bigger solar system (Wilson, 2008). We are just one of many but contribute to the whole (Wilson, 2008). Each student’s progression through life led me to reflect on my own path. As I was listening and rereading the narratives I was learning something, a narrative of how to treat others with respect and understand that connections and relationships are a lot more than what we see in front of us.

There was also an unexpected organizing framework for knowledge and, through this mechanism, distinguish between knowledge that is legitimate and knowledge that is unjustified (meta-narrative). I was originally looking at how the students reacted within a socially constructed world, with relation to definitions described by the constructivist paradigm but realized that the narrative itself was the relationship which explained how we relate to our surroundings, the earth, the animals and their natural elements.

I will now discuss subthemes that came from the themes described above.

**Intergenerational Effects of Residential School**

Each student discussed residential school and its contribution to a loss of culture, language, and traditional parenting skills and roles within community. Drug and alcohol addictions have also been unwanted outcomes of this era of state assimilation policies. I think it
is very important for educational institutions to keep in mind that the intergenerational effect of residential schooling is still held within our First Nations students today and is part of their perspective, lived experience and contributes to their path through our educational institutions. We cannot assume that the path of students that had family in residential schools will grow up in the same circumstances as other Canadian students. It is estimated that there are 80,000 people alive today who attended residential schools (Health Canada, 2013). Most residential schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s and the last federally run residential school in Canada closed in 1996 (Health Canada, 2013). Yet, this history is part of today’s, not yesterday’s, social reality. Therefore, it is crucial that post-secondary institutions develop a keen awareness of intergenerational effects of residential school and sensitivity towards personal, cultural and educational elements of an Indigenous student perspective.

**Abby M:** What bothers me the most is the perception that what happened to Aboriginal people doesn’t affect us today. If those things hadn’t happened to my father, I would have had a dad.

**Matt:** My grandma went through residential school and got reconciliation money from government for her pain and suffering. My dad dropped out in grade seven, my mom just graduated from high school at almost 45 years old. Out of five children only two of us graduated high school. My family struggled with alcoholism as well.

It is important to note that both of **Cands** parents lost their language from grandparents being in residential school. **Anna’s** grandmother attended residential school, struggled with addiction and lost her status for marrying out of their First Nation. **Shiree** had her grandparent’s in residential school affecting loss of traditional language. **Lilith** had an Aunt who went through residential school. The rest of the participants told similar stories about the impact of residential schools on their family and their own identity and aspirations as First Nations people.
Sara: My grandma and my mom both went to residential schools. My grandma can’t speak her language anymore but she can understand it and it’s just sad that she lost that because of residential schools. There’s a lot of pain and suffering from that and you can really see it even being passed down in generations as well.

Ricky B: If you tell them it's happened before, like residential school not many people knew about that. A couple of my friends thought it was an optional thing, why didn’t they just put them in a different school, no there was no choice. I had grandparents that went through residential school.

L’nu: Traditional language was fluently spoken in my home and because my dad thought all schools were like (residential school) he didn’t know any different. When we started attending school we were forbidden from speaking it at home, even though it was spoken to us. Like my mom would say okay L’nu, you wash the dishes (traditional language). I would have to answer back in English. My dad was thinking he was saving u from that ridicule and beating.

Ira: Language I’ve never really spoke my own language, I know my grandmother and grandfather on my mom’s side. I took it in school growing up but it wasn’t as significant I think because the culture, the language was lost in the residential school.

Reiterating the absurd notion that ‘what happened yesterday never affected us today’, with reflection on how a student lost their father due to removal from society, sums up the severity and reality faced by today’s students. Having an open heart and open mind is crucial when talking with Indigenous students in post-secondary, intergenerational residential school contexts (R.Point, Personal Communication, Feb 23, 2012).
‘First in Family’ Pressure and Families’ Push for Graduation

Residential schools also have an effect on the success of entire families and communities in education. The theme of being successful in school and needing to push forward and sometimes change the pattern in their family of a limited education was strongly emphasized by each technology graduate.

