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# Indigenous Women's Approaches to Educational Leadership: Creating Space for Indigenous Women in Education

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## Abstract

*This article addresses the problematic deficiency in research and scholarship that centers Indigenous women's voices in educational leadership. As Indigenous women scholars, we engaged a qualitative study that involved Indigenous women leaders from across the United States, and our discussion in this work focuses on the perspectives of Indigenous women working in education. We first provide a current snapshot of Indigenous women in postsecondary education and review preliminary theories on Indigenous leadership. We highlight cultural, social, and political factors that influence Indigenous women educational leaders, and we conclude with recommendations for the cultivation of future Indigenous women leaders.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous women; Indigenous educational leadership; Indigenous women and higher education

## Introduction

People do not have to assert, "Our women are powerful" any more than they need to argue "Our children are playful" ...in many societies where these characteristics are true, they are also obvious. (Klein & Ackerman, 1995, p. 4)

**T**his statement from Klein & Ackerman rings true for many Indigenous people. We know that our women are powerful. We recognize and respect the important places they hold in our tribes and societies. We know our histories, and so the idea and practice of Indigenous women as leaders is *nothing new to us*. We write this research article as Indigenous women scholars and women who have served in various leadership positions where we have noticed the absence of Indigenous women's stories and our exclusion from leadership scholarship that is dominated by Western narratives.

We begin our discussion by introducing ourselves and why we do this work: Robin "Zape-tah-hol-ah" Minthorn is a citizen of the Kiowa Tribe

of Oklahoma, descendant of the Apache/Nez Perce/Umatilla and Assiniboine Nations. She is Associate Professor in Education and a Director of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Washington in Tacoma. Her research focuses broadly on Indigenous leadership, and more specifically on Indigenous leadership in higher education and Native American student experiences in higher education. She has worked with various Indigenous education organizations such as NIEA (National Indian Education Association), ASHE (Association for the Study of Higher Education) and activist founded organizations, such as the NIYC, Inc. (National Indian Youth Council). Heather J. Shotton is a citizen of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes and is a descendant of the Kiowa and Cheyenne Tribes. She serves as Associate Professor in Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and her scholarship focuses on Indigenous women, Indigenous student experiences, and Indigenous Higher Education. She has worked with and served in leadership roles for Indigenous education organizations at the state and national levels. We are both mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters, and we underscore that the connection to our research is not solely based on our academic and professional lives, but rather is part of the *heartwork* we do to ensure Indigenous representation in historically oppressive settings for the betterment of our communities.

In traditional<sup>1</sup> Indigenous societies women played central and varied roles, and historically it was not uncommon for Indigenous women to hold spiritual, political, and economic power (Lajimodiere, 2011). While excluded from much of the colonial scholarship, we only need to turn to our own traditional stories and histories to understand the critical role that women played in many Indigenous societies.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous scholars have noted that traditionally Indigenous women had considerable influence on religious, political, and economic matters, noting the egalitarian nature of tribal

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<sup>1</sup> When using the term traditional, we mean during the timeframe of pre-colonization and pre-contact.

<sup>2</sup> An example of this can be further explored in Lilikala Kame'eihewa's (2001) *Na'Wa'Hine Kapu: Divine Hawaiian Women*.

societies (Denetdale, 2006; Lajimodiere, 2011; Mihesuah, 1996, 2003; Risling Baldy, 2017). Denetdale (2006) notes that “in traditional societies, gender roles were often egalitarian, meaning that both males and females were crucial to the survival and perpetuation of culture and society” (p. 10).

The invasion of what is now known as North America and the establishment of settler colonial nation-states not only disrupted, but also sought to strategically erase traditional understandings of gender and the power of Indigenous women. The imposition of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism through settler colonialism involved the “enforcement of ‘proper’ gender roles” (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013), which did not recognize the power or influence of Indigenous women. As Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill further note, “as settler nations sought to disappear Indigenous peoples’ complex structures of government and kinship, the management of Indigenous peoples’ gender roles and sexuality was also key in remaking Indigenous peoples into settler state citizens” (2013, p. 15). Thus, the exclusion of the critical roles of Indigenous women from the scholarship on Indigenous people should be viewed as an intentional act of our erasure and an extension of the settler colonial project. As a result, a number of Indigenous scholars have been critical of the exclusion of Indigenous women’s voices from the scholarship on Indigenous people (Cook-Lynn, 1996; Mihesuah, 2003; Tippeconnic-Fox, 2008), including our experiences and perspectives as they relate to leadership.

