

Helping Indigenous Students at First Nations University of Canada to Thrive

by

Lisa Bighead

BA, First Nations University of Canada, 2008

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Leadership

Royal Roads University

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: Susanne Thiessen

March, 2019



Lisa Bighead, 2019

**COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

The members of Lisa Bighead's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled Helping Indigenous Students at First Nations University of Canada to Thrive and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Leadership:

Magdalena Smolewski, PhD [signature on file]

Susanne Thiessen, PhD [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

Susanne Thiessen, PhD [signature on file]

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**Abstract**

This thesis researched what makes Indigenous students thrive at FNUniv. The focus was specifically on the student perspective. This action research inquiry was led by an Indigenous methodology and complimented with an appreciative inquiry approach. Using interviews and a group discussion that incorporated Photovoice, common themes were identified to help identify what Indigenous students felt made them thrive through their studies. The literature review focused on student success and persistence and honed in on research specific to Indigenous populations. From the research conducted, a collective of themes was identified and used as the basis for four recommendations. In addition, an overarching recommendation was made that linked to the Cree medicine wheel teachings and tipi teachings to offer a model for Indigenous student thriving.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank people who have played important roles throughout this journey. First I would like to thank my Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Susanne Thiessen, for her continuous support and guidance. Your encouragement, patience, and kind words have been greatly appreciated. Thank you Magdalena Smolewski as my Second Committee member, for your feedback of my final thesis. Thank you to my editor, Karen Graham, for your expertise at refining my thesis every step of the way. My thanks go out to the project participants, my organization, and to my project sponsor, Dr. Bettina Schneider.

This journey would not have been possible without the support and encouragement from my special friend, Jason. You encouraged me to pursue this goal and helped me to see the potential I had, you helped me to believe I could do this. Thank you for all our conversations and for hearing me out when I needed to connect theories and my ideas.

I am grateful to my family and friends for your support and encouragement along the way. Thank you to my mom who supported me throughout the process. I am especially thankful to my daughter, Alexandra, for being patient with me all those weekends and evenings I had to be away to focus on my studies. You are my inspiration.

With gratitude.

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### **Chapter One: Focus and Framing**

First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv) is a post-secondary institution located in Regina, Saskatchewan. Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can attend FNUniv, and students come from around the world. The institution is grounded in Indigenous culture and values offering Indigenous perspectives in all of its programs. Informal conversations with FNUniv senior administration have indicated the importance of student retention at FNUniv and the need to increase efforts to ensure student success at FNUniv (B. Kayseas, personal communication<sup>1</sup>, January 15, 2018). Similarly, informal conversations with current Indigenous students and alumni revealed the desire for increased supports and services to ensure they not only succeed, but also thrive. To succeed is to accomplish a goal (“Success,” n.d.) whereas to thrive is to grow or develop vigorously, to flourish (“Thrive,” n.d., para. 2). In an Indigenous paradigm, thriving occurs when one is balanced in life. Success can have different meaning from one person to the next and a student view of success is different from a University’s view of success. A student may be concerned with passing a class, feeding their children, and making it to class on time while a university is concerned with how many students are retained in a semester. These are different successes and are not aligned. Looking at how students thrive provides a different perspective and gives deeper meaning to the research. Thriving is a benefit to the student while meeting the university objectives.

FNUniv’s (2013) strategic plan aims to improve and enhance the student experience. There is an ongoing struggle in education to bridge the gap for Indigenous students and provide the supports needed to persist. It is a challenge to reach students and know what supports (e.g.,

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<sup>1</sup> All personal communications in this report are used with permission.

academic, cultural, social) they may access that will assist them in their studies. Pidgeon (2016) stressed the importance of universities to indigenize, that is, to include “Indigenous knowledge(s), in the every day fabric of the institution from policies to practices across all levels, not just in curriculum” (p. 79). As educational institutions across the country are seeking to indigenize and increase enrolment and retention, FNUUniv has the advantage of being grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and now must strive to meet its goals to remain competitive with other institutions.

To provide a context and understanding for choosing this topic, I will begin with me. My ancestry is Cree/Saulteaux/Polish/Scottish, from the Pasqua First Nation, and Indigenous culture has always been a part of my life. I was raised with the values of trust and respect and an understanding that everything is connected. I believe education plays an important role in addressing issues and barriers such as health and socio-economic status that First Nations people are facing today and can create positive change. In Indigenous Plains culture, the buffalo holds a place of significance because, historically, it was a primary food source, it provided sustenance, and people could thrive when buffalo were plentiful (Pidgeon, 2009; Stonechild, 2006). The buffalo provided food, clothing, shelter, and tools; everything was used from the buffalo. Indigenous people of the Plains believe that when a white buffalo is born, it is sacred and meaningful because these animals are so rare, and their origins signify rebirth and hope. Today, we no longer rely upon the buffalo in the same way, but it continues to hold value and meaning to all Plains people. Education is the new means of survival for Indigenous people, and so the buffalo is used as a metaphor for education (Christensen, 2000; Stonechild, 2006). There is a painting of the FNUUniv building; illustrating clouds above the building in the shape of an eagle and a white buffalo (see Appendix A).

FNUniv was housed in multiple buildings and shared spaces across the University of Regina campus until 2003, when the First Nations University of Canada building was established. It was a major step forward for Indigenous people and for the institution. The move signified the rebirth of the university and a learning environment for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn and grow in a holistic way. The artist depicted the buffalo above the university in the painting because the meaning of the buffalo has been replaced by education in today's society (C. Barenno, personal communication, September 20, 2018). FNUniv offers education in place of the buffalo as the new way of survival for Indigenous people. Education is important to me because I see the value that it can bring both personally as well as collectively to Indigenous people and society.

FNUniv embraces Indigenous values and was founded to create opportunities and enhance education not only for Indigenous people, but also for everyone. I work at FNUniv because I hold the same values written in their mission and vision (FNUniv, n.d., see also Appendix B), and it is a place where I can empower others to persist and succeed on their educational journey to ultimately benefit everyone. Through this research, I worked directly with current Indigenous students and alumni to hear their stories and better understand what they need to support their educational journey.

Retention is an institutional word concerned with increasing student population for the purpose of financial gain (Tinto, 2018). Institutions use student registration numbers as data to gauge success and to determine programming. Yet, the students that institutions seek to retain have a different underlying objective of persevering to complete their education. Generally, students enroll in an educational program and strive to be successful, to improve their knowledge

and grow. They have a goal to gain knowledge and, in the long run, to become job ready and pursue a career. In essence, students are seeking to thrive.

The medicine wheel is used in many Indigenous cultures as a teaching tool for life and learning (see Appendix C). It is a circle consisting of four quadrants, with each representing the four directions (i.e., north, south, east, and west), four colours (commonly red, white, black, and yellow). The directions hold meaning and represent different aspects of life, dependent on what journey is being taught. Each section is connected and interrelated. The wheel is most effective when the needs of each quadrant are met; this is when the wheel is said to be balanced. When there is balance, one is thriving. If retention is reframed to embody the essence of thriving, it changes the dynamic, allowing it to be seen from a different lens—from a student’s lens or perspective. Using a different lens opens the doors to see other ways of approaching the challenge and allows for creative and new solutions that can improve retention, while also meeting the students’ needs to thrive.

For this thesis, research focused on how to enhance the current supports for Indigenous students at FNUniv. I endeavoured to enhance my knowledge and to share with others what I learned through my thesis research. Kouzes and Posner (2012) sought to understand leadership and posed the question: “What did you do when you were at your personal best as a leader?” (p. 3). For this research, I sought to find out what Indigenous students are doing when they are thriving in university. I proposed to examine what makes a successful university student, specifically looking at the Indigenous student population of FNUniv. How to enhance the current supports that encourage thriving for Indigenous students is also discussed in this thesis. This research was conducted by someone of Indigenous ancestry and with an Indigenous population. Understanding that there are many different Indigenous cultures in Canada with distinctive

perspectives, protocols, and practices, it is important to note that this research focused on the Indigenous cultures of the Plains in Canada, as that is the location of the partnering institution, FNUniv. Throughout this paper, I will use the terms Indigenous and First Nations interchangeably and refer to all Indigenous people.

The principal inquiry question for this research was: What conditions are necessary for Indigenous students to thrive and persist at FNUniv? Five sub-questions were also addressed during the research.

1. How is a successful post-secondary experience defined by Indigenous people at FNUniv and what does it mean for them to thrive?
2. What is generally experienced by Indigenous learners at FNUniv?
3. How have these experiences led to positive or negative outcomes?
4. What are some of the Indigenous cultural elements that support thriving?
5. What models or strategies already exist in North America or elsewhere that optimize the ability for students to thrive in post-secondary education?

### **Significance of the Inquiry**

There is an ongoing struggle in post-secondary education to bridge the gap for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students and to provide the supports needed to thrive. The 2011 Canadian Census stated that 9.8% of the Indigenous population has a university degree compared to 26.5% of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2018b, “Almost half,” para. 2). FNUniv has an advantage in comparison to other universities because it is an Indigenous university rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. The institution operates from an Indigenous paradigm and does not need to create this experience as some other universities are currently seeking to do.

Smith (2012) stated that relationships are foundational to Indigenous community life and development; they are respectful, reciprocal, and genuine. To illustrate this unique approach, for example, FNUiv's Student Success Services department offers a one-stop office for students to access all the supports they need in university. Some of these include academic support, scholarships, free tutoring, and a free writing clinic. Understanding the importance of relational accountability, Student Success Services works as a cohesive team and strives to create a welcoming safe environment for students. Building trusting relationships is foundational to the success of all initiatives the office takes. In an Indigenous methodology, relational quality is important and necessary, requiring time to "gain a closeness or familiarity with a group" (Wilson, 2008, p. 40). Student Success Services begins building authentic relationships with students from the very first meeting and builds upon this throughout a student's time in university. While the foundation of trust and respect is attempted to be modeled in structure and practice, a gap exists between what is and is not working for students to thrive.

This research focused on understanding what helps students to persist in university, what practices and structures do and do not work, and will build off these findings so that other students can thrive. Working directly with students, I endeavoured to hear their stories, gain a deeper understanding of what environment is necessary to compel a student to persist on their educational journey, and learn how it can be transposed and shared with other students to help them thrive.

The organizational benefits include the identification of the gaps that exist in university student supports to build a stronger foundation regarding what learners need to thrive. By identifying these shortcomings, the organization will be able to review their retention strategies and address policies, structures, and processes to enhance retention. A direct result of improved

retention strategies will allow for key stakeholders, the students, to thrive and persist throughout university. This will result in the organization seeing an improvement in retention rates. As FNUniv is nearing the end of its current strategic plan, this research is timely as they review their strategies and develop a new plan.

### **Organizational Context and Systems Analysis**

FNUniv was established in 1976 by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations in conjunction with the University of Regina and was originally called the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (FNUniv, 2013, p. 3). It was created as a response to a movement in the 1970s to create Indian control of Indian education (p. 5). It was also founded to meet the cultural and educational needs of Indigenous students that were not being met at the time. Historically, Indigenous students struggled to get into universities because of tuition costs and admission requirements. In 1972, there was an influx of Indigenous students thanks to mature admission requirements and financial support from Indian affairs (Stonechild, 2006). This unique post-secondary institution was founded with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning.

The college remained on the University of Regina campus in various spots until 2003 when the name was changed to the First Nations University of Canada, and the institution was able to move into its own building. This small university remains a federated college of the University of Regina and serves over 1,000 learners from around the world. The main campus is located in Regina, Saskatchewan; two additional campuses are located in Saskatoon and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and community programming is offered across Canada.

The institution embraces an Indigenous worldview as written into the mission and vision by local Elders (FNUniv, n.d., see also Appendix B). The mission outlines the importance of preserving, protecting and respecting First Nations history, language, and culture. The classes

and programs have incorporated an Indigenous worldview, and many students choose to come to FNUniv for this reason. Some programs have culture camps where students experience a traditional life and what it was like to live off the land. The business administration program incorporates Indigenous values with business concepts and focuses on Indigenous businesses. Indigenous values, including love, kinship, and parenting, are taught while applying theories and models to the Indigenous Social Work and Indigenous Education program.

Students of FNUniv express that they can be themselves, or find themselves, through education and gain a better understanding of their culture. As institutions across Canada are working to indigenize and offer supports to Indigenous students, FNUniv has always been an indigenized university that offers unique supports and programs to every student. This research offers insight to how FNUniv can better support students to learn and thrive and to “enhance the quality of life” (FNUniv, n.d., para. 7).

FNUniv does not have a defined retention strategy to assist students in the goal of thriving. Supports and services do exist; however, they are not accessed by all students, and it is not clear how to encourage students to do so. Furthermore, it is not evident if the current supports are effective, nor is it clear what helps students to thrive in university. The Student Success Services department offers all the current supports that exist at FNUniv, and while there is no defined department strategy or goals, the staff work together to provide the best support to all students. All too often, students do not access the supports available until it is too late. Part of the university mission is to enhance the quality of life of First Nations people, and a strategy is needed to support this.