**Cands:** I was the first in my family, my immediate family to receive a diploma in post-secondary education

**Anna:** I was the first one to actually graduate on my mom’s side the first one to get the full diploma. My mom got her GED but I was the first one to get the actual high school diploma, it was a good thing.

**Shiree:** My family was so ecstatic about it, like nobody from my reserve had graduated without modified classes since my aunt, who’s in her 40’s. To go to college I think there was one other person that had gone from my reserve in between that time.

**Sara:** I’m the only one with a degree and even my mom dropped out of high school at grade 11 or whatever and even my stepdad, my dad, so even my brothers and sisters, never really made it past high school.

**L’nu:** I am, out of all my brothers and sisters-the only one with multiple degrees. I’m the only one with a college degree.

Five of the 10 students were the first in their family to graduate from either high school or post-secondary education. All of the students mentioned that their parent(s) had pushed them to succeed in post-secondary education, either because of their parents’ regret over their own lack of education or their wish for their child create a better life for themselves. This is important for secondary schools and post-secondary institutions to understand. If 50% of graduated
students came from a family that has not successfully been through the education system, we need to inform students about post-secondary opportunities at an earlier stage in their life. Specifically identifying students that are Aboriginal and promoting services and programs directly to them in elementary and high school may increase retention and graduation rates both in high school and post-secondary programs.

**Previous Post-secondary or Upgrading**

Another factor determining success for First Nations students is recognition that the path to post-secondary education is not always a linear one and that many students may require upgrading in order to qualify for their chosen program of study. Two of the students I spoke with needed upgrading, five having attended a post-secondary institution before BCIT. So, we see a common theme where the success of the students depended on their awareness that upgrading or previous experience would be needed to enter into BCITs. Two students failed a diploma course and returned to class, with one of those individuals applying for the bachelor degree program. Six students graduated with a diploma, one with a degree, one with a part-time certificate, and two with full-time certificates. One student achieved a certificate in addition to their diploma, as well as three more students continuing onto a bachelor’s degree program (two at BCIT, one at other post-secondary). Interestingly, in terms of transition from their first post-secondary programs to more advanced ones, there were no gender specific comments about their path to BCIT that differentiated the women and the men.

**Demographics**

As the Table 2 shows, six students came from a First Nations reserve; seven came from a hometown outside of Vancouver. Eight of the students were of mixed heritage. The student’s ages in no specific order are: 21, 22(2), 23, 28, 31(2), 32, 37 and 48 at time of graduation. First
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Nations graduates of technology programs (Certificate, Advanced Certificate, Diploma, Bachelors Degree, Advanced Diploma) were 149 from 2007/2008 to 2011/2012 (IPAO, personal communication, Jan 25, 2013). Aboriginal students, overall, earning credentials were 757 students in the same timeframe (See Appendix A)(BCIT, 2012b). There were 2,286 total First Nations students from 2007/08 to 2011/2012(See Appendix C)(IPAO, personal communication, Jul. 22, 2013). There were 6,556 total Aboriginal students from 2007/2008 to 2011/2012(See Appendix A)(BCIT, 2012b).

Table 2 Demographics

**Identifying Today’s First Nations Student**

The theme of *First Nations Identity* exposed factors that make up the whole student being interviewed. These include shared experiences of coming from a mixed blood home and not having the physical appearance of being First Nations but still being proud, of relating more to a Euro-centric society but with an awareness of the struggles on the reserves, whether living on- or off-reserve. We see a pattern of family and friends torn apart and ravaged by addictions while
others succeed, as well as (the instinct that may stem from an addicted home) of having to have more individual motivation and care for oneself in a single parent or crowded home. There is this shared narrative of living and trying to balance urban and rural in “two worlds” on- and off-reserve, of being away from home and needing to have tradition or ceremony in one’s life, of having no tradition or culture. We hear of the value of learning one’s culture through others or in a post-secondary institution that offers this culture and support, of losing identity, of being of mixed race, and of not accepting/or accepting one’s First Nations heritage. These aspects manifest in the pain of the students’ personal lives, of how they affect relationships, in students search for traditional teachings to offer help and strength, and of being connected to the land, water and animals. There is a common experience of having strong, community-oriented goals whether one lives in the Vancouver or on the reserve.

