

**LETHBRIDGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
NATIVE STUDENT RETENTION
IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSONAL PROFILES
AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPES**

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ABSTRACT

Enrollment records from 1981 show that voluntary dropout from Lethbridge Community College among Native students has decreased; however, though more are staying in College many are suspended due to low grades. To determine the most appropriate measures to take to promote Native student retention and success in college courses six Native students were interviewed. These six students were an approximate representation of the general College Native student population in terms of age, Band, gender, marital status, and program area. An unstructured interview was conducted with each student with the intent of having the student speak openly about their school experiences as they grew up and give their personal opinions, suggestions, and recommendations for promoting Native student retention. Each interview was taped, transcribed, and shown to the student for changes or deletions. Findings from each student's educational history show the diversity in school experiences but also adversity in learning due to peer pressure and more often low expectations placed on the Native student by teachers in some non-Native southern Alberta schools. The suggestions and recommendations by the students indicate a willingness to participate in promoting Native student retention through such

measures as peer support, group study, and active participation in the Native Student Association not only to provide support for Native students but also to promote good relations with non-Natives within the College and in the community.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. History:

In March 1981 my employment began with Lethbridge Community College (L.C.C.). The College was concerned at that time with the high attrition rate among Native students, attrition meaning both dropouts and suspensions, which reached as high as 90% in some semesters. Dropouts accounted for nearly all of this 90%. This high attrition rate was the motivating factor for the creation of the Native student counsellor position at the College.

In order to ascertain the reasons for the high dropout rate, in 1981 I conducted an interview survey of 60 Native students who had attended the College at one time or another from 1977 to 1981. The results of this survey indicated a need for increased support services for Native students, particularly those previously attending reserve schools, to help them adjust to an urban college environment. There was also a clear need for a Native counsellor in whom they could confide. These needs were acted upon by Student Services. Every year since 1981 I have compiled records of Native student attrition and retention. These records show that the dropout rate has decreased considerably. The present dropout rate (not

including suspensions) among Native students ranges between 10% to 15% per semester (Appendix A).

2. Statement of Problem:

The decrease in dropout rate indicates that more Native students are staying in College and fewer are withdrawing. However, as the dropout rate has decreased, the number of suspensions of Native students due to poor academic performance has increased. There are two implications of this trend. On a more positive note, Native students appear to feel more comfortable in the college environment than in earlier years, and more determined to stick it out. On the other hand, in spite of this determination, a large percentage of Native students still fail to pass their courses.

The high suspension rate is the concern that prompts this project. The intent was to examine with the students their academic experience and determine what could be done by the students and the College, especially Student Services, to assist Native students improve their academic achievement.

3. How the Problem was Assessed:

The project consisted of interviews which allowed Native students to freely express their ideas and thoughts regarding their own education and to participate in the formulation of proposals for improved support services. Generally,

questionnaires and surveys are administered to students to obtain the information regarding an issue such as retention. The interview method strives to get beyond superficial types of information and into what the student really feels about the subject; their academic experience in the context of retention.

It is clear that the subject of Native retention must be examined within the context of the students' entire life experience, past, present, and their resultant set of expectations for the future. Therefore, when discussing retention and success in college courses, not only must the student talk about academic concerns such as: study skills, tutoring, and teachers, but also about the factors that affect their general well-being such as: finances, family, friends, and attitudes, not only towards education but also to life in general. This is the reason the approach of an in-depth interview was most appropriate for this project.

4. Limitations:

The views, opinions, and experiences of the six students interviewed should not be considered to be a total reflection of the L.C.C. Native student population even though the six students were carefully selected to represent the age, gender, program area, academic performance, and marital status situation of L.C.C. Native students. This project was aimed

specifically at L.C.C. Native students and the findings may not be a total representation of other college Native student populations. It must be acknowledged however, that similar views, opinions, and experiences as related by the six students, have been expressed to me in my role as a Native Student Counsellor over a period of seven years by numerous other Native students.

During seven years of working as a Native Student Counsellor I have observed that there is an underlying mistrust among some Native students of non-Native teachers and researchers which results in a tendency for the Native student to respond to questions as they perceive they are expected to respond rather than being open and honest. In attempting to counteract that tendency, I must acknowledge and avoid the tendency on my part, as a Native person and a former student, to lead the interview too far in the opposite direction, such as dwelling on mutual experiences which could result in an exaggerated sense of the issue being discussed.