FNUniv’s (2013) strategic plan emphasized the importance of students and enhancing their overall experience: “At the heart of the plan are FNUniv’s students, who are the focus of all

that we do. They embody the dream of the institution's founders that more First Nations people would become empowered through post-secondary education" (p. 1). The strategic plan focuses on increasing student success and satisfaction and increasing enrolment by over 10% each year (p. 5). With these goals, the need to look at thriving students is integral in meeting those objectives. As the student population increases, it is important to also have an understanding of the students so as to be able to identify and address their needs to ensure they thrive. Highly engaged students thrive in university and have better academic outcomes (Nick, 2013). FNUUniv has identified goals but there is not an action plan to making these goals actionable.

FNUUniv is in a unique position because it is an Indigenous controlled institution with embedded Indigenous culture and values and so can focus on enhancing what it already has established and work towards enhancing the already culturally appropriate student supports to ensure students thrive. FNUUniv was in a financial deficit, and two years ago went through major cutback and position reductions, including forced retirements and layoffs in all departments. Major cutbacks were faced, but the demand for student supports did not diminish, as student enrolment increased by 4.9% in 2017 (L. Tanner, personal communication, December 20, 2018). Today, FNUUniv is in a financially stable position, but continues to control costs, while Student Success Services seeks to find creative ways to offer supports and services to students on a minimal budget.

Senge (2006) explained systems thinking as a way of seeing the whole picture as a "framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots'" (p. 69). Williams (2008) reviewed systems thinking and determined that there are three core systems concepts: (a) inter-relationships, (b) perspectives, and (c) boundaries. A systems analysis offered an opportunity to better understand these core systems

concepts at FNUUniv and what is contributing to systems thinking. Considering the role of perspectives (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2015; Cady, 2016) is key, as “systems thinking is not best conducted as solitary practice because each person brings new insights and new perspectives about reasons for these underlying dynamics” (Senge et al., 1999, p. 38).

Looking at the system through a student perspective allowed for a different understanding of the whole.

Pursuing this inquiry in the area of retention increased the understanding of what environments and supports are positively experienced by students and what else can be done to improve, based on stories heard directly from the students. The data collected identified what is working and how FNUUniv can improve. The benefits to the organization include a review of the current state of retention and recommendations for what can be done moving forward based on input from students and faculty. These data have allowed the organization to better understand who is involved and who else should be involved for the system to work more effectively.

The key stakeholders will benefit by hearing what others have said to get a sense of what is needed and use this information to take forward, envision the future (Kouzes & Posner, 2012), and make it happen. Retention is an important piece of FNUUniv’s (2013) strategic plan, and this research focused on how student thriving can assist in achieving the strategic goals. The Director of Student Success Services is responsible for retention and student services and is one of the key stakeholders. The Director will benefit by having an increased understanding of how FNUUniv can improve its efforts to ensure student success moving forward by hearing directly from the students.

**Chapter Summary**

As outlined in this chapter, the need to reconsider ways to enhance student thriving at FNUniv has been identified. FNUniv is a unique institution offering Indigenous content in all of its programs and services. While the university is open for anyone to attend, its original mission and vision (FNUniv, n.d.) sought to empower Indigenous people and to increase Indigenous people to pursue higher education (see also Appendix B). With this in mind, this research strove to consider what is already working within FNUniv supports and services for Indigenous students and how they can be enhanced. The focus was on hearing the students' perspectives rather than following a hierarchical, top-down approach. Literature to support this initiative is explored in chapter two.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will explore relevant literature pertaining to the inquiry topic: What conditions are necessary for Indigenous students to thrive and persist at FNUniv? This inquiry sought to understand what encourages thriving for Indigenous students at FNUniv. Student thriving was not a popular research term, but there was much literature on student retention, persistence, and student success, all of which lead to the same outcome of students completing a goal—generally, graduation from university. There was considerably less research done with Indigenous students thriving in university. It is notable that across all the literature with the Indigenous population, there were recurring themes contributing to student thriving and student persistence. The themes were sense of belonging, family, cultural values, and an Indigenous lens.

I begin by discussing the challenges faced by Indigenous students in the education system, and I research and analyze current trends within student retention. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP; 1996) and Stonechild (2006) highlighted the gaps in education and the need for supports and services unique to the Indigenous population. The success rates of Indigenous people are particularly lower in relation to the non-Indigenous population. In the 2011 Canadian census, the Aboriginal population grew by 20.1% from 2006 to 2011 compared to 5.2% for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2018a, para. 2). Yet the Aboriginal education statistics are considerably lower in comparison. Statistics showed that 48% of Aboriginal people have post-secondary education, 14.4% were in trades, and only 9.8% had a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2018b, “Almost half,” para. 2). While 64.7% of non-Indigenous people had post-secondary education, 12.0% trades, and 26.5% with a university degree (para. 3). “Since 2016, the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5%—more than four times the rate of non-Aboriginal population since 2006” (Statistics Canada, 2017, para. 4).

Stonechild (2006) provided a comprehensive history of how Indigenous people have fought to receive education since the treaties. Stonechild offered a chronological process of educational rights for Indigenous people and the struggles encountered from assimilation and discrimination to struggles in attempting to incorporate Indigenous content in non-Indigenous institutions. It is in this history that one begins to understand why there is a need for Indigenous-run institutions such as FNUniv and what they provide for students who seek higher education.

Indigenous residential schools was the government's response to education as promised in the treaties; however, the underlying intent was to "dismantle Aboriginal culture by removing Indian children from communities and subjecting them to cultural reprogramming" (Stonechild, 2006, p. 8). Indigenous children were taken from their families at very young ages to attend residential school for 10 months of the year where they were taught by nuns and priests. The living conditions in some of the schools were deplorable; children were not allowed to speak their language; they were abused, starved, and neglected (RCAP, 1996). The effects of residential schools are intergenerational and still impact people to this day. As a child of a residential school survivor, these effects have been seen and experienced on a personal level. Removing children from their families and their community affected the family and community bonds (RCAP, 1996), resulting in loss of culture and values and loss of self-worth.

Historically, Indigenous people who completed high school and wanted to pursue higher education faced barriers that made it nearly impossible to attend university. Higher education for Indigenous people in the 1950s was a method for assimilation (Stonechild, 2006, p. 4) and was made to be very difficult to achieve. The general belief was that Indigenous people were incapable of higher education (p. 8). In 1965, Indian Affairs began to close residential schools, and Indigenous children were put into local provincial schools; however, the "joint school

agreements quickly proved to be unsatisfactory as Indian students generally felt misunderstood, unwelcomed, and poorly supported” (p. 40). This continues to be an issue today, as Indigenous people still feel marginalized in the education system (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pidgeon, 2009; RCAP, 1996).

The RCAP (1996) articulated that universities expect everyone to fit in. Programs are created with Indigenous content in an effort to have inclusion, but student completion rates remain low. The RCAP report states that Indigenous students were “isolated in a hostile environment where professors and students express racist attitudes and opinions” (Stonechild, 2006, p. 70). Pidgeon (2009) argued that institutions of higher education were and still are a form of colonization, stating, “Aboriginal peoples need to negotiate a system that does not value their own epistemologies and cultures” (p. 342). The intergenerational effects of residential schools along with the challenges of learning in a Western paradigm at universities create challenges for Indigenous people. The cultural barriers of learning in a Western paradigm and dealing with the trauma of residential schools create challenges to overcome while trying to achieve higher education.

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure is one of the more popular theories. Tinto considered why students leave college and what can be done to retain students. When examining student persistence, Tinto argued that lack of preparation in high school is one of the factors in withdrawing from college. Adding to this, Tinto stated that “incongruence and isolation are distinct roots of student departure” (p. 50), where a student does not feel they belong at the institution, and they have not had enough positive interactions to want to stay. While Tinto did not look into the depth of ethnic or minority groups, he recognized there are differences, noting that students of colour encounter more challenges: “Academic difficulties, incongruence,

isolation, and perhaps finances seem to be more severe for them than for students generally” (p. 75).

Tinto (1999) focused on the United States college system and discussed the importance of the first year experience on student success and how it trickles into their overall success. He offered recommendations for student success: Shared learning in the first year should be mandatory, academic advising should be mandatory, important concepts should be part of a mandatory seminar in the first year, and the first year of university should be considered a developmental, learning experience for students. Tinto (2012) recognized that creating a community for students in their first year of students was an effective way to retain students. Tinto argued that students are successful when they have clear and high expectations placed on them, but noted that the supports offered should be in line with what was being taught in the classroom. He suggested courses that provide academic supports and provide credit towards a degree are an effective way to encourage student success because they provide a learning community where academics and student supports are aligned (Tinto, 2012). Tinto’s (1999) recommendations on what makes students persist in the first year are notable, but they lacked focus on the Indigenous population, cultural aspects, and the need for emotional and spiritual supports.

Malatest & Associates (2002) outlined a list of best practices to increase Aboriginal post-secondary rates that include addressing the historical, social, cultural, and family-related barriers. While this report is over a decade old, the barriers still exist, and its recommendations are still relevant today. The impacts of residential schools are generational, and Indigenous people are still working to overcome them. Academic preparation is integral to the level of success that a student will have in university, and the lack of academic preparation among the Indigenous

population is a barrier that students face. Indigenous students are often underprepared for university because they did not receive adequate education from their local high school or because they are admitted through mature admissions (p. 16). In addition to the academic barriers that exist, there are also social and cultural barriers to add to the pile. Many universities have a Western culture and ideologies, with a mostly non-Indigenous student population. It is only recently that Indigenous content and Indigenous culture have been included in the teachings. Indigenous people must adapt and try to learn in this environment that is contrary to the Indigenous worldview that places value on land. Indigenous students come to university and “are expected to leave the cultural assumptions of their world” (p. 16) and learn using a Western paradigm in order to obtain a higher education (Malatest & Associates, 2002)

### **Sense of Belonging**

Vincent Tinto (2018) articulated that several factors are necessary for students to persist: self-efficacy, perception of curriculum, and sense of belonging. Students must believe in their ability to succeed, they must value their studies, and they must have a sense of belonging. It is the combination of these factors that create an environment for student persistence. Tinto expressed that sense of belonging should be created as early as possible in a student’s journey because “developing a sense of belonging during the first year serves to facilitate other forms of engagement that further student development, learning, and completion” (p. 262). The sense of belonging comes from engaging with others on campus and how the student perceives these interactions and level of importance placed on them. Students who have a sense of belonging will persist because they are motivated. Tinto’s theory on student persistence offers insight into the student perspective on persistence, but it is based on United States colleges and does not consider the cultural differences of the Indigenous population.

Barney (2018) explored the success factors of an Aboriginal group, finding that isolation was an inhibiting factor to success. Students expressed feelings of marginalization and a lack of belonging that contributed to failure rates, while a community enabled success by providing “strong networks of supervisors, Indigenous role models, student networks and family support” (p. 19). Similarly, Brown and Robinson Kurpius (as cited in Guillory & Wolverson, 2008) stated that faculty and staff play a role in creating a welcoming and supportive environment that is key to students thriving. While this was about institutions that have mainly non-Indigenous faculty, it remains relevant to an institution such as FNUniv, as it is the environment that is of importance and not necessarily who is creating the environment.

Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird (2017) stated that sense of belonging was a critical factor in the success of Indigenous students in university. They stated that culture, family, and spirituality are connected to sense of belonging, and all are critical to student success in university. Their research was on a non-Indigenous institution that housed a “Native centre” (p. 792), and it was in this space where students felt most at home and where they could be themselves. Pidgeon (2009) offered that a holistic model be incorporated for student success, stating that it must incorporate “the inter-connectedness of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual realms along with the inter-relationships of the individual, family, and community” (p. 354).

### **Cultural Values**

There are numerous theories that exist regarding student retention, but they do not address the cultural differences that exist for Indigenous people. Furthermore, many are focused on the institutional perspective, on retention, or student departure. One theory that stood out in the research was the family education model proposed by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002),

which was not only focused on the student persistence, but it was also targeted specifically to Indigenous populations. The family education model is focused on Indigenous students in higher educational institutions, and Guillory and Wolverton (2008) concluded, “Establishing and maintaining a sense of ‘family,’ both at home and at college, fortifies American Indians’ academic persistence” (p. 61). Guillory and Wolverton pointed out a further important fact about the models discussed:

[This] theory or model derives initially from the perceptions of students, not from the perspectives of those individuals responsible for the governance of institutions of higher education and the creation of policies and conditions that foster a welcoming and receptive environment (state officials, university presidents, and faculty). (p. 62)

Student perceptions and community/family-like environments should be considered when considering what is necessary for Indigenous students to thrive.

Pidgeon (2009) highlighted the gaps in Indigenous education, articulating the importance of allowing room to have Indigenous paradigm as part of education. Pidgeon suggested incorporating a holistic model to improve Indigenous student success. Pidgeon noted that Indigenous students value their culture like mainstream society values things like financial and social status. Education can enhance financial and social status, but it fails to enhance culture, yet it is a tool that can empower Indigenous people. The family education model incorporates a holistic model by including not just culture, but also family and a community with a network of supports for students.