Advisors, counselors, admissions, faculty, staff and management are all part of post-secondary Aboriginal student engagement, and I hope by providing insight into First Nations students’ histories and experiences that helped them to reach a level of success in post-secondary education, it will inform post-secondary institutions on ways to improve First Nations student retention and graduation rates.

**Band Funding and Scholarships**

In 1969, the federal government released the White Paper, a document that sought to absorb Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society by eliminating all “special treatment” and, consequently, any need of an education strategy tailored to Aboriginal peoples (Canada as cited in Donovan, 2011). The National Indian Brotherhood’s (NIB, now Assembly of First Nations) response was the Indian Control of Indian Education (1972), argued that Aboriginal people had
the right to administer their own educational programs (Donovan, 2011, p.124). The NIB succeeded in turning federal policy on its head. In 1973, the federal government adopted NIB’s proposal, in principle, as national policy and initiated the process of Aboriginal control by regionally funding Aboriginal culture and education training centres throughout Canada (ibid as cited in Donovan, 2011, p.124). By the mid 1970s, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada created the Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program to promote access to post-secondary education for First Nations and Inuit learners (AFN, 2012, p. 9). The program, which was renamed in 1988 to the Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), supports Status Indian and Inuit students eligible to enroll in eligible post-secondary programs in approved post-secondary institutions (AFN, 2012, p. 9).

Eight of the 10 students I interviewed were band-funded and we had positive discussions about how band funding was used to get these men and women to the point of graduation at BCIT. It also brings up awareness for post-secondary institutions to see that, with a significant Aboriginal demographic entering into post-secondary education, communication with First Nations is important, as this source of funding leads to success.

Anna: So I went to school Monday to Friday and then I worked all weekend, I paid for myself. I have not talked to my band about funds, now you know I got student loans, paid for it all myself, help would have been nice but you know. People are like your native you must have your education paid for, and I’m like no it should be. I honestly feel like that should be more readily available and more complete because that’s one thing where it was hard and had that burden not been there it would be so much easier to pursue that education. If education funded and obviously you had to pay back later if you did not complete, those funds would have been huge.
**Shirree:** From BCIT to now even there like I wasn't fully confident, when the rest of the class did find out that I was First Nations and was funded to be there I got judged a lot. I kind of went into a shell even more with my class I had one friend in the class who completely understood me and accepted everything. He really actually help me graduate the program because I felt like I wasn’t really getting a whole lot of help from everybody else cause they felt like I was using their tax dollars to be there, apparently.

**Sara:** I think it also comes back down to the individual, themselves to be able to have that determination and drive and be extremely thankful to have the funding that they get. I was able to save my money too because I had a living allowance I was able to budget myself so well that I never used bursaries or anything because I always felt that attending getting funded and supported by the band was enough.

**Ira:** Definitely the funding, school funding, if I hadn’t of got funding I don’t know where I would be really. Full funding for the four years, if I wouldn’t have got funding would I have made it, it’s hard to say. Would have been like anyone else, easy enough to take up student loans, but I found that helpful, growing up I had nothing. Education coordinator was helpful; I knew people were there to help for sure.

These portions of the interviews demonstrate that even funded students struggle, as they deal with a negative stereotype that all First Nations students get education for free. These students exemplified success and I myself was funded through AANAC for my own BA, and so I see the use of funding for post-secondary education as a very positive factor. Two of the students mentioned scholarships, but with emphasis on not wanting to apply as they were already fully funded with First Nations bands. There is a correlation shown between negative depictions of AANAC tuition funding deterring students from pursuing additional available scholarship and
tuition funding. This is something that could be looked at further by post-secondary institutions as a basis for providing First Nations students with more access to the guidelines to access of scholarships and bursaries. The AANAC designates funding for First Nations for education, which affected eight of the 10 students interviewed. Their stories indicate how important it is for BCIT and other institutions to develop relationships with First Nations that are sending students.

