



Examining the Experiences of Post-Secondary Navajo Women Leaders at Diné College for Promoting Decolonial and Anticolonial Approaches to Education Practice

Dissertation Proposal Presentation
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Introduction

Study Background

- Leadership positions of Navajo women is the forefront for Navajo people now.
- According to the American Council on Education, only 30% of all college and university presidents are women, and only 5% are women of color (Billy, 2019).
- Extreme exercise of tribal sovereignty was establishment of Navajo Community College in 1966.
- Since establishment in 1966- Diné College's mission has been to integrate Navajo philosophy within curriculum, attitude and administering of the college.
- Self-Determination was at once an act of defiance and is used as a celebration of identity and empowerment for Indigenous women. (Reclaiming and honoring the identity of Navajo women, culture and teaching)
- Schools now are playing an even larger role to ensure that the language, culture and history of the Navajo are maintained.
- Today, possibly no institution has the tarnished history of advocating for colonization than institutions of higher education.



Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the intersection of gender, leadership, decision-making, and cultural teachings from the perspective of Indigenous women in an Indigenous post-secondary setting as a means of upholding decolonial and anticolonial approaches in education.



Study Gap

Studies show that TCUs are central to advancing sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and self-determination (Crazy Bull, 2015; Billy, 2019), yet little is known about how Indigenous women leaders at these institutions draw upon cultural teachings and practices in their leadership. By centering Navajo women's voices and cultural frameworks, this study addresses a significant gap in Indigenous leadership research, gender studies, and justice studies.



Problem Statement

It is unknown how post-secondary Navajo women leaders at Diné College use Navajo cultural teachings, stories and experiences to inform their leadership approaches to practice.



Research Questions

- RQ 1:** How do Indigenous postsecondary Navajo women leaders at Diné College define, implement, and understand leadership practices intended to promote decolonial or anticolonial approaches to education in their work at TCU's?
- RQ 2:** What role do culturally specific beliefs and practices play in shaping the leadership philosophies and practices of Navajo women postsecondary TCU leaders?
- RQ 3:** What recommendations do Indigenous postsecondary Diné women TCU leaders have for preparing the next generation of Navajo women leaders?



Study Significance

This study will address the intersectional approach between leadership and cultural teachings from the perspective of Navajo women leaders in post-secondary settings.



Literature Review

To better understand the need for this study, it is important to consider the following questions:

1. Identity, Culture, and Navajo Epistemologies of Leadership
2. Colonization, Education and Sovereignty.
3. Indigenous Women, Gender and education leadership in post-secondary education
4. Justice, decoloniality, and leadership in higher education: Why decolonial and anticolonial approaches are needed.

This literature review presents a discussion of these questions and research related to these topics.



Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology

- Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM) to reflect a constellation of approaches that honor the relational, collective, and ceremonial nature of Indigenous knowledge production (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).
- Case study will be used to describe and characterize the participants' leadership through experiences in post-secondary education. According to (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) a case study provides context in which participants experience life.
- Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozho (SNBH) methodology will also be used to extend current discussions and understandings to guide this study. Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hozhó (SNBH) Diné philosophy model will be used and integrated.



Research Design

A narrative research design will be used to understand the experiences, perspectives and beliefs of the Navajo women leaders interviewed.

- To begin, we start by asking why stories matter?
 - Stories serve as an integral process to define our origin and serve a purpose.
 - Indigenous knowledge systems incorporate a holistic approach toward living. Specifically, focusing on relationships, responsibility and reciprocity.
 - Cumulative knowledge that is framed in relation to place.
 - Indigenous knowledge is not one size fits all and is central to who you are.



Research Design cont.

- Individual interviews will be used to examine experiences and perceptions of Navajo women leadership in Tribally Controlled College post-secondary setting.
- A list of interview questions will drive the interview process and six participants will be interviewed in a semi-structured interview setting.
- A list of open-ended questions and probing or follow-up questions will be used. I will present these questions in a methodical manner.
- The interviews will be transcribed.
- The data will be analyzed for emerging themes.



Limitations- Ethical Concerns

- Limited Research on women of color (gender and post-secondary education)
- Limited research on Indigenous women leadership (Urban vs. non urban areas)
- Ethical concerns of Indigenous communities rooted from colonizing past practices
- The criteria for research in Indigenous communities must not just be Indigenous criteria, but decolonizing criteria (Smith, 2012).



Research Positionality

- Navajo cultural teachings, stories, and practices have shaped my beliefs, outlook and approach toward daily life as well as my professional aspirations and educational journey within this doctoral program.
- As a Navajo, I believe we have an innate responsibility to incorporate our Navajo beliefs, values and philosophies into our daily practices which involve establishing respect and connections with our families and community.
- While philosophies can change over time, our core values do not.
- As an educator, we make connections for students with the assignment, text, classroom, school, community, and world. If I look at my research I have the same expectation. I want to be relevant and impactful.
- I don't want to be discarded and put in a separate category because I am a native researcher.
- I am challenged by the identity idea of relying on story means that the focus is on Native and not on researcher.



Timeline

- **IRB Approvals:** September–October 2025 (Diné College, Navajo Nation, Arizona State University).
- **Data Collection:** October 22–November 30, 2025.
- **Data Analysis:** December 1, 2025–January 31, 2026.
- **Writing Findings:** January–February 2026.
- **Defense and Final Submission:** March–April 2026.
- **Graduation:** May 2026.



Ahe'hee!