### **Family**

In discussing the importance of family perspective, HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002),

When colleges and universities view student attrition as resulting from a lack of individual commitment or ability, these institutions fail to recognize the disconnect between the institutional values and student/family values; hence the real reasons for high attrition rates among disadvantaged students are never addressed. Clark and HeavyRunner (1999) asserted that colleges and universities need to re-evaluate their assumptions and shift the paradigm to a student- and family-centered approach. (p. 33)

With the Aboriginal population growing at a significantly faster pace compared to the overall population, it is important to be cognisant of the needs of this demographic. Malatest & Associates (2002) articulated the different challenges faced by Indigenous students.

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) recognized the dynamics of Indigenous students and the difference in supports needed to thrive in university. They introduced the family education model that provides support and an environment for students to thrive and persist throughout their education. The family education model recognizes the importance of family and builds upon it to create an environment that encourages students to persist. Three assumptions lead the model: “1. The educational institution must act as a liaison between social and health services during crisis, 2. Family members must be included to support the student, and 3. Family members must be engaged in community and activities” (p. 30). To add to this unique familial model, the emphasis of community is strong, and the institution holds the responsibility to create the partnership and engage the family in making an environment that is essential for students to thrive. The key to this model is creating a sense of belonging, not just for the student but also for the family; this can remove those feelings of resentment that family tends to experience from a student spending time away and on their studies (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). The family education model employs caseworkers who counsel and assist students and their families; they

“employ the principles and techniques of empowerment to help families” (p. 31). It is not just caseworkers who are involved, but also “administrators, faculty and staff understand the goals and purposes of retention and willingly give their full support” (p. 32). Communication and involvement by everyone are key elements to the success of this model.

This model recognizes the need for cultural and family values to be incorporated into the system for a student to be successful. Indigenous people seek community and a place where their voice is heard and responded to. They seek a place where they are comfortable to share their voice. The family education model uses a strengths-based approach, and therefore, it fits well in the appreciative inquiry approach under action research. I believe a powerful message is conveyed from this model “colleges and universities need to reevaluate their assumptions and shift the paradigm to a student-and family-centred approach” (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 33).

### **Indigenous Lens**

Kovach (2009) articulated that an Indigenous methodology is about an Indigenous worldview that encompasses history and the land and recognizes “the unique situation of Indigenous people that differentiates this group from other minorities” (p. 158). Indigenous people place an importance on land and have a special connection with it. There is acknowledgement that without the land, we would not survive; the buffalo was our source of sustenance and survival, and it has been replaced by education in today’s modern world (Stonechild, 2006). As Indigenous people strived to survive and adapt through colonialism and assimilation, the way of living and surviving has changed. An Indigenous worldview understands this, and using an Indigenous methodology acknowledges the history and its ripple effects to generations of Indigenous people.

As stated in chapter one, the medicine wheel has four parts that are all interconnected to create a whole circle. Culture is often perceived as spiritual, but there is more to culture than just spirit. Like the medicine wheel, culture has many parts, and when all parts are working together, culture can be seen in many ways and not just from the spiritual side. Yes culture is spiritual, but it is also about place. The space that is around us has culture; the environment of FNUniv is a culture. The people of FNUniv, how they are, what they do, and how they connect with one another, this is culture. Kovach (2009) stated, “Place links present with past and our personal self with kinship groups. What we know flows through us, from our experience from our places. Place tells about relationships, reveal history and holds our identity” (p. 61). In Indigenous culture, everything is interconnected (Wilson, 2008).

### **Summary**

Historically, Indigenous people have faced struggles in attaining higher education. Challenges include admission requirements; financial obstacles; family priorities; emotional, mental, and physical abuse; and trauma. While there has been extensive research regarding student success, retention, and persistence, not much Indigenous research has been done, and there is a lack of focus on the Indigenous population. This is a subject of interest, particularly if one takes into consideration the statistics on Indigenous demographics. The Aboriginal population is rising, and the level of education attained is not in proportion with the statistics. Incorporating an Indigenous methodology is essential to research in this area to maintain respect and to ensure a comprehensive understanding from an Indigenous perspective. As I sifted through the research focusing on Indigenous content, recurring themes contributing to student thriving and student persistence were identified as follows: a sense of belonging, family, and

cultural values. These theories highlighted important factors to thriving and persistence, but there is a need for more focused research with an Indigenous paradigm.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

An overview of the organizational context of FNUniv was provided in chapter one and chapter two. Together, the importance of this research and why it benefits the organization was explained in the previous two chapters. Described in this chapter is the research methodology used to explore what conditions are necessary for Indigenous students to thrive and persist at FNUniv and the sub questions:

1. How is a successful post-secondary experience defined by Indigenous people at FNUniv and what does it mean for them to thrive?
2. What is generally experienced by Indigenous learners at FNUniv?
3. How have these experiences led to positive or negative outcomes?
4. What are some of the Indigenous cultural elements that support thriving?
5. What models or strategies already exist in North America or elsewhere that optimize the ability for students to thrive in post-secondary education?

#### **Methodology**

Action research is a collaborative approach integrating theory and action to investigate issues by the people who experience them (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). In Rowe, Graf, Agger-Gupta, Piggot-Irvine, and Harris's (2013, p. 20) "Action Research Engagement (ARE) model," engaging key stakeholders throughout the entire process in a collaborative manner to create change is essential. This research focused on Indigenous students at FNUniv to gain an understanding their experiences and the variables within these experiences present at FNUniv that help them thrive. Students are key stakeholders at FNUniv, and yet, their input is often not considered when creating strategies or initiatives aimed at increasing student success. Input from everyone is the holistic way to ensure that respect, reciprocity, and responsibility are maintained.

Everything and everyone is interconnected; as Wilson (2008) stated, “Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of” (p. 80).

With an Indigenous worldview, a combination of qualitative research approaches was appropriate to ensure respect, reciprocity, and responsibility while remaining congruent with my own values and beliefs. The action-oriented approaches used in this research included appreciative inquiry, arts-based research, and Indigenous methodology.

Appreciative inquiry focuses on strengths and identifies what is working as opposed to addressing existing problems. It is an appreciative approach to research concerned with “what gives life to an extraordinary system” (Bushe, 2012, p. 9). The appreciative inquiry approach recognizes the best in the world around us and requires that everyone is engaged throughout the process. Agger-Gupta and Perodeau (2016) explained appreciative inquiry as a process that “creates organizational energy and alignment through discovering and appreciating the stories employees and other stakeholders tell about their successes” (p. 3). For this research, students of FNUUniv had the opportunity to share their stories and what helps them to thrive in university.

Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2008) outlined appreciative inquiry as having four phases: (a) discovery, (b) dream, (c) design, and (d) deliver, also known as the 4D model. The discovery stage is a reflective stage concerned with what has worked, or what strengths already exist. The dream stage requires everyone to envision where the organization or group seeks to be and sets the stage for moving forward. The third stage, the design stage, has participants work towards making the dream state more concrete by way of a proposal, sometimes referred to as possibility statements. The final stage, delivery/destiny phase, involves agreement among participants on the design statements and making commitments to take action, on their own,

towards achieving the design. The interviews and group discussion led participants through these stages to come to an agreed-upon way to move forward.

Arts-based research allows people a creative way to share thoughts and ideas; it generates conversation and allows people to open up in different ways than traditional methods (C. Tremblay, personal communication, January 31, 2018). Arts-based methods such as Photovoice use alternative methods like the camera and photos, putting the participants in control by allowing them to select what they see as fitting of the topic being researched. The Photovoice method poses a question or statement; the participants capture images based upon this and then have a group discussion around their photos and identify themes (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice encourages dialogue through photos and “reduces the distinction between experts and nonexperts” (Chio & Fandt, 2007, p. 486).

According to Wilson (2008), “An Indigenous research paradigm is relational and maintains relational accountability” (p. 71). He went on to explain that knowledge is relational and comes from the interconnectedness between people and everything around us, including the land. It is important to maintain accountability within relationships that are reciprocal and built upon trust and respect (Senge et al., 1999; Wilson, 2008). Chilisa (2012) discussed how much research is deficit based; it focuses on what is wrong rather than on what is working. An Indigenous paradigm is relational, and relationships are not built upon what is not working. Appreciative inquiry and arts-based research are both relational; they are collaborative and work with the community throughout the research process and aid in all aspects of it.

When considering the appreciative inquiry approach from an Indigenous perspective, appreciative inquiry is collaborative and seeks to find a mutually agreeable solution to benefit everyone involved. The discovery stage of Bushe’s (2011) 4D model is reflective and

collaborative, requiring both researcher and participants thought and input. The next three stages involve collaboration and communication to achieve the desired outcome, or vision, that benefits everyone involved in the research process. Arts-based research is collaborative and involves the community, seeking their input to create change. Working directly with students and consulting them along the way allowed them to be directly involved in creating positive change for their future. An Indigenous paradigm was interwoven throughout these approaches through collaborative and relational aspects.

This research strived to understand how FNUniv students thrived throughout university and what made them persist. The approach involved a combination of interviews and a group method that integrated Photovoice as a means to encourage dialogue on a deeper level about the subject. Indigenous people are reluctant to participate in research given their history and its connection to colonialism (Schneider & Kayseas, 2018; Smith, 2012). In an Indigenous paradigm, trust must be established (Wilson, 2009). As the researcher, trust was established with students because they were familiar with me, and this enabled me to conduct interviews.

Following the interviews, students were able to meet as a larger group to construct deeper synthesis of their experiences (Creswell, 2013, 2014) and to explore ways to create change. Through Rowe et al.'s (2013) ARE model, I engaged stakeholders in a collaborative method; Photovoice provided the opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue and reflect on the topic as a group.

### **Project Participants**

Research participants were selected from the Indigenous student population at FNUniv, as this research focused on understanding how Indigenous students thrive. In 2017, there were 686 self-declared Indigenous students at FNUniv; the population is 80% female and 20% male

(L. Tanner, personal communication, December 20, 2018). The selection of participants based on age range, gender, and program of study was random and based off of those who expressed interest. All Indigenous students at FNUUniv were contacted initially by an email requesting their participation in the study. A total of 12 students expressed interest, eight were interviewed and four contributed to the group discussion. Five females and three males participated, making the sample ratio accuracy close to the Indigenous student population of 80% female and 20% male.

**Interview method.** The initial email elicited a response from seven students; however, only three were able to be interviewed. Two students did not respond back to set up an interview time, and two did not show up to the arranged interview time, nor did they respond to further email requests. To garner more participants, the snowball technique was used, and five additional participants were found. Of the participants, representation was comprised from students in their first, second, third, and fourth year of study. For this first method, eight participants were interviewed.

**Photovoice group discussion.** The second method, a form of focus group, had four participants involved, who had all participated in the initial interview. Three participants from the interviews were unable to make the group discussion. One had a final exam, another had an exam to prepare for, one did not attend, and one chose to attend a pipe ceremony that happened to be held at the same time on campus.

**Inquiry partner.** My partner for this project has been Dr. Bettina Schneider, Associate Vice President of Academics and professor in Administration at FNUUniv. Dr. Schneider has her PhD in Native American Studies from the University of California, with research interests in Indigenous community and economic development. She has been a professor at FNUUniv for over five years and in executive management as Associate Vice President of Academics for the past

two years. While Dr. Schneider's research interests are in economic development, she has a personal interest in ensuring students are successful in university. The Associate VP works closely with Student Success Services and created a three-credit financial literacy course aimed at providing students with the financial tools they need to be successful as a university student and throughout their lives. The course has become a core class in FNU's first year transition program, Student Transition and Retention (STAR) program. Dr. Schneider is supportive of retention initiatives and is a champion of this research.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This study used an appreciative stance with the action research engagement model as articulated by Rowe et al. (2013). It was also aligned with the five phases of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Step two of the ARE model, "Stakeholder Engaged Inquiry methods" (Rowe et al., 2013, p. 20), and the discover and dream phases of appreciative inquiry were aligned with my data collection methods. The methods used for this research are described in detail in this section.

**Interview.** Interviews were the first method used; they allowed participants to share their thoughts in a private environment to ensure safety before the group setting. Interviews were conducted face to face and lasted approximately 15-25 minutes. The conversations were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. The interviews were conducted in an informal way to allow for a natural relationship to grow and allow for trust building to develop (Wilson, 2008). Questions were open-ended with an appreciative stance, allowing participants to focus on personal experiences, sharing their stories and experiences, in a safe space. Relationships built upon trust and respect are essential to a healthy relationship and are key in an Indigenous methodology (Seng et al., 1999; Wilson, 2008). At the end of the interview, participants were

informed about the technique of Photovoice and asked to take a picture in preparation for the next portion of research, the group discussion.

The interviews concluded by providing participants an overview of Photovoice and a focus question to find photo(s) for the group discussion. Photovoice is an arts-based method where people can identify and represent their community through photographs (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang, 1999). Haldenby (n.d.) articulated the difficulty that some researchers face in observing behaviours when working with communities and how Photovoice can address this problem. Using Photovoice enabled the participants to be directly involved in the research and created an environment of trust, accountability, and reciprocity. Participants were open to Photovoice and liked the different approach to research.