**Racism**

Significantly, racism was a topic raised by all the students, but it was not a priority. I feel that this had to do with a shared perspective between the interviewee and myself; it was as if racism was assumed to have happened—it was simply normal. Here are the words of the three participants who spoke openly about this issue:

**Cands**: We spoke earlier about racism (racial slur), I’m from a small town, logging town and racism was quite rampant.

**Sara**: I did not even like to talk about being First Nations. I did talk about the culture, but I found that even talking about culture and stuff some people are really fascinated. Other people say with the mass media or they just want their land back, stopping the pipelines and the mining and you’re one of those that want to stop it. How I see it, like my grandma taught me, even though somebody had done something to you, it’s because they’re hurting inside. They don’t know how to express the pain, so you have to forgive them and feel sorry for them when they hurt you or lie to you, that’s racism. It’s because they’re hurt inside and they don’t know how to get rid of that pain or heal it, so they project it onto somebody else. It’s two-sided, it’s not just from the white it’s from First Nations, non-First Nations, all cultures you know they’re so many different forms of it.
Unfortunately there are some misunderstandings when it comes to non-native and native individuals and there is still that bias that I've run across even going back home. Even in Vancouver at Christmas time, I'm over going into the thrifty store and people just do whatever they want, run you over with a cart. Racism I grew up with I experienced it and my hope is that the people change with education, with communication.

Students who did speak to how racism related to their education pathways noted experiences of growing up in industry-based towns with a racial divide, of not discussing First Nations history, and of hoping that racism tendencies across the broader social landscape will change. These comments confirm the need for resources to be directed toward fostering post-secondary faculty and staff professional development and collaborative consultation so that they have a keen awareness of the history of Aboriginal people in Canada and how that impacts the present reality of Aboriginal students. Peer mentoring programs can also help to mitigate this problem and provide a sense of belonging for individual students. Other post-secondary policy initiatives that seek to dispel racism include the hiring of Aboriginal staff under equitable employment policies and proportional hiring practices. Ensuring the presence of Aboriginal-focused staff in post-secondary environments and providing gathering places helps to give the students a place to be themselves and get support while transitioning into such a large, learning environment. Aboriginal advisory councils and the development of strategic plans with shared goals for Aboriginal student success and belonging are steps being taken to address racism and promote awareness.

Post-secondary Environment—Admissions, Instructors, Counseling, and Aboriginal Services

Finally, it is important for me to share here the elements of student stories that reveal how
post-secondary institutions already support student success. All of the students mentioned how important it was to have good instructors when they were attending BCIT. Two comments in this vein are worth noting here:

**Cands:** Our instructors really recognize each student’s strengths and/or weakness and pushed us with our strength or pushed us with our weaknesses and helped us to develop them.

**Shiree:** At BCIT I found that the teachers were really great, I had a lot of issues while I was there and I just felt like they were really supportive of everything and when I did fall behind me they would give me a chance to catch up. We’re not rushing you, it’s okay.

One student also mentioned how they appreciated being able to access counseling services on campus (no questions directly asked if they saw counselors). It was also important for students to be able to draw on the services that expressly reach out to support Aboriginal students. Five out of 10 of the interviewees used BCIT Aboriginal Services, and their comments indicate what a student is looking for when they enter the doors of a post-secondary institution. Their stories demonstrate their support for and appreciation of the department and individuals working within.

**Sara:** Joanne Stone Campbell was only one that I really knew of (community resource); with the funding and everything that was a huge difference. Then of course going to school as well having Joanne there helping me with finding tutors and helping me even with certain personal issues too, she helped out a lot.

