**Becoming Aware: Rethinking College Readiness for Alaska Native Students**

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my husband and sons for their support and encouragement throughout my career, but most specifically during this endeavor to pursue my doctorate through a project that has been part of our lives long before I began my program.

I further dedicate this work to the many Alaska Native students, past, present, and future who have navigated, or will navigate, their journey through the Alaska education system. Student experiences have been my greatest source of professional growth over the years. My great hope is that my efforts will help in some way to enhance the experience for future students.

Abstract

Alaska Native students attend and persist in college at rates much lower than their non-Native peers. I addressed the need to develop a culturally responsive college readiness model targeting Alaska Native students. Three college readiness factors were considered specifically for Alaska Native students: academic preparedness, cultural self-identity, and navigation skills. In each of these factors three themes emerged regarding school practices: unintentional bias practices, missed opportunities to incorporate culture as an assistive factor, and cultural miscues that lead to low student agency. This study uses a review of literature, cultural expert input, and educator feedback to develop a self-assessment for schools to use in a school improvement process. The self-assessment includes six school practice statements under each of the themes of academic preparedness, cultural self-identity, and navigation skills. The process of rating one’s school with these statements is designed to help increase awareness of bias practices, promote opportunities to include cultural knowledge to support college readiness, and create a heightened awareness of cultural tendencies that may lead to cultural miscues or patronization of Alaska Native students through the post-secondary planning process. The author views the specific change in college readiness models within a broader mission of transforming education for Alaska Native students. Further research on schools using the self-assessment compared with student outcome data in college readiness and college-going and persistence rates is recommended.

*Keywords:* college readiness, indigenous education, Alaska Native, cultural identity

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Chapter 1

# Problem of Practice

Alaska Native students have experienced low college-going and college-persistence rates compared to their peers. Identifying factors that contribute to college preparation and persistence, along with institutional factors that may serve as barriers to success, provides the opportunity to build a high school college readiness model targeting Alaska Native Students for successful transition to post-secondary.

## Background

The history of Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools is recent in Alaska. Although the overt philosophies of the Carlile Indian School are decades old, the subtle residue of the expectations of assimilation and colonization remain. Despite Alaska state cultural standards and an increasing awareness of culturally relevant education, rarely does a school reach integration of Indigenous ways of knowing. While youth are developing their self-identity, Alaska Native students lack school experiences that invite their authentic cultural-self into an academic setting.

Aligned with this disconnect, Indigenous youth are attending college at rates below their peers. According to census data published in the US Department of Education report on the Condition of Education 2018, the ethnic group of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) has the lowest college enrollment rates for 18-24 year olds: 19% compared to 41% total (McFarland, et al., 2018). More localized data mirrors the national data. Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS), originally a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, was re-opened by the state of Alaska in 1986 to provide Alaskan students a comprehensive high school option with a focus on leadership and post-secondary preparation. Using National Student Clearinghouse data, MEHS reported a college-going rate of 46% for the class of 2016 (Mt. Edgecumbe High School, 2017) compared to 69.7% reported nationally for the same cohort year by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). Across the nation, AI/AN college persistence rates are the lowest among ethnic groups (National Student Clearinghouse 2018). National Student Clearinghouse Data for MEHS reveal that on average only 17% of students graduate with a degree within six years (Mt. Edgecumbe High School, 2017). These rates suggest that the readiness model currently in use by MEHS is not preparing students to go and stay in college.

## Purpose

The purpose of this capstone is to address my problem of practice which is to identify factors that may lead to a successful college-readiness model targeting Alaska Native students in a residential school setting.

## Personal Significance

Throughout my career I have worked in Alaskan schools with high populations of Alaska Native students. In my experience, many times educators approach Indigenous culture within the schoolhouse in one of two ways. Some view cultural ways of knowing and college-preparatory coursework as conflicting values, assuming a request for cultural education is a deselection of western education. Others, often those who embrace diversity in schools, limit value to observable displays of culture while expecting a voice and way of thinking in the academic setting that mimics a western culture. In *Why Don’t More Indians Do Better in School? The Battle between U.S. Schooling & American Indian/Alaska Native Education,* McKinley, Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) describe the need to “braid” the two knowledge systems. Through this capstone I will explore what actions a high school may take to accomplish a braiding of the value of Indigenous ways of being with accessible western college preparation to increase college-going and persistence rates for Alaska Native students.

My Alaskan experience includes 20 years of living and working in a remote Western Alaska region steeped in the Yup’ik Native culture. High rates of at-risk factors required a tireless belief in the potential of every student and a tenacious will to try multiple methods to bring about change. The richness of culture was a clear asset. While serving as a high school principal, efforts to increase participation in college preparation courses combined with a value of culture produced initial results including an increase in college-going rates and national recognition. (Taco Bell, 2013). During my time in Western Alaska, I also spent time traveling and serving very small village schools and observed the efforts in these settings, typically kindergarten through 12th grade schools ranging from 10 to 250 students. Currently, I serve at MEHS, a school positioned in Alaska to provide college and career preparation in response to the lacking opportunities and lagging results of these smaller rural schools.

MEHS is a stand-alone school operated as a division of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. Enrollment criteria is guided by state statute and provides preference to students from limited high school programs, typically those from small isolated communities with K-12 schools, but all Alaskan students are eligible for the publicly funded school (AAC 22.080). MEHS serves over 400 students that come from across Alaska.

Over 120 communities are represented at MEHS, as well as virtually every Alaska Native language region; 90% of the student body is Alaska Native (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2018). MEHS opened as a school in the 1940s, with only two years of closure between federal and state operation. It has a positive reputation and a strong legacy tradition over the years. Many Alaskans reference MEHS as a school that produces Native leaders.

When I transitioned to MEHS, the state-run boarding school that had a reputation of being superior, I expected to see a successful college readiness model already in action. What I found was stagnant growth rates, inflated reports of college-going rates, and a staff basking in the reputation of being the “best school” in Alaska. When I led a discussion on what it meant to be college-prep, many staff suggested changing admission standards rather than adjusting instruction or programming. Unwittingly, a successful MEHS student was defined as one prepared to function in a Western-centered school environment. I observed pride from teachers, staff, and alumni in stories that I would characterize as acculturation. In reality, the inherent cultural bias was just as much at play in this environment, with the added conditioned expectation of assimilation by both teachers and applicants.

I began to consider how a systemic model to address school practices that leave Alaska Native students out of the college-readiness pipeline might contribute to real change. Change is possible; however, until a systemic model is put together, schools that serve populations of Alaska Native students will continue with assimilation practices or experience only fleeting periods of success. The situation of MEHS, with its expectation of college preparation and the controlled assets of a residential setting, provides an ideal environment to explore the development of a college readiness model that values the Alaska Native student.

Pursuing this problem of practice aligns with my commitment to the potential of every student and belief that a cultural sense-of-self is an asset. It also allows me to play a part, albeit small, in a larger context of decolonization for a culture of people that have been so generous to me in sharing their culture and gifting me with broader ways of thinking.

## Professional Significance

There is a whole generation of young Alaskan Native students poised to take on leadership in our state, but their opportunities are hindered by current school systems. If I can help identify actionable methods to integrate Alaska Native students’ cultural sense-of-self and draw on their own cultural knowledge as a strength with barrier-free access to college preparatory classes, I can not only help MEHS students, but help other schools and ultimately influence college-ready and persistent-prepared Alaska Native students across the state.  My own journey in becoming aware and finding ways to serve Native students in a more culturally responsive way continues after decades of a career. I am in a position to support other educators, specifically non-Native educators, in accelerating their own learning and to support the open dialogue that can lead to self-reflection and change in school practices.

Dr. Panigkaq Agatha John-Shields will serve as my field mentor and cultural guide throughout this project. Panigkaq is a Yup’ik educator who I have known for over 20 years. She has been my friend, college, my children’s principal, my profession, and always a cultural guide. Her father was a revered elder well known for his wisdom and generosity in sharing the teachings of Yup’ik people. Panigkaq has carried on his gift. Panigkaq has been so influential in my own journey of becoming more culturally aware that it is impossible to separate my own perspectives from what I have learned from her over the years. Conveniently she has recently written her own dissertation that provides me a written reference to document some of what I have learned. She will also serve as a cultural expert and a field guide for me throughout my project. In this paper she will be referred by her Yup’ik name Panigkaq with references, when appropriate, in her English name.

In exploring a vision for contemporary Indigenous education, Cajete and Pueblo (2010) declare that “American Indian people must determine the future of American Indian education. That future must be rooted in a transformational revitalization of our own expressions of education” (p. 1132). There is a larger vision and need within Indigenous education that is not mine to lead, but perhaps I can influence this small adjustment and ultimately support more Alaska Natives to position themselves to be the leaders to move Indigenous education to that next level.

## Scope

The scope of this problem of practice is based on three main hypothetically necessary factors for an Indigenous-focused college-readiness model: academic preparedness, cultural sense of self, and navigation skills. In considering these three factors, two primary school influences will be explored: first, implicit bias school practices serving as barriers for Alaska Native students and secondly, the inclusion of culturally relevant and responsive practices that value Alaska Native culture in an academic setting that build strong cultural sense of self and value of cultural ways of knowing as a skill for resiliency and persistence in the post-secondary environment.

To explore the potential of these factors and the related school practices, a review of the literature, current status, and practices in the areas of academic preparation for college, development of a sense-of-self, and college navigation skills specifically considering the population of Alaska Native students is needed.

## Guiding Questions

1. To what degree does each factor contribute to college readiness and persistence with specific focus on this population?

2. What influences in current systems serve as barriers or supports in building each factor with this population?

3. What unique contribution may the Indigenous experience or way of knowing have on each factor?

## Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, each of the three identified factors contribute to the preparedness and success of Alaska Native students in their pursuit of a college degree, with college-going and persistence rates serving as indicators of success. The level to which a student embodies each factor influences his or her success in post-secondary. Simultaneously, the school institution—first the high school then the college—has an impact on each factor inherent in institutional practices. The impacts may be counteractive; the student needs a strength in each factor for college success, yet the institutional tendencies or implicit biases may reduce opportunities for this population to build the needed skills.

Impact of institution on student

Impact on College Success

Figure 1. Interplay between three college readiness factors

## Definitions

Alaska Native- Alaska Native refers to Indigenous Peoples of Alaska and is inclusive of all Alaska Native language groups.

Indigenous- Indigenous is used to refer to original populations of lands. Despite group uniqueness, commonalities have been found in Indigenous ways of knowing and thinking and therefore research involving various Indigenous groups have relevancy for others. At times, the term will be used in conjunction with a specific group or area, which narrows the location of originality.

American Indian/Alaska Native- Data reported by the US census uses the following definition:

American Indian or Alaska Native’ refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment. The American Indian and Alaska Native population includes people who marked the ‘American Indian or Alaska Native’ checkbox or reported entries such as Navajo, Blackfeet, Inupiat, Yup’ik, or Central American Indian groups or South American Indian groups. (Norris et al.,2012)

Sense-of-Self-One’s perception of oneself to include his or her concept of efficacy, sense of belonging, confidence and consistency in his or her own self-identity.

Cultural Sense of Self- Cultural systems influence how one sees oneself. The cultural systems surrounding a person can also influence one’s sense-of-self, and this can be situational. The concept of cultural sense-of-self will refer to the extent that one has a sense-of-self grounded in their own cultural background and to the extent that he or she maintains that sense-of-self regardless of the surrounding cultural systems. A cultural sense-of-self is individualized and often influenced by a racial or ethnic background, but it is not defined by ethnic generalizations. (Rodgers, 2015)

**Culturally Responsive Education-** Hammond (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as:

An educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning.

**Culturally Affirming Education-** Williams (2020) makes a distinction from the term culturally responsive education to describe “educators demonstrate cultural affirmation when they commit to understanding, respecting and meeting the needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. They intentionally engage parents, families and the cultural community at large by co-constructing reflective learning experiences that promote student achievement and positive cultural identity” (p.13). With this definition, culturally affirming education specifically includes the active promotion of positive cultural identity.

**Code-Shifting**-Initially coined to describe linguistic shifting between two languages, the term has been broadened to refer to behavior adjustments made based on the cultural expectations of the environment. “Broadly, code-switching involves adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and …opportunities” (McCluney et. al., 2019, n.p.).

**Assimilation-** Assimilation refers to the pressure or expectation that one takes on the cultural norms and practices of the dominant or colonizing culture. In the early years of Alaska Indian boarding schools, the goal of assimilation was very overt. The goal was “to detribalize and assimilate indigenous people into Euro-American culture…Most of these programs separated children from their families and communities in order to immerse them in Euro-American culture. Students could not speak their Native language, were dressed in Euro-American styled clothing, and taught about Western civilization” (Alaska State Archives, n.d. para 1). These are the roots of the term, but it is also applicable to describe “contemporary efforts that empower Euro-American pedagogy and minimize the validity of Indigenous education systems and pedagogy” (Alaska State Archives, n.d. para 4)

**Decolonization-** Decolonization, and its counterpart indigenization, is an overarching concept in a larger Indigenous education movement. Definitions for this project are pulled from a Canadian publication for post-secondary institutions titled *Pulling Together: A Guide for Front-Line Staff, Student Services, and Advisors* (Dull et al., 2018)

Decolonization is the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches…For non-Indigenous people, decolonization is the process of examining your beliefs about Indigenous Peoples and culture by learning about yourself in relationship to the communities where you live and the people with whom you interact…Decolonization is an ongoing process that requires all of us to be collectively involved and responsible. Decolonizing our institutions means we create spaces that are inclusive, respectful, and honour Indigenous Peoples. (Dull et al., 2018, p.7)

**Indigenization-** Indigenization of an institution is considered an on-going process of being aware of actions to decolonize while simultaneously seeking out opportunities to include and incorporate Native ways of knowing into the institutional practices.

Indigenization is a collaborative process of naturalizing Indigenous intent, interactions, and processes and making them evident to transform spaces, places, and hearts…Indigenization benefits not only Indigenous students but all students, teachers, staff members…Indigenization seeks not only relevant programs and support services but also a fundamental shift in the ways that institutions:

* Include Indigenous perspectives, values, and cultural understandings in policies and daily practices.
* Position Indigenous ways of knowing at the heart of the institution, which then informs all we do.
* Include cultural protocols and practices in the operations of our institutions…

When Indigenization is practiced at an institution, Indigenous people see themselves as represented, respected, and valued and all students benefit. (Dull et al., 2018, p.7)

## Summary

There is a mismatch between Alaska Native students and typical college-readiness models in high schools. A model that builds student skills concurrently with addressing institutional biases in the areas of academic preparedness, cultural sense-of-self, and navigation skills has the potential to impact college-going and persistence rates for Alaska Native students. Inviting Indigenous culture into college preparation is a small effort compared to a larger vision of education reform, yet it may assist today’s youth to join leaders of that greater reform.

Chapter 2

# Review of the Literature

Alaska Native students experience low college-going and college-persistence rates compared to their peers (McDowell Group 2015). Indicators of low academic preparedness among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students has been documented for many years with little indication of change. More recently, having a strong cultural identity has been suggested as an asset for college success. College navigation skills, those skills needed to successfully complete and self-advocate through the systems, application, and requirements to prepare for, transition to and persist in a college environment have been a focus of federal initiatives to boost the college going and success rate of underserved populations (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015).

The aim of this study is to explore the factors of academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills in relationship to college success for Alaska Native students. Alaska is home to a diverse collective of Alaska Natives incorporating at least “20 Native languages belonging to four distinct language families” (Holton, n.d., n.p.). The state is home to 229 federally recognized tribes of the 573 tribes nationwide (National Congress of American Indians, 2019). The diversity of Alaska Natives as unique tribal and language groups is respected, yet for the purpose of the study Alaska Natives will be explored as a group. Furthermore, the data specific for Alaska Native students is sparse, so research draws from American Indian and Alaska Native national data as well as Indigenous experiences around the world. Alaska Native students are disproportionately low-income and first generation, therefore relevant studies of other students of color, particularly those focused on low-income and first generation, are also drawn upon. The review of the literature will consider the college readiness factors of academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills. Each of these factors will be explored through two lenses, first the current status or status of the factor relevant to this population and secondly the impact of institutional bias.

## Academic Preparedness

### What is the current status of academic preparedness as it pertains to the Alaska Native population?

College entrance exams, such as the ACT or SAT, are typical indicators of college readiness. Redefining Ready is an initiative to broaden college and career readiness indicators beyond a single test score. In this model a standardized ACT/SAT test is an option, but alternatively a student may demonstrate readiness with a GPA of 2.8 and participation in at least one of a list of college preparatory classes, advanced math, advanced placement (AP) courses and dual credit courses (Redefining Ready, n.d.). Therefore, participation in advanced courses is a reasonable indicator of college readiness, along with ACT/SAT scores, and may provide insight into the academic preparedness of Alaska Native students. Current data suggests that AI/AN students are lagging behind their peers in both advanced class participation and test scores that serve as readiness indicators.

AI/AN students are performing below their peers on standardized college entrance exams. The ACT sets benchmarks in each tested subject: math, science, English, and reading; benchmark scores are based on the predictability of earning a B or higher in a freshman level college course in the subject. In the graduating class of 2015, a smaller percentage of AI/AN students met ACT benchmarks than their peers; only 11% met all four subject benchmarks compared to 28% for all students; over half did not meet the benchmark in any subject (ACT, 2015). ACT/SAT scores for AI/AN students in 2007 were below all students and the average ACT score for AI/AN was below the level considered minimally prepared for college (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). The pattern for Indigenous students is not limited to the United States, in Australia the ATAR, Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank, is used to determine student eligibility for university. Only 10% of Indigenous students were eligible compared to 46% of non-Indigenous students in 2008 (Wilks &Wilson, 2015).

AI/AN students access advanced classes at a lower rate than their peers. In 2004, a smaller percentage of AI/AN high school graduates completed advanced science, mathematics, or English courses than their peers, with an advanced math participation rate of 21.8%, less than half of the 54.3% rate for White students (DeVoe et al. 2008). On a positive trend, the number of AI/AN students increased by 73% between 1997 and 2007, but that is only slightly higher than the rate for all students (DeVoe et al. 2008). Participation rates for AI/AN students remains comparatively low. Nationally AI/AN students made up 1.0% of the 2013 graduating class and only .6% of the AP exam takers (College Board Report to the Nation, 2014, Appendix D).

The disparity is much greater for Alaska Natives in Alaska; in 2013 Alaska Native students represented 18.8% of the Alaska graduating class, but only 5.7% AP exam takers (College Board Alaska Supplement, 2014). The issue of access may be further complicated for low-income Alaska Native students; low-income students represented only 7.1% of students taking an AP exam in Alaska yet represented 38.4% of the 2011 graduating class (College Board Alaska Supplement, 2014).

A lack of access and quality in advanced placement confounds the problem. In a report prepared for the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, access to AP courses for American Indian students was found minimal and “fraught with failure” (Benally, 2004, p.3). In addition, the report found “schools serving high populations of American Indian students offer either no AP programs or courses or a very limited number of AP courses”; when the courses are available, “very few American Indian students participate” (Benally, 2004, p. 3).

Recent data does not suggest much progress. Despite an overall increase to AP courses for all students, gaps remain, and American Indian have the least access to AP classes (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). A survey of the AP ledger listing all schools in Alaska with approved AP courses reveals a high representation of schools in Alaska that are majority White students and an under representation of schools that serve high percentage populations of Alaska Native students (College Board, 2019). Even when schools do offer AP courses, American Indian students are much less likely to access the courses than their peers, about half the rate of the national average (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

AI/AN students that did access the classes performed below their peers on the assessments (DeVoe, et al., 2008; Moore & Slate, 2010). Moore and Slate (2010) examined the success of American Indian students on 2007 AP exams, less than half of AI/AN students scored a three or higher while more than half of their White counterparts scored a three or above. The performance gap between AI/AN students and White students on all five AP assessments studied was statistically significant (Moore & Slate, 2010). Contreras (2011) points out that even high performing AI/AN students are less likely to enroll in AP courses and asserts that the lower AP scores for AI/AN students “suggest that access to an AP curriculum alone does not guarantee that underrepresented students will have access to comparable materials or teachers to deliver the content that optimally prepares students for such exams” (p. 508). The situation for AI/AN students is impacted by a combination of less opportunity, less recruitment, and lower quality implementation.

Dual credit access mirrors that of AP courses. In response to an observed gap, Hawaii Gear Up funds were utilized to intervene and encourage rural Hawai’i students to access dual credit programs (Hodara & Wang, 2015). Low recruitment was one of many factors identified as causing low participation (Hordara & Wang, 2015). Promisingly, DeFeo and Tran (2019) found a significant improvement in Alaska Native students accessing dual credit in Alaska between 2008 and 2017, representing an increase of 119%. This same report, however, exposed that rural and Alaskan Native students were much more likely to access career-technical dual credit courses and had a lower completion rate resulting in fewer credits earned than the statewide average (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). Research by Pierson and Hodara (2019) found that the participation rate of AI/AN students lagged behind their White peers and had the largest discrepancy gap between high-income and low-income students in their ethnic group accessing dual credit classes. Similar to AP classes, the low access is confounded for low-income Alaska Native students.

The barriers to college preparation are broader than access to advanced courses; the lack of preparation prior to these courses is embedded in the regular high school curriculum and in earlier years of education. The McDowell Group (2001) asserted “poor academic preparation tops the list of barriers to success for Alaskan Natives in post-secondary education” (p.33). In 2005, AI/AN students had the lowest percentage completing a core academic track of any race (DeVoe et al., 2008).

It is well recognized that early intervention is needed. Theokas and Saaris (2013) support addressing the preparation gap to address issues in equity in AP participation (2013). Bryan et al., (2015) view early college awareness embedded throughout the K-12 experiences as essential in preparing students for successful college transition. Early experiences have lasting impacts. “Students’ academic preparation and initial education intentions influence and shape the way they approach college” (Larimore & McClellan, 2005, p. 24).

### What role does unintentional bias and institutional bias play in academic preparedness for Alaska Native students?

Systemic institutional bias and the unintentional bias of educators within institutions have an impact on the academic preparedness of AI/AN students. Conditioned by a long history of assimilation and a continued partiality toward a White-middle-class culture in schools, many of the teachers and educational leaders take on a deficit lens regarding AI/AN students. Well-intentioned support is designed to help students assume the cultural norms of the school environment, rather than building an academic environment that values the cultural assets of the students.

Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) took a deeper look into low-income schools with purposeful college-going initiatives and exposed a deficit orientation in school leadership. The schools provided access to college readiness, but only within the context of deculturization. In reviewing two studies focused on the college readiness of students of color, Welton and Martinez (2014) describe “a college readiness debt… related to the inequities in enrolling in more rigorous classes such as Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment courses, and school policies and procedures that increased college-related opportunities for only certain students” (p. 208). Welton and Martinez (2014) reference the large amount of college readiness research on students of color that frame the problem only as a deficit compared to White peers with an “emphasis on policies, programs, and practices that tout to remedy deficiencies instead of building upon the prevailing assets of students from underrepresented groups” (p. 201).