**Photovoice group discussion.** The group discussion began with students sharing their photo and what it meant to them. The Wang and Burris technique, “SHOWeD” (as cited in Wang, 1999, p. 188) was the starting point to get participants sharing their thoughts and creating more dialogue about their photos and the subject of thriving. SHOWeD is a series of questions that assist in creating dialogue:

What do you **S**ee here?

What is really **H**appening here?

How does this relate to **O**ur lives?

Why does this situation, concern, or strength **E**xist?

What can we **D**o about it?

The discussion grew on its own, and as I was the facilitator, I did not need to engage the participants very much. Photovoice began the conversations and made for an easy transition into an action-learning circle. Action learning circles involve participants in the research process,

using reflection and action in a group setting. An issue or concern is raised in the group, and students draw upon their own experiences to address and find solutions (Wade & Hammick, 1999). Students shared their photos on student thriving and began discussing what is currently working and what could be improved at FNUniv.

The discussion during this session was rich, and everyone was involved in the conversation. During this discussion, I took notes highlighting what I saw as key themes to the conversation in relation to my research. At the end of the Photovoice discussion group, I read out my notes to the participants to ensure they agreed that I had captured the main points of what was said. All participants agreed with reiteration of the points made.

### **Study Conduct**

Immediately following completion of both ethics reviews, which adhered to the ethics guidelines of Royal Roads University (2011) and the University of Regina (2015), and following Bushe's (2011) 4D model, this research began in the discovery stage by seeking out student participants with a letter of invitation (Appendix D) and research information letter (Appendix E). This was sent to all current Indigenous students at the Regina campus through email by a neutral third party to reduce the risk of coercion or power over, as requested by the University of Regina ethics board. The snowball technique was used to secure additional students. At the start of each interview, participants were given a hard copy of the research information letter, which also contained the research consent form (Appendix F). I reviewed them with the participant prior to asking them to sign. I emphasized that their confidentiality would be protected and that they were free to withdraw at any time without prejudice. For the Photovoice group discussion, I asked everyone to respect the privacy of one another to maintain confidentiality. I let them know

that all the data would be transcribed by me and coded, meaning that there would be no personal identifiers in the documents.

The interviews and Photovoice group discussion were audio recorded. In addition to the audio recording of the sessions, I also took notes and reviewed them with the participants at the end of each session to ensure they agreed with what I was hearing. Reviewing my notes with participants ensured accuracy and also maintained relational accountability. It ensured I was being “true to the voices of all the participants and reflect an understanding of the topic that is shared by researcher and participants alike” (Wilson, 2008, p. 101).

Interviews used a combined approach of a conversational method (see Appendix G for interview questions) and a Photovoice discussion group (see Appendix H for group discussion questions). The Photovoice method engaged participants in a unique way that encouraged creative thinking and opened minds to think about the topic in a different way. The eight interviews were held with students to understand what they need in student supports and what is currently working for them. Interviews ended with asking participants to bring a photo to the Photovoice group discussion of what they think captures success.

Upon coding and analyzing (Saldana, 2009) these data, themes were identified and used to ask questions in the secondary method of the Photovoice group discussion, which functioned as the action learning circle. The secondary method began with an overview of Photovoice by presenting Wang and Burris’s (1997) guide for participants when sharing their photos of student thriving, which prompted the rest of the discussion. The photos were the focus of the group discussion; however, Wang and Burris’s SHOWeD questions were used to encourage more dialogue (Appendix H). The dream and design phases occurred through the group discussions using Photovoice, where participants proposed what the future of student thriving looks like at

FNUniv. Photovoice encouraged creativity and collaboration that will lead change where everyone is involved.

### **Data Analysis and Validity**

Data analysis began with data collection. After each interview, I noticed themes beginning to emerge. To ensure accuracy and validity, I summed up what I heard at the end of the interviews and group discussion with the participants. The analysis process was aligned with what Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) outlined. The audio recordings of the interviews and group discussion were transcribed by me to provide a strong familiarity with the data. Once transcribed, the data were reread several times to identify recurring themes, which allowed for categories to emerge (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). I used methods including highlighting, word repetition, In Vivo coding, and descriptive coding (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Examples can be found in chapter four where I discuss themes and subthemes. Using In Vivo coding, I took verbatim words from the interviews and Photovoice discussion group to ensure participants' perspectives were captured and their voices honoured. This was important to ensure an Indigenous paradigm was maintained throughout the research. Next, I organized the codes into groups and classified them into themes and subthemes. The subthemes helped to reveal emergent connections and relationships.

Working with the participants and allowing a space for themes to emerge ensured participants felt heard and that their input was important. The idea behind this research was to identify new ways of looking at student thriving; therefore, rather than coming in with pre-set categories, I wanted to have the categories emerge through working with the data (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

In the Cree language, the word *tapwê* translates roughly to the word truth or validity. *Tapwê* “is bound with the integrity of the person sharing knowledge” (Kovach, 2009, p. 148). Similarly, Glesne (2016) stated, “Trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study, about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research was carried out” (p. 53). Participant involvement means voices are heard throughout the process; it ensures trustworthiness, authenticity, and validity of the research while also maintaining an Indigenous methodology. Summarizing at the end of each interview and Photovoice group discussion with the participants allowed for reliability, trustworthiness, and authenticity for this research. Validity of the research also occurs through reflexivity, knowing where I am in the research, being aware of my biases, and acknowledging them (Kovach, 2009).

### **Ethical Issues**

This project followed the ethics policies of Royal Roads University (2011) and the University of Regina (2015), which FNUUniv adheres to. Kovach (2009) articulated that “Indigenous inquiry is a relational methodology: its methods are dependent upon deep respect for those (or that) which it will involve, and those (or that) which will feel its consequence” (p. 174). Ensuring trust and respect was an important aspect to this research. As a researcher, I ensured that participants were informed of what was being researched and how it affected them. Also, checking with participants ensured that their voices were heard and ensured accuracy. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences, & Humanities Research Council of Canada (Tri-Council; 2014) created a policy statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans. This framework is based upon three core principles: “Respect for persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice” (p. 6).

These principles were adhered to in this research, and I will now articulate how each principle was addressed.

**Respect for persons** ensures every individual is respected by allowing each person the ability to give or refuse his or her consent to participate. In advance of the inquiry method to ensure respect for persons, I provided a detailed research information letter (Appendix E), which contained the consent form (Appendix F); this ensured participants had time to review and consider possible risks and benefits and make an informed decision. The Tri-Council (2014) has stated, “The voluntariness of consent is important because it respects human dignity and means that individuals have chosen to participate in research according to their own values, preferences and wishes” (p. 26). Prior to each interview and the Photovoice discussion group, I went over the consent forms before obtaining signatures for participation. Photovoice discussion group participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and that once audio recording began, any recorded comments would be part of the data. Participants were also informed that due to the nature of the group discussion, any personal identifiers would be used.

This research design, data collection, and dissemination have kept within an Indigenous worldview. By incorporating the findings and recommendations of this study into the student retention initiatives of FNUniv, all knowledge will be shared and passed on for future generations to benefit from. This research called upon the knowledge of students, who are community members of the institution.

**Concern for welfare** is the concern for a person’s overall life and well-being. The Tri-Council (2014) noted that researchers are to “provide participants with enough information to be able to adequately assess risks and potential benefits associated with their participation in the research” (p. 8). Prior to participating in the research, participants were provided all information

pertaining to the research to make an informed decision as to whether the benefits justify the risks. Interviews were deliberate and conducted first to ensure participants were comfortable and prepared for the group discussion amongst their peers. The interview and group questions had an appreciative stance so that the focus was on what is working rather laying blame as to what is not working. For the group discussion, guidelines were explained, which included ensuring everyone was clear about respecting all participants as equal, that all comments were being made in a safe space, and that confidentiality would be respected. There was no risk to health or welfare in this study and the research directly benefits the participants (Tri-Council, 2014).

**Justice** is concerned with ensuring participants are treated fairly and equitable. There was no power-over imbalance for this research. At the request of the University of Regina Ethics Board, initial email invites to participate were sent by a third party to ensure there was no coercion of any kind. The research is contributing to a better future for Indigenous people, but also for all of society, as it sought to improve the success of students in university and increase graduation rates. This research was with an Indigenous population at an Indigenous organization by an Indigenous person. Historically Indigenous people have not been treated fairly in research (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Stonechild, 2006; Wilson, 2008), and the Tri-Council (2014) has an entire section on research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people of Canada. “Taking time to establish a relationship can promote mutual trust and communication, identify mutually beneficial research goals, define appropriate research collaborations or partnerships, and ensure that the conduct of research adheres to the core principles” (Tri-Council, 2014, p. 114). I am an Indigenous person working in the Indigenous institution; my relationships with the community were already established. This research maintained an Indigenous paradigm, and keeping consistent with this, respect, reciprocity, and trust were maintained throughout the research by

inviting all Indigenous students to participate, and then ensuring participants were informed and involved throughout the research process. Participants will be provided with a draft before contributions are published and again after publication to ensure the learned knowledge is shared throughout the process.

### **Chapter Summary**

An overview of methodology, data collection and analysis, and ethical guidelines were provided in this chapter. First, a description of research methodologies used to explore the inquiry question and sub-questions were provided. There was a discussion on the ARE model and the multiple approaches used in this research, including the four phases of appreciative inquiry as well as the importance of using multiple methods to stay aligned with an Indigenous paradigm. An overview of participants and methods were provided as well as an explanation of data collection methods that followed the ARE model. In the final section of this chapter, I covered how ethical guidelines were adhered to. In the following chapter, the study findings will be presented, the conclusions discussed, and the limitations of this inquiry will be examined.

### **Chapter Four: Inquiry Project Findings and Conclusions**

This research endeavoured to explore what conditions are necessary for Indigenous students to thrive at FNUniv. The sub-questions of this inquiry were:

1. How is a successful post-secondary experience defined by Indigenous people at FNUniv and what does it mean for them to thrive?
2. What is generally experienced by Indigenous learners at FNUniv?
3. How have these experiences led to positive or negative outcomes?
4. What are some of the Indigenous cultural elements that support thriving?
5. What models or strategies already exist in North America or elsewhere that optimize the ability for students to thrive in post-secondary education?

Using an appreciative stance, these questions guided the interviews and the Photovoice discussion group. As the participants provided their input and themes began to emerge, it was evident that there was a connection to the medicine wheel teachings of Indigenous cultures (see Appendix C). As discussed in chapter one, the medicine wheel is a tool to teach ways of living and knowing; the teachings vary dependent upon who is teaching and what region the person comes from. Kemppainen, Kopera-Frye, and Woodard (2008) expressed the versatility of the medicine wheel and how it can be adapted to address all aspects of life; they focused on counselling and goal setting in an educational field.

As I was raised with Cree teaching and FNUniv falls under Cree territory, I will focus on the Cree teachings of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel has four parts, and when these are balanced, things will function effectively. The wheel can have many different meanings, and different aspects fall under the four quadrants depending on what is being taught. Some examples include four seasons, four directions, four colours, four stages of life, or four stages of

human development (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008; Lee, n.d.). The middle, or the centre, is the home fire and is the beginning of the wheel (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008; see also Appendix C). The sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and a journey begins with the sun rise. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the human development aspects of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Similarly, a systems thinking model looks at these same four areas or four dimensions.

Systems thinking is an interconnected system designed to “achieve a desired purpose” (Stroh, 2015, p. 16). When the quadrants of the medicine wheel are balanced, it is working effectively. This is much like systems thinking that strives to improve a system or make it work better by looking at the whole system and all of its dimensions. Everything in life is interconnected (Kovach, 2009; Wenger-Nabigon, 2011; Wilson, 2008). As noted by Wenger-Nabigon (2011),

Relationships are fundamental to understanding the nature of events, and establishing standards of behavior. Separating things out from each other and studying them as singular entities without a holistic viewpoint as an organizing point does not fall within the natural way of thinking in Aboriginal epistemology. (p. 147)

In this chapter, I will describe the findings of this research and relate them to the medicine wheel teachings, report the project’s conclusions, and discuss the scope and limitations of the inquiry.

### **Study Findings**

As described in chapter three, my preliminary analysis used descriptive and In Vivo coding as outlined by Saldana and Omasta (2018). This process began during data collection, was enhanced during transcribing, and again as I evaluated the data. The sub-questions honed in

on what was currently working for students to thrive and what could be improved upon to enhance student thriving. Broad themes that emerged from interviews and the Photovoice discussion group were:

1. Student supports are essential.
2. Culture and emotional well-being lead to academic successes.
3. A safe, supportive environment creates a sense of belonging and acceptance.
4. Communication is essential to create healthy relationships and a community.

Some of these categories overlap and are interrelated. For the purposes of this paper, I have broken them down into separate categories to provide descriptions of the data collected for this research. I will now describe these findings in detail through summaries and direct participant quotes. Coding of interviews and photovoice discussions was done to protect participant anonymity. To differentiate between the two, interviewees are coded as I-1, I-2, and such, while quotes from the photovoice discussion are coded as P-1, P-2, and so forth.