Today, Indigenous women continue to have central roles in our tribes and communities, and many have taken on important roles that mediate the linkages between tribal nations and settler society. Indigenous women are activists, educators, and scholars and have emerged as critical leaders, particularly in the realm of education. However, our deeper understanding of their roles in educational leadership, their journeys to leadership, their nuanced involvement in specific organizations or movements, and their unique values is severely lacking. Indigenous leadership perspectives have previously been explored amongst Indigenous students (Minthorn, 2014; Minthorn, Wanger, & Shotton, 2013; Williams, 2012), tribal college leaders (Johnson, 1997), and tribal leaders (Harris & Wasilewski, 1992), but research has not fully addressed Indigenous women’s

educational leadership perspectives. This article challenges these deficits and aims to increase understanding of contemporary Indigenous women and educational leadership through a qualitative study involving 15 Indigenous women educational leaders from across the United States (U.S.).

Prior to presenting our research, we begin with a brief overview of two key considerations regarding Indigenous women and educational leadership—a current snapshot of Indigenous women in postsecondary education and preliminary theories on Indigenous leadership. We then discuss our study highlighting cultural, social, and political factors that influence Indigenous women educational leaders, and finally, we conclude with recommendations for the cultivation of future Indigenous women leaders. As Indigenous women scholars, we contribute to critical scholarship on Indigenous women and educational leadership, and through our research, we offer Indigenous women’s own voices regarding their leadership development and experiences.

### **Indigenous Women in Postsecondary Education**

When considering Indigenous women in education, we first underscore the importance of understanding the numbers of women accessing higher education and obtaining college/university degrees. Today, more Indigenous women are present in the academy than ever before. The number of Indigenous women enrolled in higher education institutions from Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs<sup>3</sup>) to historically white, four-year institutions is roughly double the representation of Native men (Knapp & Kelly-Reid, 2010). For example, the number of American Indian/Alaska

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<sup>3</sup> TCUs are historically Indigenous-serving 2-year institutions in the U.S. offering Associate’s degrees; however, a number of TCUs now offer 4-year degrees (Bachelor’s) and some advanced degrees (Master’s). For more information on TCUs, see the American Indian Higher Education Consortium: <http://www.aihec.org>.

Native women enrolled in higher education in the U.S. in 2012 was 104,300, compared to 68,600 men (NCES, 2015)<sup>4</sup>.

For the past 30 years, tribal communities and Indigenous scholars have observed the growing presence of Indigenous women in higher education, with a four-fold increase over that time period in the number of Indigenous women earning master's, doctorate, and professional degrees in the U.S. (DeVoe, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). Among the faculty ranks, data show that in 2015, Indigenous women comprised 51 percent (1,806) of the total Indigenous faculty in postsecondary education, a steady increase from 2005 where Indigenous women represented 47 percent (1,534) of the Indigenous faculty (McFarland et al., 2017). Demographics of Indigenous women in higher education vary depending on life circumstances. The age range for Native women in higher education is between 18 and 60 years old; some Native women will start their journey to college immediately after high school, while others wait until after they have raised their own families to pursue higher education (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007).

Compared to research on other populations in the U.S., the literature on Indigenous women in postsecondary education is sparse, but there are a few key pieces of scholarship that address Indigenous women specifically. White Shield (2009) conducted a qualitative study with eight Indigenous women in higher education who discussed their own educational journeys, and four clustered themes were identified regarding what contributed to the success of these women in higher education. White Shield identified: 1) spirituality, 2) journey perceived through traditional cultural stories, 3) traditional roles as identity and cultural strength, and 4) family loyalty as key components of Indigenous women's educational journeys. The overarching finding from White Shield's study was that the higher education journey for Indigenous women was grounded in *love*—love for

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<sup>4</sup> This article does not focus on Indigenous men in higher education/post-secondary opportunities, though there are significant concerns among Indigenous educational researchers and others regarding the participation of AI/AN males in the U.S. The authors have chosen to focus on the Indigenous women as our narratives are still not well-represented in the literature.

their communities and families. Commitment to community and the central role of traditional Indigenous cultural factors have also been identified in other research on Indigenous women in postsecondary education programs. Shotton (2008, 2018) explored the experiences of eight Indigenous women in doctoral education programs in the U.S. and found that reliance on spirituality, grounding and connection to their Indigenous cultures, and desires to give back were integral to their success, which we understand as their persistence and completion of their doctoral studies.