Systematic low expectations also come into play. Teachers send messages about who is, and by default who is not, AP material (Theokas & Saaris, 2013). Contreras (2011) reports that even high performing underrepresented students, including AI/AN, are often advised to take a less rigorous route to post-secondary. Welton and Martinez (2014) recognize the potential benefit that teachers can play in reaching out to students of color and encouraging college readiness, yet also expose that in many schools, teachers and counselors serve as gatekeepers and contribute to the tracking of students of color into low level courses and a minimum graduation plan.

Tracking has been another manifestation of low academic expectations. Funneling AI/AN students into vocational pathways alternatively to academic pathways represents a long-standing predisposition. Referencing a long history of Indian serving schools prioritizing assimilation, Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) explain that a historical call for relevant education was met with a reply of vocational education. This reveals an assumption of AI/AN students lacking the ability for academic work and a continued framework of how the AI/AN best assimilates into the dominant society. This pattern continues. Contreras (2018) points out the tendency to guide American Indian students into vocational or community college options suggesting little change in contemporary schools. MEHS provides an example of both historical and contemporary school trends. Hopkins (2008) describes an overt assumption at MEHS in the late 1950’s to guide Alaska Native students into vocational training; as late as 2018, MEHS had well developed vocational programs but no Advanced Placement offerings (MEHS, 2018). In the Australian system, in which career decisions are made earlier in the education pathway, James et al. (2008) interpreted a high percentage of Indigenous youth going into vocational programs as a product of low self-concept about academic ability born from their institutional experiences, not a symptom of a lower value of education. Even the positive trend of increased dual credit earned by Alaska Native students reveals the propensity to provide vocational education with rural and Alaska Native students much more likely to access, presumably because of availability, vocational classes (DeFeo & Tran, 2019)

AI/AN students that remain on a college path are also impacted by institutional practices of low academic expectation and non-academic course recommendations as they attempt to navigate and persist through the college system. Once in college, many AI/AN students reflect on the low expectations of their pre-college education pathway, past the opportunity for advocacy. Interviewed AI/AN college students listed their own lack of academic preparedness as a barrier to college success and expressed exasperation toward a K-12 education that steers AI/AN students into low academic classes (Guillory & Wolverton 2008). Retrospectively understanding a lack of academic preparation has been a pervasive experience for AI/AN students. “Academic deficiencies in English and math seemed to cross generations”, similar experiences were shared from traditional as well as older students and “suggests that not much has changed in the educational school systems” serving AI/AN students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p 80). Larimore and McClellan (2005) identify precollege academic preparation as predictive of college persistence for Indigenous students and suggests that attention of precollege preparation is necessary for improvement. Schools are called to examine their student and faculty perceptions of Indigenous students in AP classes as well as the preparation gap that begins years before placement in the classes (Adelman, Taylor, & Nelson, 2013; Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

## Cultural Sense of Self

### What is the current research on the relationship of cultural identity and college success as applicable for Alaska Native Students?

There has been increasing recognition of the value of cultural identity and pride in positively impacting school success (Adelman et al.,2013; Huffman, 2001; Reyhner et a, 2011; Spencer et al., 2001). Larimore and McClellan (2005) examined the various relationships between achieving mastery in a Western system, resisting assimilation, and cultural identity.

Native American students who are able to draw strength from their cultural identity while adapting to the demands of campus life are more likely to succeed in their academic pursuits than are either culturally assimilated students or those unable to establish a level of comfort within their campus environment. (Larimore & McClellan, 2005, p. 21)

Adelman, et al. (2013) and Huffman (2001) also include a strong cultural identity as assisting in college retention and persistence. Huffman (2001) interviewed Indigenous college students about persistence. He defined four levels of incorporating traditional culture into one’s own personal ethnic identity and had students self-identify with a level (Huffman, 2001).

Some students develop a strong cultural identity over time while navigating the college experience. Despite a common experience of isolation, students who progressed to identify their cultural identity as a strength and source of confidence in their ability to navigate the mainstream environment had the highest GPA and demonstrated persistent skills (Huffman 2001). Huffman (2001) labeled this “transculturation” as four stages of development: stage one is “initial alienation”, stage two is “self-discovery—discovery of personal strength emerging from Native cultural heritage,” stage three is “realignment—learn to relate to both Native and mainstream cultural settings using traditionalism as an emotional anchor” and stage four is “participation—full use of American Indian culture and heritage as a source of strength” (Huffman, 2001, figure 2). Chen (2012) also described a transformation of identity for Indigenous college students in Taiwan that resulted in empowerment along with both individual and collective efficacy. Spencer et al. (2001) identified a similar strength for black students, “youth with higher achievement are more likely to score high on Afrocentric Identity and lower on Eurocentric Identity” (p. 27). A well-developed cultural identity is an assistive factor in college persistence. Literature supports actively developing students’ sense of self within the context of culture as a college readiness skill. In her own dissertation, Panigkaq (John-Shields, 2018) described a process of Indigenizing her own inner self as she became aware of the “need to balance my Yup’ik being” and learn to allow herself to be authentically Yup’ik in Western school environments (p.7). She contrasts a significant difference from how she was during her undergraduate degree with her time earning her Master’s degree about 10 years later; “Through my process of becoming aware, I have learned to remain true to myself as a Yup’ik person” (John-Shields, 2018 pp 7-8).

This reframing of the role of culture invites a shift from a deficit lens to a view of cultural identity as an asset for college readiness. In interviews with students of color, many “used academic achievement to affirm their racial/ethnic identity” (Weldon & Martinez, 2013, p. 214). Wexler et al. (2016) administered a survey to rural Alaska Native youth and found these youth possessed a “remarkably unequivocal belief in self, a high level of responsibility, and connectedness with family and culture” (p. 369). This is a very localized example that academic self-efficacy and cultural connectiveness go hand-in-hand.

In contrast to bias practices, schools can play an active role in building a strong sense of self for Alaska Native students. Huffman (2001) advocates for providing students opportunities to learn how to embrace cultural identity as an asset. Keene (2016) described a successful summer college bridge program for AI/AN designed for that purpose; the program for AI/AN high-potential college students combined cultural self-identification activities with college preparation tasks. Students had different past levels of participation and interaction with their traditional culture; the program helped students across the spectrum explore self-identify and practice how they may articulate the cultural part of themselves, “teaching them to think about who they are as Native people and to be prepared for the identity politics that come with being on a college campus” (Keene, 2016, p. 93). Similarly, Taiwanese university students actively sought out Indigenous studies; as they transformed to view their culture as a source of empowerment, they found identity strength in sharing about their culture and heritage with others on campus (Chen, 2012). In an opinion piece, Williams (2020) references her own experiences as a student and a current educational leader in the need to shift “from cultural responsiveness to cultural affirmation,” practices that specifically build positive cultural identity.

Providing Indigenous spaces and a school culture that seeks to show value of cultural practices and languages is a best practice for post-secondary schools. Multiple sources (Adelman et al., 2013; Chen, 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Soria & Alkire, 2015) cite participation in Native student organizations or clubs as positively influencing a sense of belonging and resulting college success and persistence. Spaces for students to speak their own language and be around others with cultural comfort is evidenced as assistive to college belonging (Contreras 2011). This may be particularly aligned with Alaska Native students given the diversity and strength of Indigenous languages spoken in Alaska (Holton, n.d., n.p.). Panigkaq describes the importance of the rural student service center during her time at the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus for its importance as

a community within the University to reenergize our Indigenous being in an unfamiliar space…a space where you were able to feel at home…speak our Native language…[and] have the best medicine of laughing as stores were told which eased our homesickness and our imbalance at the University. (John-Shields, 2018, pp. 5-6)

She describes how her dad, Dr. Chief Kangrilnguq advocated for his people to keep their Indigenous Yugtun language and way of life as a way “to keep balanced in the dominant world” while simultaneously supporting the pursuit of Western education (John-Shields, 2018, p.6)

Inviting culture into the curriculum and acknowledging academic value of Indigenous ways of knowing supports learning. Kanu (2006) and Castagno and Brayboy (2008) suggest that the inclusion of Native culture in curriculum helps students become more post-secondary ready. This concept is not new, a McDowell Group (2001) report completed for the First Alaskans in 2001 affirmed “Native ways of knowing will improve Native student success” (p. 4). Furthermore, support for inclusion of culture and Native ways of knowing in K-12 curriculum is well documented (Adelman et al., 2013; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; James et al., 2008; Kanu, 2006).

Despite a long history of support for culturally relevant instruction, data interpretations conflict regarding the inclusion of culture in schools. The National Indian Education Study (NIES) includes survey questions about levels of culture in school and relies on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for achievement reporting. Lopez, Heilig, and Schram (2013) utilized the NIES survey questions and NAEP scores from 2007 to assess correlation; “the more students reported perceiving AI/AN culture was incorporated into instruction, the worse their achievement” (p. 530). In their same published research, Lopez et al. (2013) argue against using this data for any conclusion about the impacts of culturally responsive schooling and points out the problems of correlating the data without attention to other factors of academic rigor, academic expectations, and quality of instruction. Torres (2017) worked to control more factors in exploring the relationship of cultural discontinuity between school and home with achievement. Utilizing NIES and NAEP data, Torres (2017) asserted AI/AN students experience no negative impact on achievement when their home culture is not aligned with school culture, while also recognizing no notable negative impact with schools utilizing culturally based education.

Another approach with the same NAEP data was to compare the experiences of the highest performing AI/AN students with the lowest. A 2015 supplemental NAEP report compared the highest performing AI/AN students, above 75%, with the lowest performing, below 25%. The highest performing students reported their school had materials about AI/AN people at a significantly higher rate than the lower performing group (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The large data set of the NIES and NAEP provides opportunities to explore relationships between culturally responsive schooling and achievement, yet the volume of data itself makes it difficult to assess the relationship of any variable.

Kanu (2006) took a comparative route; in Canada two ninth grade classrooms were taught social studies, one with culture embedded and one without. Higher achievement and higher critical thinking were realized in the classroom that included culturally relevant techniques (Kanu 2006). Multiple other researchers support the use of culturally relevant instruction (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018, Cajete & Pueblo, 2010; Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010; Demmert, 2008; Reyhner et al., 2011). Overall, culturally relevant instruction maintains strong support as an effective instructional technique for AI/AN students.

At the stage of college preparation, culturally relevant curriculum is not enough. To encourage full participation in higher education by AI/AN students without a requirement of assimilation, school environments must embrace academic value for Indigenous ways of knowing. Schofield et al. (2013) argue that getting more Indigenous students into higher education programs is not only about expanding their “access to dominant Western knowledges…such participation also serves to shape what is constituted and accepted as legitimate knowledge” (p. 15). Cajete and Pueblo call for inviting “traditional Indian concepts and foundational principals” into accepted learning frameworks; “modern education and traditional education can no longer afford to remain as historically—and contextually separate entities” (p. 1127).

Oakes and Maday (2009) lay out a case for the coexistence of implemented culturally relevant strategies and rigor, debunking the myth that rigorous academics and cultural knowledge must compete for instructional time. These ideas are beyond just utilizing place-based and culturally relevant materials to teach western school concepts, and rather acknowledge that Indigenous ways of knowing provide a different perspective on high rigor academics that call for critical thinking. Expanding academic environments to invite this diversity not only provides an advantage to the Indigenous student, but also enhances the educational environment for all students exposed to this other epistemology. Dr. Chief Kanglnguq explained that Yup’ik and Non-natives learn together, “the people’s knowledge will be greater” (John-Shields, 2018, p.22)

### What role does unintentional bias and institutional bias play in the relationship of cultural identity and college success as applicable for Alaska Native Students?

Despite an increased recognition of the value of cultural pride and identity in the school setting, underlying biases continue to value assimilation, apply a deficit lens to cultural misalignment, and compartmentalize cultural activities from academics. In schools, “experiences of Whites and middle-income people” serve “as the norm from which nonmajority children are seen as deviating” (Spencer et al., 2001, p.21). The narrative of the 2014 Native Youth Report describes a history of assimilation that includes a desire to “inculcate within them the values and beliefs of possessive individualism” (Executive Office of the President, 2014 p.9).

The Euro-centric view of our institutions, which tend toward a White middle-class orientation, not only isolate students but creates cultural dissonance. There is often a disconnect between “AI/AN student experiences and non-native intuitional practice” (Windchief et al., 2018, p. 515). In exposing the deficit orientation of schools purportedly advocating for preparing students for college, Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) described how personnel perspective shifts the school culture to assimilation, setting expectations for students to change and eliminating cultural identity as an asset. Windchief et al (2018) report that at times AI/AN students on campus felt “unwelcomed, isolated, misunderstood, and marginalized” (p. 508). Similar experiences are felt by Indigenous students in Australia (Schofield et al., 2013). Ellis et al. (2019) describes students experiencing microaggressions, typically about being less qualified, that “illuminate the deficit orientation often communicated to first-generation and racial-ethnic minority college students” (p. 275).

When students do not naturally fall into the culture of school, educators misread the cultural mismatch as a lack of motivation. In exploring marginalized students on campus, Spencer et al. (2001) describes an institutional assumption that African American students and families do not value education. Schofield et al. (2013) references a historical tendency to blame the Indigenous people themselves for low participation in Australian university. Spencer et al. (2001) debunked the low motivation assumption in other marginalized minorities.

The McDowell Group (2001) directly explored attitudes of Alaska Natives toward education and found significant support and aspirations. Okagaki et al. (2009) surveyed Indigenous students and compared their answers to European American students; there was no difference in the reported value of education by the students and they equally described support from their parents for pursuing higher education (Okagaki et al. 2001). Others also document high aspirations (James et al., 2008; Lopez et al., 2013). Even potential strengths may be misread when viewed through a myopic school culture lens. Universities are not cognizant of the “hard independence” of many first-generation students, referring to skills of resiliency and self-reliance (Covarrubias, et. al. 2019). “In not recognizing these hard forms of independence, universities may be reinforcing deficit narratives of first-generation students, such as misconstruing self-reliant behavior as a lack of motivation to seek help” (Covarrubias, et al., 2019, p. 403).

Culturally relevant school practices could address feelings of alienation, yet despite the overwhelming and deep history of researched support for culturally relevant instruction, most schools fail to reach the ideal. Sometimes it is a lack of capacity to implement. Lopez et al. (2013) illuminates the many layers of reasons that lead to the lack of inclusion of AI/AN culture in classrooms, even in schools where it is an adopted philosophy and teachers have been trained. Other times it is a rejection of the philosophy. “The knowledge, values, skills and interests that Native students possess are largely ignored in favor of strategies, aimed at enticing them to conform to mainstream education” (Cajete, 2010, p. 1127). The very data that some use in the rejection of culturally relevant schooling is viewed by others as a symptom of the continued failure to invite culture into the academic setting. Using NAEP scores Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) cite a long history of stagnant academic growth for AI/AN students and assert:

It is clear to us that calls for assimilation for Native students have failed; Native children fight assimilation in schools every day. There is overwhelming evidence that Native students who excel in school are often also well-educated as tribal peoples (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018, p. 87)

It is clear that culturally relevant schooling remains a supported practice in need of continued attention and capacity building.

The cultural preference of institutions creates tension in which cultural knowledge and thinking is viewed in conflict with western academic achievement, a choice sometimes projected onto the students themselves. Many American Indian/Alaska Native students feel a pressure to assimilate in the school environment and “feel forced to choose between assimilating into the dominant culture as a means of achieving academic success and maintaining ties to their traditional culture by resisting dominant assimilation” (Soria & Alkire, 2015 p. 1).

Soria and Alkire (2015) did expose a negative correlation between time spent with families and academic success for Indigenous students, along with a strong correlation between a sense of belonging on campus and success. Soria and Alkire presents their research as an advocacy for building spaces for a sense of belonging (Soria & Alkire, 2015). Additionally, the findings may be considered a symptom that in current institutions it is easier to feel a sense of belonging the more comfortable a student is with assimilation code switching. The pressure to assimilate is counterproductive. Spencer et al. (2001) used a scale to assess levels of assimilation with other minoritized students of color and revealed that those with Eurocentric or mainstream view actually correlated with lower academic achievement.

Compartmentalizing culture as an elective or outside of the core academic realm is another way of not valuing Indigenous epistemology. Schofield et al (2013) describe barriers on Australian University campuses including institutional bias and devaluing Indigenous knowledge systems through categorizing it as a religion or special topic study. Adelman et al. (2013) also stress that integration of traditional culture with western learning cannot be accomplished with special projects but must fully incorporate Indigenous ways of thinking.

## Navigation Skills

### What is the current research on the relationship of navigation skills and college success as applicable for Alaska Native Students?

Many (Adelman et al., 2013; Bryan et al., 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014) demonstrate that low-income and students of color have needs in building navigation skills. James et al. (2018) echo these issues in Australia pointing out that Indigenous students have less information about pathways in higher education, both from the system of school and the lack of higher education experiences in their homes and communities. The family may be very supportive of college, but lacks the experience needed to guide the AI/AN student through the system. Okagaki et al. (2009) describe a cultural tendency in AI/AE families in which parents allow their child to take the lead in pursuing post-secondary goals, the parents fully support their child’s motivation and view their role as one of support, rather than direction.

AI/AN, especially those that are also low-income and first generation, often do not have experiences in traversing through layered bureaucratic systems such as universities. Schools expect students of other cultures to navigate the expectations “often left to students themselves to unravel in their traditional cultures, frequently without benefit of cultural translation” (Spencer et al. 2001 p. 21). Combined with AI/AN family tendencies to support student autonomy in their post-secondary plans (Okagaki et al., 2009), institutional practices of relying on student initiative to access services further disadvantages AI/AN students.

School support for AI/AN students needs to be comprehensive, targeted, and pervasive throughout the college preparation and transition process. Larimore and McClellan (2005) point out that many Alaska Native college seeking students need support in a great many navigation skills such as course selection, financial aid, study skills and more. “For many students from low-income, minority, or first-generation college backgrounds, the school counselor constitutes a major and sometimes, only source of information about college” (Bryan et al., 2015 p. 7). Adelman et al. (2013) describe the need for early counseling that includes the direct instruction of navigational skills such as “survival courses in high school…focused on providing information and teaching coping skills and attitudes” (p. 42).

To reach the intended students, targeted outreach is required. Bryan et al. (2015) reference the initiatives Michelle Obama’s *Reach Higher* and the U.S. Department *College Completion Goal* 2020 as example calls to increase counseling outreach to underserved and minority students to increase access to college. Targeted outreach includes hands-on support in teaching navigation skills and completing application and student aid paperwork with students and families (Bryan et al., 2015).

High school counseling practices often “rely on students approaching the career advisor for advice”, disadvantaging Indigenous students who’s “families often do not have the educational capital to inform their children about the options and possibilities” (James et al. 2008, p. 49). Students were largely left up to themselves to seek out a Running Start dual credit program available in several high schools in Hawaii; those that did access the program required a high level of need for support to get through the application process, including accessing immunization records and meeting other application prerequisites for Native Hawaiian students (Hodara & Wang, 2015).

Even when schools offer supports, the task of synthesizing these into a complete package to address the overall need, is often left up to the student and only adds to the obstacle. This experience transcends high school into the college environment. Larimore and McClellan (2005) contend that with the great many needs of Alaska Native student, that the skill of accessing multiple supports in a compartmentalized system is a skill in itself. AI/AN graduate students described a need for support “with obtaining financial support and/or going through the bureaucratic process to access the right information” (Windchief et al., 2018, p. 509).

Furthermore, some students are unlikely to seek help. High school students expressed reluctance in asking questions and exposing their lack of understanding about their options when others were around them (Bryan et al., 2015 p. 26). A successful case study explored by Larimore and McClellan (2005) shifted from a role-based guidance approach to a collaborative approach that involved all stakeholders and achieved a more pervasive support system and overall college-going culture for students of color. Such an approach aligns with the relational and interdependent nature of Indigenous cultures.

The literature supports the direct instruction of navigation skills. High schools are poised to provide opportunities to students to actively build and practice navigation skills that may be carried forward into post-secondary. Throughout the college preparation process in high school, there are systems and structures that must be navigated. Bryan et al. (2015) describe times in which low-income and first-generation students miss opportunities to access college preparation activities because of their unfamiliarity with the process or its importance. Counselors may capitalize on these as learning experiences.

Information sharing is not enough, however, structures must be put into place to actively teach students the skills to navigate through applications and test sign-up and self-advocacy when these opportunities arise. Bryan et al. (2015) describe using the process of signing up for the ACT/SAT as a teachable moment to accomplish the needed task but also directly teach navigation skills and boost students’ self-efficacy in transferable ways (Bryan et al., 2015).

### What role does unintentional bias and institutional bias play regarding navigation skills and college success as applicable for Alaska Native Students?

Students with families that are least familiar with the post-secondary system and options are in greatest need for school supports, yet AI/AN early-needs often go unnoticed. In 2007, AI/AN 8th grade students were confident about their plans with 78% saying they will “probably go to college”, yet when this same cohort was asked how many times a teacher or counselor talked to them about what courses to take or plans for post-secondary over half, 53% reported “once or never” (U.S. Department of Education 2007, p. 15). Adelman et al. (2013) suggest that the focus on AI/AN students has been on reducing dropout rates, leaving a void of attention on preparation for post-secondary and necessitating a shift to targeted focus on early advising and transition supports.

In examining students of color who did access AP courses, Welton and Martinez (2014) noted that most came from one middle school, the one with more White students; similar students from the other feeder school were less likely to have been guided toward an academic pathway leading to AP classes. This illustrates a disparity in overall services between primarily minority schools and those that more culturally mirror school culture.

The low numbers of AI/AN students accessing advanced programs, such as AP described earlier, may exacerbate the pipeline to college. In a case study described by Bryan et al. (2015) 100% of students who were part of a program comparable to Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate (IB), within a school had solid plans to transition into college, whereas only 34% of the general program had made a college decision. Some discrepancy can be expected since IB programs are designed for higher achieving students, yet the author pointed out the pattern was noticeable even with students in the general population that were high achieving and had accessed highly rigorous courses in the general program (Bryan et al., 2015 p. 19). AI/AN students may not be receiving the initial counseling needed to access the advanced programs, and then are being left out of the additional counseling and general college-going culture that exists in these programs that further support the acquisition of navigation skills to successfully transition to college.

In addition to the complexity of navigating complicated bureaucratic systems with little prior experience, the typical counseling and advising supports and expectations often have embedded cultural mismatch with AI/AN students and families. Goals and a strong purpose are critical for college persistence, yet there are significant cultural differences from where motivation is drawn. High school counselors, and later college advisors, draw upon career goals and the American values of capitalism in advising students, yet many AI/AN students are not motivated by these ideals. AI/AN students are motivated by their families and home communities (Adelman et al., 2013 Chen, 2012; Huffman, 2001; Soria & Alkire, 2015).