**Finding 1: Student supports are essential.** All participants had accessed student supports and found great value in what exists. These are academic workshops and seminars, Elders, free tutoring and writing clinic (for all subjects), scholarships, emergency bursaries, one-on-one academic advising, and referrals. Participants reported that FNUniv's current supports encourage growth and learning. One interviewee stated, "The student supports are more accessible here and the faculty are easy to talk to" (I-1). Another interviewee said, "You come here and they want you to succeed. They provide a lot of tutoring and writing workshops and are more willing to help a student out" (I-3).

This research strived to maintain an appreciative stance and focused on what was working; however, when asked to provide three hopes for improving student thriving, multiple

participants focused on what was lacking. There was a strong focus on the lack of counseling services and a desire to have counselling available on campus. Interviewee I-4 stated,

A lot of students carry a lot of crap, and more often than not, we see them breaking down. To me it's a letdown when you need help, you need to speak to someone and are told you have to go across campus first and there you are told that you have to make an appointment but you can't get in for two weeks. To me that's not an institution looking after their students.

Another participant said, "More supports like a counsellor here would be helpful. The Elders aren't here every day, and some people want to talk to someone besides an Elder" (P-2). The academic supports were invaluable to students, and participants identified a need to have more emotional supports such as talking circles and one on one counselling.

To orient this theme within an Indigenous context, the medicine wheel can be referenced. In the medicine wheel, the west door represents the emotional side, as it consists of emotional well-being, and the east door represents mental well-being (Laframboise & Sherbina, 2008). The academic supports are being met, but participants expressed that there is an imbalance with their emotional and mental well-being. The needs of the west door are not being met, and it requires attention so students might find better balance between the two.

**Finding 2: Culture and emotional well-being lead to academic success.** When I asked participants why they chose to come to FNUniv, everyone indicated that Indigenous culture was part of the reason. An interviewee stated, "Because the Indigenous knowledge is integrated into the learning, into the education" (I-3), while another expressed a desire for an "education that encompassed who I am culturally" (I-6) and to be taught in an environment of Indigenous culture.

The culture at FNUniv was brought up several times, both in individual interviews and in the group discussion. It was interesting how each participant expressed that the culture at FNUniv was comforting and enabled students to feel a sense of belonging that encouraged thriving. One interviewee indicated he/she liked how to be able to “reconnect with my culture” (I-5). The cultural events happening at FNUniv bring everyone together and allow students to share their knowledge in their own ways. Another interviewee was grateful for the opportunities to showcase culture on campus, stating, “I can show that side of myself and I can display things that I’m proud of” (I-1). Another interviewee felt there needed to be more cultural events to support thriving: “I wish we had more cultural events, the community sense increases communication between faculty, staff and students. . . . I think that is what is needed” (I-6). One participant excused herself from the Photovoice discussion group to attend the pipe ceremony that was happening that day because this cultural event was more important for her. Culture is very important to students, and when events are offered, they are taken advantage of.

The north door of the medicine wheel encompasses culture and emotional well-being. It was evident from participants that FNUniv provides the cultural aspects that students appreciate.

**Finding 3: A safe, supportive environment creates a sense of belonging and acceptance.** All participants expressed that FNUniv offered an environment that provided a sense of belonging and allowed them to be themselves. For some, that was the main reason they chose to come to FNUniv and why they stay. The overarching theme that emerged from the interviews and group discussion was a safe space to grow and learn. Sub themes indicative of a thriving environment included smaller learning environment, family-like environment, understanding staff and faculty, and supportive environment. I will now discuss these sub themes separately.

***Accepting environment (sense of belonging).*** The smaller classroom size at FNUUniv provides an environment that encourages growth and learning. The largest classroom at FNUUniv has 80 seats, and the average class has 20-30 students, unlike larger institutions where classes can be have well over 100 students. An interviewee expressed that “being in the smaller classroom settings with people that I’ve developed a close relationship with allows me to be myself” (I-3). Another interviewee spoke to the smaller environment that allowed her to ask for help: “I don’t feel embarrassed to go to an advisor or instructor and ask for extra help” (I-1).

***Safe space.*** An interviewee stated, “It is more friendly here, it’s not restricted and you can be yourself” (I-5). The environment at FNUUniv is that of a family-like atmosphere where students are comfortable to be themselves, find themselves and go out of their comfort zone to learn and grow. During the Photovoice discussion group, a participant expressed that she/he found “happiness in coming to campus because of the atmosphere provided” (P-2). Another participant spoke about how people were genuine and the space was safe for him/her to “put myself out there and grow. For the first time in my life I felt like I was accepted for who I am” (I-2). Interviewee I-1 stated, “I don’t feel nervous to ask for help or admit that I might be falling behind in my studies. I don’t feel that intimidation when I come here.”

***Room to grow.*** One interviewee encapsulated how the environment assisted his/her thriving in one statement:

The most helpful thing to me as a FNUNIV Student here was gaining the motivation to talk to others and build relationships with individuals that help make it feel like I never left home here. For me, what made me talk to others was how friendly the staff and students are here at FNUUniv—from the Student Association to students’ events. Personal

motivation to be able to drive myself to talk to others and that helped my self-esteem a lot. How comforting you guys have made it made me come out of my bubble. (I-8)

The south door of the medicine wheel is the physical side, and this includes the environment around us. FNUniv offers an environment that is safe and comforting, and it enables students to have a sense of belonging.

**Finding 4: Communication is needed to create healthy relationships and a community.** The need for improved communication was stressed in the interviews and group discussion. Sub themes were communication to and with students as well as communication of events and activities. The group discussion was rich and focused in on communication as an area to improve in order to enhance thriving. This research was conducted using an appreciative inquiry stance; however, the responses did not all focus on what was working. This was particularly true when participants were asked what their hopes to improve student thriving were, and all comments led back to the lack of communication overall. Participants stressed the need for “increased communication” from management, stating that “student voices are ignored,” and there is a need to “bridge the communication gap.” These were comments targeted at management and in relation to student needs versus university agenda. As an insider to the university, this was not entirely unexpected (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

What was surprising was that it came from all the participants and not just a few. All participants stated they liked that the comfort and community-like environment of FNUniv promoted student thriving, but the communication that should exist in a community was lacking. An interviewee spoke about how recent changes to his/her program caused students to leave: “Students should have feedback on programs, sometimes there are changes to programs without any student knowledge or consideration. More communication would assist in helping programs

to grow better and stronger” (I-6). This participant went on to say, “When we are not communicating, we are not finding out what our needs are from each other, and I don’t think those conversations happen enough with students, faculty, and staff.” One participant expressed his/her love for the university, but stated that there is a disconnect with management and students, saying, “Without your student body, you don’t exist. . . . How can we actively engage students to see what they want, what are their concerns and validate these?” (P-2).

Communication is essential to any relationship. Short (1998) stated that communication is a means of learning in relationships. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational, that it is shared, and that it is a relationship with all of creation. Relationships are an important part of Indigenous culture and are built from a foundation of trust and respect. Relationships matter, and at the heart of Indigenous research and Indigenous community and development are relationships that are respectful, reciprocal, and genuine (Smith, 2012). Healthy relationships require communication, and communication is throughout all parts of the medicine wheel. Communication is the way we learn and socially bond. Learning and community are created this way.

### **Study Conclusions**

The primary and sub research questions for this inquiry were restated at the beginning of this chapter. Coding revealed four main themes: (a) student supports are essential, (b) culture and emotional well-being lead to academic success, (c) a safe, supportive environment creates a sense of belonging and acceptance, and (d) communication. I will now compare and contrast findings that emerged from this research with the literature summarized in chapter two and provide four conclusions to address the primary research question and sub-questions:

1. Student supports such as academic and emotional well-being foster learning and growth for those that attend.
2. Indigenous culture in the classroom and as part of the overall environment at the university fosters thriving.
3. The Indigenous culture makes it comfortable and more like a community, family-like environment.
4. Student voices want to be heard, there is a desire for increased communication by students, with students, and for students between faculty, staff, and executive.

These conclusions will now be described with support from the data and relevant literature.

**Conclusion 1: Student supports foster learning and growth for those that attend.**

Participants of this research were asked what three things would improve student thriving, and student seminars and supports were on the top of the list of suggestions. Academic seminars included note taking, exam preparation, and writing skills, while supports included counselling services and emotional and mental well-being events. These supports fulfill the north (i.e., mental) and west (i.e., emotional) quadrants of the medicine wheel. Participants found value in the information that was learned through the seminars. As stated in chapter two, Tinto (2012) stated that supports need to be “aligned or contextualized to demands of the classroom” (p. 5) for students to succeed. It is not an isolated event that must occur. Currently, the academic seminars are offered for students at times throughout the semester that are in line with what is happening in the classes, and the participants found value in these being offered. One participant felt that it should be mandatory for students to attend and suggested that a first-year program could incorporate the seminars and assist students in being successful. Aligning supports with the classroom requires multiple people working together with the same goal in mind, and this

requires effective communication. As stated in chapter two, the literature supported the need for the first year of university to be a foundational year for students to learn the essentials of being successful in university (Tachine et al., 2017; Tinto, 2012).

Senge (2006) articulated a theory called creative tension (see Appendix I), which is the gap between current reality and a vision. It is a space that can cause tension or anxiety, but when used effectively, it is a gap that can be used to harness creativity and move towards a desired vision or a goal. Senge explained that people do not utilize this space effectively, and often in an attempt to relieve tension in the gap, the vision is lowered, making it easier to reach that goal. This gap of creative tension is a space that students can harness in university. Students come to university with a desired goal in mind, and when they are faced with stress or anxiety, they are in the space of creative tension. The supports provided by the university are a method to harness creative tension, and when students access them, it helps to relieve the tension by bringing their current reality closer to towards their vision instead of lowering their vision.

**Conclusion 2: Indigenous culture in the classroom and as part of the overall environment at the university fosters thriving.** The overwhelming response that the Indigenous culture throughout FNUniv contributed to student thriving demonstrated that the environment played a key factor in overall thriving of students. As well, the stories shared reflected the safety felt by participants at FNUniv, where they were “free to be themselves” (I-2). Participants expressed a sense of relief when they talked about the comforting family-like environment that FNUniv offered. Literature showed that a connection to culture and spirituality was a contributing factor to student persistence (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Pidgeon, 2009; Tachine et al., 2017). Students face many obstacles and high amounts of stress when in university, and it was evident in the interviews that the Indigenous culture of FNUniv alleviated

some stress and was a contributing factor to the overall success of students. Pidgeon (2009) stated that universities lack the cultural component that Indigenous students seek. This is something that FNUniv has, and it is a reason why students choose to come to FNUniv. Students can attend university to enhance their way of life and maintain their cultural identity. Classes taught by Elders and programs such as Indigenous Social Work and Indigenous Education that have mandatory cultural camps are examples of ways culture is incorporated into the classrooms. Participants of this research noted that they were able to learn about their culture, and this was important to them. This conclusion reflects the south (i.e., physical, land) and east (i.e., cultural) quadrants of the medicine wheel.

**Conclusion 3: The Indigenous culture makes it comfortable and more like a community, family-like environment.** Monthly pipe ceremonies, round dances, and feasts all contribute to the Indigenous culture that fosters thriving. The Indigenous culture makes it a safe space that allows students to be their authentic selves, to grow, learn and be empowered. This aligns with literature stating that community and familial environments create a sense of belonging (Barney, 2018; Brown & Kurpius, 1997; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, Pidgeon, 2009). As described in chapter two, the family education model (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002) is based on creating a sense of belonging by involving a community of support that includes the students, their family, faculty, and staff. Further to this, creating a community-like environment creates a space where students are comfortable enough to access supports, which they would not otherwise do so. Participants described how they were comfortable and felt safe to try new things and ask for help when they normally would not. All FNUniv is Indigenous; from the moment a person walks in the doors, he or she is part of an Indigenous environment. Indigenous culture is incorporated into the building structure, the classes, the teachings, and the

culture of the environment. The environment is already set up for students to find their place and have a sense of belonging, where they are comfortable enough to be their authentic selves and grow and learn. It is because of this that students choose to come to FNUniv, and it is this environment that should be built upon. This conclusion reflects the east (i.e., spiritual, cultural) quadrant of the medicine wheel.

**Conclusion 4: Student voices want to be heard; there is a desire for increased communication by students, with students, and for students between faculty, staff and executive leadership.** The need for communication was expressed by all participants on multiple levels. Participants expressed the desire to have their voices heard and their needs met. Participants expressed that they felt their voices were not heard, and they felt they did not have a space to express their voices. They also expressed the desire for increased communication about events, policy, procedure, and changes that affected them directly. Effective student supports and creating a family-like environment requires continual and effective communication to foster the relationships that encourage student thriving.

The first year of university is crucial in establishing an environment of thriving for students (Long, 2012; Tachine et al., 2017; Tinto, 1999). Creating this environment requires staff and faculty to work together as a cohesive unit and communicate in a timely manner and on a regular basis. Community and relationships require communication in order to be healthy. The quadrants of the medicine wheel are interconnected, and communication is interwoven into all aspects of the medicine wheel. Communication enables learning and growth within the medicine wheel teachings.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry**

The intended scope of this study was to understand what conditions are necessary for students to thrive at FNUUniv and how this could be enhanced for more students to thrive.