That element of commitment to community for Indigenous women is consistently a major motivator for postsecondary education, which is linked with Indigenous women's desires to utilize their doctoral degrees to "give back" to their own and other Indigenous communities. Waterman and Lindley (2013), analyzed findings from two separate qualitative studies that investigated the journeys of 37 Haudenosaunee and 16 Northern Arapaho women college graduates. Through a familial cultural capital lens, they found that valuing community was a core yet unique strength for Indigenous women. They explain,

Familial cultural capital, as demonstrated by family and community support, is a part of community cultural wealth, the culture and traditions of Native communities—the glue—that binds a community. The women wanted to give back to their communities; they did not pursue education as a means to escape the reservation, but as *a vehicle to strengthen their nations*. The women valued their Native communities, cultures, and traditions as a distinct form of social capital, Native capital, which they relied on as they negotiated sometimes-hostile higher education environments. The point is that the women viewed their culture and communities as capital and used them as such, and through concepts of Native capital and resiliency to nation building. (2013, p. 155, our emphasis)

Likewise, Shotton (2018) found that reciprocity played a key role in the motivation of Indigenous women in doctoral education. In her study, reciprocity was framed as *an act of nation building*, where Native women viewed doctoral degrees as a means to give back to and better their tribal communities. Scholars have further built on these notions regarding



Indigenous women's commitment to community and building community for Indigenous people in academia. In their discussion of sisterhood practices in the academy, Shotton, Tachine, Nelson, Minthorn, and Waterman (2018) point to the responsibility Indigenous women have to future generations of scholars. They explain,

A part of our relationship as sister scholars and responsibility as Indigenous scholars is being mindful of future generations. This means being intentional in how we create space for others who are coming behind us. We have a responsibility to continue to widen our circle as Indigenous sister scholars to welcome more Indigenous women scholars at all levels (p. 9).

When we examine the literature on Indigenous women in postsecondary education, we note Indigenous cultural values, the strength of Indigenous women, and their commitment to community as central to their experiences. We can observe that as they navigate higher education, including graduate programs, Indigenous women carry forward the teachings and values of their tribal communities and utilize these as both resources and inspiration to guide their journeys through education.

### **Indigenous Leadership**

A second key consideration we offer regarding Indigenous women and educational leadership is the need to explore current and historical understandings of Indigenous leadership, particularly in relation to dominant definitions and modes of leadership that have been determined by Western/European societies. The general literature on leadership, leadership development, and educational leadership is expansive; however, as with postsecondary education research, the broader conventional scholarship fails to incorporate or adequately address Indigenous perspectives. Minthorn (2014) asserts that understanding the constructs of Indigenous leadership, which she argues is culturally-based and informed, is important in examining the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous leaders today.

Based on existing Indigenous leadership research, we can glean some important insight into Indigenous leadership values. For example, scholars have identified three major factors that shape Indigenous perspectives of leadership in the U.S.: cultural identity, community engagement and social responsibility, and leadership values. At the same time, as there are clearly distinct Indigenous cultures, languages, and geographies in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>, Fitzgerald (2002) addresses the challenge of developing a universal definition of Indigenous leadership, explaining that Indigenous leadership “may be exercised in multiple ways in a variety of settings” (p. 17). What is thus suggested is that there are two layers of Indigenous leadership to consider when we understand what it means to be an Indigenous leader: (1) traditional or community leadership that derives from an Indigenous worldview is an essential part of how we act and live; and (2) leadership that serves as advocacy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Both of these layers are intricately intertwined and guide how we enact and live out our leadership as Indigenous people.