AI/AN college students interviewed by Guillory and Wolverton (2008) listed family and giving back to their tribal communities as the top two factors contributing to their persistence. “A college education meant more than just a means to obtaining a career and financial independence; for these students it was an instrument to combat deleterious conditions back home” (Guillory & Wolverton 2008 p. 75). Interviewed Indigenous college students in Taiwan, listed serving their Indigenous community as a key to their own motivation to pursue higher education (Chen, 2012). Panigkaq remembers the words and teachings of her Dr. Chief Kangrilnguq:

“Do not put yourself above others even though you receive something they haven’t, but to remain equal.” He used to remind us to complete our schooling to become able to help our people. His belief was receiving a training, certificate, or degree would give one tools to help our Indigenous people (John-Shields, 2018, p.6)

These teachings are in great contrast to guidance services that emphasize a college path for its opportunities to get ahead, earn money, gain status or even for individual preference or pleasure.

Family and community as a key motivation reflects the interdependent culture of many AI/AE homes and Indigenous cultures. College cultures that value exceptionalism and individualism are less likely to tap into interdependence as a strength or offer support in a culturally responsive way. First generation students “experience a mismatch when universities fail to recognize interdependence as a valuable way of being” (Covarrubias et al., 2019, p. 384).

In reflecting on participation in a mentoring program, College students commented that some mentors were not attune to the relational nature of AI/AN students (Windchief et al., 2018). Covarrubias et al. (2019) describe motivation stemming from students supporting their families and making a difference for their families and communities in the future, however also describes how this sense of obligation can produce struggles for students as they balance family and college campus demands. When Indigenous students are from rural communities, this stress can be compounded as they “are removed from the financial and emotional support they would otherwise get from family” (James et al., 2008, p. 52). Many Alaska Native students are from remote rural villages and even more isolated from family. School instructors and advisors need to go beyond providing academic opportunities and college navigation resources, but must also focus “on taking the time to develop trusting and authentic relationships” (Welton & Martinez 2014, p. 223).

Counter to the deficit lens, a college mentor observed that successful students maintained a connection to home and community, including the opportunity to participate in cultural activities; the mentored students described family and home community as a key support system (Windchief et al., 2018). Welton and Martinez (2014) frame the interdependence nature as “Community cultural wealth… comprised of various forms of capital that persons of Color possess based on their aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, and resistant knowledge and networks that help them navigate structural challenges in educational systems” (p. 205). School support systems need to adjust to a more relational approach to tap into this wealth.

College is a time in which students are expected to exhibit increased independence, however this too is colored by an institutional bias. For instance, colleges typically view assertiveness to ask for help as an independent skill, yet many AI/AN students who possess a great many independent skills may not naturally reach out for help. Jack (2016) contributes a reluctance to ask for help as a product of low-income students in regular public schools not having the opportunity to learn the hidden rules and expectations of more affluent schools and universities. It is not that students lack independent skills, they are intimidated by the environment, they view it as a potential display of weakness and do not understand the hidden rule that it would demonstrate empowerment and independence (Jack, 2016).

Covarrubias et al. (2019) also explores the situational definition of independence. Referencing research by Kusserow on early childhood, Covarrubias et al. (2019) applies the concepts of “soft independence, an emotion-focused sense of independence wherein children were nudged to explore their feelings and to express their preferences” and “hard independence, survival-focused sense of self-reliance” to first generation college students (p. 384). Covarrubias et al. (2019) explains a value imparity regarding independence; survival-based independent skills, such as self-reliance and toughness, is often ignored by universities that demonstrate a preference for independent skills that are emotional-based such as reflection and verbal expressions of your own opinion or preferences.

In exploring African American youth on campuses, Spencer et al. (2001) discovered many demonstrated significant resiliency, yet these navigation skills were rarely recognized. “The unique contributors leading to success and resiliency in challenging environments are not typically identified or integrated into other training or policy” (p. 23). Alaska Native and other minoritized groups may be demonstrating independence and resiliency, but in ways less familiar in the institutional culture and thus less valued.

## Summary

The goal of Alaska Native students having a strong sense of cultural identity and sense of self is not mutually exclusive with being academically prepared for post-secondary high school. On the contrary, the historical practice of this very assumption may be instrumental in producing the current state of low college participation rates.

The literature supports the development of a college readiness model that builds Alaska Native student skills in both academic preparedness and cultural self-identity not only simultaneously but as coadjutants. To accomplish this, navigation skills must be taught directly and early to be certain that Alaska Native students access the essential classes and activities that serve as effective prerequisites for college preparation and transition.

In building these skills, attention must be given to the institutional bias and cultural miscues that are born out of a long history of an assimilation practice for AI/AN education. Keene (2016) describes the power of this combination well in her reflection of a pre-college summer program that builds students’ cultural pride and self-awareness concurrently with traditional college navigation skills.

The students themselves are transformed. Their confidence has grown—confidence in the college application process and also in their identities as Native students and tribal citizens. They are in the process of creating their futures and the futures of their tribal nations (p. 95)

A model to enhance the college pathways of Alaska Native students will not only provide services to these students, but will call on the institutions themselves to become more self-aware and provide services in ways that value the culture of the students and invite into the academic framework Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous communities have century old education practices and ways of knowing which, when valued, enhance education environments that tout a value of diversity. A successful model will not be something that is applied to Alaska Native students, but rather an exchange that benefits both students and institutions themselves.

Chapter 3

# Action Plan

The percent of Alaska Native students attending and persisting in college is far below the percent of this demographic in the Alaska high school population. This problem is impacted by unintentional biases in institutional practices around college readiness. The purpose of my project is to create a self-assessment tool to be used as part of the school improvement process. The tool will serve to reveal institutional biases and identify opportunities to capitalize on student cultural strengths as part of a college preparation program. Initially a basic tool was drafted based on the review of literature. Data collection served to improve and refine the tool through feedback from experts and feedback from educators. Originally, additional data collection was planned through a pilot school improvement use of the tool. It was eliminated, however, because MEHS diverted from its annual school improvement process to concentrate entirely on COVID response measures during implementation of this project. The data collected from cultural experts and educators did result in assessment revisions. These data collections also highlighted the need for additional information to create an effective self-assessment. It became apparent that to be effective the self-assessment must not only provide areas for targeted improvement, but also assist educators’ reflection and gained knowledge on tendencies toward institutional bias. Additional background information and stories can help someone think deeply about their own thoughts and beliefs in a more illustrated way than a simple checklist of school actions. My deliverable is the creation of an interactive website inclusive of the revised assessment with links to guidance and background knowledge regarding the themes from research that provide the basis for the self-assessment. My intention is for schools to use the website and self-assessment as part of their own school improvement process. This chapter provides further information on the analysis of review of the literature, my data collection plan, and the planned capstone project.

## Analysis of Literature

Arranged around the three main factors of: academic preparedness, cultural sense of self, and navigation skills, the literature revealed key themes with implications for school action.

Themes. The main theme is an inherent institutional bias grounded in a school culture that mirrors and shows preference for White middle-class cultural norms. A second theme of cultural identity as a strength indicates opportunities not yet realized by schools. These two themes overlap; the preference of one culture contributes to the lack of recognition of the strength of another. A third less dominant theme alludes to colonized practices of predetermining education needs and reveals a lack of student empowerment in the approach to college readiness. These themes suggest that schools can create change by addressing their own institutional bias, actively capitalizing on culture, and empowering students in a college readiness model targeting academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills.

Value & Include Native Ways of Knowing

College Ready

Address Bias

Empower Students

Figure 2. School actions to impact three college readiness factors for college readiness

Institutional Bias. Research frequently revealed a tendency of schools to prefer, assume, or expect student behavior aligned with White middle-class norms. Schools themselves have taken on these cultural norms; the preference is unintentional and often not understood as based in culture. In some instances, programs designed to reach minoritized students were set up specifically to help them better assimilate to the behavior expected by the school without any understanding of the cultural implications. This preference also contributes to Alaska Native students being overlooked or guided away from college preparation pathways. Schools tend to make assumptions about student and family behavior through a school culture lens aligned with middle-class norms. College and career options are often presented through motivations not well aligned with the cultural values. This creates cultural miscues. For instance, the concept of independence can be misread. In a middle-class culture, and thus school culture, seeking help and asserting your preferences are labeled as independent skills and valued. In contrast, families from relational cultures value interdependence; the concept of independent skills references doing things without help and in times of survival. These are very different internalized views on independence and suggest that even the act of asking for help requires some culturally code-shifting. Furthermore, interdependent families often allow their children to take the lead on their own post-secondary planning. Schools often read these family behaviors as a lack of interest or value for education. Additionally, when students are not familiar enough to navigate the system, schools view the students’ low engagement in seeking help or asserting their preferences or needs as lazy. In reality, the student does not know how to culturally code shift in these times to use the soft independent skills of asking for help and asserting their own needs. In addition to cultural miscues, schools do not recognize cultural identity as an asset and fail to incorporate culture in college-readiness programming.

Cultural Identity. The positive impact of cultural identity in persisting in college was frequent and undisputed in the literature review. Throughout many studies, successful college students described cultural identity as an assistive factor in college persistence. Students often go through stages in their ability to draw upon their cultural identity as a source of strength. Initially, many students either do not recognize their culture as a strength or even feel estranged from the college experience because of it, yet through a process of becoming more aware learn to rely on their cultural identity. Some students are halted in their journey. During earlier stages of the transition, students rely on their assimilation skills, likely a carry-over expectation from their school experience. When students internalize a need to assimilate to fit in, they often feel a disconnect on a college campus and are less likely to persist. Panigkaq described it as “an inside out process of Indigenizing my inner self again” (John-Shields, 2018,p.7). Despite strong research on cultural identity serving as an asset for college persistence, the review did not find any example of cultural identity in a high school-based program. The review did identify a successful summer program with a cultural identity focus, College Horizons (Keene, 2016). Initiating the stages of cultural self-identity in a well-developed high school program has the potential for increasing student college success.

Exploring literature on college readiness for Alaska Native students tapped into a much larger discussion regarding the acknowledgement of Indigenous ways of knowing as having academic value. This issue has implications that extend far beyond college readiness. Within this context, it is a powerful contributing factor to building a strong cultural identity and becoming academically prepared. Progressive viewpoints in education point out that the inclusion of non-dominant cultural ways of knowing is essential for all students to gain a deeper understanding of knowledge and develop critical thinking skills. This is a major factor in the concept of decolonizing education of Alaska Native students and represents a significant paradigm shift that will likely take many years to transform. However, even initial steps to a include academic value of other ways of knowing in a school setting can have a large impact on students’ confidence and sense of self as it relates to college readiness.

Student Empowerment. Another takeaway in the review of literature is the passive treatment of students through the post-secondary process. AI/AN college students reflecting back on high school described being completely unaware of their own lack of preparedness. Low participation rates in college-preparation programs are impacted by lack of outreach and low expectations for AI/AN students. Data trends and history demonstrate a tendency to funnel Alaska Native and other minoritized students into vocational programs. Family tendencies to play a supportive, yet not directive, role contribute to students’ vulnerability to be shuffled along in the system. Schools assume low interest by the families and take on the role of guidance. Too often this is done without educating the student to meaningfully involve them in making informed decisions about their own pathway. This dynamic is tied to the assumptions made within institutions based on the school culture, yet it also presents an opportunity for building empowerment. Educating the student early and often about the various pathway and preparation decisions can help them take on the self-directed role that is culturally appropriate for them.

Implications. The implications of the research on my problem of practice suggest that my project must help schools: (a) become aware of their bias and ways to address it, (b) provide opportunities for students to use cultural identity as a strength, and (c) involve students, in culturally responsive ways, in understanding and defining their own pathways. The unintentionality of current ineffective school practices is critical in how I must approach my work. Backed by the research, I will be asking schools to rethink how they have approached the problem of low college participation by Alaska Native students and shift the source of deficit from the student to school practices. It is reasonable to assume there may be some resistance to this shift, or at least some hesitancy. The changes suggested by the research will only work if motivation comes from a source of commitment and belief by those implementing the changes. Therefore, my project must be well designed to shift mindsets. Without an aligned mindset, any suggested shift in practice will be useless. In her Indigenous Epistemologies class, Panigkaq Agatha John Shields, Ph.D. describes the Yup’ik concept of the life cycle as a process of becoming aware (A. John-Shields, personal communication, 2018). I have come to consider this concept as applied to the schools of Alaska. Our schools must work to become aware of our own actions, our history, and our relationships. It is in the awareness of how our actions relate to others and our surroundings that our actions can become change.

A self-assessment tool is appropriate for this work since it relies on self-reflection. The metacognition of working through a self-assessment tool opens the door for increased awareness. With this purpose in mind, the tool itself must provide the background knowledge to assist schools, and the personnel working within the schools, to consider their own actions in ways they have not yet understood. The tool must include a well-developed rubric designed to educate as well as increase scoring accuracy. Increasing awareness is essential, yet not enough alone; the tool must also propose action steps to address these needs once awareness is achieved.

The literature review provides a starting point for a developed self-assessment to support awareness and target future action. Themes from the literature review have been synthesized into descriptive practices designed to counteract bias and capitalize on cultural strength. Written as statements with a scoring rubric, educators will self-assess the level of implementation of these descriptive practices. The statements are organized under the initial readiness factors of academic preparedness, cultural sense of self, and navigational skills. Given the strong research on the power of cultural identity, it is worthy of separate focus, yet drawing from culture as a strength remains an overarching theme in all three factors. In achieving the goal of both awareness and suggested action, review statements may be categorized as: (a) personnel practices, actions of individuals within the school that can be changed through adjustments in behavior; (b) school structures, systems that are part of how the school operates which typically require procedural or administrative direction for change; and (d) data indicators, information that can be verified and used to raise awareness and monitor progress.

Limitations. The limited number of studies available on college readiness regarding Indigenous students and specifically Alaska Native students was a drawback in the literature review. At times I had to draw from research with other minoritized groups and first-generation students to get a more complete picture because of the lack of research on Indigenous students. Research from other countries did fill in some gaps; the experiences of Indigenous students around the world was remarkably similar. It remains a limitation, however, that my problem of practice is acutely focused specifically on Alaska Native students and only a few of the research cited targeted this specific population. Furthermore, the project is limited by the number of stakeholders who will have direct involvement in building the assessment tool. The experts are critical, yet there are likely a great many cultural and educational experts in Alaska whose perspectives would assist in improving the tool. The use of educators in the tool development are also limited, only a small number of educators at a specific school will contribute to the development of the tool. Utilizing MEHS for this project provided meaningful context as a school targeting college readiness, yet also limiting since ideally the tool will be useful for all Alaska high schools. Lastly, the development of a tool through this project can only result in a starting point. Once developed, the tool will need to be used broadly with comparative student outcome data to further determine its usefulness for its intended purpose.

Future Data Needs. The data gleamed from cultural experts and educators, was key in localizing my research to Alaska and Alaska Native students. Continuing to solicit experiences from those that have lived the experience and those that are practicing in Alaska schools further serve the purpose to localize the tool and support its ongoing development. Ultimately, research will be needed to compare school practice implementation measured by the tool with college going and persistence data. Hypothetically, if a school adjusts practices to align with higher ratings on the tool, one should expect a corresponding increase in Alaska Native college going and persistence rates. These student outcome data indicators are likely to lag behind the change in school process yet are key to evaluating the effectiveness of the tool. Future research will be needed to explore this relationship.

## Data Collection Plan

The overarching questions that drive my project are:

1. What awareness and adjustments may be made to address unintentional bias practices in high schools to address inequities in college preparation for Alaska Native students?
2. In what ways may a high school draw upon the Indigenous experience or ways-of-knowing and being to enhance college preparation for Alaska Native students?
3. How can a school authentically involve Alaska Native students in the college preparation process in a culturally responsive manner?

I will not only be exploring these questions myself, but my capstone concept is to lead schools through these questions in a school improvement process resulting in changed school practices to better serve Alaska Native students.

A self-assessment tool drafted from the research served as a starting point for my project. Data gathered was used to improve the self-assessment tool and identify ways for it to be used effectively. My project data collection served two purposes: (a) draw from the knowledge and experience of experts to ensure that the content of the tool is localized and accurate for Alaska Native students; and (b) gather input on the process needed to support effective use among educators. In gathering data from cultural experts, the initial draft assessment tool was shared as a working document. Cultural experts provided feedback and insight. With their feedback, I actively adjusted and revised the tool. The initial draft of the tool was grounded in research, however data collected from cultural experts and educators was necessary to localize and refine the tool to work for the stated population.

First, I sought feedback from experts on the content, language, and cultural appropriateness of the tool. Early draft versions of the statements and explanations in the assessment tool (see Appendix A for draft after expert input) was provided as context for them to respond. I also drafted and made available a more detailed version with rubric information and background information (see Appendix B), but found this to be too much information and it was set aside and not referenced in all interviews. Experts were chosen who have knowledge of Alaska Native Culture and experience with Alaska Education either as a student, educator, or a tribal organization. These experts were asked to draw upon their knowledge and experience to comment on the tool’s relevance, key ideas, wording, and cultural appropriateness. I used this information to make immediate revisions to the assessment tool and to further consider what experiences and understandings may be helpful in a descriptive rubric to be developed to support the use of the assessment tool.

Secondly, educators at Mt. Edgecumbe High School were asked to use the tool and provide feedback. Appendix A represents the self-assessment statements that were used to collect data from educators, a version that incorporates some of the feedback from experts. The statements were transferred to an online form to allow for easy distribution and participation given COVID mitigation needs. The educators were asked to use the tool to assess MEHS and additionally rate each statement on its clarity and usefulness for improving college readiness for Alaska Native students. An open-ended comment section accompanied each section, academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills. MEHS educators were defined as someone who worked at MEHS for at least one school year and either works within the instructional setting or in the residential setting in a position that specifically interacts with students about their academic goals and post-secondary plans. This included teachers, administrators, counselors, and education program specialists that work directly with students and educators. I collected their ratings on the tool and their comments about the tool.

Based on these three initial data collections, the tool was revised and provided back to both the experts and the MEHS educators (see Appendix C for Action Plan).

Analysis. Analysis of the data led to adjustments in the self-assessment tool including a revised descriptive rubric (see Appendix B). Experts were asked to review the initial self-assessment and provide direct feedback on the content, wording, and cultural appropriateness. A planned open-ended question was asked to allow for any further feedback. My intent was to tag each answer as to whether it represented a concern, an emphasis, suggested addition, or other and to tag whether the response was idea related or about wording. My plan was to prioritize recommendations or concerns for adjustments to the assessment. In reality, all of the interviews shifted quickly to the more open-ended question. Several experts did comment on specific statements in the draft self-assessment, yet these rarely aligned with my initial questions on content, wording, or cultural appropriateness. Nearly all of the interviews shifted to the experts telling me a story of how they have experienced or observed something related to the statement. Sometimes they asked me for clarification, and the dialogue further helped me to understand what is not clear or what of their own experiences I had not captured. Because the interviews became so organic, I circled back at the end of the interview time and re-asked “is there anything in the document that may be culturally inappropriate or insensitive”. The data that became most valuable from this portion of data collection, was stories and examples of how the themes of the various assessment statements had played out in the lives of the experts. In all of the interviews, the expert seemed pleased that attention was being given to experiences they viewed as common, yet largely unnoticed by the school system. The information gained was valuable for adjusting the assessment, but was even more influential in considering what descriptions and background information might be needed to be accessed by educators unfamiliar with concepts and potential biases behind each statement. This not only led to the flushing out of a descriptive rubric, but also served as a catalyst to the conception of an interactive website that would give educators access to not only needed rubric and background information, but to stories from people with experiences related to the statement. Stories can also be collected through the website beyond the completion of my capstone.

With the self-assessment adjusted from the experts, educators used it individually. This produced scores for each statement as well as a score on their perceived clarity and usefulness of the statement. The primary purpose of this data was to consider the use of the tool, not the results for improvement. The variance of the scores for each statement was analyzed. A high variance for a statement resulted in further statement analysis with these considerations: 1. Is the statement unclear? 2. What descriptive explanation is needed to provide enough information for accurate assessment? 3. May this suggest the statement is highly impacted by prior perception? The scores for clarity and usefulness further assisted in this analysis. A higher variance in clarity suggested a need to either adjust the statement or add clear descriptions in a rubric, whereas a higher variance in usefulness was viewed as an indicator that the statement is highly impacted by prior perception and perceived need for bias awareness in schools. In determining if the question needed to be adjusted, expert feedback and the open-ended answer from the educators was also referenced.

The final stage of the project was to engage the educators in considering the results of the assessment tool as part of their regular school improvement process. MEHS has an existing school goal of preparing students to pursue their post-secondary goals. Each year the staff considers data that serves as indicators to meeting this goal including: NWEA MAP growth data, Alaska Performance Scholarship eligibility, and Re-defining Ready indicators. Re-defining Ready indicators include dual-credit and Advanced Placement class participation, GPAs, and completion of Algebra 2. In my design, MEHS was to use the data from the self-assessment alongside student outcome data during the school improvement process as a pilot. I had planned to journal during this process. Unfortunately, the presence of the COVID pandemic disrupted this plan. MEHS abandoned the cyclical process of school improvement to dedicate all professional development attention to COVID mitigation and blended learning strategies.

In lieu of my journaling through a school improvement process, I shifted attention to translating what I had learned through the expert interviews and initial educator use to a dynamic interactive website. I conceived of a website as an ideal repository for the self-assessment because of the ease of voluntarily accessing additional information through hyperlinks. As I moved through this project, I began to realize that my self-assessment needed to be both short and concise, therefore accessible, yet also needed to include background and stories about the deep concepts around culture and bias that educators are being asked to consider. A web version of the assessment allows for three sections of six statements each to be fairly simple and concise, yet also allows for each of these statements to link to background and research data for greater understanding. The power of the stories told by my cultural experts caused me to consider the potential to continue to collect stories through the website for an ever-improved set of backup material. Through this concept, data collection from people experiencing the themes of the assessment will continue long past the completion of this capstone.

Data presentation. The data was initially presented back to the experts. Presentation included the revised tool and an explanation of changes and the contribution of their comments. Experts had the opportunity to comment or clarify if they felt the adjustments did not represent their intent. A written presentation was provided to the Commissioner of Education. Once the capstone is complete, the assessment tool and its use will be presented at the 65 by 2025 Alaska Conference. The Alaska 65 by 2025 statewide initiative is focused on increasing the number of Alaskans with college and career credentials. (Alaska Can, n.d)

**Potential bias.** As a non-Native principal investigator, my involvement presents a potential bias in data collection and interpreting the data. Dr. Panigkaq Agatha John Shields served as my mentor throughout the project and agreed to co-author the resulting research and project. Her involvement is critical in mitigating the bias I bring as a non-Native interpreting the input of Native experts and seeking to impact students from this culture. Panigkaq is highly credible in Alaska Native communities and is generous in her willingness to provide feedback and educate those of us who may not always understand cultural subtleties. Conversely, my hope was to utilize my perspective to build a document that is assessable to educators, many of whom are non-Native themselves. As I heard from cultural experts, I used my past experiences to consider what background knowledge is essential for non-Native educators to understand the suggested cultural shifts. Based on the research and this project, I believe that if a school implements change to the point of accurately scoring high on the self-assessment, the number of Alaska Native students who are successful transitioning and persisting in college will significantly increase. This, however, represents an assumption until it can be studied. Once the tool is refined through this process, it will need further study to assess whether there may be a correlation between the assessed school actions and college readiness indicators for Alaska Native and ultimately college going and persistence rates.