5. Definition of Terms:

1. Throughout the study, the term "Native" will be used interchangeably with the term "Indian". The term "Native" will be used in contexts of Canadian studies or comments, and the term "Indian" will be used in contexts of American studies or comments.

2. "Attrition" will be used to mean both "dropout", those who have left the College of their own choice, and "suspension", those who have been dismissed by the College due to low grades.

3. The term "persister" will be used to describe students who stay in College.

4. The Canadian spelling of the term "counselling" will be used in Canadian contexts, and the American spelling, "counseling" will be used in American contexts.

5. The term "minority" will include not only Natives but other minority groups as well.

CHAPTER II.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Scarcity of Research on Natives in Higher Education:

The majority of research on student retention and attrition originates in the United States and focuses on the experiences of White students in four-year colleges or universities. Research on Native student retention and attrition is meager and what is available mostly concerns United States Indian students in four-year colleges or universities. Ponce (1988) estimates that there has been a focus on minority students only within the last 15 years and writes:

Although the earliest retention studies can be traced to the first part of this century, a focus on minority students has been present only in the past 15 years. Summerskill (1962) identified 35 attrition studies conducted from 1913 to 1953; none considered minority student retention. In a review of the literature, Pantages and Creedon (1978) found approximately 60 studies on college student attrition from 1959 to 1975; only four contained any reference to minority students. In a summary by Ramist (1981) of over 100 studies, less than 10 dealt with minority student retention. An earlier literature review of 150 studies of junior and four-year colleges (Lenning et al. 1980) included slightly more than 20 studies that focused on factors and programs relevant to minority student persistence in colleges.... Research on only specific variables that influence minority student persistence at predominantly white institutions is even more scarce (pp. 1-2).

The term "minority students" includes not only Indian students but other groups such as Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans.

The majority of the studies on minority student retention and attrition are unpublished reports which cannot be accessed through regular journal reading. For example, Sullivan (cited in Ponce, 1988), abstracted 76 studies pertaining to minority student retention in, Minorities in Higher Education: An Abstracted Bibliographic Review (1978-82), found that the majority of studies were unpublished reports, papers, and dissertations. Very few of the studies reviewed are on the subjective perceptions of Native students themselves.

2. Common Theme in Research:

The common theme reported in Native student retention and attrition studies is that very few Native students finish high school and those that continue on to college or university take longer to finish or don't finish at all. Two-year colleges have been reported to have a much higher dropout rate than four-year colleges and the highest minority dropout rates are also reported in two-year colleges in the United States, Oldin, (cited in Ponce, 1988). Nettles (1988) makes a disillusioning observation when he states: "If you are concerned with intervening to solve the problem of low representation of minorities in higher education; higher education is not the place to begin... . The problems in higher education are a symptom, you cannot solve them unless

you deal with the root causes" (pp. 7-8). The root causes, as Nettles identifies, exist in preschool, elementary, junior, and high school. Nettles does suggest that research should be conducted separately for different ethnocultural groups and states: "The social and educational problems facing one group are not always the same as those facing another. Even when they are similar, the paths to their solution may vary" (p. 8).

Some of the reasons cited for dropping out include, lack of parental, community, or financial support, poor academic high school preparation, lack of specific support services and programs, and cultural value conflicts (Falk & Aitken, 1984). Frideres (1976) even identified the "typical characteristics" of Native students as being:

- . at least two years behind in reading, math, and science
- . unable to complete long-term assignments
- . reluctant to participate in oral classroom work
- . lacking self-identity
- . apathetic toward the educational environment
- . reluctant to ask for specific help in classroom work
- . inattentive and difficult to motivate
- . low involvement in non-academic programs (p. 66).

This identification of Fideres appears to be intended more towards the pre-college Native student because that was the context in which the report was written.

3. Causes for Low Academic Achievement:

The many and varied factors that cause low academic achievement have been identified and examined. However, West (1988), and Kerbo (1981), have found some of the factors to be inconsistent predictors of college achievement. This means that a Native student may have an academic history giving all the indications of being a poor student yet be able to achieve academically in college. A possible explanation for this may be that many college and university Native students are older, which suggests a family with dependents. This factor, according to Whittaker (1986), Degan (1985), and Sloan (1979), seemed to have provided a supportive and stabilizing influence on the student and may have contributed to the student completing their education.