Moreover, the community engagement and social responsibility components of Indigenous leadership are integral to Native American communities (Johnson, Benham & Van Alstine, 2003). Portman and Garrett (2005) propose that a foundational value of leadership for Native Americans is the holding of a shared vision and responsibility. Wise-Erickson (2003) examines team-based leadership and the values of Native American leadership within tribal communities and finds congruence between values and the need to create a community-based leadership model that integrates roles and values and the holistic<sup>6</sup> natures of Indigenous communities with concepts of leadership. Since leadership research and subsequent understandings and practices are dominated by Western conceptualizations, we also argue that exploring how to create

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<sup>5</sup> There are over 570 tribal nations in the U.S., for more information see the National Congress of American Indians: <http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes>

<sup>6</sup> Holistic references to the complete person and being. Meaning not just the professional and personal but on a deeper level the many pieces that make us who we are in our emotional, physical, social and cultural parts.

understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations with regard to notions of community engagement and social responsibility is essential.

When we further examine the extant scholarship on educational leadership, the absence of Indigenous voices is even more glaring. Indigenous women's voices are left out altogether (or at best marginalized) despite the considerable scholarship on other populations of women and educational leadership (Shakeshaft, 1987; Adler et al., 1993; Ozga, 1993; Chase, 1995; Court, 1995, 1998; Limerick & Lingard, 1995; Grogan, 1996; Blackmore, 1999; Strachan, 1999; Coleman, 2001). Scholarship that does not address race, ethnicity, and culture is problematic, and Fitzgerald (2002) notes,

Women as educational leaders have been theorized about as if they are a homogenous group and considerations of circumstances such as ethnicity/social class/location and beliefs have been discounted. Or, at the very least, distinctions between and among women have collapsed in the attempt to provide a meta-narrative that describes and defines women's experiences and practices as educational leaders (p. 10)

The dangers of homogenizing women educational leaders are varied, but one concern we and other scholars raise is that homogenizing processes privilege white women, whereby whiteness is taken for granted as normative (Adler et al., 1993; Fitzgerald, 2003). Fitzgerald urges us to be critical, challenging discussions of gender and educational leadership to ensure that the position of white women is not placed at the center of our theorizing and forcing Indigenous women further into the margins.

More recent scholarship has started to explore contemporary Indigenous women and leadership. In a study of nine Indigenous women leaders Lajimodiere (2011) identified characteristics and experiences of Indigenous women leaders, including their support networks (e.g. family and mentors), the importance of tribal culture and spirituality, survival skills that contributed to success, and having off-reservation (non-tribal land based) educational and career experiences. These themes spoke to what women leaders considered strengths and what motivated them to

keep moving forward in their work. Additionally, Lajimodiere identified themes that spoke to the resiliency of Indigenous women leaders that allows them to grow stronger through and in spite of difficult or challenging life experiences. Common threads across women's experiences included poverty early in life, experiencing male gender bias, and gendered sabotaging where women are pitted against each other<sup>7</sup>. It is important to note that to us, resiliency as referenced in Lajimodiere's work refers to thriving and leading despite experiences that are meant to harm us and finding beauty in our journeys as Indigenous women leaders. We assert that what is integral to who we are as Indigenous women and what connects us is that we are resilient, principles that our own research speaks to, thus constructing an Indigenous community narrative that we uphold.

Building on the emerging, yet limited, scholarship on Indigenous women leaders, we continue to advocate for more research that privileges our voices and perspectives and that also serves to unsettle the normative status of white men and white women and their versions and experiences of leadership. The research we present takes up the call from Indigenous and ally scholars to continue to conduct research that honors the abilities of Indigenous women to tell our own stories and the power to define our own realities (Fitzgerald, 2002; Mihesuah, 2003).

## **Influences of Indigenous Women in Educational Leadership**

### *Methods*

Our study employed a qualitative design using a narrative approach that was guided by the framework of an "Indigenous Research Paradigm" (Wilson, 2008). Because we sought to understand the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous women with leadership roles and experiences, it was imperative to approach the research in a way that was established and

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<sup>7</sup> For more information about this scholarship, see Dr. Lajimodiere's scholarship and profile: <https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/morningstar/index.html>

guided by Indigenous values and the privileging of Indigenous women's voices. Indigenous Research Paradigm is not only aligned with these approaches, but also requires them and posits that Indigenous knowledges, values, and lived experiences strengthen the research rather than function as what conventional researchers might consider bias. More importantly, according to Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, an Indigenous Research Paradigm approach is based in the supposition that the research is not being conducted *on* people or participants but *with* participants (Wilson, 2008). Such participatory and relational approaches to research speak back to positivist, extractive, and exploitative research practices.