**Ricky B:** Aboriginal Services was great, to get a piece of advice, hear what somebody else has to say who knows what you’re coming through. Really just knowing they know what you're talking about, they have experienced it or they have talked to somebody else who’s experienced the same thing. Knowing that they’re there to understand you specifically and some of things that you’ve gone through.
L’nu: Aboriginal Services actually helped me reconnect with the First Nations students that were there. Growing up where we were off the rez, we were the only non white family in the town so being in non-native surroundings was familiar for me but there something to be said to sit down and look around and you see a bunch of brown faces. We’re relaxed, where there’s a sense of humor or there’s a place where you just go and just be and that helped.

Lilith: When I got to BCIT, I went to Aboriginal Services the first day and Celeste Dunstan said, “be prepared eat, sleep, breathe BCIT for the next two years”.

While I was pleased to hear that BCIT was already doing well in supporting the success of their Aboriginal students, the narratives reveal various aspects of institutional procedures and practice that the students felt could be improved to allow for a more welcoming environment entering into post-secondary education. For example, for one student, attending school was a great experience, but having to deal with bureaucratic barriers such as courses being cancelled and not offered until further or even the following year made it challenging to for her to complete her program on a part-time basis. Another student commented on the blending of departments and how their instructors, even though they were teaching in the same subject area, might not know the specialty courses taught by someone within the department.

Looking at positive and negative comments regarding post-secondary experience is important. The comments and narrative show the students voice and allow institutions and post-secondary to have an awareness of characteristics so that each department can work as one to better suit the needs of Indigenous students.

**Further Areas for Study**

This research has set out to identify the factors that both challenge and support First Nations/Aboriginal students in their quest for education, but there is more work to be done.
Further areas of study from which the post-secondary advisory community could benefit are as follows: explore residential schools’ intergenerational effect on post-secondary First Nations/Aboriginal students; continue researching awareness and accommodation of differences among Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions (e.g. funding models for First Nations status compared to Aboriginal); and, continue discussing and investigating each of the 10 individual student’s path further to help with other barriers (e.g., high school students typically do not hear much about options available to Aboriginal students seeking further education).

In relationship to this last topic of the barriers that Aboriginal students in high school face, my interview data strongly suggests that it would be fruitful to conduct further research that investigates how mass media and social media influence Indigenous people’s perception of post-secondary education and the opportunities and support that exist there for them. The question of how K-12 and tertiary education institutions communicate amongst themselves also warrants further study. For example, when we were discussing the issue of that looking at post-secondary recruitment and retention and how to provide programs for post-secondary to high school student communication, one student mentioned “It may have helped me to get there quicker if I’d known that so maybe start high school with this information”.

In regards to retention, explore research that focuses on First Nations positive role models, mentorship and how these students are able to affect others for success in education. The retention levels in post-secondary institution and graduation rates of First Nations students are also relevant areas for further study. More research could be done on the number of First Nations students entering into and graduating from post-secondary such as BCIT and how factors such as those discussed in the Findings section here can be addressed. My data also supports research based on discussing possibilities of designing Aboriginal specific technology certificate, diploma
or degree programs at BCIT and other institutions from an Indigenous perspective, in a way that involves participant action research conducted with specific bands and their prospective students. Finally, I acknowledge here that all of my thesis research has been conducted with First Nations graduates, who represent, the largest group among Canada’s among Aboriginal people—that is, First Nations (45.5%, not including 36 unsurveyed reserves and multiple Aboriginal identities and Aboriginal identities not included elsewhere) (Statistics Canada, 2013e). However, we should also be prepared to develop research-based admission and retention strategies that explicitly speak to the Metis, non-status First Nations, and Inuit student experience.