Project permission. Mt. Edgecumbe High School is a statewide school that is operated by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development. Permission was sought from the Commissioner of Education (Appendix D). The school improvement process is on-going and expected for the school. It is not unusual to seek out different resources for this process, so the introduction of a tool aligned with an existing school goal is not significantly different than standard procedures. It is unique, however, to have this process be part of a capstone project. To provide complete transparency, a letter of information and invitation for comments or concerns was presented to the advisory board which includes parent and alumni representation (Appendix E). Because the project has the potential to impact Alaska Native students, information is being sent to regional corporations that represent the over 200 tribes of Alaska and to two statewide Native organizations: Alaska Federation of Natives and First Alaskan Institute (Appendix F).

## Conceptualization of Capstone

My envisioned capstone project is a publishable self-assessment tool with corresponding guidance to be used by Alaska high schools. The low participation rates of Alaska Native students in college are well-documented and included in statewide goals through the Alaska 65 by 2025 initiative (Alaska Can, n.d.). Typically, school discussions around remedies to this problem have been through a deficit lens, considering ways to mitigate what students lack. This tool will provide an alternative lens, one that adjusts to a strength-based approach and considers school system change. I hope to be able to provide leadership in our state with this shift. I conceive the assessment tool, along with well-developed backup information including a descriptive rubric for scoring, experiential stories, and further information and research, being easily assessable for use through an interactive webpage. The webpage includes opportunities for crowd-sourced stories. Stories that serve as examples of people experiencing the bias practices underlying the assessment statements as well as stories of successful strategies to improve school practices around the statements will be gathered. Ideally, the website will provide examples and a blueprint for addressing and improving the areas identified most in-need on the self-assessment. Some of these examples and stories have already been gathered through the interviews with my experts, yet many will continue to be gathered as the website exists with opportunity for visitors to contribute their own experiences and stories. This capstone will allow me to professionally impact schools beyond my own and will provide me with further leadership and consultation opportunities.

My hope is to directly improve college readiness for Alaska Native students. Hypothetically, the implementation of the practices assessed by the assessment tool serve to create an environment conducive to increased college readiness for Alaska Native students. Further research will be needed to suggest correlation or causation. Outcome data may lag program implementation, but ultimately the desired outcomes of increased college readiness should align with improved program implementation as measured by the assessment tool. It will take some time, but the real impact of this capstone will be acknowledged when we no longer need the assessment tool because no disparity exists, and the practices are institutionalized in Alaska schools.

## Summary

It is time for schools to become aware. Rethinking college readiness for Alaska Native students requires a mindset shift in which schools begin to look inward at our own actions to find opportunities for change. Alaska Native students are best equipped to succeed at college when they have resisted assimilation and have embraced the strength of what comes from their own families and culture. This is also a process of becoming aware for the student. My capstone project will provide a self-assessment tool to help schools become aware and consider changes to better support Alaska Native students in their pursuit of a college degree. The initial draft of the tool will be based on current research and will be enhanced with the input of cultural experts and educators through this capstone data collection. Once the assessment tool is complete, a guidance document will be developed to provide rubric scoring guide and examples for addressing and improving the areas identified most in-need on the self-assessment. The use of these tools will assist schools in addressing unintentional biases and creating opportunities to draw on students’ culture as a strength in college readiness. These culturally responsive changes in school practices will lead to increased numbers of Alaska Native students going and persisting in college.

Chapter 4

# Capstone Application

## Data and Deliverable

Alaska Native students attend and persist at college at rates much lower than their non-Native peers. The problem of practice I addressed is the need to develop a college readiness model to meet the needs of Alaska Native students in order to positively impact the college-going and college persistence rates in this population.

College-going and persistence rates for Alaska Native students have been identified as an area of need for Alaska high schools, yet very little work had been done in defining the elements of a successful college readiness model for this population. My project was to seek out the roots of the problem and identify the school actions needed to produce change.

My review of the literature dove deep into three college readiness factors: academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigational skills. Through this investigation, three school behaviors repeated themselves: institutional biases that left students out, a lack of recognition of culture as an asset, and a tendency of schools to treat Alaska Native students passively through the process.

Considering these themes, I set out to articulate what self-reflections and actions might guide a school in changing these tendencies. I chose a self-assessment for schools to use as part of a school improvement model. I set up this self-assessment as a rubric; by design, educators will discuss several school behavior statements and score their own school on a Likert scale. Schools will then build school improvement plans for those behaviors that are ranked lower relative to the others. The implications of the literature review suggested the rubric must help schools: (a) become aware of their bias and ways to address it, (b) provide opportunities for students to use cultural identity as a strength, and (c) involve students, in culturally responsive ways, in understanding and defining their own pathways. A draft self-assessment rubric was possible from the research itself. However, data collection was needed to inform and refine the rubric so that it would truly be designed to address the needs of Alaska Native students and would be usable by Alaskan educators in the field.

The data I collected through my project was designed to refine the deliverable rubric and ensure its relevance and clarity for the intended purpose. The initial draft was built based on the literature. Because research specific to Alaska Native students is scarce, I widened my review to Indigenous populations around the world as well as research on first generation and low-income people of color. I needed data in order to determine if the actions pulled from this larger scope of research were applicable and appropriate for the specific population of Alaska Native students. I sought out cultural experts to provide a review. Through interviews, I collected data needed to adjust the rubric to reflect the needs and experiences of the specific population of Alaska Native students and to address any language or concepts lacking cultural sensitivity. In addition to cultural experts, I needed to gauge how the self-assessment tool would be received and understood by educators. The majority of educators in Alaska remain non-Native. These educators are critical in producing any change in today’s schools. In order for the rubric to be effective, educators must understand the concepts presented in the rubric and be open to using the rubric for change. The data collected through the educators provided feedback on the usefulness and clarity of the document for use by this intended audience. Both the cultural experts and educators provided insight and an opportunity to adjust the draft document.

## Limitations

The draft school self-assessment rubric was built from the research. The limited number of studies available on college readiness regarding Indigenous students, and specifically Alaska Native students, was a limitation in the literature review. The data gathered through the experts was designed to counterbalance this limitation. The expert contributions were critical in localizing the self-assessment. It remains a limitation, however, that this is just a sampling of those who may effectively contribute to the rubric’s development; there are likely a great many cultural and educational experts in Alaska whose perspectives would assist in improving the rubric.

The timing of the involvement by the educators of MEHS also created an unintended limitation. The rubric was set to be used as part of the school improvement process during the 2020-21 school year, the year COVID-19 virus dominated the need for school resources and attention. The normal cycle of school improvement was interrupted by the need to focus on the short-term plan of school operation within the context of virus mitigation. Not only was the process interrupted, the attention of educators was directed elsewhere.

The scope of this project is the greatest limitation. The rubric is designed to be used in a variety of Alaska schools serving Alaska Native students. The development of a rubric through this project is only a starting point. Once developed, the rubric will need to be used broadly with comparative student outcome data to further determine its usefulness for its intended purpose.

## Biases

As a non-Native researcher, I bring my own biases and cultural lens to the project. Part of my passion for this project comes from many years of working in schools with high numbers of Alaska Native students and observing the failure of traditional school models for college readiness. This observation piqued my interest in how a model may be developed to meet the needs of these students. However, the acknowledgement of the failure of the school system is not a substitute for lived experiences. I will always address school needs through my own cultural lens and personal background. In many ways I represent the very history that my project is designed to respond to, a Western educator applying a theory of education to the Alaska Native population. Work with my field mentor and the cultural experts are key to balancing this bias. Regardless, I recognize this as issue and plan to make the rubric available in a format open for future revisions by those more personally connected to the movement to decolonize education. I am in a position to do this work at this time, but my role is limited. In the words of  Cajete and Pueblo (2010) “American Indian people must determine the future of American Indian education. That future must be rooted in a transformational revitalization of our own expressions of education” (p. 1132).

## Data Analysis

My literature review served as the first step in gathering information to guide my project. I focused my research on three factors that influence college readiness: academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills. Three reoccurring themes, each actionable for school improvement, surfaced in all three readiness factors: institutional bias, an omission of cultural knowledge and identity as an academic readiness skill, and a tendency to treat students passively through the college readiness process. The thematic patterns led to three guiding questions:

1. What awareness is necessary to address unintentional bias practices in high schools and what actions can schools engage in to counterbalance these biases in order to address inequities in college preparation for Alaska Native students?
2. In what ways may a high school draw upon the Indigenous experience or ways-of-knowing to enhance college preparation for Alaska Native students?
3. How can a school authentically involve Alaska Native students in the college preparation process in a culturally responsive manner?

In response to these questions, I wrote 18 school action statements that arose directly from patterns found in the literature review. The statements were further influenced by my own experience, and the input from cultural experts through my data collection. I interviewed six cultural experts who I recruited based on their cultural knowledge and experience in education. All experts actively practice cultural traditions and have completed college degrees. Demographics of the experts are summarized in table 1. Individuals were considered bilingual if they self-reported an understanding of conversational Native language.

**Table 1**

Demographics of Cultural Experts

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Native Language Group | Female | Male | Age  20-40 | Age  40-60 | Advanced Degree | Bilingual  Some | Fluent |
| Yup’ik | 3 | 1 |  | 4 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Tlingit |  | 1 |  | 1 | 1 | 1 |  |
| Inupiat | 1 |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |
| Total | 4 | 2 |  | 6 | 4 | 2 | 3 |

The statements are arranged in sections named after the three readiness factors of academic preparedness (labeled as “A”), cultural identity (labeled as “C”), and navigation skills (labeled as “N”). The statements may be additionally categorized by the school actions that drive my guiding questions, bias awareness, culture as an asset, and student empowerment. I chose not to label these specifically in the self-assessment. Table 2 shows the crosswalk of statements categorized by readiness factors with the school action themes.

**Table 2**

*Crosswalk of Statements by School Readiness Factor with School Action Themes*

| Statements by Readiness Factor | | School Action Theme | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Bias Awareness | Culture as an Asset | Student Empowerment |
| Academic Preparedness | |  |  |  |
|  | A.1 Proportionality Checks | X |  |  |
|  | A.2 Finding Talent | X |  |  |
|  | A.3 Support without Tracking | X |  |  |
|  | A.4 Strength-based vs Deficit Model | X |  |  |
|  | A.5 Student Monitoring Academic Progress |  |  | X |
|  | A.6 Native Knowledge is Academic |  | X | X |
| Cultural Identity | |  |  |  |
|  | C.1 Historical Acknowledgement | X |  |  |
|  | C.2 Open Discussions about Assimilation | X |  |  |
|  | C.3 Cultural Code Shifting vs. Right Way | X |  |  |
|  | C.4 Cultural Identity as Assistive Factor |  | X |  |
|  | C.5 Explore and Practice Self-Identity |  | X | X |
|  | C.6 Indigenous Spaces |  | X |  |
| Navigation Skills | |  |  |  |
|  | N.1 Early Comprehensive Outreach |  |  | X |
|  | N.2 Beyond the Counselor’s Office |  |  | X |
|  | N.3 Avoid Projecting our own Values | X |  |  |
|  | N.4 Cultural Impact on Motivation |  | X |  |
|  | N.5 Different Independent Skills | X | X | X |
|  | N.6 Home Outreach | X |  |  |

*Note.* Most statements can be categorized in more than one student behavior theme. Only the primary behavior is checked. Some statements do have two or more primary behavior themes.

A limitation of Table 2 lies in the very essence of this project to advocate for a wholistic approach to college readiness for Alaska Native students. Most of the statements contain elements of all three school actions and a some can be categorized under more than one readiness factor. For the purpose of the table, the primary school behavior was checked and only those that equally could be categorized under more than one are listed under two.

Each readiness section has six statements. I had educators at MEHS use these statements for a school self-assessment on a five-point scale. Educators further provided information on the clarity and the usefulness of each statement for school improvement. At the end of each readiness section, educators were invited to provide open comments.

Most of the research explored in my literature review revealed negative impacts of school actions on Indigenous students and students of color. Since my purpose in developing this capstone project is to identify the counter actions to change these negative tendencies, I drafted the statements as positive school actions. The statements are a combination of personnel practices, school structures, and data indicators, each designed to impact college readiness for Alaska Native students. Data indicators provide concrete ways for schools to become more aware of the issue, these statements require less self-reflection and may be an emotionally safe start for some schools. Personnel practices may vary among staff and therefore can be difficult to score schoolwide, but also provide an opportunity for individual educators to take on change within themselves. Individual educators could set personal goals to improve in these practices even if there is not consensus in their school. School structures typically require policy or practice change and broader administrative support. Given my history of working in schools with Alaska Native students and my unique position as a researcher, it is impossible, if not desirable, for my own experiences to not also influence these statements. The purpose of data collected from cultural experts was to check cultural sensitivity of the wording of the statements and to assure the statements reflected the experience and needs of Alaska Native students. Statements were adjusted based on this feedback prior to the statements being used with educators.

In this section I restate each of the guiding questions followed by (a) brief references to patterns found through the literature review (b) the self-assessment statements as prepared for my capstone after both expert and educator feedback and (c) cultural expert testimony related to the statement(s). Refined based on some initial feedback from the cultural experts, the statements as listed in Appendix A were provided to educators at MEHS in the form of a self-assessment. The purpose of gathering data from educators was to observe variability in self-assessment ratings and obtain information on the clarity of statements from the perspective of an educator. I further refined the statements based on this data in creating the self-assessment that is part of my deliverable.

Guiding Question #1. *What awareness is necessary to address unintentional bias practices in high schools and what actions can schools engage in to counterbalance these biases to address inequities in college preparation for Alaska Native students?*

The following statements in the self-assessment rubric primarily address school actions related to institutional bias.

Proportionality checks and finding talent. Multiple research findings highlighted disproportionate participation of Indigenous students in courses designed to prepare students for college (Benally, 2004; College Board Alaska Supplement, 2014; College Board Report to the Nation, 2014, Appendix D; DeFeo & Tran, 2019; DeVoe, et al. 2008; Pierson & Hodara, 2019). The first step for a school to address these is to gain the awareness of disproportionality. I drafted the first academic preparedness statement of the self-assessment to simply assess if the school routinely checks for disproportionality. Many studies (Contreas, 2011; Theokas & Saaris, 2013; Welton & Martinez, 2014) identified bias in recruiting students into these preparation classes, students of color were overlooked regardless of their academic potential. I extended the expectation of proportionality to include a deeper dive into socio-economic and prior education status. I drafted the second academic preparedness statement to specifically address recruitment into college preparation classes. Each of these statements focus on raising awareness of potentially bias school behavior in recruiting and placing students in courses designed to build academic preparedness.

*Academic Preparedness 1 (A.1) Proportionality Checks: Our school systematically checks who is taking college pathway classes and makes plans to address an imbalance. Proportionality is not only checked by ethnicity, but also socio-economic status, first-generation status, and other relevant sub-groups.*

Academic Preparedness 2 (A.2) Finding Talent: Our school routinely uses data to identify students with potential and actively works to place those students in courses for college preparation. In this process, we specifically look for students who have not been traditionally recruited into college preparation classes.

##### One cultural expert specifically picked out the statement on socio-economic and first-generation status as very important. She referenced relatives that spend a lot of time at her house compared to her own children. “you know it is not the same for my kids…I have taken my kids to visit colleges and they have had these expectations for a long time…[the other kids] they too said they wanted to go to college, but they do not know all that it means, they are saying it because they think it is what they are supposed to do.” She went on to talk about how it can lead to financial hardships. “if they take out loans but do not finish, they can come back with a lot of debt to pay and that hurts them for a long time”. She suggested that considering socio-economic status and first-generation status may need to be more emphasized in the document.

Support without tracking. Several studies identified early school actions that deselect students of color for college readiness and supported the need for early intervention (Bryan et al, 2015; DeVoe et. al, 2008; Theokas & Saaris, 2013; The McDowell Group, 2001). I drafted the third statement to address early school actions that impact Alaska Native students’ access to preparatory tracks, guiding schools to provide access even if students demonstrate some achievement gaps in earlier grades. This statement is also designed to combat a well-documented tendency (Brayboy & Lomawaima 2018; Contreras 2018; Hopkins 2008; James et.al 2008; MEHS, 2018) to funnel Native students into a vocational track as opposed to a college track.

Academic Preparedness.3 (A.3) Support without Tracking: Our school program includes early interventions designed to address learning needs. However, participation in interventions or support classes does not track students for their entire high school time. If a student needs interventions or support classes as a freshman, our school system and counseling provide opportunities for this student to still access a college-preparation pathway.

One cultural expert asked for clarification on this question and then stated support. She reflected on a friend’s son who took lower level classes in 9th grade, but was able to reach advanced classes before graduation.

Strength-based model. Multiple researchers (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018; Ellis et al, 2019;Schofield et al. 2013;Spencer, 2001; Windchief et al, 2018) described a tendency of schools to view marginalized students with a deficit lens, focusing on “fixing” these deficits through assimilation or teaching students the “right way”. I drafted the fourth statement in the academic preparedness section to challenge schools to shift to a strength-based perspective, even when academic gaps require interventions.

Academic Preparedness 4 (A.4) Strength-Based Model: Our school interventions to address performance gaps are designed to be culturally responsive and build on the strengths of the students. Our school staff avoid taking on a deficit-model theory in approaching gap-closing measures.

One female cultural expert shared a story about how she experienced the difference between how school and her family valued skills. “I remember when we went to fish camp, my sisters were always reading books and I was more of a doer. Sitting around and reading was not seen as a good use of their time, I was treated like the smart one because I was quick to cut fish and do things at camp.”

Historical acknowledgement and open discussions. Several researchers explored the relationship between students and the dominant culture of the school. They found that students who sought to assimilate, take on the Western culture, did not do as well as students who resisted assimilation and learned to embrace their cultural identity as a strength (Adelman, et al, 2013; Chen 2012; Huffman 2001; Larimore & McClellan, 2005). Other researchers highlighted the tendency of schools to expect assimilation as the route to academic achievement (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In my own experiences, I have observed many educators believing they are doing the very best for students in teaching them the skills they will need “in the real world.” Many of these educators understand the atrocities of the history of Indian education, but do not see the connection to the more subtle expectations of cultural substitution in today’s schools. I drafted the first two statements in the cultural identity section of the self-assessment to assess awareness and a willingness by staff to consider their own actions within the context of assimilation.

Cultural Identity 1 (C.1) Historical Acknowledgement: Our staff is aware of the historical relationship between schools and Alaska Native populations and the theories of how this has impacted Alaska Native populations generationally. Staff and students have opportunities to learn about this history and the theories on generational impacts.

Cultural Identity .2 (C.2) Open Discussions: Our school has a culture in which we openly discuss school practices that may be anchored in colonization or assimilation. We routinely reflect on these tendencies, challenge each other in our thinking, and invite other viewpoints and/or ways of practice.

I discussed these two questions with Panigkaq, my field mentor and a cultural expert. I was able to share with her that these questions had a lot of variability in whether teachers thought they were important. She shared how powerful it is to be colonized, it sets expectation of how things are supposed to be. “When the existing institution already embodies trust and empowerment in this colonized mindset, it becomes hard to question. Even Native people who have been colonized may find it difficult to question the institution of school.” In an interview with a different cultural expert, he referenced the audience of the self-assessment not as a source of blame, but rather people in need of assistance. “When I think about the whole scenario of education and these pivotal issues, the majority of educators are non-Native. Be that as it may, we have to try to help them.” I think these two questions are a hard ask for many teachers, yet I believe they are key to bringing about awareness.

Cultural code shifting. Assimilation is tied to the deficit lens theory. Expectations of assimilation, as the route to academic achievement, influence how knowledge is valued and presented (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014). I drafted the third statement in the cultural identity section to challenge educators to consider the value of learning and presenting knowledge in ways less typical in a school setting, inviting other perspectives and styles of presentation when possible. It is understood that students need to learn the skills to navigate in settings with Western expectations; however, the shift from a deficit lens to a strength-based position expects educators to value both the Western and Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Cultural Identity 3 (C.3) Cultural Code Shifting: Our school avoids presenting Western culture as the “right way” and seeks out opportunities in which Indigenous ways of being are valued and invited into classroom activities. Cultural code-shifting is when a student shifts between cultural expectations based on their surroundings. We help students think about when this might be helpful, yet also encourage them to think about when it can be enriching to share their Indigenous ways of being.

One cultural expert shared her own story of feeling like she needed to mimic Western presentation to be considered successful. In her first years as an educator she wore what she thought a “teacher should wear”, heels and a skirt. In her own dissertation, years deep in her education, she titled a chapter “the skirt I won’t wear.” During the interview she equated this sentiment to this statement. “I wore those things because I thought I had to…even I was assimilated.” She referenced the Yup’ik immersion grade school her children attended along with mine and shared “my daughters are less assimilated than I am” as an example of how powerful it can be when the school experience values Indigenous ways of being. My own son, a non-Native, attended the school while she was the principal. He is now a teacher at the high school in his hometown. She contemplated, “I wonder how Nuqarrluk will take that with him.”

Another cultural expert tied this statement with the power of Native knowledge. “We feel pressure to use a formal way to communicate when it can be better how it naturally comes out. The depth of the concepts you want to express might come out better if you can do it naturally.” She explained that to invite this valuable Native way of thinking into the academic classroom, we need to help students shift their own internal dialog from a message of ‘I can’t talk this way in this setting’ to ‘it can be appropriate’. Educators can help this shift through valuing these contributions instead of always assuming a ‘code shift’ of expressive language is necessary.

Home outreach. Several researchers discussed a cultural mismatch between school counseling practices and the values and motivations of Indigenous students and other students of color (Adelman et al, 2013; Chen, 2012; Huffman, 2001; Soria, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In some cases, the mismatch results in teachers and counselors making assumptions about students and families that are not correct. In the sixth and final statement in the navigation skills section of the self-assessment, I ask educators to reflect on their own behavior to increase awareness of this tendency.

Navigation skills 6 (N.6) Home Outreach: Our school includes home and community in conversations about post-secondary plans. We avoid labeling student and family behavior in the context of our own beliefs or school experiences. We are aware of cultural differences and recognize strengths. We know how to help students explore and identify ways in which their family and/or cultural supports can benefit them.