The personal narratives of 15 Indigenous women leaders served as the data source for the aspects of the study we present here, and we were guided by a broad and open-ended inquiry to learn about the experiences of Indigenous women leaders. We were interested in the following questions:

1. *How do Indigenous women approach leadership?*
2. *How do Indigenous women view themselves as leaders?*
3. *How do leadership roles impact Indigenous women?*
4. *In what context do Indigenous women serve in leadership?*

Data was collected through one-to-one, in-depth interviews with Indigenous women leaders from across the United States, and interviews were conducted in a personal space chosen by the women where they felt comfortable (e.g. their homes or private offices). Another tenet of Indigenous Research Paradigms is the relationship built between researchers and participants, which effectively takes place through face-to-face in person contact; thus, we traveled to spend time with the women leaders and conducted interviews in a manner that allowed for their comfort as a mechanism of relationality. As Indigenous researchers, familiar with many of the women in this study, spending time reestablishing our connections and caring for our relationships with each woman was an important part of the research process.

The women represented in this study identify as Indigenous and represent various tribal nations from within the United States. They range

in age from their 30s to their 70s and serve in diverse leadership roles—from tribal government, education administration, and non-profit arenas, and are recognized in the broader local and national Native communities as leaders. In this particular article, we have pulled from findings focusing on Indigenous women leaders in educational settings specifically. These women include Tribal College and University presidents, university administrators, leaders of education organizations, and state Indian education leaders.

### **Major themes: Cultural, political, and social factors**

Three major themes emerged from the findings of our study regarding the experiences of Indigenous women in educational leadership and factors that guided the development and practice of their leadership values, and we discuss them here. The themes are, (1) cultural factors; (2) political factors; and (3) social factors.

#### *Cultural Factors: Tribal communities, service, and humility*

The cultural factors that we identified were largely influenced by tribal identity and Indigenous women's connections to their tribal communities. These factors were also strongly tied to their own interpretations of Indigenous values of service and humility.

Throughout the narratives, each woman identified connection to their tribal communities through identification of their clans, tribal names, and the relationships they practice within and through these affiliations. The women talked intimately about their clanship, connection to community, the values that were taught to them by their elders, and how they carry those teachings with them. One participant who serves as a Vice President at the university level said, "Don't compromise who you are. Remember—so that's why going back to my childhood, having been raised by my grandmother to have some of those teachings, it's almost like I was that little child again." This woman starts off with stories of her childhood and the cultural ways of raising a child and how she also gave her oldest

child that same experience of being closely raised and guided by grandparents and around the tribal language and ways of being.

Furthermore, when recounting their professional backgrounds, each woman had worked with their own tribal communities to some degree or had found ways of working with other tribal communities. We do note that none of the educational women leaders worked within their own tribal communities at the time of this study, but each worked directly or indirectly with Native American students and communities. For example, serving in roles such as tribal liaisons for universities or executive directors of non-profit organizations that promote Indigenous education are ways these women are still advocating for tribal sovereignty, nation building, and Indigenous peoples' access to culturally relevant education. Despite not working professionally in their own communities, these women spoke explicitly about their own tribal identities, which relates to seminal literature proposed by Indigenous scholars who argued that Indigenous women define themselves primarily by their tribal identities (Gunn Allen, 1992). So, we were not surprised that for the women in this study, those connections to their tribal communities, no matter where they found themselves, was an important part of the ways in which they understood their own leadership development.

Service was also viewed as central to the current leadership roles for the women participants. More than merely service, which in popular literature and scholarship predominantly refers to volunteerism, the life work of these women embodied culturally-based values of service to their people, for their tribal nations. Participants viewed their life work professionally as serving Indigenous peoples and all of Indian country<sup>8</sup>. One woman working in a Tribal College linked service to her leadership role as such:

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<sup>8</sup> Indian Country refers to tribal nations and urban Indigenous communities in the United States. It refers to the relational power and connections we find amongst Indigenous peoples within and across the United States.

I feel like this school is owed to our people. It is a sovereign right. It is a treaty right. If we let it fail, we fail our people. That's how strongly I feel, I feel that we owe it to our Indian people to work hard, work as hard as we can mind, body, and soul to get this school to a place where our Indian people will be proud of.