**Contribution to BCIT Aboriginal Support**

Awareness within post-secondary institutions is important in order to improve support of Aboriginal students from an Indigenous perspective. In my work environment, BCIT’s Aboriginal Strategic Plan has formed the Aboriginal Student Advisory Committee from one of its recommendations (BCIT, 2010a). This committee advises the President on strategic issues related to the recruitment, retention and graduation of BCIT Aboriginal students. The Indigenous perspective discussed in this qualitative research adds the students voice to all objectives in the BCIT Aboriginal Strategic Plan and Recommendations (2010b) and I hope it will provide additional guidance in the actualization of that plan. This research also hopes to aid BCIT’s Strategic Plan Goal One, 4.0 states “Increase the Graduation Rate of Aboriginal Students-Aboriginal access to higher education is a primary goal of the provincial government, and while BCIT has more Aboriginal students than any other post-secondary institution in British Columbia, we will focus on substantially increasing their rate of graduation” (BCIT, 2013). This and other goals fall in line with MAVED’s Aboriginal Transitions Fund and support for

Limitations

As the list of factors that make up each of the themes are so large and have such a significant impact on each of the students, the size of this paper is limiting as I cannot expand on each of the themes extensively. The confidentiality of the First Nations students did not allow me to speak on the diversity of the communities that each student came from. The limited amount of retention related research and statistics regarding First Nations students in post-secondary, specifically how many start and how many actually graduate. Each of these limitations, however, offers fruitful paths for future research.

Indigenous Student Perspective on the Research

Reflecting on this process is an undertaking that has been transformative for me, both as a First Nations person and as an advisor working in post-secondary education with Indigenous students. I have found that we all share a common bond in how we respect and welcome each other into personal, educational and cultural relations, as well as how we aspire to be successful as First Nations people in education and in life. It was an honour to meet with these students and tell our collective stories by integrating mine with theirs. I intend that this research will inform and promote an Indigenous perspective of post-secondary education that allows for reflection and a better understanding of the personal, educational and cultural factors that need to be present in a post-secondary institution for Indigenous students to aspire to enter and then successfully graduate.

I asked all 10 students what they felt about the research I was doing, and they answered:
We are an evolving body and I think what you’re doing here is encouraging that and helping re-establish a larger foundation for the First Nations student body to grow. On your research method, as far as two people sitting down and sharing, that’s how our people learn from each other. This is where the clan system comes from, no matter where you are in this, the parents—the mom and dad, fishing, hunting, cleaning all that, the babies. I think it’s important to hear the stories. I come from a very fortunate place where I know a lot of people don’t have that. I came through this different place and I made it through everything. You’re not going to get that from a questionnaire with A, B, C or strongly agree, strongly disagree. I do think this method is what is needed, the voice of people. I think that it’s a huge help to put that kind of stuff in perspective, everybody with a different culture and how they were raised, influences, how they are going to react to the environment that’s in front of them. That’s opening up your mind and taking away your own personal barriers, so I think to be putting that out in your thesis and presenting any research would help. You can’t say you’re going to take two steps back doing research, it’s never going to happen, I’m pro research, every little bit helps. I think it’s good because you look at the numbers and facts about First Nations that graduate and all those facts are going out there and First Nations are looking at that and saying hey that’s impossible. There is so much negative coming back so to actually be doing research and seeing people that actually graduate and see where they are at right now and see how they got there is good. There is a lot of research out there with everyone trying to figure out why no one is succeeding on the rez. The questions are all good and the work you’re doing is good because it will give institutions the information they need.
Conclusion

The value of the educational system has been seen through an Indigenous student perspective through the personal narratives of successfully graduated BCIT students. I will present the knowledge I have co-created with these 10 students to the President and Leadership team at BCIT, so that this research can contribute to supporting the increased success of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education, as well as promoting ongoing research surrounding differential success factors for First Nations, Aboriginal and Indigenous students. I have also submitted a shorter paper to the *Canadian Journal of Native Education Journal: Indian Control of Indian Education-40 years later*, through UBC, written as a prelude to this thesis in hopes of getting published and bringing awareness of an Indigenous student perspective to a wider academic audience.