I have had observed this bias in my own experience many times, teachers assuming that a lack of participation by parents equates to a lack of interest or caring. Early in my experience as a principal in a western Alaska high school, my administrative team set a goal to increase participation at parent teacher conferences. About one third of the students were typically represented at parent teacher conferences. One team member surmised “there is about a third of parents who will show up no matter what, and maybe another third that have so many distractions and barriers that they likely will not make it, our problem is we assume the middle third mirrors that bottom third instead of the top third.” We asked our staff to start with an assumption that those not showing up cared just as much as those that do, but they just have less comfort or understanding of how to interact with the school. With this mind shift and a few simple strategies for outreach, we grew to 70%+ attendance at parent teacher conferences. Educators often use their own cultural background to assume that non-participation means a lack of caring.

Guiding Question #2. *In what ways may a high school draw upon the Indigenous experience or ways-of-knowing to enhance college preparation for Alaska Native students?*

The following statements in the self-assessment rubric primarily address school actions to recognize the Indigenous experience as an asset for college readiness.

Native knowledge. Multiple researchers (Adelman et al., 2013; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; James et al., 2008; Kanu, 2006) support the inclusion of Native ways of knowing in curriculum. The work of Kanu (2006) and Castagno and Brayboy (2008) specifically suggest that the inclusion of Native culture in curriculum helps students become more post-secondary ready. Others (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010; Oaks & Maday, 2009; Schofiled et al., 2013) point out the academic value to both Native and non-Native students in expanding rigor and critical thinking through the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies. I drafted the sixth statement under academic preparedness to encourage schools to embrace the perspectives of Indigenous ways of knowing, recognizing it as having high academic value. This statement could be categorized under either academic preparedness or cultural identity as it is impactful in both readiness factors. I ultimately placed it under the academic preparedness section to further emphasize the value of Indigenous epistemologies to enhance critical thinking and rigor for all students, rather than tie it to cultural identity. However, having Native knowledge be validated as academic has incredible power in increasing cultural identity for Native students.

Academic Preparedness 6 (A.6) Native Knowledge: Our school includes academic instruction that recognizes and values Native ways of knowing. Native knowledge is presented as valid and academic, and we avoid presenting Western knowledge systems as superior. Our recognition of Native ways of knowing as academic is not limited to special populations, special classes or special units; it is woven throughout course content and considered rigorous for all.

In agreeing with this statement, one cultural expert explained that he has been using the term “competitive advantage” when referring to thinking in an Indigenous way. “Yes! I have been telling students to consider it a competitive advantage. We hear people talk about ‘walking in both worlds’, that is not what we need to do.” The statement of walking in both worlds maintains a separation and places a focus on switching. The power or “competitive advantage” occurs when a student brings their authentic cultural way of being and thinking with them in every setting, recognizing this unique perspective as having value and appropriately existing in the college academic setting. This is tied directly to the other cultural expert that expressed “the depth of the concepts that you want to express might come out better if you can do it naturally.” It is not enough for educators to include published works by Native authors and science to demonstrate value of Native ways of knowing, they must invite students to be natural in their own ways of thinking and value those contributions.

Cultural identity as assistive and practice self-identity. Multiple researchers (Adelman et al.,2013; Huffman, 2001; Reyhner et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2001) highlighted the value of cultural identity and pride in positively impacting school success. Four studies (Adelman et al.,2013; Chen, 2012; Huffman, 2001; Larimore & McClellan, 2005) went deeper into the relationship between resisting assimilation as part of a transformative journey of cultural identity as a specific assistive factor in succeeding and persisting in college. As an example of how this can be accomplished, Keene (2016) described a successful summer program with this same purpose. I drafted the fourth statement under cultural identity to increase awareness of the link between cultural identity and college readiness and persistence. Williams (2020) suggests schools should go beyond culturally responsive and be culturally-affirming for students. In the fifth statement I dive deeper into school actions to actively provide opportunities for students to develop this cultural identity and begin this journey of transformation.

Cultural Identity 4 (C.4) Cultural Identity as Assistive: In our school, a well-developed cultural identity is viewed as an assistive factor in college readiness and persistence. Students are guided in developing this as part of their college preparation. *We not only encourage students to include their culture in applications and scholarship essays, but also help them understand how cultural identity helps to succeed and persist in an unfamiliar college setting.*

Cultural Identity 5 (C.5) Practice Self-Identity: *In our school, classroom instruction includes helping students explore self-identity. Students have opportunities to practice how they may articulate the cultural part of themselves. We provide students time to consider skills they could use in environments where they may confront cultural assumptions*.

In expressing the high value for exploring your own cultural self-identity, one cultural expert suggested that C.5 be split in the assessment. I did not do this prior to using the tool for educator data, but considered it in making final revisions for clarity and understanding. She explained that understanding yourself and the work to explore your own self-identity is powerful and necessary work. She described the ability to confront cultural assumptions as a skill; she posed it may be more accurately characterized as a navigation skill. She explained that not everyone will develop or be comfortable with the navigational skill. The implied risk is with keeping them together, some may shy away from exploration if it is presented with the need to be an outspoken advocate. Ultimately, I left the two concepts together in the assessment, but changed the language from “Students prepare and practice skills needed for environments where they may confront cultural assumptions” to language that provides the opportunity for students to consider how they may navigation this situation, but not require outward advocacy. See Appenix A for previous wording.

Indigenous spaces. Cultural identity statement Multiple researchers supported the value of providing students opportunities to participate in cultural practices and languages in the school setting (Adelman et al., 2013; Chen, 2012; Soria, 2015; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Contreras 2011 tied these practices to a sense of college belonging. I drafted the sixth statement under cultural identity to encourage schools to purposefully create these spaces.

Cultural Identity 6 (C.6) Indigenous Spaces. Our school provides Indigenous spaces. These are times and places in which Indigenous culture is the expected culture. Native language, traditions, foods, customs are part of the environment.

One expert described an experience she had attending a school out of state. An elderly couple was at the Indigenous Cultural Center at her college, she figured she would not be interested, they were not Alaska Native. She described how she found herself feeling very comfortable. The elders did not do a lot, they were available. She described becoming aware of the broader connections. Another expert described the importance of being able to feel comfortable being your natural self. “I don’t think ‘other’ when I am home with Elders, it is ok to be natural.” In referencing school actions that can be helpful for students she remarked “If there is a way to allow kids to just be natural”.

Cultural impact on motivation. Multiple researchers identified cultural, family, and community values as powerful motivation for Indigenous college students (Adelman et al., 2013 Chen, 2012; Huffman, 2001; Soria, 2015); yet, these are often overlooked by counselors and school personnel that focus on career goals and the American values of capitalism in advising students. I drafted the fourth statement under navigation to not only build awareness of the tendency to assume motivations, but to also encourage schools to consider the value and power of tapping into the core values of culture, family, and community for many Indigenous students.

Navigation Skills.4 (N.4) Cultural Impact on Motivation: Exploration of post-secondary options is presented in a way in which students explore their own motivations and consider cultural ways of being. Lasting motivation is personal and deeply connected to culture and family. We avoid assuming the motivations and priorities of prevailing school culture when presenting post-secondary information and career exploration.

Cultural impact on independent skills. Research by Covarrubias (2005) and Spencer et al (2001) explored the contrast between independent skills expected in the college environment with the resiliency skills often developed in minoritized students. Jack (2016) speaks specifically how this can result in reluctance to ask for help; students lack understanding of hidden rules on college campuses where asking for help is viewed as an independent skill and a demonstration of empowerment. I drafted the fifth navigation statement to bring awareness to this contrast and challenge schools to help students understand the value of the skills they may bring with them from their own family or cultural experience while also learning to operate in the college environment.

Navigation Skills 5 (N.5): Cultural Impact on Independent Skills: Our school recognizes the independent skills and resiliency of our students, even when these skills are not those most commonly expected by school environments. Some students are very self-reliant in many situations, yet this same value can make them reluctant to ask for help or undermine confidence in an unfamiliar school setting. We value the independent and resiliency skills students have while also teaching them to recognize skills expected by schools with opportunities to practice with feedback.

One expert reflected on his own experience as well as what he has observed in others. “It is very hard to say I need help… you called them navigation skills…people call it shy, but it is more of a humility issue. For a non-Native it is easy for them to say ‘I don’t have these skills’. He mused that there are hidden rules though; he told of a story where directly asked a colleague if they were seeing a therapist. The colleague said ‘that is not a question you ask your friends’; the expert explained how he backed away. He was describing his own navigation in figuring out the non-Native rules of when it is ok to express you need help. Thinking back on his own college he reminisced “My high school English focused more on reading than writing. In college when I had to go to a writing lab I was so bad at taking suggestions to make it better because I would perceive these as criticism. I had to get over it at some point. Overtime I got better at taking suggestions and realized this is actually helpful.”

Another cultural expert talked about students learning to make a shift in how to ask for help. She described the different relationship between thinking first in order to talk or talking in order to explore your own thinking. “Traditionally you think it through first, before it comes out.” This simple norm difference in the role talking plays in our formulation of ideas has the potential to be at the core of many miscues between students and teachers. The cultural expert went on to explore the reluctance to ask for help. “You are expected to fully exhaust your own attempts to take care of things before asking for help.”

Guided Question #3. *How can a school authentically involve Alaska Native students in the college preparation process in a culturally responsive manner?*

The following statements in the self-assessment rubric primarily address student empowerment through school actions to actively involve students in their post-secondary planning and readiness.

Student involvement. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) interviewed AI/AN college students; many described their own lack of preparedness and a frustration of not being aware of the gap in high school when they could have done something about it. This is a sentiment I have heard over the years from Alaska Native college graduates, stories of fully capable and successful students needing to take remedial classes initially. I drafted the fifth statement under academic preparedness to ensure that schools invite students into their own progress monitoring and be transparent in the students’ current performance with the expected readiness levels for their post-secondary goals.

Academic Preparedness 5 (A.5) Student Involvement: Our school actively involves students in monitoring their own academic progress. Students understand their own academic standing compared with their goals or post-secondary plans, They know what classes are expected for their goals. Students are active participants in making plans to address any identified academic gaps

Cultural identity statements related to student empowerment. I have not primarily categorized any cultural identity statements as directly targeting student empowerment, however the inclusion of cultural identity as a targeted college readiness skill is designed to be empowering for students in a way that can directly impact persistence in the college setting.

Comprehensive outreach and beyond the counselor. Multiple researchers demonstrate that low-income and students of color, have needs in building navigation skills (Adelman et al., 2013; Bryan et al., 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Okagaki et al. (2009) describe a cultural tendency in AI/AE families for parents to allow their child to take the lead in pursuing post-secondary. Taken within the context of the work around the cultural mismatch in concept of independent skills (Covarrubias, 2005; Jack, 2016; Spencer et al., 2001), these same students are less likely to ask for help. In first-generation families, this is further impacted by the lack of family experience in navigating the complexity of preparing for post-secondary education. Students are not likely to understand the importance of individual preparation courses or activities within the larger context of college readiness. In contrast, school counseling is often set up to serve the students and families who seek out services or respond to initial outreach. When students and families do not take the initiative to seek out services, school counseling often assumes a lack of college interest. Sometimes adults fill this gap by projecting their own beliefs of what a student should do as a post-secondary path for students. Taken all together, this suggests that to build the necessary navigation skills in our Alaska Native students, schools must reach out early and often, while also resisting the tendency to project or assume. Counseling must seek to engage Alaska Native students in college readiness activities while also building the internal skills and confidence within these same students to make decisions for themselves that are grounded in their own cultural and family values. I drafted the first and second navigation skills statements to encourage schools to set up such counseling services.

Navigation Skills 1 (N.1) Comprehensive Outreach: Our school includes early college awareness embedded into the school program. Starting in 9th grade or earlier, we provide direct information about early preparation activities, career and college exploration, testing requirements, and expected courses to prepare for college and other post-secondary goals.

Navigation Skills 2 (N.2) Beyond the Counselor: Our school’s messaging for students to actively explore their own interests and self-identity, as well as our recruitment into activities and college prep courses, is pervasive throughout the school and not solely reliant on the counseling office. Adults in our building (teachers, secretaries, coaches etc.) serve to guide, encourage, and connect students with resources so that targeted outreach to students does not rely on the students coming to us.

Avoid projecting our values. Given the tendencies in school to project White middle-class and American individualism and capitalism onto students, extending the outreach far beyond the counselor’s office poses a risk of those adults projecting their own post-secondary values and goals onto students in ways that could result in students feeling pressured or like they are “supposed” to do certain post-secondary plans. I drafted the third navigation statement to bring about awareness and encourage educators to overtly reflect on this potential pitfall.

Navigation Skills 3 (N.3) Avoid Projecting our Values: Adults in our school avoid projecting our own values and college opinions onto students; instead, they are skilled in empowering students to know themselves and their options. We serve to help students’ access and interpret the information they need about themselves and post-secondary opportunities to make informed decisions.

One expert commented “’this is what I am supposed to do’ is a big one…we are not doing any favors by getting them off to school.” She described a story of a very bright friend who has been very successful with a path more aligned with his own interests. “There needs to be other examples of achievement.” She said “generationally, we do not see delayed gratification” and suggested short term goals and demonstrative value for a “sustainable livelihood”.

In my own experience I had a student express the pressure he felt from some teachers to accept an offer to Stanford when he preferred to stay close to home and stay involved with a local Alaska Native college program. The teacher assumed he did not understand the ‘value’ of the opportunity he was giving up rather than his preference to be close to home and connected with his community.

## Educator Feedback

Fourteen MEHS educators provided data on the initial statements. Each educator completed a 1-5 Likert scale for the statement with consideration of MEHS current school behavior. Additionally, educators provided a 1-5 scale ranking regarding clarity and usefulness of each statement. My primary goal with this data collection was to identify statements with a large standard deviation, suggesting either a lack of clarity or a statement significantly impacted by a person’s own prior knowledge or values. The additional information about clarity and usefulness helped to consider which may be the larger factor. The clarity question was used to further identify statements that are not easily understood. If the clarity rank was low with a smaller standard deviation, it was likely that the question was not well worded. If the clarity ranking has a high standard deviation, the lack of understanding may be more related to individuals’ knowledge or belief systems. Such a question was considered for additional background information and examples to support deeper and more informed conversations. The usefulness question allowed me to assess whether current educators were already bought into the suggested school behaviors. A larger standard deviation in usefulness suggested the statement or topic may not be universally supported by educators and therefore would likely need background information for constructive discussions. In essence, the feedback from educators informed my deliverable through a revision of language in the statements and the focus on building informative backup material for certain statements for value-added discussions during the intended use of the self-assessment rubric.

Table 3 provides a summary of data collected on the questions categorized under the readiness factor of academic preparedness. A mean and standard deviation is provided for each statement assessed on a 1-5 Likert scale as well as a mean and standard deviation for how the teachers rated the clarity of the statement as well as the usefulness.

**Table 3**

Mean and Standard Deviation of Educator Ranking on Academic Preparedness Statements

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Statement | Mean | SD | Clarity Mean | Clarity  SD | Usefulness  Mean | Usefulness SD |
| A.1 Proportionality Checks | 3.08 | 0.76 | 2.71 | 1.27 | 4.23 | 0.83 |
| A.2 Finding Talent | 2.93 | 0.83 | 2.29 | 1.07 | 4.36 | 0.50 |
| A.3 Support without tracking | 3.98 | 0.83 | 2.07 | 1.14 | 4.36 | 0.93 |
| A.4 Strength Based Model | 2.71 | 0.99 | 2.57 | 1.28 | 4.64 | 0.63 |
| A.5 Student Involvement | 4.23 | 1.24 | 1.50 | 0.85 | 4.57 | 0.65 |
| A.6 Native Knowledge | 2.57 | 1.02 | 2.43 | 1.45 | 4.50 | 0.65 |

The statement about students being involved in their own academic monitoring had the highest standard deviation as well as the lowest score for clarity with a smaller standard deviation. This suggests that this statement is unclear, and in need of attention. Statements on employing a strength-based model versus a deficit-model and on Native knowledge being presented as academic in classrooms had the largest standard deviations for clarity. These statements required attention on clarity and will benefit from additional background information as a supplemental resource. The statement regarding support services being available without the impact of tracking the student out of a college path had a clarity mean just over 2.0, this statement was also benefited from attention regarding clarity. I adjusted targeted statements to provide more clarity as well as provided additional backup information for greater understanding in my deliverable. Because my deliverable will be an on-going project with continued improvements, the attention on clarifying with rich additional information will continue. Usefulness for all academic preparedness statements are above 4.0; indicating that the academic preparedness statements have teacher buy-in.

Table 4 provides a summary of data collected on the questions categorized under the readiness factor of cultural identity. A mean and standard deviation is provided for each statement assessed on a 1-5 Likert scale as well as a mean and standard deviation for how the teachers rated the clarity of the statement as well as the usefulness.

**Table 4**

Mean and Standard Deviation of Educator Ranking on Cultural Identity Statements

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Statement | Mean | SD | Clarity Mean | Clarity  SD | Usefulness  Mean | Usefulness SD |
| C.1 Historical Acknowledgement | 4.14 | 0.77 | 1.93 | 1.27 | 4.50 | 0.76 |
| C.2 Discuss Assimilation | 1.93 | 0.73 | 2.00 | 1.36 | 4.07 | 1.00 |
| C.3 Cultural Code Shifting | 2.71 | 0.83 | 2.43 | 1.50 | 4.43 | 0.76 |
| C.4 Cultural Identity as Assistive | 3.50 | 0.76 | 2.14 | 1.23 | 4.57 | 0.76 |
| C.5 Practice Self-Identity | 2.64 | 0.74 | 2.57 | 1.16 | 4.29 | 0.73 |
| C.6 Indigenous spaces | 3.93 | 0.73 | 1.86 | 1.17 | 4.79 | 0.43 |

The standard deviation for all questions in the cultural identity are below 1.0, suggesting a consistency in how teachers assessed each of these statements. Statements on historical acknowledgement, Indigenous spaces, and open discussions of assimilation had clarity ratings at or below 2.0. These statements were targeted for revisions and will receive continued attention for additional backup information to support clarity and understanding. The statements on cultural code shifting, assimilation, historical acknowledgement had clarity standard deviations greater than 1.25. Additional information is part of the deliverable to build awareness and understanding on these issues. The statement on staff having open discussions about assimilation practices had the lowest usefulness mean of all rubric statements and the only statement that reached a 1.0 standard deviation in the usefulness ranking. This may be because this statement asks for teachers to scrutinize their own personal practices or it may be an indication that some teachers feel assimilation continues to be the best path for Alaska Native students to become college ready. The statement was rewritten to include observable actions. Supplemental material in the deliverable may help to facilitate these recommended conversations and provide further information on the negative impacts of an assimilation mindset can have for college persistence. Usefulness for all cultural identity statements are above 4.0; indicating teacher buy-in.

Table 5 provides a summary of data collected on the questions categorized under the readiness factor of navigation skills. A mean and standard deviation is provided for each statement assessed on a 1-5 Likert scale as well as a mean and standard deviation for how the teachers rated the clarity of the statement as well as the usefulness.

**Table 5**

Mean and Standard Deviation of Educator Ranking on Navigation Statements

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Statement | Mean | SD | Clarity Mean | Clarity  SD | Usefulness  Mean | Usefulness SD |
| N.1 Early outreach | 3.50 | 0.95 | 1.93 | 1.27 | 4.50 | 0.65 |
| N.2 Beyond counselor office | 3.57 | 1.02 | 1.86 | 1.17 | 4.71 | 0.47 |
| N.3 Avoid projecting values | 2.79 | 0.89 | 2.07 | 1.21 | 4.14 | 0.77 |
| N.4 Culture & motivation | 2.86 | 0.77 | 2.36 | 1.28 | 4.29 | 0.83 |
| N.5 Independent skills | 2.79 | 0.97 | 2.43 | 1.09 | 4.50 | 0.65 |
| N.6 Home outreach | 2.64 | 1.28 | 2.29 | 1.07 | 4.50 | 0.52 |

Statements regarding early and comprehensive outreach and outreach that extends beyond the counselor’s office had a mean below 2.0 when rated for clarity. Both of these statements were revised to increase clarity for the deliverable. The rating for the statement on home outreach had a standard deviation above 1.25; this may be a reflection of the difficulty in assessing outreach at a boarding school, where families are generally not in the same town as the school. Usefulness for all navigation skill statements were above 4.0; indicating teacher buy-in.

Based on the feedback from Educators, all statements were considered for possible revisions and I specifically identified statements A.3 A.5, C.1, C.6, N.1, and N.2 for targeted rewording to add clarity. I identified A.1, A.4, A.5,A.6, C.1,C.2, C.3, C.4, N.1,N.2,N.4 and N.6 for attention to background material to support use of the rubric based on higher standard deviations in one of the measured areas. These adjustments are part of the deliverable. The wording clarification typically included minor adjustments to the statements themselves. The more significant impact of this data is in the development of background information. The deliverable includes links to further information to add clarity and provide opportunities for deeper learning in each of the behavior statements. Special attention was paid to including background information for clarity for the identified statements.

## Summary

Contributing factors to the low college readiness for Alaska Native students is well documented; however, little has been published on what schools can do to counter these negative impacts. Through my capstone project and deliverable, I seek to provide guidance to schools through the use of a self-assessment that will target areas for improvement to create a culturally responsive college-readiness model for Alaska Native students. Research from the literature review provided the basis for an initial draft of 18 school behavior statements organized in a self-assessment rubric under the readiness factors of academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills. The literature suggested school action to (a) become aware of bias practices, (b) include cultural identity as a college readiness skill, and (c) actively involve Alaska Native students in the college-readiness process in a way that recognizes their cultural values. I collected data from cultural experts to check localized application of these statements, their cultural relevance, and cultural sensitivity. I also collected data through a pilot use of the self-assessment by teachers at MEHS to provide information about the variability of scores, clarity for use, and self-perceived usefulness for Alaskan Educators.

## Deliverable Description

My research and data guided my work in producing a self-assessment rubric of high school practices to support college readiness in Alaska Native students. My deliverable is to incorporate this assessment into a recommended school improvement process. I created a web page that guides schools to effectively use the self-assessment, alongside recommended student data, to identify need, target improvements, and monitor progress in a typical school improvement cycle. Effective school improvement efforts require both student data and school practice data to target areas of improvement. My developed self-assessment provides the school practice assessment that was not previously available in this statewide need to increase college going rates for Alaska Native students.

Early on in my project process, I knew I wanted to do something that would help my school, as well as other Alaska schools, take action. The disparity of college readiness and attendance between Alaska Native students and non-Native students is well recognized in the State of Alaska, yet schools do not have a source of guidance of how to change these outcomes. In well-intended attempts, schools often double-down on traditional school models, which may only exasperate a problem grounded in cultural mismatch. However, as I worked through the literature review and synthesized both research and cultural expert feedback, I found myself considering how the necessary shifts are as much about mindset than actionable tasks. The bias of institutions and educators is typically unintentional. I am certain that there have been times in my own educational work that I have unknowingly relied on my Western background to make assumptions and suggest solutions that were ultimately counter-productive from a culturally responsive lens. A self-assessment with a limited focus on what to do or even how to do it would lack power for sustainable change.