She is referencing the broader rights and responsibilities of this specific Tribal College to participate in its own commitment to fulfilling a treaty right to Indian education that was promised to many tribal nations in the United States that have binding political agreements with the United States government<sup>9</sup>. Her own leadership role is linked with her motivation in that she understands the work she is doing and the purpose the college is fulfilling is one that serves as a pathway to honoring those treaties and to build a sense of community through the students attending the Tribal College.

Other women discussed service in reference to cultural ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance, which is a religious ceremony of the Lakota peoples, and how that is sacred and a part of tribal traditions and teachings from elders. As one Lakota tribal affiliation and a CEO of a non-profit education organization participant stated, "He [Lakota linguist and activist] taught me that people do the best they can. You're on a path. You do the best you can." What we take away from these participants is that service, as a culturally-defined term, is a value embedded in how and why Indigenous women educators engage professional roles in leadership.

We must note that initially, at the start of interviews, we observed that it was hard for some women to identify themselves as "leaders," even though their positions and roles were specifically labeled as leadership. When asking them about their journeys through education and into

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on treaty rights and the United States government reference to: Wilkins, D. E., & Lomawaima, K. T. (2001). *Uneven ground: American Indian sovereignty and federal law*. Norman [Okla.]: University of Oklahoma Press, ©2001. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cato5987a&AN=unm.45879563&site=eds-live&scope=site>.



leadership, each woman was willing to share, but they were very humble in discussing their specific contributions and roles. For instance, one of the women who worked as a statewide Indian education Director said, “In terms of leadership, I don’t know if it was something that I sought—that I cannot stand to sit by and see mediocrity, and when there’s work to do, you just roll your sleeves up and you just pitch in, you just do what needs to be done.” For her, leadership was not about the status of gaining a leadership role and the external recognition that comes with these roles; rather, she was concerned with doing the work for the sake of the organization and its mission for students, communities, schools, and so forth, without worrying about receiving credit for her contributions. This concern for the work paired with what we interpreted as humility emerged from multiple narratives whereby Indigenous women acknowledged that leadership was not defined by the individual but rather the group or team. As was explained by the same Indian education Director, “I could not have done anything that I’ve done without a team... the collective wisdom of a group was just phenomenal... I think that speaks to the heart of leadership. You’re not a leader unless you’ve got people working with you. It’s not all about one person.”

Furthermore, part of thinking about what constitutes the team, the group, communities, and others is considering future generations, and cultural factors that influence Indigenous women educational leaders speak to their sense of responsibility to not only their families, communities, their professional affiliations, but also most importantly, future generations of women leaders. As one woman working as a Director of a Native American student center states, “We have responsibilities to young girls, who whether we like it or not, we are role modeling some things for them. You got to think about what messages you are sending to them because they are very impressionable.”

### *Political Factors: Leadership potential*

Indigenous women’s experiences in educational leadership also implied intersections with political factors. While Lajimodiere’s work

identified political factors (i.e. sabotage from other Indigenous leaders or tribal politics, men and women) as a negative factor for Indigenous women leaders (2011), the political factors described by our participants presented a departure from this finding and in their current roles. Political factors were actually discussed in generally positive terms and centered on interactions with influential individuals and validation received from those individuals that recognized Indigenous women's potential as leaders.

This recognition of their potential as leaders often came from key individuals in administrative positions, from mentors, or from community members and community leaders. Many of the participants in our study did not initially or actively seek out leadership positions; rather, they were often asked to step into leadership roles by others who recognized their potential. One of the women serving as a university administrator explained that she did not apply for her current leadership role, but instead, she was appointed by the president of her institution and based on the recommendations of key university and community members. The recognition by others was often the result of their demonstrated work ethic, previous work, and personal qualities of these Indigenous women. Another university administrator participant added that part of her development was due to other people in influential positions who had helped to mentor her: "I've been very fortunate to be mentored by individuals at the university. For whatever reason, [they] took me under their wing, and I don't know if it was because they saw something in me, but folks who were fairly influential, VPs [Vice Presidents] and associate VPs, who sort of took me under their wing."

Thus, recognition of Indigenous women's leadership potential by others and their subsequent mentorship by influential individuals holding institutional political power (and not necessarily always other Indigenous peoples in those roles) was key in the pathways to leadership for these women. What we deem as this political factor was also tied to what the women described as opportunities presented to them throughout their educational, professional, and leadership journeys. The opportunities came in the form of the ability to pursue graduate education, interact with

influential individuals, and take on additional learning roles and positions that would lead to their current leadership roles.