**Participants.** Participants were limited to students to provide a thorough understanding of the student perspective on thriving.

**Timing.** The timing of the research was not conducive to high participation rates because it was the end of semester when students were focused on exams, papers, and then Christmas holidays. In addition, I was not able to email potential participants directly, as I was required to have a third party as instructed by the University of Regina Ethics Board. This process resulted in confusion by some interested participants on who to contact. The process also resulted in interested participants not responding to participate because they did not recognize the email address. This was expressed to me by several students after the research was completed. The timing of the research was a major limitation on the number of participants that were able to be involved in this research.

**Researcher inexperience.** I recognize and acknowledge that I am a novice researcher. In retrospect, I see how I would have adjusted some of my research, including how I asked certain questions and how I would have inquired further with participants on certain answers provided. I was overly concerned with following the methods to a tee and regret not pursuing certain discussions with participants beyond the questions outlined in my proposal. In hindsight, I would have asked participants to expand on some of their answers to get a deeper grasp on the research.

### **Chapter Summary**

The findings and conclusions from eight interviews and one Photovoice discussion group were reviewed in this chapter. The findings were organized into four main themes: (a) student

supports are essential; (b) culture and emotional well-being lead to academic success; (c) a safe, supportive environment creates a sense of belonging and acceptance; and (d) communication.

Subthemes included the smaller learning environment, safe space, and room to grow. The findings are interconnected, and through analysis, these findings led to four conclusions addressing the inquiry topic. The conclusions were:

1. Student supports foster learning and growth for those that attend.
2. Indigenous culture in the classroom and as part of the overall environment at the university fosters thriving.
3. The Indigenous culture makes it comfortable and more like a community, family-like environment. This, in turn, makes it a safe space that allows students to be their authentic selves, to grow, learn and be empowered.
4. Student voices want to be heard; there is a desire for increased communication by students, with students, and for students between faculty, staff, and executive.

Recommendations to enhance student thriving at FNUniv will be covered in chapter five.

### **Chapter Five: Inquiry Implications**

This research project explored what is necessary for Indigenous students to thrive at FNUniv. For reference, the sub-questions of this inquiry are listed here:

1. How is a successful post-secondary experience defined by Indigenous learners at FNUniv and what does it mean for them to thrive?
2. What is generally experienced by Indigenous learners at FNUniv?
3. How have these experiences led to positive or negative outcomes?
4. What are some of the Indigenous cultural elements that must be present that support thriving?
5. What models or strategies already exist in North America or elsewhere that optimize the ability for students to thrive in post-secondary education?

The context of this inquiry was described in chapter one, and a summary of the relevant literature around student thriving in an Indigenous context was provided in chapter two. Outlined in chapter three was the research approach used to explore the research question and sub-questions. In chapter four, I analyzed the data, findings, conclusions, and finally, the scope and limitations of this inquiry. The primary question and sub-questions guided this research through the interviews and Photovoice discussion group. The data collected and analyzed produced four themes: (a) supports for students, (b) culture and emotional well-being, (c) safe and supportive environment/sense of belonging and acceptance, and (d) communication. Four main conclusions were determined from the themes and centred on support, culture, environment, and communication. These conclusions served as a basis for the recommendations.

In this chapter, I will provide five recommendations along with relevant literature, followed by the organizational implications, possibilities for future research, and a summary of the entire thesis.

### **Study Recommendations**

The recommendations found from this inquiry are:

1. Incorporate mandatory academic and cultural sessions for first year students, and create multiple first year cohorts based on their program of study.
2. Build upon the culture that already exists at FNUniv.
3. Augment the family education model at FNUniv.
4. Enhance communication and provide opportunities for students needs to be heard.

**Recommendation 1: Incorporate mandatory academic and cultural sessions for first year students and create multiple first year cohorts based on program of study.** Stroh (2015) asserted, “Creating a common context for collaboration and establishing creative tension through initial statements of a shared direction and contrasting current reality help provide a strong foundation for change” (p. 85). Students in their first year are able to leverage their creative tension and move forward in a good way to ensure success. Participants valued the academic and non-academic supports that they were aware of and indicated that all students should be aware of these supports and know how to access them. The first-year transition program at FNUniv, Student Transition and Retention (STAR), can provide this by incorporating mandatory academic and cultural sessions.

Students have creative tension, and it is in this gap that the university can use as leverage. A mandatory first-year program focused on building a sense of belonging and community would ensure students are attending all seminars and that they are learning about all the supports and

networks available to them. Academic seminars would cover essential skills such as note-taking, study skills, and writing skills. Cultural sessions would provide skills to deal with anxiety, stress, goal setting, and mental health and well-being. The university would be creating a space for students to utilize their creative tension efficiently by giving them the knowledge and tools necessary to achieve their desired goal.

As presented in chapters two and four, Tinto (1993, 2018) recommended learning communities to create safe spaces and a sense of belonging for students on campus. Aboriginal students enter university academically underprepared (Stats Canada, 2011), and creating a mandatory first-year program that enables “new students to break down the university into smaller knowable parts where social integration is more readily possible” (Tinto, 1993, p. 124) would provide a safe learning community for students to prepare academically and socially. The first-year program would provide the academic tools necessary for students and also help to develop and nurture relationships with both students and faculty and staff at the university, effectively building a network of supports for the student.

The STAR) program needs to be reviewed and enhanced to provide tools to students in their first year. STAR offers academic seminars that are optional and are not mandatory. STAR is currently designed so that any first-year student can take the program, and it will work towards any degree. However, a maximum of only 25 students can enter the program. Students enroll in STAR when they request it or when an academic advisor has met with the student and recommends they take the program. Each year, this cohort fills up, and students are left wanting to take the program, but it is full. In some semesters, classes conflict with the STAR courses, and students are left to choose whether to take STAR or the courses required for their program. Making academic and cultural seminars mandatory would ensure students are receiving the skills

to thrive in university. Creating multiple cohorts specific to programs would allow more students to take STAR.

Cohorts could be created for Administration, Indigenous Social Work, Arts/MAP/Undecided. Students could take the three mandatory STAR classes, and then the fourth class would be selected based on what program they are taking. Making STAR seminars mandatory would ensure all students are involved in the community and receiving the academic support needed. The cohorts would create a community and provide a sense of belonging.

STAR is not currently mandatory, so students pick and choose when to attend classes and seminars. With a streamlined application process, students who take STAR courses would have to go through an application process. It is suggested that an application form be created that outlines the requirements of the program, including mandatory attendance to academic seminars. Placing this expectation on the students requires them to have a level of commitment and responsibility, and research has shown that expectations help students to thrive (Tinto, 1999, 2012).

These recommendations offer ways to bring balance, as they address the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of the medicine wheel. This will be discussed in more detail following the recommendations.

**Recommendation 2: Build upon the culture that already exists at FNUniv.** This research showed that students want to belong and feel like they are part of a community. Bolman and Deal (2013) stated that creating community in an organization enhances working relationships and the culture. FNUniv has an Indigenous culture and a facility designed for community and needs to take advantage of this. Allowing for more cultural training and awareness would build community, and this is an advantage compared to other universities that

are working towards indigenization. Incorporating HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) family education model would build and foster relationships between students, faculty, and staff and enhance the culture. Participants of this research all felt that the Indigenous culture at FNUniv was an integral piece to their thriving. To participants, culture was the entire atmosphere that FNUniv offered. Participants indicated that they chose to be at FNUniv because they were comfortable and felt safe. If participants had the choice, they were going to attend an event or session at FNUniv over attending elsewhere. It is suggested that FNUniv provide more events for students and promote them. Furthermore, and to build upon the FEM, this would enhance the community and serve to get students, faculty, and staff all involved.

Education is a tool that can empower Indigenous people (Pidgeon, 2009; Stonechild, 2006); Stonechild (2006) stated that education is the new buffalo. FNUniv is an Indigenous-run institution offering university degrees with Indigenous content and Indigenous values rooted in its courses, programs, and supports systems. Other institutions are striving to have what exists at FNUniv. It is Indigenous, its vision and mission are created by Indigenous peoples, including elders and its focus is on Indigenous culture, and its secondary priority is education. No other institution can offer this; these focuses are unique to FNUniv, and they should be built upon and celebrated.

**Recommendation 3: Augment the family education model at FNUniv.** The FEM model creates a family-like environment in a university setting that creates a sense of belonging and increases student success. FEM offers a framework that FNUniv could utilize. A collective theme identified in the data was an established sense of belonging and the need for a community-like environment at FNUniv. FEM is cultural, familial, and focuses on creating a sense of belonging. FNUniv could enhance the community-like environment that exists by adapting FEM

to fit within its goals and structure, which could enhance student thriving and retention. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) concluded that family and community support was a driving factor to student persistence. Similarly, Tinto (2018) recognized the need for community and a sense of belonging to be established for student success. This was evident in the research as well. When students articulated why they chose to come to FNUniv, they all discussed community and the home-like feeling. For some participants, it was the safe space that FNUniv offered that enabled them to persist.

FEM is based on the understanding that institutional values should be aligned with student/family values. It recognizes the interrelationships that exist and are necessary for students to thrive. It is not the responsibility of one person to ensure students thrive; it takes a team of people to “willingly give their full support” (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 32).

The STAR program fits well with FEM because the goals are aligned. STAR creates a community and provides a network of supports to students. FEM aims to create a sense of belonging and ensure students are supported both academically and emotionally. While this model offers a good framework, it does not incorporate the values of the medicine wheel. There are pieces missing to the model that FNUniv could incorporate. However, FEM serves as a basis to begin with and provides opportunity to adapt a model that is suitable to the students of FNUniv.

One of the assumptions of the FEM model is that “many students and their families need the college to act as their liaison with existing social and health services during times of crisis” (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 30). There is an overwhelming need for students to have access to counselling services on campus. Currently, FNUniv has no counselling services available on campus; academic advisors are the main contact with students, and they currently

have no counselling training. One participant expressed a strong need to have counselling readily available on campus because often, students are in crisis, and they require assistance immediately. FEM recognizes the need for counselling supports and incorporates this through the “caseworker” who is a resource specialist and “family specialist” who “knowledge of family-centred approaches but also developed tools and strategies ready for immediate practice” (p. 32).

Similarly, Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that social supports as opposed to academic supports were a driving force for students. Research has suggested that a holistic model be incorporated for students to succeed (Barney, 2016; Garrod, Kilkenny, & Benson Taylor, 2017; Pidgeon, 2009). FNUniv could draw upon FEM and use it to enhance what exists.

**Recommendation 4: Enhance communication and provide opportunities for student needs to be heard.** This recommendation would occur if Recommendations 1, 2, and 3 were enacted.

The data from this research showed the need for increased communication overall. It was evident that participants want their voices heard and their needs addressed. The participants also felt that the communication needed to be increased about the current supports and events that already exist.

As research has shown, aligning supports with the classroom is an effective method for student success, and it requires employees working together and communicating (Tinto, 2012). Bringing together staff to work as a cohesive unit would enhance communication and create community.

Participants from the research indicated culture was an important component to their thriving at FNUniv; however, there was a need to have more communication about what was offered. One participant expressed an awareness of the pipe ceremonies every month, but did not

know to what extent she/he could access the tipi outside of that. Participants suggested having tipi guidelines available for students so they were aware of when they could use the tipi and what protocol they needed to follow. Providing a guideline would ensure everyone is following proper protocol and enable more people to access this space because they would know how and when it can be used.

Participants stated that more communication was desperately needed, indicating that events, seminars, and supports needed to be promoted more and in different ways. Participants suggested making use of the TVs on campus, make bigger signage, use the large banners that the University of Regina Student's Union makes, and have a monthly e-newsletter available on the website that was emailed out to students. Participants had noted that not all students are aware of the supports offered because they are not advertised or promoted in ways that are reaching all students.

One participant stated that non-Indigenous people were intimidated and afraid to come to FNUUniv campus because they were unsure if it is for non-Indigenous students as well. Participants stated that improved advertising highlighting that everyone is welcome at FNUUniv, including non-Indigenous and University of Regina students, would help to break that stigma.

Adapting an FEM would require people working together more cohesively and regularly; this will require enhanced communication between staff, faculty, and with students. Utilizing the space FNUUniv has more effectively by having more cultural events would enhance communication because it would bring everyone together. Streamlining the STAR admission program could bring students together in the first year, make them more informed about what the university has, and provide them with the tools to thrive. This could also improve communication because students would work together and staff and faculty would be involved

from the beginning of a student's educational path. If all of these recommendations are implemented, communication would naturally improve.