The Yup’ik concept of gaining awareness as benchmarks of growing maturity, something I was taught through an Indigenous Epistemologies class taught by Panikaq Agatha John Shields, influenced my thinking on schools and our own need for maturing from a self-centered view to one of more awareness. This meant that my assessment could not simply provide a checklist of school actions, it must also provide a way for the school as an institution, as well as the individual educators, consider their own actions and become more aware of how they may be bias—even if unintentional. I began to consider not just what schools needed to do, but what did they need to understand. The form of a rubric that would be used as a self-assessment seemed appropriate for this work because it relies on self-reflection. The metacognition of working through a self-assessment opens the door for increased awareness.

With a focus on awareness in mind, I considered how the assessment might provide the background knowledge to assist schools, and the personnel working within the schools, to consider their own actions in ways they have not yet understood. I added a background portion to the assessment to support reasoning behind the practice statement. I also wrote rubric descriptions with examples that can be easily referenced (Appendix B).

Once I began to flesh out the self-assessment with the elements of (a) statement of practice, (b) background information, and (c) rubric for scoring, the tool seemed to get unwieldly; I was worried that it would not be used. If a school improvement document is too long and wordy, it tends to get set aside. I determined the assessment should come with two parts: a short form that would likely be used in the process, and background information to be referenced as needed. The detailed background information will help to inform and provide resources and examples. It can serve as a reference or be used in a professional development activity in which a deeper dive into the understanding of the issue is the purpose. For the assessment to work well, an introduction and a how-to document is required. Last, I hope to provide stories from actual Alaska schools that serve as specific field examples from schools using these techniques well. These adjustments grew my initial capstone concept of a single assessment to a broader school improvement guidance product that includes the self-assessment at its core.

As I considered each of these needed elements and how they might be used, I grew concerned that the full product would take on a weightiness that may not invite interaction in the process. I decided a web-page format that allows for hyper-links to the background information on an as-needed basis would allow teachers the ease and autonomy to access the information when needed. This concept also opens up the possibilities for background and additional resources well beyond what the written long-form rubric can hold. For my deliverable, I created a web page providing guidance on how to use the evolved self-assessment, along with student data, in a school improvement process. My intention is that with targeted school improvement in the school practices addressed by the self-assessment, college readiness, and college going and persistent rates for Alaska Native students will improve.

Student impact. My project is designed to result in measurable increases in student readiness for college. I believe a school that authentically scores high on my developed rubric will experience a greater parity in college readiness benchmarks between Alaska Native students and their non-Native peers, and that the school will experience an increase in college going and persistent rates for Alaska Native students. As schools target improvements in school practices and monitor their progress, recommended student outcomes through the Re-defining Ready Matrix indicators, Alaska Performance Scholarship eligibility, and National Clearinghouse data will provide a qualitative way for schools to track student impact.

Benefit for my colleagues. My project is designed to be used by educators for school improvement. I designed the rubric in order to guide school change, with a focus on increased awareness of bias and cultural responsiveness. Approached with an open mind, the metacognition of self-reflection has the potential to assist educators in considering personal adjustments in their professional practices as well as school-wide change.

Other stakeholders. For the Native community and the many Native organizations that work tirelessly to enhance Alaska Native education, my hope is that the self-assessment will provide a concrete activity that schools can engage in which will advance the continued conversation of how to provide a more culturally relevant and responsive educational experience for our Alaska Native students.

Benefit to my personal capacity. For me personally, my project serves as both a culmination and an opening for my career. I have spent many years addressing this problem, but without the benefit of a guided process. The research and data collected through my project has provided me the opportunity to learn and articulate the elements of a culturally responsive college readiness model. I am not only gaining the opportunity to use this process for my current school, but this will open doors for me to influence other schools and systems in helping a broader statewide need to attend to college readiness for Alaska Native students.

## Deliverable Checklist

My capstone deliverable is in the form of a web-based product that guides schools through a school improvement process to employ culturally responsive practices in order to increase the college readiness of Alaska Native students. The central feature is a self-assessment on school practices. The self-assessment will serve to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement as well as provide the context for necessary conversations to lead to increased awareness of potential biases and opportunities to be culturally responsive. Given this dual purpose, I provide a user guide, background information, detailed rubric descriptions, and field examples to accompany the shorter quick form of the assessment. The deliverable describes how to use the program data from the self-assessment as part of a school improvement process along with student outcome data. Student data is recommended as a means for tracking outcomes. Stories from schools successfully meeting rubric statements will be provided as examples.

1. Introduction
2. Acknowledgements
3. Background
4. How-To-Use
5. Assessment Short Form
6. Background information and examples for Rubric statements
7. Recommended Student Outcome Data
8. Field Examples
9. Use Authority

Capstone Deliverable

My capstone deliverable is a webpage that provides access to the self-assessment along with the background information and crowd-sourced stories and resources.

The website can be accessed at: https://rethinkingreadiness.com

Chapter 5

# Discussion

Alaska Native students attend and persist in college at rates much lower than their non-Native peers. The problem of practice I addressed is the need to develop a college readiness model to meet the needs of Alaska Native students in order to positively impact college going and persistence rates for this population.

College going and persistence rates for Alaska Native students have frequently been identified as an area of need for Alaska high schools, yet little work had been done in defining the elements of a successful college readiness model for this population. Through my project I sought out the roots of the problem in order to identify the school actions needed to produce change. Over the years, efforts to address the gap have typically drawn upon college readiness models created without consideration of culture. I wanted to spend time considering the issues, with a lens on culture, in order to meaningfully craft a framework for change that can not only be used by MEHS but also applied to other schools in our state. Continued failed approaches, or even isolated successes, cannot substantially impact our state’s population of Alaska Native students who deserve an education that simultaneously values them and invites Native perspectives to the leadership positions that require higher education.

Pursuit of this problem of practice aligns with my commitment to the potential of every student and belief that a cultural sense-of-self is an asset. It is also part of my own journey. I have worked in secondary schools primarily serving Alaska Native students for nearly two decades and have been an observer of my own growth and gained understanding. I have reflected on how deeply rooted my own cultural upbringing is on who I am with a realization of how closely this mirrors the expectations of school. Conversely, I have also observed how my students have equally valid and deeply rooted cultural selves and how these are not mirrored in the school environment; in fact, they are sometimes devalued. As I progressed through the work, I gained an even deeper understanding of the role of a culturally based sense-of-self in students’ ability to not only transition to college, but to navigate through any unfamiliar environment. I have begun to understand it as a critical developmental skill that obviously deserves purposeful attention in every high school educational model. The details I learned around institutional bias were less new for me, these are the tendencies I have observed over my many years of education, yet this work required me to contemplate deeply about my role, as a non-Native, in addressing these biases. I have gained greater insight into the reluctance toward these bias acknowledgements and believe I can play a meaningful role in helping other similarly non-Native educators consider our actions.

Through this project, I have deepened my commitment to play a role in addressing bias in our high school programs and championing culture as an academic asset. I have greater confidence; the self-assessment tool and capstone project website provides me a framework for carrying this conversation to MEHS staff and beyond. If I can help to make these changes in the high school programs in our state, we will see a change in the indicators of college readiness for Alaska Native students. I serve on the board of the AlaskaCan 65 by 2025 initiative to increase Alaskans with credentials to 65% by 2925. We have desegregated the data, yet I have grown tired of the discussions around the discrepancies for Alaska Native students and stagnated progress for all Alaskans without action. This project can move the needle. The numbers, however, are only an indicator, the real power of this change will be in the stories of students to come. Throughout my project, it has been all too easy to find confirming stories from Alaska Native adults describing their own experiences with bias and cultural struggles on college campuses. When we can replace the prevailing experience to produce stories of cultural affirmation and inclusion in the highest academic environments, then I will know that my project has served the people.

This chapter includes a description of the limitations I encountered throughout the project, a discussion of the relevance of this work, recommendations and plans for future action, and an exploration of my own personal and professional growth.

## Limitations

The initial limitation I encountered was the limited number of studies available on college readiness regarding Indigenous students, and specifically Alaska Native students. This was consequential because the self-assessment and ultimate capstone project was developed directly from this research. To address this limitation, I drew from research with other minoritized groups and first-generation students to get a more complete picture for Indigenous students. I also sought out research from other countries; the experiences of Indigenous students around the world are remarkably similar. I relied on the stories from my cultural experts to gain additional understanding of the experiences of Alaska Native’s in particular. In drafting and refining the self-assessment tool, I also had my own experience to serve as affirmation. Since I have worked so many years supporting Alaska Native students in their journey to college and have been blessed to work with many Alaska Native coworkers who themselves had navigated the journey, I was able to utilize my own knowledge in translating the research into the self-assessment statements. However, it remains a limitation, that my problem of practice is acutely focused specifically on Alaska Native students and only a few of the research cited targeted this specific population.

The expert contributions were critical in localizing the self-assessment. However, my expert group is quite a small sampling of the many cultural and educational experts in Alaska with valuable perspectives for improving the self-assessment. Furthermore, the situation of COVID made the gathering of information from experts difficult as well. The conversations with the experts became much more organic than I planned, which turned out to be beneficial, but I think this would have been and even greater advantage without COVID mitigation. I offered to my experts that they could provide input in writing or through an interview. None of them chose to provide me written feedback. Most interviews were set up by Zoom or phone; I only interviewed one of my experts in person. Neither Zoom nor phone provides the more natural environment that in-person conversations can provide, especially considering the organically told stories that greatly impacted my work. Two experts spoke with me at two different times, breaking up the phone conversations; I think that was helpful given the circumstance. During my interviews, I found my questions to be both limiting and too open ended at the same time. I asked specifically about language and cultural appropriateness, yet I did not ask specifically about individual assessment statements. As stated, the most valuable data came when they told stories from their own experiences. I am grateful these happened, but a limitation of my data collection is that it was not initially set up to elicit such stories. This limitation was influential in my decision to build crowd sourced story collection into my capstone webpage. I have set up a web portal to collect stories from those who have experienced either barriers or successes in their journey of education. I plan to curate these as they come in and use them to support the learning of those for whom the assessment is intended for—those that are still becoming aware of the biases in schools.

The timing of the involvement by the educators of MEHS also created unintended limitations. The rubric was set to be used as part of the school improvement process during the 2020-21 school year, the year COVID-19 virus dominated the need for school resources and attention. The initial gathering of input from educators regarding the tool was planned to be conducted in person after a presentation. To follow COVID mitigation protocols, I shared the information during a relatively quick Zoom meeting and then distributed the survey through email. I had about 60% of the teachers participate, yet I believe I would have had a larger portion complete the survey if it was provided in person rather than as an email buried in the many demands of the COVID year of teaching. The portion of my plan around utilizing the tool through the normal cycle of school improvement was completely diverted. MEHS typically utilizes professional development time at the start of each semester for reviewing data and setting school action goals. The plan was to utilize the self-assessment as additional data and to set goals for improvement influenced by that information. I had planned to journal through this process. The reality, however, was the typical improvement process was completely set aside and all professional development time was dedicated to focusing on the short-term plan of school operation within the context of virus mitigation and building blended and distance learning instructional skills. I considered gathering a small group to go through the process, but the reality is the attention of educators is directed toward the demands of COVID and the discussions would likely not have been authentic under the current environment. This limitation does not eliminate my opportunity to use the self-assessment in an improvement cycle, simply not as part of this project. I do plan to carry out the school improvement use next year. One unintentional benefit of this limitation is the development of the capstone webpage. I shifted my attention from observing and journaling through a school improvement process, to using my data and research to consider what information may be most helpful for those exploring each of the assessment statements for their own journey in becoming aware of the issues. As that project has developed, I think it is producing a much richer experience for educators with the self-assessment. The process of using the self-assessment with the support material built into the webpage is likely to be a more powerful experience and may lead to greater understanding and ultimately change.

Finally, the scope of this project is the greatest limitation. Ideally, the rubric is designed to be used in a variety of Alaska schools serving Alaska Native students. Utilizing MEHS as the school informing the self-assessment is helpful in that it is a school targeting college readiness, yet this is limiting in building a tool that ideally will be useful for all Alaska high schools. The development of a tool through this project can only result in a starting point. Once developed, the tool will need to be used broadly with comparative student outcome data to further determine its usefulness for its intended purpose. Ultimately it will be the use of the tool, alongside a monitoring of college readiness indicator data, that will truly inform the effectiveness of the school actions suggested by my project.

## Discussion

Relevant use of evidence. I have developed a self-assessment tool designed to assist high schools in implementing a college readiness model that is culturally responsive to Alaska Native students. The self-assessment tool is based on relevant research and enhanced significantly through the analysis of data provided by both cultural experts and the MEHS teaching staff. The assessment tool serves to identify existing strengths and weaknesses in school college readiness practices in the areas of academic preparedness, cultural identity, and navigation skills. My desired implication is the use of the self-assessment tool to drive specific school improvement goals designed to increase culturally responsive practices in college readiness for Alaska Native students. The tool is more than a check list of tasks, however. The tool is intentionally designed to support increasing awareness by educators of the unintentional bias practices that typically underlie the problem of low college readiness for Alaska Native students. With this purpose, the tool is more important for the discussions it may inspire than any accuracy or reliability in scoring. The stories that I gathered from experts as well as the data I collected from educators has highlighted this need. The stories were remarkably similar in how every one of my experts had experienced barriers through bias practices in schools. Educators were more mixed in their assessment of practices. The statements that were most self-reflective about considering bias had the greatest differential on whether the educators thought it was important and in how they assessed their own school. The experiences of Alaska Native people demand that schools work to become more aware and skilled in culturally responsive practices, yet the data from educators indicate there is not yet a commonly held understanding of that need. Hopefully my self-assessment tool and corresponding capstone deliverable website will help to rectify that difference and assist Alaska high schools in cultural awareness and culturally responsive practices in their college readiness models.

My work in building a self-assessment tool took on an even broader impact as it was transformed into my capstone project as a webpage. The webpage not only provides access to the self-assessment in both a downloadable form and an electronic form, but it also provides the flexibility of hyperlink navigation to expand on the concepts the self-assessment statements are built upon. As my capstone grew through the webpage development, I found an opportunity to capture stories from the field to serve as examples. These can be in the form of stories that further illustrate the bias practices revealed through the assessment or can serve to provide examples of actions schools put into place to improve in the areas of the self-assessment. This crowd sourcing of stories and examples allows me to engage stakeholders beyond my completion of dissertation.

Improving status quo. Mt. Edgecumbe High School, with a long history of a focus on college readiness for a population that is primarily Alaska Native, will now have a tool to be more purposeful in identifying strengths, and, more importantly, opportunities for improvement in our college readiness efforts. Already, our school has added Advanced Placement classes, yet without the use of the self-assessment, we may risk the tendencies of other schools in Alaska and fill them disproportionately. The tool will require us to consider not only if students are Alaska Native, but if they are low income or first generation as well. That awareness in itself will change status quo, yet it is also the easiest of the change suggested through the self-assessment. If our use of the tool helps to implement practices that are culturally affirming and help a student begin the cultural transformation discussed by Huffman (2010) and supported by others, we will have significantly shifted from a mindset of assimilation to begin a journey toward decolonization of our school, particularly significant given our history as a federal Indian Boarding School. If other high schools utilize the self-assessment as part of their school improvement process, schools will actively be targeting areas of improvement to better serve Alaska Native students.

The impacts of my project are tied directly to the themes revealed from my literature review and may help schools: (a) become aware of their bias and ways to address it, (b) provide opportunities for students to use cultural identity as a strength, and (c) involve students, in culturally responsive ways, in understanding and defining their own post-secondary pathway.

Becoming aware of bias and ways to address it. Ten of the self-assessment statements directly address biases in schools and are designed to support a greater self-awareness of school practices through the lens of institutional bias. Two of the statements in the cultural identity section specifically require staff to openly discuss practices that may be bias and tied to colonized education. Statement C.1 requires schools to understand historical actions of colonization and how that impacts generations of Alaska Natives; statement C.2 requires teachers in schools to openly discuss and challenge practices that may require assimilation. These two statements are direct in requiring self-reflection regarding bias and call for dialogue between educators for ongoing reflection and shared learning. Navigation statement N.3 expects teachers to avoid projecting their own values onto their students as they guide students through post-secondary planning. This statement directly asks teachers to assume they have a bias and to actively counteract applying that bias with their students. There are also statements that require a look at schoolwide data or representation in college prep courses. These statements also challenge status quo and expose institutional bias yet in a much more comfortable or familiar way. The statements in the self-assessment that require self-reflection have the potential to truly affect change when approached with curiosity and vulnerability. These are difficult conversations, and it will require leadership and shared goals toward growth, however these conversations are necessary to move forward.

Building cultural-identity as a college readiness skill. Although limited in number, all research I found that explored the impact of cultural identity on college success indicated that a strong sense of cultural self was an assistive factor. Regardless of this clear link, it is rarely overtly planned as part of college readiness. Many students transition through increasingly beneficial stages of developing cultural sense of self in the college environment. My project seeks to take this after-the-fact research and apply it to high schools before the students go to college. High schools have the opportunity to jumpstart the development of a strong cultural sense of self to better equip Alaska Native students to navigate the college environment from day one. Developing a strong cultural self as part of a high school college readiness model will be a new approach.

Empowering students in culturally responsive ways. Throughout my project, several mentors and colleagues questioned why I limited my focus to college readiness rather than vocational preparedness. I absolutely value vocational training and alternatives to college for post-secondary training. However, my own experience and evidence found throughout my literature review exposed a tendency of school personal to funnel Alaska Native students into vocational programs citing “good with their hands” and other goodwill statements symptomatic of an underlying assumption that the student might not have what it takes for college. I have seen educators pump up student’s confidence with non-specific praise, yet automatically sign them up for courses that lack college preparatory rigor. When Guillory and Wolverton (2008) interviewed AI/AN college students, they cited their own lack of academic preparedness as a barrier, yet also reported that they were not aware they were being unprepared while in school. These students never had the chance to advocate for themselves. When this is combined with the likelihood that an Alaska Native student is taking a lead role in their own post-secondary planning (Okagaki et al., 2009) and the potential reluctance to ask for help (Jack, 2016), the status quo for schools is not tolerable. What I hope for my project, is that as schools look to engage Alaska Native students in their own post-secondary goal setting and progress monitoring, that we do so without patronization. The reluctance to ask for help revealed by Jack (2019) is not the result of a deficit, but rather an alternative way of viewing independence. Viewing our Alaska Native students as self-reliant, unassuming, students who have been gifted with both autonomy and support from their families will be a meaningful shift. Furthermore, understanding that their goals and obligations are often intertwined with their family and community will help schools shift to meaningful guidance that empowers students in a culturally responsive way.

New knowledge to advance the profession. I learned a lot through this process, but there are three new learnings for me that have not only shaped my project but have deepened my understanding of the problem significantly. Huffman’s (2001) concept of “transculturation” as four stages of development was specific in his research, but his concept of developmental stages of a transformative journey of students moving from an assumption of required assimilation to use of culture as a strength was also echoed by others. This implies that a high school program can be purposeful in helping a student begin this self-identity journey; an early start may allow the student to experience the late stages of cultural strength much earlier in their college life thus positively impacting their persistence. Second, the concept of hard and soft independence skills as described by Covarrubias (2005), provided me a new lens in which to consider behavior I have observed over the years. I have observed a juxtaposition between many students’ resiliency yet lack of stick-to-itiveness in the school setting. Understanding how our cultural background impacts how we view and develop independent skills provides a new way for me to consider these observations and ways to support students. A third new learning was from Okagaki et al. (2009) who observed a cultural tendency in AI/AN families to allow their child to take the lead in pursing post-secondary goals—the parents role serving to support rather than direct. I had observed this tendency, but always considered it as a product of the parents being less familiar with the process rather than a culturally grounded role expectation. It really opens up the opportunity to consider the empowerment theme to consider the culturally appropriateness of Alaska Native students taking the lead role in their own self-discovery and future planning. It also calls further into question the school bias tendency of assuming a patronizing guidance role and making direct suggestions to students in lieu of parent involvement. We do not need to take over for parents who do not know what to do; we need to understand culturally that students need to find their own way. We do have a role, which is to provide the information early and often so students can be informed navigators through this process, but we must also be very careful not to step in and tell them what to do.

## Recommendations

Culturally responsive education is gaining momentum in Alaska with several tribal organizations advancing efforts through grants and curriculum materials. As my research revealed, however, undertakings such as these too often fall short of producing long term change in schools. Now is a time to capitalize on the current momentum and link the various initiatives into a movement to incorporate culturally responsive practices to ultimately contribute to the decolonization of education for Alaska Native students. My project can be a piece to this much larger puzzle. Alaska high schools that serve an Alaska Native population may use the self-assessment tool and corresponding back up information to identify specific actions that can be taken to be more culturally affirming in their college readiness approach. College readiness may be a comfortable foray into the larger transformation.

School implementation. I recommend that high schools with Alaska Native students utilize the self-assessment as part of a school improvement process. Schools can select one to three low scoring statements to target for specific improvement effort. Most of the statements can be used to set an annual goal for school practice improvement; improvements are possible within a year timeframe, yet maintenance will be ongoing. Some of the self-assessment statements pose less of a philosophical challenge and may provide easy entry points. These include statements related to checking data for proportionality. Others, such as the statement requiring staff to openly discuss their own actions in relationship to assimilation, require a greater vulnerability and willingness to consider change through a deeper understanding of the decolonizing movement. My desire is that schools will find appropriate entrance points within these statements. A continued use of the tool for monitoring progress can then further the conversations and support professional growth along with school change.

Secondary to the use of the tool for meaningful conversations and change, yet needed for effective use, is my recommendation that schools use the self-assessment tool along with student outcome data. The implementation of the practices assessed by the assessment tool will create an environment conducive to increased college readiness for Alaska Native students. College readiness indicators need to be monitored alongside the self-assessment. As schools improve their actions with the self-assessment, college readiness indicators and ultimately college-going and persistence rates should improve. Outcome data may lag program implementation, but ultimately the desired outcomes of increased college readiness should align with improved program implementation as measured by the assessment tool. This will be the true measure of my project.

Ideally, my research behind the power of a culturally affirming culture for college readiness will contribute to the approach both high schools and universities take in servicing Alaska Native students. Universities not only have the chance to consider services for incoming Alaska Native students that support the transition to seeing culture as an asset but can include this information in teacher preparation programs to ultimately contribute to the acceleration of that transition through encouraging culturally affirming practices in high schools and even elementary schools.