*Social Factors: Family and the power of encouragement*

Social factors in this study refer to interactions and roles within family structures, as well as the network of Indigenous women's relationships that serve to support and encourage Indigenous women in leadership.

The role of family in Indigenous communities is important in shaping individuals (e.g. socialization) and keeping strong ties to family members—immediate and extended—was held as sacred by the women. Indigenous women leaders spoke candidly about their parents, brothers, sisters, children, and grandchildren. The women discussed the special places that their family members had in their lives, sometimes mentioning one side of the family explicitly (e.g. father's or mother's side of the family). Of the educational leaders we worked with, there were single mothers and those who had attended college while raising their child(ren). The notion of family was held intimately by these women as they talked about their own evolving family structures. For example, in addition to being single mothers, some were the oldest child in their families—which meant leading the care for siblings or relatives—and some had needed to assume leadership roles within their own families after the passing of their parents.

Familial bonds and responsibilities were often discussed in depth and observed during interviews. For example, one of the women serving as a Tribal College President was taking care of her grandchild while her niece attended class on campus. She stated, "Value family and...giving them the time...it's okay if you need to take care of your mom, your dad; within reason, we will understand." Our participants were conscientious of balancing familial roles in combination with their leadership roles. The Indigenous women leaders often spoke of the influence their own family members had on them in their early years and then spoke of the influence they had in their current leadership role. This included their connection to their grandparents, parents, brothers or sisters as influencing who they are.

They also spoke to how they navigated being parents or grandparents by either including their children in the various roles or that their children were their motivation. They also spoke of a futurity consciousness in understanding what they are building will have an impact on future generations.

Encouragement was another recurrent theme that emerged from the narratives. Encouragement was received from family, supervisors, administrators, and community members. Participants also explained that they were initially encouraged to pursue graduate education, to apply for key positions that would lead to their leadership roles, and received general encouragement throughout their lives. This was particularly salient in their educational journeys. For many of the women, the decision to pursue graduate education was the result of encouragement from key individuals. For example, for one woman working as a Vice President at a university the decision to begin a graduate program was the result of her boss encouraging her to do so, despite her initial hesitation and fear that graduate work might be too difficult. Therefore, we found that encouragement speaks critically to the role of mentors/potential mentors who not only recognize Indigenous women's potential, but also actively find ways to support these women.

Another woman added, "That whole experience of working on my doctorate opened up a lot for me. At that time working on my doctorate, I was really blessed because there were people around me who really believed in me." Receiving strong encouragement from family and community members was especially meaningful. Another Indigenous woman leader shared that her family's encouragement was critical when she was in college: "I have a large extended family that have been to college, so I sort of had people tell me, "This is what you want to do," and encourage me along the way." She was speaking to the fact that she was a second-generation college student, so the expectation was that she was going to college because many in her extended family had gone so she had the modeling and insights on the path to get there. Perhaps most importantly overall, the encouragement that Indigenous women leaders in education received from family, mentors, and community members throughout their experiences

helped to not only initiate their pathways and to sustain them through their journeys, but also to give them the necessary confidence to take on inevitable and new challenges.

## **Recommendations for Future Indigenous Women Educational Leaders**

### *What Indigenous women leaders teach us*

We have argued that the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous women in leadership positions has not been fully extrapolated—whether at local or at broader levels that seek to understand common themes across different Indigenous nations and Indigenous women’s experiences. Over the last few decades, however, Indigenous women have increasingly emerged as prominent leaders in education, serving as TCU presidents, administrative leaders at both Indigenous-serving and non-Indigenous higher education institutions, as state and national government education leaders, and leaders of local, regional, national, and international educational organizations. However, the role of tribal cultures in their development and how we can inform broader understandings of leadership and women’s roles remains incomplete in the research. This study provides insight into these questions, and what we present may help us to better understand Indigenous women in educational leadership with implications for future research and current practices to support and guide more Indigenous women in leadership roles.