### **Balancing it Out: The Medicine Wheel**

As stated earlier, the medicine wheel is an important tool in Indigenous cultures. When the four quadrants of the medicine wheel are balanced, life is working in a harmonious way. FNUniv offers an environment (i.e., physical) for students filled with culture (i.e., spiritual), academic support (i.e., mental) and counselling support (i.e., emotional), but there is an imbalance to the services. This imbalance is not conducive for students to thrive. There is a lack of counselling support. Elders are available, but not every day. There are no onsite counselling services, the University of Regina counseling is stretched, and there is a wait to get in. Students are drawn to FNUniv because of the environment and the space offered. The cultural environment is sought after, but participants saw a need to enhance it through added cultural pieces and more communication of what is happening on campus, including clarification on the use of the tipi. Current employees of FNUniv are not trained to provide counselling at the capacity required by students.

The medicine wheel has four quadrants, with each representing a stage in life (see Appendices C and J). When looking at the whole picture, the circle itself is a base, a structural foundation that when balanced out is stable and strong. The inner part of the circle is the home fire; for the purposes of this research, this represents the student, and the circle is their educational journey from beginning to end. The journey begins in the east, where the sun rises. This is the physical space, it symbolizes birth and where a student begins. The physical space is FNUniv and the university community where the students begin to learn and grow. The south represents mental space, family, and adolescence. As a student moves through their educational

journey in their classes, they learn through building knowledge and creating friendships and networks. The west represents emotional space, introspection and reflection, and adulthood. Students enhance their knowledge and look deeper into the meaning behind their purpose and goals. This is where sunset begins; the end of the day is in sight. The final quadrant, the north, represents spiritual space; it is a place of knowledge and wisdom and Elders. Students have walked the circle of education and are ready to move on to the next phase of sharing knowledge and teaching others. It is in this circle that a student learns, grows, and builds a community. The foundation for this wheel is FNUniv.

When considering systems thinking (Senge, 2006), the medicine wheel is a system, FNUniv is a system, a student's educational path is a system and they are all interconnected. As students enter university they begin their journey through education. In this journey, they learn and grow, developing new skills, building upon what they know. They choose to do this journey through FNUniv, which is the community and the foundation that they are building from. FNUniv is the community and foundation for this wheel (i.e., for this system), and this research has identified gaps in the system that are not conducive to student thriving. The quadrants are imbalanced, and FNUniv is not offering a strong foundation for students to thrive in. Incorporating these recommendations offers ways to bring the wheel into balance so that FNUniv can better support students to thrive.

### **Organizational Implications**

This research was supported from the beginning. Initial meetings with the sponsor provided many opportunities and options for areas to research, and the support for this initiative was well received. Since the initial meeting, there have been some changes and shifts in management. My original sponsor retired and did not contact me to recommend another sponsor.

Despite this, I was able to find someone new who gratefully agreed to take over. The new sponsor has been very supportive throughout the process.

Following Rowe et al.'s (2013) ARE model and to move forward in the action phase of this research, I organized a meeting with the FNUiv Associate Vice President of Academics and the Vice President of Academics to engage in dialogue about the research and findings. The Director of Student Success Services was invited, but unable to attend. A separate meeting will be held at a later date to present with her. My findings and recommendations were presented, and a good discussion evolved around ways to implement the recommendations. It was indicated that some of my findings and recommendations fit well with the new strategic plan that will be released in the near future. There is also enough time to make an action plan for the fall semester, where some of the ideas could be implemented. Even before this meeting, some of the recommendations were already underway as people heard about the research.

The Student Success Services department is preparing for the fall semester, and discussions have begun regarding ways to enhance the STAR program, specifically looking at ways to improve the admission process. As the recommendations suggest, streamlining the admission process to STAR would be beneficial. Discussions around making portions of the STAR program mandatory, such as attending academic seminars, are underway, as the department sees value in making these changes. Streamlining the admission process to the first-year program requires the Student Success Services department to collaborate and ensure that students apply to STAR and are aware of the program requirements. Stroh (2015) asserted, "Systems shift not as a result of making many changes, but by sustaining focus on only a few changes over time" (p. 147). Making small changes to aspects of student thriving will be an effective way to move forward.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) discussed learning agility, defining it as “the ability to reflect on experience and then engage in new behaviors based on those reflections” (p. 202). This research provided insight from a student lens on the student experience at FNUUniv and has offered an opportunity to engage in change leadership and enhance student thriving experience. Student participants appreciated having their voices heard and look forward to seeing what actions will come based off their input.

Organizational leaders will face challenges to get faculty and staff support of these recommendations; however, the university is at the end of a five-year strategic plan (FNUUniv , 2013); with a new one to be released in the very near future, this creates opportunity to motivate and get buy in. I believe that if space is made to enhance the community, then the support from everyone will be able to grow and thrive on its own. It is an opportunity to reflect on what has been done, to move forward in a collective way, and align with the new strategic plan.

A strong first-year support program plants the seed for a community, beginning with the establishing a sense of belonging for students who will, in turn, feel comfortable to grow and thrive. Courses for the STAR program exist for the program, and placing restrictions on course sections will require an email request to the department head prior to each semester. Placing restrictions on courses is not a new strategy, and it is done every semester. There are no foreseeable implications to doing this. The challenge will lie with creating multiple STAR cohorts and ensuring the class times do not conflict. For this, organizational leadership must ensure communication across departments happens on a continual basis every semester and in a timely manner. Creating set meetings, either through video conference equipment or in person, would ensure this happens.

**Implications for Future Inquiry**

Indigenous students' thriving has limited research available to date. Extensive research was available on student retention, persistence, and success, but it lacked an Indigenous lens. From this research, four recommendations have been made. When considering implications for future inquiry, I have a fifth recommendation: Create a model for student thriving based upon the medicine wheel and tipi teachings (see Appendices C and J). The medicine wheel offers a framework to build upon. The tipi teachings offer 12 values that could serve as teachings related to student success. Incorporating a holistic model to student thriving offers a way to provide supports to Indigenous students, and this is an area that needs to be researched and developed further. A foundational framework for Indigenous student thriving needs to be developed and considered for the success of future students. I see an opportunity to revamp the STAR program by incorporating the medicine wheel, tipi teachings, and aspects of FEM and creating a holistic first-year program that would create a community for students to thrive in. If inquired into further, this is a model that can be used by FNUniv and adapted by other institutions.

**Thesis Summary**

This research set out to answer how is a successful post-secondary experience defined by Indigenous people at FNUniv and what does it mean for them to thrive? Through interviews and a Photovoice discussion group, I discovered that students want an opportunity to have their voices heard, community and culture are important, and academic and emotional supports are essential to student thriving. This research found that students value the space FNUniv offers, and they want the culture to grow. For this to occur, four recommendations were made from the data:

1. Streamline the admission process for STAR, and create multiple cohorts based on program of study.
2. Build upon the culture that already exists at FNUniv.
3. Augment the family education model at FNUniv.
4. Enhance communication and provide opportunities for student needs to be heard.

A fifth recommendation was also made under implications for future inquiry to create a model for student thriving based upon the medicine wheel and tipi teachings.

This research began with an inquiry question. It delved into the history of Indigenous education and sought input from current Indigenous students. The data were analyzed, and conclusions and recommendations made. Chapter five has brought this together to consider ways to move forward with what has been learned. Implementing the recommendations and next steps would be a collaborative effort between staff, departments, and me. The knowledge learned from this research is only the beginning and will pave the way towards improving student thriving at FNUniv.

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**Appendix A: First Nations University of Canada Painting**

Painting of FNUniv building in Regina, Saskatchewan by Christian Barreno, FNUniv Alumni



I was still fairly new to Canada when I did that piece. I am Indigenous Mayan from Guatemala so learning about FNUniv was like witnessing an impressive achievement for indigenous people. I was completing the ESL program but I was already planning to attend FNUniv. The administration at the time learned I was a visual artist and commissioned me to do the painting. I was pretty honoured and I took it as a high responsibility. I was recommended to sit down with one of the elders at the time to learn more about the culture and current context. That's when I was introduced to the concept of the white buffalo and what it means today. It made total sense as survival continues to take many shapes and forms. I did various sketches with the things I learned, until one day I stood in front of the building and pictured the head of the buffalo on one side. Then, as the sun was setting I imagined the eagle protecting the building. The buffalo has always been considered the means for survival for many tribes in turtle island. Now, education is considered the new buffalo for Indigenous people. FNUniv offers that learning environment where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can grow in a holistic way. The white buffalo is sacred as there are only a few on earth so I wanted to show that concept in one image. The eagle is the protector of the inhabitants of turtle island so it will always be there protecting and blessing the institution and everyone who comes and goes through the building. (C. Barreno, personal communication, September 23, 2018)

**Appendix B: First Nations University of Canada Vision and Mission<sup>2</sup>****Vision**

We, the First Nations, are children of the Earth, placed here by the Creator to live in harmony with each other, the land, animals and other living beings. All beings are interconnected in the Great Circle of Life.

As First Nations, we treasure our collective values of wisdom, respect, humility, sharing, harmony, beauty, strength and spirituality. They have preserved and passed down our traditions through countless generations.

The Elders teach us to respect the beliefs and values of all nations. Under the Treaties, our leaders bade us to work in cooperation and equal partnership with other nations. The Elders' desire for an Indian institution of higher education led to the establishment of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC).

The First Nations University of Canada provides an opportunity for students of all nations to learn in an environment of First Nations cultures and values. The university is a special place of learning where we recognize the spiritual power of knowledge and where knowledge is respected and promoted. In following the paths given to us by the Creator, the First Nations have a unique vision to contribute to higher education. With the diversity and scope of the First Nations degree programs, the university occupies a unique role in Canadian higher education. The university promotes a high quality of education, research and publication.

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<sup>2</sup> *Overview: Who We Are: Vision and Mission*, by First Nations University of Canada, n.d. Retrieved March 10, 2018, from <http://fnuniv.ca/overview> Reprinted with permission.

At the First Nations University of Canada, First Nations students can learn in the context of their own traditions, languages and values. Rooted in their own traditions, our students will walk proudly and wisely today. The university, through extension programming, reaches out and welcomes First Nations peoples to use its resources for the enrichment of their communities.

The university requires facilities which reflect the uniqueness, values, dignity and beauty of the First Nations it represents. It will include appropriate recognition and integration of the role of the Elders, cultural symbols and the First Nations connectedness to the land.

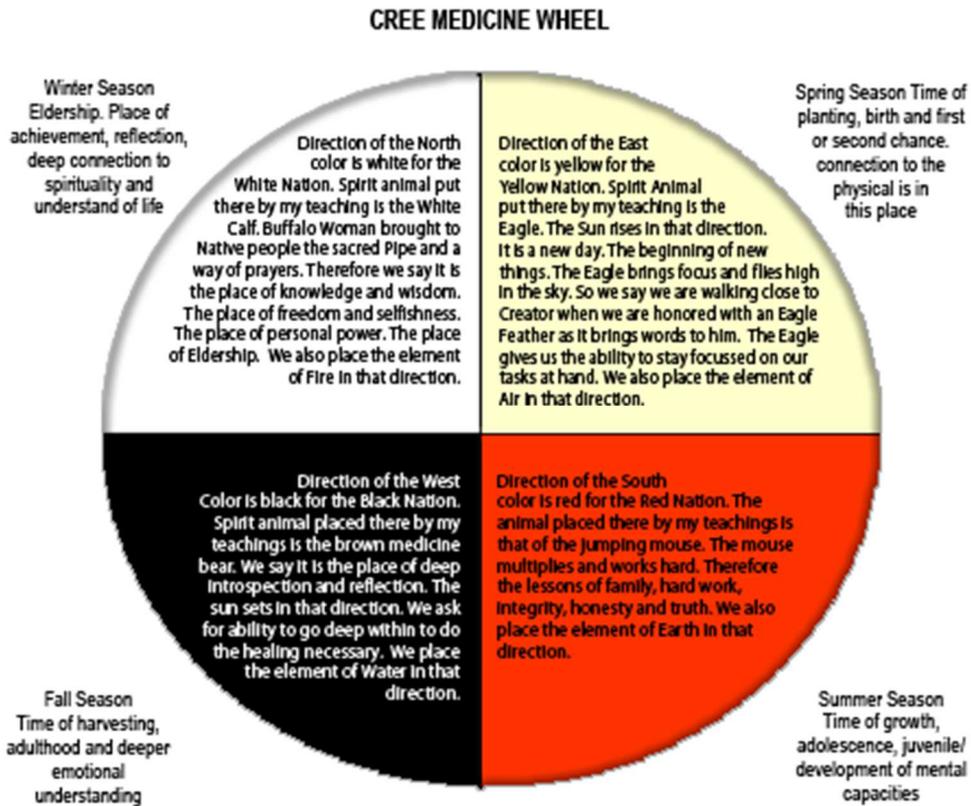
### **Mission**

The mission of the First Nations University of Canada is to enhance the quality of life, and to preserve, protect and interpret the history, language, culture and artistic heritage of First Nations.

The First Nations University of Canada will acquire and expand its base of knowledge and understanding in the best interests of First Nations and for the benefit of society by providing opportunities of quality bi-lingual and bi-cultural education under the mandate and control of the First Nations of Saskatchewan.

The First Nations University of Canada is a First Nations' controlled university-college which provides educational opportunities to both First Nations and non-First Nations university students selected from a provincial, national and international base.