Further research needed. Going forward, research will be needed to compare school practice implementation measured by the tool with college going and persistence data. Hypothetically, if a school adjusts practices to align with higher ratings on the tool, one can expect a corresponding increase in Alaska Native college going and persistence rates. To confirm this correlation, research is needed to compare school self-assessment ratings with college readiness indicators and college-going and persistence rates. I recommend the use of the readiness indicators suggested by the Redefining Ready initiative (Redefining Ready, nd.) and National Clearinghouse data. College-going rates as measured by National Clearinghouse data has recently been made available to schools through Alaska Public Schools report card (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, n.d.). A comparison of these data with self-assessment ratings may indicate a correlation between the school practices assessed by the self-assessment and student outcomes. Additionally, a longitudinal study of a school that utilizes the tool in making targeted school practice improvements along with monitoring any change in college readiness indicators and college-going and persistence rates would further validate the usefulness of the tool. This type of research will focus more on the impact of change within a school. These student outcome data indicators are likely to lag behind the change in school process yet are key to evaluating the effectiveness of the tool. Future research will be needed to explore this relationship.

## Action Plan

My website provides the platform for continued work in advancing culturally responsive college readiness for Alaska Native students. Key to this work is my plan to continue to crowd source stories. Stories from Alaska Native current and past students who have experienced biases provide a rich illustration for educators to learn and deepen their understanding of the issues. Stories from the education field that provide examples of success in tackling the issues will provide concrete examples for schools to consider in their own school improvement.

I will also continue to identify other meaningful efforts and resources that can be linked through the website. Adjusting college readiness models in schools is only a small piece in a much larger movement to decolonize education. There are a great many initiatives across Alaska in the effort toward creating culturally responsive schools and including Alaska Native culturally relevant instruction. Schools working toward these goals will inherently be advancing their efforts on the self-assessment toward a culturally responsive college readiness model.

In addition to maintaining the website, I will use the tool through a school improvement process at MEHS once we return to our normal annual improvement cycle. The use of the tool alongside student outcome data as part of the improvement process will not only provide me the experience I am recommending for others, but it will also help MEHS continue to move forward in our own journey to culturally respond to the needs of our Alaska Native students with college aspirations.

I plan to share my project and aspirations to improve college readiness for Alaska Native students through continued opportunities. I will be submitting a short essay for publication consideration to a national publication calling for articles on college and career readiness. I will plan to present to Alaskans at the Alaska Can conference in February 2022. I will also consider opportunities to present in teacher preparation classes or through an adjunct teaching opportunity with the University of Alaska. Teaching and presenting are primarily what I hope to do, to provide information directly to those currently in the field in Alaska. Submitting for publication will be a new endeavor for me and may open doors I have not previously considered.

## Personal Growth

Throughout this project, I have deepened my understanding of the role of culture in education and college preparedness. I have gained a more nuanced lens to consider family and student behaviors of independence, and I have come to consider cultural self-identity as a developmental skill. Throughout my experience over the years, I have observed the value of a strong cultural self for Alaska Native students, now I have a researched-backed understanding of how it assists students in successfully transitioning and remaining in college. I have taken on the term culturally affirming practices to bring language to my greater commitment and understanding of the value of students feeling authentically valued in the academic setting.

I have learned specifically how institutional bias creates layers of barriers and have gained greater insight into the reluctance toward acknowledging these biases. I have deeply contemplated my role in change for Alaska schools and believe I can play a meaningful role in helping other similarly non-Native educators consider our actions.

## Professional Growth

Throughout my work on this project, I have had the great pleasure to interact with many other professionals passionate about improving Alaska Native education. I have re-connected and have made new connections with other culturally based initiatives to improve education in our state. I have already had opportunities to share the work of my project and this has connected me into a larger network of efforts to address the educational needs of Alaska Native students in our public schools. My opportunities to share will only grow as my capstone is complete and engaging others through its interactive design. I anticipate increasing network opportunities as I continue to advocate for the use of the self-assessment and implementation of culturally affirming college readiness practices.

I have also gained skills in organizing and articulating themes around this work in ways that may lead to change. I have positioned myself to continue the work that may lead to a variety of roles in the state. The consideration of the organization of the self-assessment statements, including a purposeful attempt to place the most comfortable questions first, was a professional growth moment as I considered the impact and use by staffs beyond my own walls and current knowledge. I have been forced to think deeply about the role that I may play in the larger vision of decolonizing education including a consideration of whether it is appropriate for me to take a role. In this consideration, I have professionally grown in considering and articulating my own professional position on the role of existing non-Native educators in this needed movement.

Finally, I have opened the door for consideration of how I may lead these efforts into the future. I have considered how I may continue the work not only through maintaining the website, but through presentations and submitted articles for publish. These are leadership considerations that were not within my future view prior to the work of this project and my professional growth through these past years.

## Conclusion

Alaska has set goals for college attainment yet struggles with a disparity between Alaska Native students and non-Native students attending and persisting in college. It is time to consider models for college readiness that are culturally responsive. My research and project support the need for high schools to become purposeful in targeting Alaska Native students for college readiness and then supporting them in ways that honor the culture of their families and helps to build their own sense of self and cultural identity.

Throughout the review of literature, I focused on three factors for their impact on college readiness for Alaska Native students: academic preparedness, cultural self-identity, and navigation skills. My review of literature revealed: low participation in college preparation courses by Alaska Native students as a well-documented and long-standing indicator of system failure; the power of a strong cultural identity for Indigenous students and students of color; and a cultural impact on navigation skills that leads to misunderstandings and miscues in college and career counseling for Indigenous students and other students from cultures less tied to American ideals. In each of the three factors, institutional bias contributes to underperformance as well as a lack of acknowledgement or inclusion of culture as assistive for college readiness. These two predominant school trends were further complicated with a general tendency for Alaska Native students to be shuffled through high school with low student agency. Despite these trends in the research, I discovered little has been published on what schools can do to counter these negative actions.

To address this void, I set out to use my deep exploration of literature to develop a model to guide schools to (a) become aware of bias practices, (b) include cultural identity as a college readiness skill, and (c) actively involve Alaska Native students in the college-readiness process in a way that recognizes their cultural values. A self-assessment process designed to be used as part of a school improvement cycle became central to my project to support school change.

I drafted a self-assessment based on the literature review and then used this literature-based draft to collect data from cultural experts and educators. Cultural experts provided feedback on the relevancy of the statements included in the self-assessment and contributed rich examples from their own lives. Educators used a slightly adjusted self-assessment draft to provide feedback on clarity and perceived importance of the issues addressed. The data collection supported the use of a self-assessment, but also suggested the need for added clarity and to build awareness and understanding of the issues included in the self-assessment. This led to a decision to create an interactive website that includes significant background information and examples for each self-assessment statement.

My capstone website provides access to the self-assessment, along with multiple links to more information designed to increase awareness and understanding of the underlying issues of bias and cultural impact on school practices. Increased awareness and understanding combined with targeted goals for improved school practices will help schools create a culturally responsive college-readiness model for Alaska Native students. With increased awareness, schools may embrace a strong cultural identity as an important college readiness skill as well as become more aware of their own actions and potential biases. Native students having a strong sense of cultural identity and sense of self is not mutually exclusive with being academically prepared for post-secondary high school. On the contrary, the historical practice of this very assumption may be instrumental in producing the current state of low college participation rates.  My capstone website includes building a strong cultural identity as an assistive factor alongside a more traditional consideration of participation in college preparation opportunities and a nuanced cultural lens look at building navigational skills for both preparing and operating in the post-secondary environment.

My model will not only target services to Alaska Native students, but it also calls on the institutions themselves to become more self-aware and provide services in ways that value the culture of the students and invite into the academic framework Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous communities have centuries-old education practices and ways of knowing which, when valued, enhance education environments that tout a value of diversity. A successful model will not be something that is applied to Alaska Native students, but rather an exchange that benefits students of all backgrounds and institutions themselves.

The self-assessment is designed to be used as part of a school improvement process. The statements of the self-assessment will help schools target areas for improvement and can be used to track progress. The data collected through the use of the self-assessment will provide data on school practices. I suggest school teams use the self-assessment as program data along with student outcome data that quantifies student progress and ultimately demonstrate increased outcomes in college enrollment and persistence. Hypothetically, as a school increases their school practices assessed by the self-assessment, student outcome data, and ultimately college-going and persistence rates should increase. Concurrently with the use of the assessment as part of a structured school improvement process, school teams can access stories from people who have experienced the biases and barriers of transitioning into college and from educators who have worked to address the issue. These stories and other additionally research and background information serve the purpose of increased awareness and understanding of the issues. Raising awareness of the underlying beliefs or misinformation that contributes to the unintentional bias actions of schools is a less quantifiable, yet impactful in achieving desired outcomes. Ideally, use of the website, inclusive of the stories and the self-assessment, will help schools become more aware of issues, help target specific areas for improvement, and ultimately lead to a positive change in college going and persistence rates for Alaska Native students.

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Appendix A

Re-Thinking College Preparation for Alaska Native Students

School Self-Assessment Short Version Draft

**Academic Preparation**

A.1 Proportionality Checks: Our School systematically checks proportionality of college pathway classes\* and makes plans to address an imbalance. Proportionality is not only checked by ethnicity, but also socio-economic status, first-generation status, and other relevant sub-groups.

\*Ex: early enrichment classes, upper level math/science, honors, Advanced Placement, Dual Credit

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A.2 Finding Talent: Our school routinely uses data to identify students with potential-- who are not currently being recruited into college preparation courses or pre-college preparation-- and actively works to place those students in courses to allow for college preparation.

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A.3 Support without Tracking: Our school program includes Freshman and/or middle school support (intervention) classes designed to address learning needs. Participation in support classes does not track students for their entire high school programming. There is built-in flexibility, so that students who require support classes still have opportunities to move through a college preparation pathway

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A.4 Our school interventions to address performance gaps are designed to be culturally-responsive and build on the strengths of the students. Our school staff avoid taking on a deficit-model theory in approaching gap-closing measures.

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A.5 Our school actively involves students in monitoring their own academic progress. Test scores are shared with students in ways they understand. Growth is tracked. Students understand the expectations of their stated goals, their current level, and what learning opportunities are available to help them address any gaps.

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A.6 Native Knowledge: Our school includes academic instruction that recognizes and values Native ways of knowing. Native knowledge is presented as valid and academic. Western knowledge systems are not presented as superior. Recognition of Native ways of knowing as academic is not limited to special populations, special classes or special units; it is woven throughout course content and considered rigorous for all.

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**Cultural Identity**

C.1 Historical Acknowledgement: Our staff is aware of the historical relationship between schools and Alaska Native populations and the theories of how this has impacted Alaska Native populations generationally.

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C.2 Open Discussions: Our school has a culture in which we openly discuss school practices that may be anchored in colonization or assimilation. We routinely reflect on these tendencies, challenge each other in our practices, and invite other viewpoints and/or ways of practice.

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C.3 Cultural Code Shifting: Our school avoids presenting Western culture as the “right way” and seeks out opportunities in which Indigenous ways of being are valued and invited into classroom activities. When cultural code-shifting is a needed skill-- when students need to learn and practice behaviors and norms expected in school or business settings-- it is presented as learning a different way, not correcting a deficit.

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C.4 Cultural Identity as Assistive: In our school, a well-developed cultural identity is viewed as an assistive factor in college readiness and persistence. Students are guided in developing this as part of their college preparation.

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C.5 Practice Self-Identity: In our school classroom instruction includes helping students explore self-identity. Students have opportunities to practice how they may articulate the cultural part of themselves. Students prepare and practice skills needed for environments where they may confront cultural assumptions.

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C.6 Indigenous Spaces: Our school provides Indigenous spaces. These are times and places in which Indigenous culture is the expected culture. Native language, traditions, foods, customs are part of the environment. Examples include a culture room, Native student services, dance groups, Native Language learning etc.

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**Navigation Skills**

N.1 Comprehensive Outreach: Our school includes early college awareness embedded into the school program. Early awareness does not assume prior knowledge and includes awareness of early preparation activities and expected courses to prepare for college and other post-secondary goals.

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N.2 Beyond the Counselor: Our school’s outreach to support students in finding and following their education path is pervasive throughout the school and not solely reliant on the counseling office. Adults in our building (teachers, secretaries, coaches etc.), serve to guide, encourage, and connect students with resources. targeted outreach to students does not rely on the students coming to us, we meet the student where they are at.

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N.3 Avoid Projecting our Values: Adults in our school avoid projecting our own values and college opinions onto students; instead, we are skilled in empowering students to know themselves and explore their options. We serve to help students’ access and interpret the information they need about themselves and post-secondary opportunities to make informed decisions.

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N.4 Cultural Impact on Motivation: Exploration of post-secondary options is presented in a way in which students explore their own motivations and consider cultural ways of being. Lasting motivation is personal and deeply connected to culture and family. We avoid assuming the motivations and priorities of prevailing school culture when presenting post-secondary information and career exploration.

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N.5 Cultural Impact on Independent Skills: Our school recognizes the independent skills and resiliency of our students, even when these skills are not those most commonly expected by school environments. Some students are very self-reliant in many situations, yet this same value can make them reluctant to ask for help or undermine confidence in an unfamiliar school setting. We directly teach students to recognize and value their own independent skills while also teaching the soft independent skills that many college environments value. We give students the opportunity to practice independent skills with feedback and guide code-shifting as needed.

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N.6 Home Outreach Adults in our school participate in home and community outreach. We avoid labeling student and family behavior in the context of our own beliefs or school experiences. We are aware of cultural differences and recognize strengths. We know how to help students explore and identify ways in which their family and/or cultural supports can benefit them.

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Appendix B

Re-Thinking College Preparation for Alaska Native Students

RUBRIC for SELF ASSESSMENT DOCUMENT\_Draft 1

Review of this document will be used by Janelle Vanasse in a doctoral project.

Academic Preparation

A.1 Our School systematically checks proportionality of college pathway classes and makes plans to address an imbalance. (school practice)

*Background: Statistically Alaska Natives are underrepresented in college preparation classes. This can happen as early as middle school with a lower representation in courses that are designed to feed into a college pathway. A key first step is for schools to systematically use data, across grade levels, to become aware of their own tendencies that may reveal unintentional bias practices.*

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| Data are not gathered or made available to decision makers. |  | Data are gathered and available to decision makers, but action is reliant on decision makers to take initiative to ask for the data. It is not routine or expected |  | Data are routinely gathered and provided to a team that analyzes proportionality. This is done for many opportunities and classes, not just junior and senior prep courses. Process includes action plans for addressing any disproportionality and includes consistent monitoring. |

A.2 Our school routinely uses data to identify students with potential, who are not currently being recruited into college preparation courses or pre-college preparation, and actively works to place those students in courses to allow for college preparation. (school practice)

*Background: Research demonstrates that even when performance is controlled, students of color are targeted for enrichment, accelerated programs, and college preparation pathways at a lower rate than their white peers. This tendency can compound issues of disparity when high potential students miss out on experiences in early grades designed to build readiness for college preparation courses. School systems must address these tendencies early and often to combat disproportionality.*

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| Little or no attempt to assess whether current systems may be passing up students with potential. |  | Data are occasionally accessed, or individual teachers take on a role to notice students or request the data and advocate for students. |  | Data (including test scores, grades, and teacher recommendations) are routinely used to identify students with potential that may not be accessing enrichment opportunities, upper level courses, or college/career pathways. |

A.3 Our school has achieved proportionality in college preparation classes. The number of Alaska Native students accessing upper level, honors, Advanced Placement, dual credit etc, courses is the same proportionally as the regular school population. Proportionality not only holds true for ethnic identity, but also for socio-economic status and first-generation status. (data indicator)

*Background: Indicator A1 suggests schools develop a systematic way to assess tendencies across grades and courses. This indicator targets specific high-level courses which correlate with a successful college transition. It is important to consider demographics beyond ethnicity to gage opportunities for broad participation. Proportionality in these classes is a good indicator of a successful system in reaching students. On the contrary, disproportionality in these classes may be symptomatic of biased system-wide tendencies. If students in these demographics are not accessing these courses, school may need to look back through the system to consider why students are not accessing or being prepared for these courses.*

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| Disproportionality is evident in all three assessed areas with very few Alaska Native students accessing college preparation courses |  | Proportionality achieved in one area but not all or proportionality approaching general population (less than 15% difference) |  | Data suggests that the number of students accessing college preparation courses and those going to college are proportionately similar to the general high school population for AK Natives, low income, and first-generation status |

A.4 Early High school and/or middle school programs include courses designed to address learning needs, offering both support and enrichment options. Participation in support classes does not limit the ability to access enrichment courses. There is built-in flexibility, so that students who require support classes still have opportunities to move through a college preparation pathway. Enrichment courses have proportionality. (school structure)

*Background: Schools sometimes justify disproportionality based on lower numbers of students of color being “prepared” or requesting to access college preparation courses. The lower numbers of preparation and/or request are often impacted by early education practices that either do not invite these students into opportunities or effectively track students at an early age based on an intervention need. To combat this, schools must address practices that invite students to set goals and participate in college readiness. Academic pathways must include flexibility so that if a student needs some “catch up” academic instruction, it does not track them for non-college pathways only.*

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| Courses taken in Middle school or freshman year essentially track students throughout the four years of college in core subjects.  Or all freshman schedules are the same with little consideration to student needs. |  | There is flexibility within the system, but students must take the initiative to seek out opportunities to get back on track if they are placed in support classes and enrichment courses are often filled only by students with families familiar with the system and seeking enrichment. |  | System is used to identify students needing support or enrichment opportunities to best meet potential. There is flexibility in the scheduling so that with careful four-year planning students who access support classes early can still navigate to college preparation classes by 11th and 12th grade |

A.5 Interventions to address any performance gaps are designed to be culturally-responsive and build on the strengths of the students. Our school staff avoid taking on a deficit-model theory in approaching gap-closing measures. (school structures)

*Background: Some approaches to intervention seem to double-down on the philosophy that cultural experiences typical of a white middle-class are required for academic success. Students not grounded in this culture are viewed as deficient and lacking skills with little or no recognition of a student’s cultural knowledge as a benefit or strength. This approach can subtly communicate that something is wrong with the student or that their culture and family experiences are inferior or not compatible with school. Internalizing this message can contribute to students feeling they do not belong in academic settings in the future.*

*An example of this approach is often recognizable with early reading interventions. Certainly, reading books to young children is an important way to build language skills. However, when educators push parents to practice reading routines without any recognition that traditional story telling is also beneficial in building language skills, it demonstrates a deficit model approach. It communicates that the only way to “fix” the deficit is to replace behaviors with those more aligned with a dominant culture. When educators talk about the value of reading and storytelling, providing value to both, students and parents are invited to embrace their own cultural norms at the same time.*

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| Interventions make no attempt to incorporate culturally relevant materials. Messaging around interventions focus on listing deficits and what students and families need to do to fix them. Only school skills are presented with value. |  | Student current skills and strengths are recognized and valued, but the interventions focus on the skill deficit and/or the parents/students are not provided accurate information about academic gaps. |  | Academic gaps are discussed honestly with students and parents, however there is also a focus on current skills and how these may be relied upon to help bridge gaps. Value is given to skills that are more culturally ground. |

A.6 Students are actively involved in monitoring their own academic progress. Test scores are shared with students in ways they understand in order to track their own growth. Students understand the expectations of their stated goals, including prerequisite courses and entrance exam expectations. Students are actively involved in mapping out their goal plans including how to address any gaps between current performance and goal expectations. (school structures)

*Background: Stories from Indigenous college students often share an experience of not knowing their own lack of college preparedness until entering college. Many of these students felt deceived and stated they would have been willing to do things differently if they had understood they were being underprepared. Having students understand what they are expected to know and do compared with their current status, and supporting this with a plan to address the gap, is current best practice for all students. Directly involving students allows them to take an active role in their own preparedness. (School Structure)*

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| Students are not actively involved in monitoring their academic progress. |  | There are opportunities for students to be involved in tracking their academic progress and doing high school course planning, but it is reliant on students to initiate the process with counselors or specific teachers to engage students. It is not pervasive in the school culture. Or it is a school practice, but students are mostly told what to do and are not actively involved in understanding their own progress or needs based on their goals. |  | Students are actively involved in monitoring their own academic progress, including both credits and test scores. If school uses growth data (ie MAP) students know how to track growth and use scores to consider progress toward being “on track” for college readiness tests. Students are actively involved in mapping out their academic pathway based on post-secondary goals including accessing support and enrichment classes as needed and knowing what courses are expected/best for their goals. |

Cultural Identity

C.1 Our staff is aware of the historical relationship between western schools and Alaska Native populations and the theories of how this has impacted Alaska Native populations generationally. (school practices)

*Background: Understanding the history of schools and Alaska Natives over past generations is valuable in understanding current Alaska Native students and families as well as the perspectives of the institution. Understanding the role school has played in colonization and assimilation of Alaska Native students in the past is essential in building the skills needed to identify current practices that may be rooted in this history.*

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| Our staff is not aware of the history of western schools in Alaska or only views it through the perspective of western culture. |  | Our staff acknowledges the history of boarding schools and impact of western school on AK Native culture and students. |  | Our staff is aware of the history of western schooling in AK and has the vocabulary and understanding to discuss assimilation, colonization, generational trauma and cultural deficit model. |

C.2 Our school has a culture in which we openly discuss school practices that may be anchored in colonization or assimilation. We routinely reflect on these tendencies, challenge each other in our practices, and invite other viewpoints and/or ways of practice. (school practices)

*Background: The practices within schools that expect assimilation or are tied to colonization are long standing. The biased practices rooted in this history are often unintentional in today’s schools, yet still impactful. Having an open conversation about practices and exploring how these may be tied to historical practices is key in being able to identify and deepen understanding of the issues. This self-learning by those working in schools is necessary for any lasting change.*

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| Staff does not discuss educational practices or does not acknowledge the need for culturally responsive teaching and environment. Cultural deficit model is the norm. |  | Pockets of staff are aware of the need for culturally responsive education and are willing to discuss amongst themselves. Cultural deficit model is present. |  | Staff regularly discuss educational practices and invite self and peer questioning on tendencies toward dominant culture or implementation of Cultural deficit model |

C.3 When cultural code-shifting is a needed skill, our school avoids presenting one as the “right way” and seeks out learning opportunities in which Indigenous ways of knowing are valued and invited into classroom activities. (school practices)

*Background: Code-shifting is commonly used to describe the practice of moving back and forth between two languages for bilingual people. It can also be used to reference switching between cultural norms and expectations. Just like with language, cultural code shifting often requires a deeper understanding of subtleties and ways of thinking, not just a knowledge of words or actions. In a school environment, students are often expected to take on the cultural norms of the school, typically white middle-class, as the “right way” to do things with little or no acknowledgement of the value of other cultures. It is sometimes important for students to learn these school expectations to help them in future environments yet presenting it as a code-switching skill that values both cultures invites students to carry with them a sense of cultural belonging even when the situation calls for a code switch. When the school culture is presented as the “right way”, it may lead to students feeling they “do not belong” in future education settings.*

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| Situations that require code shifting are presented such that students must learn the “right way” to do things. When students do not naturally participate in the expected norms of the school culture, they are seen as deficient in skills. |  | No acknowledgement of the skill of code-shifting. Little concerted effort to recognize Indigenous ways of knowing or doing or Indigenous ways are expected to be expressed outside of the classroom but not viewed as valuable in the academic setting. |  | Teachers use the term cultural code-shifting as a recognition of a skill rather than present the requested western behavior as “correct”. Opportunities are created in the classroom for students to share and present indigenous ways of doing within the classroom setting. |

C.4 Academic instruction in core subjects include the recognition and value of Native ways of knowing. Native knowledge is presented as valid and academic. Western knowledge systems are not presented as superior. Recognition of Native ways of knowing as academic is not limited to special classes or special units; it is woven throughout course content.