The likelihood of success for First Nations students is increasing but improvements and adaptations are still needed to provide equitable access and success. Awareness, resources and programs need to be continually developed by Aboriginal people and, therefore, staffing policies should be reflective of and supportive to the Aboriginal students’ unique needs. To come full circle from where we started with the introduction into their lives, it is only respectful to end with how these students see their education as an integral part of how they are relating to the world around them, in a holistic way.

I leave the reader with a comment from one woman who is passionate about continuing her education in order to make a positive impact on our world. My hope is that this study inspires post-secondary institutions to create the relationships that will allow them to understand the resilience, challenges and promise of First Nations, Metis and Inuit students and to adjust their practices and policies accordingly.
Sara: I would like to go and get my Masters and possibly my PhD, that’s where I basically would do a report where it’s beyond reasonable doubt that we need to change our management practices. I’m not talking about changing now and getting better. I’m talking like we need to suck it up and spend the money; because there is going to be the chance of losing out on money over the first few years of changing the way you manage things or changing like even the law in the environment to be stricter. They talk, you see it on commercials, heftier fines, nothing is done, are they creating more areas for fish populations for SARA listed species, like even salmon, the coho salmon is a blue listed specie. Same thing with sockeye salmon every year they allow the early Stewart run and you’re not allowed to fish them because they’re almost on the endangered species list, but the thing is if they don’t want to list them on SARA because then that will impact mining, logging it will impact a lot of moneymaking industries. Then it’s extremely strict on the water practices and water management, look at down on the coast with the in water booming where they throw the logs in, transport law raw logs. You wouldn’t be able to do that if the salmon were listed, so they don’t want to go there and try and bring the salmon population up and other means and that’s where they’re getting the farm fish and doing salmon enhancement programs. It’s going to affect the economy and already people are looking at “Yeah we need the mining, we need this because of our economy”, they don’t see that our economy comes from resources. That’s where I am going with my Masters and PhD, one of things that you just step up to the government and say this is how you should do it, this is why, this is what’s happening, this is why it’s happening and these are my recommendations.
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Appendix A

Profile of Aboriginal Students

The following report provides information about Aboriginal students who were enrolled at BCIT in program or course activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
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<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>432</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>463</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>916</td>
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<td>1,338</td>
<td>1,374</td>
<td>1,326</td>
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Note: Gender responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

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Note: Age responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Ten School Districts Where Students are Enrolling From</th>
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<tr>
<td>All other School Districts</td>
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<td>518</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>551</td>
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<td>985</td>
<td>993</td>
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Note: School District responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

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<td>689</td>
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<td>635</td>
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<td>461</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>478</td>
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<td>Visual and Performing Arts</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>1,466</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>1,513</td>
<td>1,444</td>
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Note: Students can be enrolled in more than one CIP Cluster within a reporting year.

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<th>Credentials Earned</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Total Credentials Earned</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>164</td>
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</table>

Note: Aboriginal status is self-declared by students. Figures are based on Domestic student data only.
March 15, 2013

Dear [Prospective Participant],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. My name is Derik Joseph and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Professional Communication at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by telephoning my thesis supervisor, Professor and Program Head for the MA in Professional Communication, Joshua Guilar at (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

The objective of my research project is to provide a pathway to success in a post-secondary environment such as BCIT, for a First Nations person. I am an Advisor with BCIT’s Aboriginal Service department, using this research to write from an Indigenous perspective. The perspective is important as Indigenous people face barriers going into post-secondary and while attending. The factors of your success will help students as well as those that teach and manage post-secondary institutions such as BCIT.