Our findings clearly indicate that leadership is uniquely conceptualized from Indigenous women’s perspectives. These findings are relatively consistent with other research that indicates that leadership practices and underlying values are perceived differently from western norms when viewed through an Indigenous lens (Minthorn, 2014; Williams, 2012). Moreover, we have demonstrated that leadership is altogether not approached from an individual perspective by our participants; rather, leadership is distinctly tied to community, family, and service.

The narratives of the Indigenous women in this study expand our understanding of culturally-based references to service and commitment to community and indicate connections between these and mentorship, encouragement, and support for Indigenous women. The women in this study pointed towards mentorship as key in their development as leaders and acknowledged that they had benefited from their mentors, and as a result, felt a responsibility to mentor others. Mentoring was an intentional act, and although Indigenous women did not seek out leadership roles, they actively sought to mentor other Indigenous people, especially other Indigenous women. This desire goes beyond giving back and is related to the responsibility of creating paths that will contribute to the greater and future good of tribal communities, and we believe this philosophy has important implications for future research and practice.

Future research should further explore mentoring relationships—their dynamics, practices, visions, and outcomes—for Indigenous women. The women in this study indicated that their mentors were men and women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Further examination is needed to understand how these mentoring relationships as they relate to leadership development and experiences are built and nurtured and the specific roles they play for Indigenous women. Memorable mentoring for Indigenous women occurs in higher education settings, so understanding how we as educators develop intentional mentoring opportunities for Indigenous women is critical.

We believe our work also has implications for how we support and develop Indigenous women leaders in higher education, which includes addressing the need for increased representation of Indigenous role models in institutions of higher education and establishing and maintaining connections between higher education and Indigenous leaders outside of colleges and universities. Finally, we must deconstruct Western notions of pathways to leadership and definitions of leadership. Our findings demonstrate that leadership extends beyond the individual in ways closely tied to Indigenous values, and we believe that there is a place for these values in multiple Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings. The women in this study humbly spoke of leadership as “choosing” them. While we did not

pursue further explanation regarding why women did not view themselves as leaders, and it is likely that this is related to values of humility that are consistent with many tribal values and that in tribal communities, individuals are often chosen to be leaders because of qualities that they possess—ultimately decided by the broader community. Further exploration of these concept is necessary to better understand leadership and its development over time.

### *Human rights education and Indigenous women leaders*

We see a strong fit between our research on Indigenous women in leadership and education and human rights education (including human rights principles). Indigenous women leaders like the women in our study have dedicated their lives to improving conditions for their people and often more broadly to the Indigenous/Native American communities their institutions or organizations serve.

Access to quality education is a basic human right for Indigenous peoples as referenced in Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)<sup>10</sup>, stating,

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

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<sup>10</sup> See:

[https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wpcontent/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wpcontent/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)

We take these articles a step further and believe that the underlying requirement within UNDRIP points to education that is culturally relevant and accessible for all Indigenous peoples, including adult learners. This is the work that each of these Indigenous women educational leaders engage on a daily basis. In the U.S., federal Indian law based on treaties with tribal nations should ideally provide the legal context that includes how we view human rights within the United States. However, the federal government-tribal nation relationship remains complex and tenuous for several reasons, including political and judicial administrative leadership processes. This is true in other Indigenous contexts worldwide. Thus, instruments that are based on Indigenous consultation, like the UN Declaration, provide the international landscape to help us better understand how rights have been constructed, violated, and supports the local and global need for addressing Indigenous rights in relation to our nation states, especially with regards to education. Most importantly, from an epistemological standpoint, we must recognize the impact that Indigenous women educational leaders have made within the global landscape of Indigenous education, which speaks to the roles that Indigenous women have held since time immemorial; Indigenous women remain the backbone of Indigenous communities.

### **Conclusion**

The voices of contemporary Indigenous women have long been excluded from education and leadership research and scholarship. However, in a time when Indigenous women comprise approximately 60% of the college student population (at both the undergraduate and graduate levels), it is safe to assume that Indigenous women will continue to play important roles in the leadership of Indigenous people. It is imperative that we gain a better understanding of the experiences of Indigenous women in their leadership journeys so that we can work to better serve this overlooked population and prepare future generations of Indigenous educational leaders. We assert that studies like ours provide important insight into how we understand leadership from Indigenous women's perspectives and across tribal nations, and we encourage other researchers



to take critical first steps in addressing how we honor the experiences of Indigenous women while supporting the development of future Indigenous women leaders in education.

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