**Appendix C: Medicine Wheel Teachings**



Medicine wheel photo credit: <http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/medwheel.php>

**Medicine Wheel**

1. East: Physical, birth, air, beginning of new things (Sunrise)
2. South: Mental, adolescence, earth, family, hard work/integrity/truth/honesty
3. West: Emotional, adulthood, water, introspection, and reflection (sunset)
4. North: Spiritual, Eldership, fire, knowledge, Wisdom

**Tipi Poles**

- |              |                             |               |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. Obedience | 6. Faith                    | 10. Sharing   |
| 2. Respect   | 7. Kinship                  | 11. Strength  |
| 3. Humility  | 8. Cleanliness (in thought) | 12. Parenting |
| 4. Happiness | 9. Thankfulness             | 13. Hope      |
| 5. Love      |                             |               |

(These teachings can be found in more detail at [fourdirectionsteachings.com](http://fourdirectionsteachings.com))

**Appendix D: Letters of Invitation**

Dear [Prospective STUDENT Participant],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. This project has been approved by the First Nations University of Canada Vice President of Academics, Dr. Bob Kayseas, and I have been given permission to contact potential participants for this purpose.

The purpose of my research is to collaborate with students in researching ways to enhance success of students at FNUniv. Objectives include creating awareness and understanding of what student thriving is, what is needed to better support students and to encourage and motivate students to continue pursuing their education.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because you are an Indigenous student registered through the FNUniv campus.

This phase of my research project will consist of an interview that is estimated to last 20-30 minutes and can be conducted on campus or in a location of your choosing. The second method is a group discussion that is estimated to last 60-90 minutes and will be held on campus (with lunch provided).

The attached document contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw up until one week after the research methods are complete

without prejudice. The FNUniv will not know who has or has not participated, or who has withdrawn.

I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please be aware that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw up until one week after the methods are complete without prejudice.

If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to this request. Your decision to not participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect our relationship in any way.

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 contact me at:

Name: **Lisa Bighead**

Email: **[email address]**

Telephone: **[email address]**

Sincerely,

Lisa Bighead

## **Appendix E: Research Information Letter**

### **Researching ways to enhance student success at FNUniv.**

My name is Lisa Bighead, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting Dr. Catherine Etmanski, Director, School of Leadership Studies: [email address] or [phone #].

#### **Purpose of the study and sponsoring organization**

The purpose of my research project is to collaborate with students and staff for improved ways of creating an environment of student success at FNUniv. The objectives are to collaborate with students to create awareness and understanding of what student thriving is, what is needed to better support students to encourage and motivate them to continue pursuing their education.

#### **Your participation and how information will be collected**

The research will consist of interviews and a group discussion. The interview is anticipated to last from 20-30 minutes and the group discussion is anticipated to last 60-90 minutes. Some anticipated draft questions include:

What does student success look like to you?

Why did you choose to come to FNUniv?

Tell me a story about a time you felt most fulfilled as a student at FNUniv?

If you have three hopes for improving student success, what would they be?

#### **Benefits and risks to participation**

This study will evaluate student success of Indigenous students at the FNUniv and will provide findings of what could be done to improve student success in the first years of university. Participants will have the opportunity to share their voice and assist in leading change to enhance the success of students at FNUniv. The report of this inquiry is intended to be a basis for a student success retention plan at FNUniv. This report may also be included in a scholarly or professional journal article or may be part of a conference presentation.

There are no known risks by participating in this research.

#### **Real or Perceived Conflict of Interest**

There is no known real or perceived conflicts of interest for the researcher, Lisa Bighead. Participants will not receive any academic grades or marks for participation. I disclose this information here so that you can make a fully informed decision on whether or not to participate in this study.

#### **Confidentiality, security of data, and retention period**

I will work to protect your privacy throughout this study. All information I collect will be maintained in confidence with hard copies (e.g., consent forms) stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. Electronic data (such as transcripts or audio files) will be stored on a password protected computer on my home computer. Information will be recorded in hand-

written format and, where appropriate, summarized, in an anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Upon completion of this research project, all raw data will be destroyed. Should any participant choose to withdraw from the project, their data/information will not be retained and the participant will not be identified.

For participants who participate in the second method of group discussion, due to the nature of the group method, it is not possible to keep identities of the participants anonymous from the researcher, facilitator, or other participants. Participants will be asked to respect the confidential nature of the research by not sharing names or identifying comments outside of the group.

### **Sharing results**

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with First Nations University of Canada decision makers to decide what the next steps are based on the findings and recommendations of the research. Research findings will have been made anonymous and no participant identity will be disclosed in my research findings. The research report will be disseminated to the Vice President of Academics and the Director of Student Success Services. All participants will receive an electronic copy or be provided with a link to access the research online.

### **Procedure for withdrawing from the study**

Participants will be given a copy of the transcribed interview and will have one week to provide feedback to change any comments made. After the one-week period all comments will become part of the study data set. For the group discussion, participants can withdraw at any time by simply leaving the room, all comments made up to that point will have influenced the direction of the conversation and will be part of the data. Transcripts will not identify any person and will not have any personal identifiers.

Should a participant decide to withdraw, they can contact me directly and at that point their data will be destroyed. After this point, all data will have been coded and made anonymous and will not be able to be removed due to the anonymity.

Participants are free to withdraw from the group discussion at any time during the event, all other participants will be asked to respect confidentiality. Due to the format of group discussion, the data collected will not be able to be removed without affecting all the data. Group discussions will be immediately formatted so that no comments are identifiable back to any particular participant.

You are not required to participate in this research project. By replying directly to the e-mail request for participation or signing the in-person consent form you indicate that you have read and understand the information above and give your free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Please keep a copy of this information letter for your record.

**Appendix F: Research Consent Form**

By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study and you consent to the following:

- I consent to the audio recording of the interview
- I consent to the audio recording of the group discussion (if applicable to you)
- I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the interviews and group discussion be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed
- I consent to the material I have contributed to and/or generated through my participation in group discussion be used in this study
- I commit to respect the confidential nature of the group discussion by not sharing identifying information about the other participants in the group

Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project and the data contributed will be used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, newsletters, etc.). You consent to the audio recordings of the interview and the group discussion including possible quotations and excerpts expressed

Name: (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix G: Student Interview Guide**

One on one interview questions with students

The following questions will be used during the interviews:

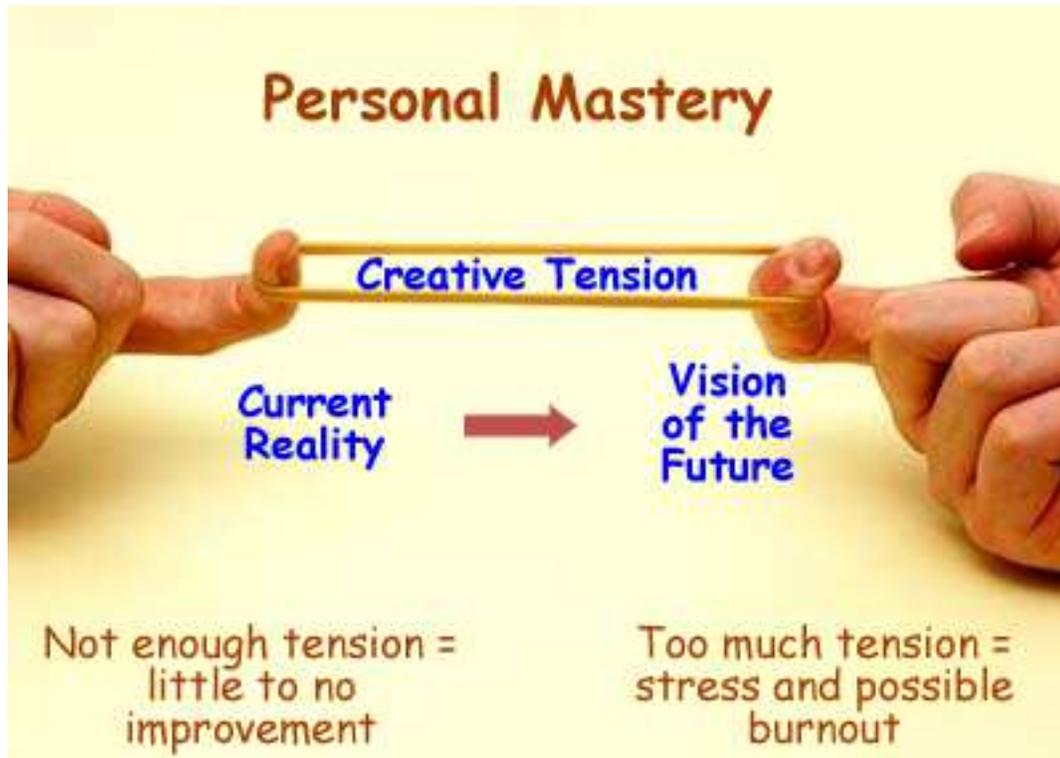
1. Why did you choose to come to FNUniv?
2. What has been your experience at FNUniv?
3. Tell me a story about a time you felt most fulfilled as a student at FNUniv?
4. What does student success look like to you?
5. What experiences have led to positive or negative perceptions of your success?
6. If you have three hopes for improving student success, what would they be? how would you like to see this develop?
7. What is your definition or idea of a successful post-secondary experience? Can you describe what it means for you to thrive?
8. Does communication within FNUniv have an impact on your decision to stay at FNUniv?
9. What are some strategies or supports that would help you to thrive?
10. How could FNUniv staff, faculty, and other students, improve their current practices to help you thrive?
11. Are you aware of other models that support Indigenous student success, in Canada or US, that could be helpful to support student thriving at FNUniv?

**Appendix H: Photovoice Group Discussion**

Group discussion questions

- Tell us about your photo and what it means? (thriving question)
- SHOWed Method questions need to be inserted here
- Insert questions asked about what thriving looks like in an ideal world at FNUniv

**Appendix I: Senge's Creative Tension**

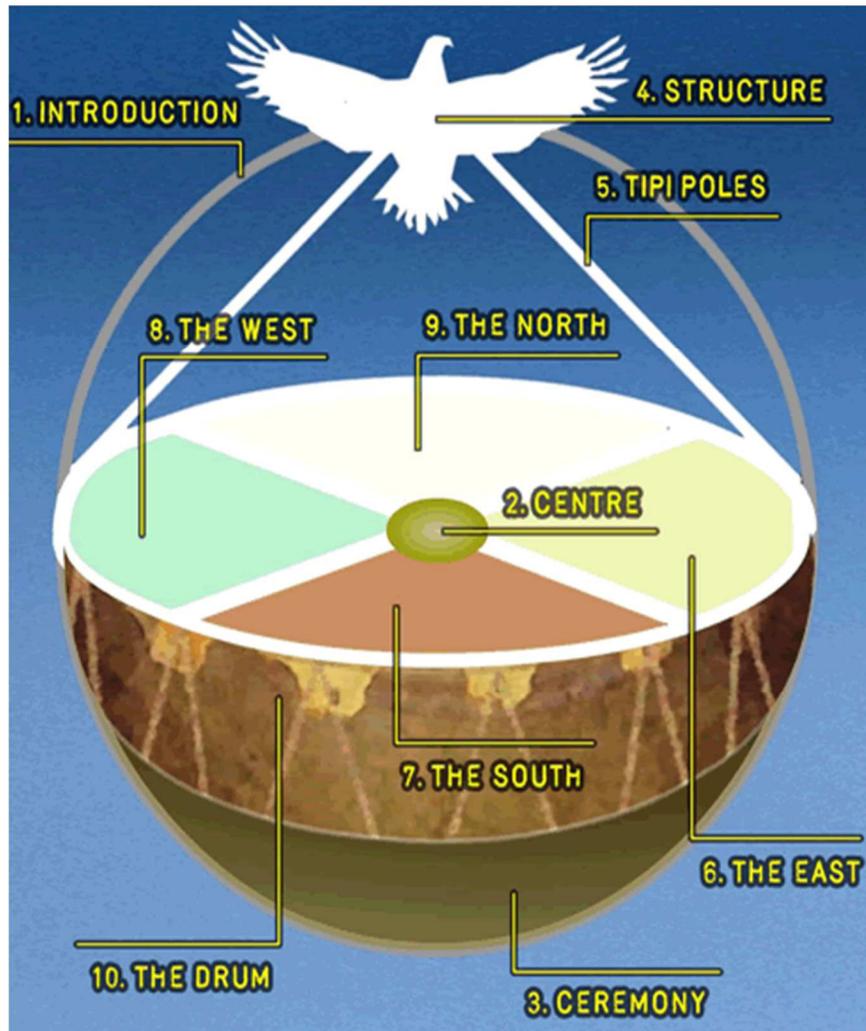


*image credit: waremalcomb.com*

Diagram of Peter Senge's Creative Tension

From Education to Save the World. (2013, November 21). Re: Think about: Creative Tension [Web log message]. Retrieved from <https://edtosavetheworld.com/2013/11/21/think-about-creative-tension/> Reproduced with permission.

Appendix J: Cree Medicine Wheel



From: *Cree (Nehiyawak) Teaching (First Image)*, by M. Lee, n.d., Retrieved from <http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/cree.html> Reproduced with permission.