The research will consist of a one on one interview and is foreseen to last up to three hours. Interviews may call for several sessions depending on the length of the answers. The questions will refer to how your aspirations to graduate as a First Nations person at BCIT and personal factors led to your success within your own life. In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University, a partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Professional Communication, I will also be sharing my research findings with BCIT. If the
opportunity to publish this thesis does arise I will pursue this for awareness of success that students at BCIT contribute to Indigenous students worldwide. Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because of graduating as a First Nations person at BCIT. Information will be recorded in a voice-recorded session and, where appropriate, summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be kept in a secure password encrypted external hard drive and if requested erased when finished. If you, as a participant, want to withdraw at any point during the process the recording and information will be erased immediately. The thesis will be made available to you as a participant in hard copy and electronic form. You are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw OR REFUSE INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS at any time without prejudice. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will be confidential. If any concerns of rights or treatments arise you can contact Kathy Quee, BCIT, Research Ethics Board Chair at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. If you would like to participate in my research project, please reply to this email by March. 29, 2013 and I (Derik Joseph) will contact you for interview information. Note if you do live out of Vancouver I have allotted time to travel to your area or home community. Sincerely, Derik_joseph@bcit.ca ph: xxx-xxx-xxxx
### Profile of First Nations Students

The following report provides information about First Nations students who were enrolled at BCIT in program or course activities.

#### Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>159</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>321</td>
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<td>292</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>490</td>
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Note: Gender responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

#### Age Groupings

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<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
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<tr>
<td>17 years and under</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 TO 24</td>
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<td>65</td>
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<td>25 TO 29</td>
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<td>30 TO 39</td>
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<td>112</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50 TO 64</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 years and older</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>473</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>451</td>
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Note: Age responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

#### Top Ten School Districts Where Students are Enrolling From

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<td>Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
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Note: School District responses that are unknown or undeclared are not included in the counts.

#### Enrolment by Classification of Instructional Program Clusters (CIP)

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Note: Students can be enrolled in more than one CIP Cluster within a reporting year.

#### Credentials Earned

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Source: Ministry of Advanced Education’s CDW Pivot Tables
http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/datawarehouse/

Note: First Nations status is self-declared by students. Figures are based on Domestic student data only.
Appendix D

Interview Questions/Guide

Background:

What is your name (traditional name if you have one)?

What First Nation are you from?

What program(s) at BCIT(s) did you graduate from?

What is your age?

Questions

1) Tell me the story of your path to BCIT, beginning with a) your family’s influence b) what motivated you to succeed in High School c) Your acceptance into BCIT and how you transitioned into BCIT

2) Were there specific factors that you feel inspired you to succeed at BCIT?

3) How has your graduation from BCIT affected your life?

4) What were your goals and aspiration before entering into BCIT? How did your friends and family respond to your acceptance into post-secondary?

5) How have your aspirations/goals continued after graduation from BCIT?

6) How are you different a) before b) during c) currently on your post-secondary education and/or life path?

7) Please describe some pros and cons of a) leaving home and community b) attending BCIT c) graduation

8) Tell me how your life has changed, how you have changed, have people changed the way they treat you?
9) How were you raised, I am curious about your surroundings that you grew up in: on-reserve/off reserve/urban/rural-mom, dad-family.

10) How has cultural ceremonies influenced your success in life?

11) How has traditional language knowledge influenced your success in life?

12) How would you describe yourself as a First Nations person? What do you think of when I say BCIT First Nations graduate role model?

13) Which community First Nations services have you used? How were they helpful in your life?

14) As this is a communication-research thesis, does social media/mass media have any influence on you or how you view yourself as a First Nations person?

15) How much have you relied on person-to-person contact as opposed to mediums such as social media? What are your preferences?

16) Do you currently work in your community using your skills from BCIT?

17) Are you continuing your education currently? Please tell me what you are doing.

18) Has your post-secondary education affected your professional relationship in community? How?

19) This method (how knowledge is gained) of qualitative interviewing using an Indigenous Paradigm, situates the researcher (myself) and interviewee (yourself) within a epistemology (nature and thinking or thought), ontology (nature of reality), axiology (worth of knowledge). Do you have any thoughts on an Indigenous Paradigm of research and its use by myself and other First Nations researcher? (This question may be expanded upon at time of interview or before).

20) Are there any other comments you would like to add, or pieces of information you would like to tell me? What did you think of the questions?