*Background: Indigenous people have a unique world view and interdependent understanding of the natural world. This has served the culture well however has historically been ignored by western school education. Indigenous ways of knowing are increasingly being recognized as academic and valuable in the study of diverse world views and knowledge systems. Many high schools have yet to explore what this means. Inviting Native ways of knowing into classrooms is much deeper than culturally relevant or place-based education, which is also valuable; it represents an approach to learning and understanding the world. Understanding or considering the world through a diversity of thought is understood as a scholarly endeavor. This is why inviting Native ways of knowing into the school environment is understood as beneficial for all students, not just those that are Indigenous. In 2005 Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley described the benefit of this movement in an article published by the University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

[*Indigenous Knowledge Systems/ Alaska Native Ways of Knowing by Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley*](http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Articles/BarnhardtKawagley/Indigenous_Knowledge.html)

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| Native ways of knowing are not part of the academic courses. Demonstrated value of Native culture is limited to special projects or special clubs typically outside of the academic time. |  | Native ways of knowing are presented in a few classes by specific teachers with an interest in incorporating culturally relevant and culturally responsive instruction. |  | Recognition of, reference to, and opportunities to use/experience Native ways of knowing are present in many core academic courses. These are referenced as academic and of value to learn and know. This is a school expectation with recognition of Alaska being homeland to Indigenous populations. |

C.5 A well-developed cultural identity is viewed as an assistive factor in college readiness and persistence. Students are guided in developing this as part of their college preparation. Instruction includes helping students explore self-identity. Students have opportunities to practice how they may articulate the cultural part of themselves. Students prepare and practice skills needed for environments where they may confront cultural assumptions. (School Practice)

*Background: Research supports that students who are able to draw strength from their cultural identity, while adapting to the demands of college life, are more likely to persist and academically succeed in college. Many students who are able to draw upon their cultural identity as a support describe transitioning through phases of cultural identity development. Initially students may feel alienated on a college campus. A process of self-identity is often required before a student reaches a level of fully integrating their cultural self-identity as a strength. Starting this journey of self-discovery in high school may help students persist through the early years in college. In addition to building internal strength, having students think through potential interactions with others can also prepare them for a college environment. Students are likely to experience assumptions about their culture, themselves, and be faced with questions or expectations of representation on campus. Considering how to navigate these likely interactions ahead of time can help students navigate a sense of “otherness” and other people’s assumptions or labels.*

*Tailyr Irvine, a photojournalists, describes her own college navigation experiences in a short article to introduce her photo exhibit. Reading her story may provide further understanding of this indicator.*

[*Being Native: Showing the Consequences of Non-Natives Defining Who is an American Indian* by Tailyr Irvine](https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/being-native?fbclid=IwAR0GmVYtdwLHUUYIF8gGfhmkfQk82YBjZn16Gi6jMbMmAvFWfFDOPGFsCkQ)

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| Cultural identity is not typically discussed or part of the post-secondary exploration or planning |  | Students are encouraged to express their cultural identity and some adults encourage them to explore their cultural identity and include it as part of their post-secondary planning or personal statement, but it is not a schoolwide culture or systematic. |  | College and career exploration and preparation include specific activities to help students explore their cultural identity and actively use this in identifying their post secondary goals and school choices. |

C.6 Our school provides Indigenous spaces. These are times and places in which Indigenous culture is the expected culture. Native language, traditions, foods, customs are part of the environment. (School Structures)

Examples include a culture room, Native student services, dance groups, Native Language learning etc.

*Background: The environment of schools and colleges generally reflect the cultural norms and expectations of white middle to upper class culture. Students spend much of their time practicing and code-shifting to best respond in this culture. Having spaces that allow students to take a break from this expectation is very healthy and is supported by research to assist in retention and academic success. Providing these spaces in high school not only can help students feel comfortable, but can help students assess how important this support is for them in considering college campuses. Exploring what colleges offer as Native student services should be included in students’ college exploration. (school structure)*

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| Our school does not make an effort to create Indigenous spaces. |  | Our school has a space and/or a club and/or a cultural week, but these Indigenous spaces are limited in time and scope. |  | Our school includes physical spaces in which Native culture is the norm and students can go there and feel comfortable. Our school also includes times in which Native culture is recognized and valued with the full student body- times in which spaces that are typically western are adjusted to reflect Native culture. Our school has opportunities for students to learn Native languages, dance, and customs. |

Navigation

N.1 Our counseling services include early college awareness embedded into the school program. Early awareness includes awareness of preparation opportunities and expected courses to prepare for college and other post-secondary goals. (School Structure)

*Background: The selection or deselection of college as a pathway starts well before high school. Some schools rely on families to know and pursue these early opportunities, leaving out many Native families, particularly first-generation student families, who are not familiar with the school systems or unwritten rules of preferential access.*

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| Little or no comprehensive counseling services in early grades. |  | Our school has early counseling services to all students primarily focused on career exploration. |  | Our school systematically provides information in early grades about preparing for college including information about high school courses, college entrance exams and dual credit or summer bridge programs so that students may plan for these early. Four year planning is done with each student beginning in 9th grade. Specific attention is provided to first generation students. |

N.2 Our school has targeted outreach to students that do not require students to come to us. The targeted outreach and information sharing are pervasive throughout the school and not solely reliant on the counseling office. A variety of adults, who typically build relationships with students (teachers, secretaries, coaches etc.), serve to guide, encourage, and connect students with resources. (School Structures)

*Background; Many schools advertise opportunities to students, but then rely on those students to respond or seek out those opportunities. There are two researched tendencies that undermine access for Alaska Native students. First, often families of Alaska Native students, especially first generation students, are not as familiar with opportunities or college path expectation; and two, there is a tendency in interdependent cultures such as Native cultures, for parents to allow their child to take the lead on setting their own post-secondary path. To compound the issue, the students themselves often have little background or knowledge of the importance of the opportunities being “advertised” or the skills in how to access them.*

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| Opportunities are advertised from the counselor’s office and then it is up to the student to go to the counselor’s office or otherwise respond. Students are expected to initiate conversations with the counselor to get support in their post-secondary planning. |  | There are planned presentations for students in various classes to help them learn about opportunities and to guide them through making choices to help prepare for post-secondary. Follow up from the presentations is often left up to the student. |  | Academic and post secondary messaging is common throughout the building. Adults in the building have skills in encouraging students and guiding them in their own goal setting, and self-monitoring, and 4-year planning. Adults avoid projecting their own beliefs and values on students, but rather are skillful in guiding and encouraging them and access the counseling department as needed for further assistance. |

N.3 Adults doing targeted outreach avoid projecting their own values and college opinions onto students; instead, they are skilled in empowering students to know themselves and their options. Adults serve to help students’ access and interpret the information they need about themselves and post-secondary opportunities to make informed decisions. (School Practices)

*Background: Educators are often expected to consider what they believe is best for a child. It can be hard not to project our own values and beliefs when helping a student with their post-secondary plan. This can lead to a student making post-secondary planning choices because they think “this is what I am supposed to do” rather than deeply exploring their own motivation, values, and support system. Helping students explore what is truly meaningful to them may help them select a good-fit post-secondary option to start with as well as draw upon their own deep personal reasons for being there and how to access their support system*

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| Discussions about post-secondary planning are limited to the counseling department and/or students are put into courses and onto pathways with limited student input. If students are asked, there is little effort to provide them with the background knowledge needed to make informed decisions. |  | Adults talk to students about their academic goals yet tend to project their own ideas and beliefs onto students. Adults share a lot of their own opinions grounded in their own cultural identity. It is not uncommon to hear “you should” in teacher- student conversations. |  | Adults frequently talk to students about themselves and encourage self-exploration about their academic and post secondary goals. Adults are skilled at asking questions and helping students build the skills to use their own data and experiences in exploring post secondary options and making course choices. |

N.4 Exploration of post-secondary options is presented in a way in which students explore their own motivations and consider cultural ways of being. Our school avoids assuming the motivations and priorities of the dominant culture when presenting post-secondary information and career exploration. (School Practices)

*Background: Our cultural experiences impact our goals and motivations for our post-secondary plans. Educators whose own cultural background aligns well with the school culture can unintentionally assume and project these onto students. In career exploration, the American values of independence, financial gain, and status are often assumed to rank high. These become an assumed priority for all students; information on careers and post-secondary options are often presented through these lenses. When interviewed, Indigenous college students often include community and family as both a motivator and obligation. When students are guided through exercises to help them identify their own motivations and priorities, they are more informed to make choices for themselves. Guidance that acknowledges the influence of culture can further help students tap into motivation and post-secondary goals that support college persistence.*

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| Presentation of college and career exploration assumes and asserts certain values.  Example: Financial gain is assumed and asserted as a priority in selecting a career and is central to activities with little individual exploration of whether this is a top priority for the student. |  | Students are presented with lots of options and are encouraged to choose the “right fit” for their own goals, but there are not planned activities that guide students through their own self-reflection or exploration of how their culture and family background may influence |  | Students are guided through questions to help them explore their own motivations and goals for post-secondary. An attempt is made to help students think through their own family and cultural values and how these may influence their motivations and choices. |

N.5 Our school recognizes the independent skills and resiliency of our students, even when these skills are not those most commonly expected by western education environments. We directly teach students to recognize and value their own independent skills while also teaching the soft independent skills that many college environments value. We give students the opportunity to practice independent skills with feedback and guide code-shifting as needed. (School Structures)

*Background: College environments typically define and expect soft independent skills that are emotionally-based, skills that include expressing your own opinions and asserting your needs. These are taught early and become second-nature to students whose cultural upbringing aligns with school culture. Students from low-income and/or relationally based cultures often grow up with very different conceptions and values of independence. In these environments, interdependence is given high value and independence sometimes requires making do with what you have and asking for more. These students may not understand that asking for help is viewed as an independent skill and communicates empowerment. It is a misconception to label these students as lacking independent skills. In fact, the resiliency of many of these students is quite admirable viewed in another context. A more culturally responsive approach is to help students identify their own independent and interdependent skills yet also teach them those expected in a college environment. With this information, students can begin to recognize when they need to code-shift and have the skills to do so.*

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| Students who do not naturally express their opinions and initiate help for their school and academic needs are often labeled as unmotivated and are viewed as dependent. |  | Adults recognize that not all students will naturally exhibit emotionally-based independent skills and provide supports our outreach to these students to assist them in navigating school systems and opportunities. |  | Adults in our school recognize that concepts of independence and the value of interdependence is deeply rooted in culture and that students may display these skills in very different ways. Adults recognize and value this diversity of skills. Adults help students recognize the expectations of a school environment and provided guided practice in navigating school needs that require emotionally-based independent skills. |

N.6 Teachers and counselors avoid labeling student and family behavior in the context of western beliefs. Adults in our school participate in home and community outreach, are aware of cultural differences, and know how to help students in identifying ways in which their family and/or cultural supports benefit them. (School Practices)

*Background: We all have a tendency to view the world through our own experiences and values. When we observe people from other cultures, it is natural to make comparisons. If a teacher’s own culture aligns well with a western school culture, it can be easy to misunderstand the actions of students and families if they are different. This can lead to labeling behaviors as “unmotivated”, “not valuing education”, “not interested in their child’s education” etc., when the behaviors observed may just be different based on family or cultural norms. Students are guided in identifying what family and cultural supports are important to them and how to consider these needs in selecting a college.*

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| It is common to hear educators make judgement statements about students and families. Label assume that the lack of Western culture behavior is a deficit or communicates something negative. |  | Adults in the building typically avoid making assumptions or judgements about students and families. |  | Adults in the building are curious about students’ background and cultural experiences. When parents or student’s behavior does not fit within an adult’s expectation, they explore with questions and respect. Adults help students explore and identify colleges that align with their home and culturally support needs |

Appendix C

# Action Plan

## Problem of Practice

The percent of Alaska Native students attending and persisting in college is far below the percent of the high school population. In part, this problem exists due to biases in institutional practices around college readiness and a preference toward western thinking. I will address this problem by identifying practices that a state-run boarding school may incorporate to counteract the tendencies of bias and invite cultural strength into the college preparation process.

## Capstone Project

The capstone of this work will be a school self-assessment tool designed for use in a school improvement process. The assessment tool will serve to reveal potential institutional biases and identify opportunities to capitalize on student cultural strengths as part of a college preparation program. Alaska has set goals for increasing college and career readiness outcomes for Alaska Native students, yet school practices typically rely on national models that do not directly target the needs of this population. This capstone seeks to address the needs of college readiness with a specific lens toward the needs and strengths of Alaska Native students. The tool will help schools identify actionable steps for school improvement. The tool may then be used to progress monitor the implementation of identified program improvements.

## Guiding Questions

What awareness and adjustments may be made to address unintentional bias practices in high schools to address inequities in college preparation for Alaska Native students.

In what ways may a high school draw upon the Indigenous experience or ways-of-knowing and being to enhance college preparation for Alaska Native students.

## Project Overview and Data Collection Plan

Arranged around the three main factors of (a) academic preparedness, (b) cultural identity, and (c) navigation skills, the literature review revealed themes related to institutional bias and missed opportunities to capitalize on Alaska Native student cultural strengths for college preparation. These will be synthesized into descriptive practices designed to counteract bias and capitalize on cultural strength. I will create an assessment tool suite to be used to self-assess the level of implementation of these descriptive practices.

The desired outcome of student college readiness will be tracked using the National College and Career Readiness Indicators associated with Redefining Ready, a national initiative to expand readiness measurements to a matrix of indicators rather than a single test score. NWEA MAP Freshman scores will be used to consider incoming academic variance between cohorts. Comparisons between Freshman incoming NWEA MAP scores with spring Junior NWEA MAP scores to consider academic growth. This data will primarily be used through the school improvement pilot project alongside the assessment tool.

The self-assessment will include a rubric and background information to help clarify assessment statements. The self-assessment is designed to be completed by school officials and educators. The assessment rubric will gather perception data on descriptive practices categorized under each of the three main college readiness factors.

Data will be collected for the purpose of improving and localizing the tool. Cultural experts will provide feedback through interviews. Educators will use the tool and provide feedback on the tool. I will also take notes on the tool in a pilot project that will include a small group of educators using the tool through a school improvement process. Piloting the assessment tool will be the initial data collection for the project. The assessment tool will be revised based on the data analysis and qualitative feedback to increase clarity and address any inconsistencies that may be revealed through the pilot process.

Hypothetically, the implementation of the practices assessed by the assessment tool serve to create an environment conducive to increased college readiness for Alaska Native students. The use of college readiness indicators in this plan does not suggest direct causation, but rather serves as a compliment to the program data for a comprehensive school improvement process. Outcome data may lag program implementation, but ultimately the desired outcomes of increased college readiness will align with improved program implementation as measured by the assessment tool.

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| Step | Task | Description | Timeline & Permissions |
| 1. | Assessment Tool Draft | Drawing on the literature review, I will develop a rubric with corresponding student and parent surveys to assess potentially bias practices in schools related to the three themes of the Problem of practice. | May 2020 |
| 2. | Expert Consultation | The draft assessment tool will be provided to experts to provide input on content, language, and cultural appropriateness. | June- September 2020  Expert permission |
| 3. | Pilot School permission | Necessary agreements will be put into place for initial pilot of assessment tool | March-April 2020  MEHS Permission |
| 4. | Student Outcome and academic monitoring data | Data will be aggregated on college readiness indicators | May- September 2020 |
| 5. | Educator feedback | MEHS teachers will use the tool individually and provide feedback. | September- October 2020 |
| 6. | School Improvement Pilot | A small group of educators will use the tool alongside student outcome data in school improvement process to increase college readiness. | Eliminated due to COVID |
| 7. | Data Analysis |  | July- December 2020 |
| 8. | Assessment Improvement | Based on pilot data, implementation feedback, and expert feedback, adjustments will be made to Assessment Tool. | December 2020-February 2021 |

## Obtaining Permissions

At least five experts will be selected to provide feedback on assessment tools and guidance document. Experts will be selected on their position to provide cultural feedback and knowledge on Alaska Education. Individual permissions will be obtained. Additionally, information about the projected will be provided to Native Organizations with an invitation to provide additional expert feedback.

Permission will be obtained from Mt. Edgecumbe High School to conduct assessment tools. In addition, each individual staff member who chooses to participate in using the tool will be voluntary and require individual permission. Students, families, and the school advisory board will be provided information about the study.

Appendix D

# Permission from Department of Education

Date: April 7, 2020

To: Commissioner Michael Johnson

From: Janelle Vanasse

RE: Informal Letter for Ed.D Project with Gonzaga University

As you know, I am in the process of pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Gonzaga University. This letter serves to update you on my project and seek approval.

The percent of Alaska Native students attending and persisting in college is far below the percent of this demographic in the Alaska high school population; this discrepancy serves as the impetus of my project.  This problem is impacted by unintentional institutional bias around college readiness. My project seeks to create a tool to be used as part of the school improvement process. The assessment tool will assist in revealing biases and identify opportunities to capitalize on student cultural strengths as part of a college preparation program. The key work of my doctorate project is to develop and pilot the assessment tool at Mt. Edgecumbe High School as part of our normal school improvement process.

Educators will use the tool as a self-assessment as part of the normal school improvement process at Mt. Edgecumbe High School. I will document the process and consider the information within the context of other school improvement data. This will include cohort comparisons of freshman map scores, reported only as quintile percentages, and college readiness data reported in the categories of the Re-defining Readiness model. This data is already part of the school improvement model at MEHS and reported to the Advisory board annually. There is no identifiable information in this aggregate data.

After piloting the tool through a school improvement cycle, I hope to further refine it and build a corresponding guidance document with recommendations for ways to address identified needs. These will be gathered through conversations with the experts, past experiences, recommendations from research, and success stories from Alaska schools. If successful, I ultimately hope the assessment tool and guidance document may become available to help other Alaskan schools adjust college preparation practices to better meet the needs of Alaska Native students.

Please let me know if you approve of my continued work in this area as part of the MEHS school improvement process and my use of this work as part of my doctoral program. Thank you for your time and assistance. I look forward to sharing my learning with you.

Janelle Vanasse

Mt. Edgecumbe High School Superintendent

University Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix E

# Sample Letter Provided to Families and Advisory Board

Becoming Aware: Rethinking College Preparation for Alaska Native Students Project

Project Summary and Information

Dear Families,

While I have been encouraging MEHS students over the past year, I too have been going to school. I have been pursing my Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Gonzaga University. Over this next year I will be working on a project for my own schoolwork that I want to share with you.

As you are likely aware, the percent of Alaska Native students attending and staying in college in Alaska is below what is expected. Mt. Edgecumbe High School has long been a leader in our state in preparing students for college. Even at MEHS, however, one of our identified school improvement goals is to increase the number of students prepared for their post-secondary goals. Here at MEHS, students have many different goals including college, vocational school, military career, the work force, or others. All of these are very valuable, but for my project I am focusing on college preparation since it is the most common stated goal of our students.

In this project, students and parents do not need to do anything. Starting with research, I have drafted a self-assessment tool to help identify ways our school can be more culturally responsive in our college preparation practices. I will work with educators and cultural experts in refining the tool. We will pilot the use of the tool through our school improvement cycle here at MEHS. Ideally it will help us identify areas that we can adjust to meet more needs of our students. We will use this data alongside the other data we have identified for our measurable targets in post-secondary readiness such as Alaska Performance Scholarship eligibility and Advanced Placement and Dual Credit participation.

After piloting the tool through a school improvement cycle, I hope to further refine it and build a corresponding guidance document with recommendations for schools. I ultimately hope the assessment tool and guidance document is useful for schools across Alaska in addressing this need.

MEHS is always looking for ways to offer our highly rigorous program in a way that values and honors the rich cultural traditions that our students bring with them to our campus. I hope that this project will further our mission and support our efforts at helping students explore their post-secondary options and prepare for them.

I invite discussion about the project and am available for any questions.

Janelle Vanasse

Appendix F

# Letter to Native Organizations

Date:

To:

From: Janelle Vanasse

RE: Information regarding doctoral project

Good day, I am Janelle Vanasse, I have been an educator in Alaska for over 25 years. Twenty of my years were spent in the Yukon Kuskowkim Delta region; I lived in Bethel and worked for the Lower Kuskokwim District. My children attended Ayaprun Elitnaurvik, the Yup’ik Immersion elementary school in Bethel. My oldest son graduated from Bethel Regional High School and will return there as a teacher this year. I currently work at Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka. My youngest son will graduate from Mt. Edgecumbe High School this year. My early years in Alaska were with the Fairbanks Northstar Borough School District in Fairbanks.

I am writing to let you know about a project I am doing as part of pursuing my Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Gonzaga University. I am interested in any comments, concerns, or feedback you may have regarding the project. The goal of the project is to develop a tool for schools to use to identify potential bias practices in college preparation services.

As you are likely aware, the percent of Alaska Native students attending and persisting in college is far below the percent in the Alaska high school population. To address this discrepancy, schools may need to consider opportunities for cultural responsiveness in college preparation. My project is to create a self-assessment tool to assist schools in considering biases and identify opportunities to capitalize on student cultural strengths as part of a college preparation program. Dr. Panigkak Agatha John Shields is serving as my mentor for the project. A key activity of my project is to develop the self-assessment tool and to pilot it at Mt. Edgecumbe High School. The first draft of the assessment tool will be based on research. Dr. Panigkak John-Shields and other cultural leaders will then provide further feedback for revision. Finally, the tool will be used by Mt. Edgecumbe educators who will also provide feedback for revision. Toward the end of my project, I hope to develop a corresponding guidance document with examples of ways schools can address the identified needs.

Mt. Edgecumbe High school will use the process to help identify next-steps in building a culturally responsive college-going culture. If successful, I hope the assessment tool and a corresponding guidance document may become available to help other Alaskan schools adjust college preparation practices to better meet the needs of Alaska Native students.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about the project. I can be reached by email at [Jvanasse@zagmail.gonzaga.edu](mailto:Jvanasse@zagmail.gonzaga.edu) or by phone 907-966-3201. If you have anyone in your organization that would like to be kept abreast of the project, please forward their name and contact information.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Janelle Vanasse

Mt. Edgecumbe High School Superintendent

University Ed.D. Candidate