Many of the reasons or causes for low academic performance in college or university appear to be the same for both Native and non-Native students. For example, high school grades are reported to be the most important indicator of academic achievement in college; a student with low high school grades will probably have similar grades in college or university.

Astin (1982) conducted a study on academically successful students. The students were comprised of Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Whites, in two and four-year colleges, in their first and second year of studies. Astin found, as mentioned, that high school grades were the most important predictor of college grade point average (GPA), and that this factor was a better predictor for Indians and Whites than for Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans. Scott (1986) in a study with Indian students in a large four-year college also had similar findings.

The students' attitude and self-concept also influence their academic performance. Scott (1986) found that a students' belief in their academic ability was associated with good college grades. Blustein et al. (1986), in a study with regular non-Native college students, found that in addition to cognitive ability, the students' positive expectation towards a college education was associated with good grades. For example, the student not only had to have good reading comprehension ability to handle college courses but had to have an accompanying attitude that getting an education was a positive activity.

Having a definite career goal was also found to be related to college achievement. West (1988) conducted a study of 69

students, 30 of whom were Indian, at Eastern Montana College in 1986. The Career Maturity Inventory-Attitude Scale (CMI-AS) was administered. Results from this study indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between academic performance and career maturity for all students. West was careful to point out that some aspects of the instrument CMI-AS, may not have been appropriate for the sample of Indian students because the questions tended to reflect the dominant culture's work values. For example, important demographic factors that likely affect the career maturity score for Indian students include their residence; whether they live on or off the reserve, and whether they are traditionally or non-traditionally oriented. Astin (1982) found that having a career goal influences academic performance and states, "Minority students' initial degree aspirations are found to be consistently related to their actual degree attainment" (p. 96).

4. Native Cultural Environment:

The major difference in the situation of Native students from non-Native students in colleges or universities is in the cultural area. This cultural difference appears to be the major reason for academic difficulty experienced by the Native student. Many of the differences in cultural orientation of

Native and non-Native cultures conflict. The consensus by most educators is that the Native culture is not conducive to the academic process as we know it. Frideres (1976) outlines the contrast in certain values between the two cultures as follows:

<u>DOMINANT SCHOOL SYSTEM</u>	<u>NATIVE CULTURE</u>
verbally oriented	silence oriented
individualistic	group identity
competitive	group cooperation
acquisitive	sharing
strong pressure to learn	little pressure to learn
supervision	less structured discipline
routine oriented	non-routine
time deadlines	timelessness
English as first language	Native language

(Frideres, 1976, p. 13)

The dominant school system value of competition, or winning at the expense of someone else's failure is sometimes perceived to be the basis of academic performance in the school system. However, the advantages of cooperative learning are being acknowledged. Johnson and Johnson (cited in Armstrong-West, 1988), have found that cooperative learning promotes greater interaction, greater feelings of acceptance,

more positive expectations, and higher self-esteem and self-acceptance in students.

Some Native students' tendency to be nonassertive or silent is often associated with low English verbal skills, the skills necessary to produce academic success in the educational system. This tendency of nonassertiveness in Native students is also present in other minority groups. For example, Cheek (cited in Armstrong-West, 1988), made an interesting observation about assertive Blacks who puzzled White teachers who perceived them as being aggressive. It seemed the expectation by the White teachers was that Blacks were supposed to be silent and nonassertive. This observation suggests that teachers may have a subconscious expectation that some minority students, such as some Blacks or Indians, are supposed to be silent and this expectation may be conveyed to the student through actions such as, non-questioning in class or lack of eye contact when speaking to a class.

Learning style is influenced by traditional Native culture. An observation made by Moore-Eyman (1984) in her role as a student services advisor for 12 years with close contact with Native students at the University of Calgary was:

A major academic problem faced by most Native students is acquiring a critical frame of thinking to accommodate university courses... . There is no doubt that university

thinking patterns are mastered by most Native students only over time. It appears that Native thinking is essentially non-critical and is characterized by narrative, by description, and by analogy, rather than by analysis and scientific inquiry and it is easy at the university to mistake the indigenous process of thought as indicating lack of ability rather than differences of patterns (Moore-Eyman, 1984, p. 11).

Studies on learning styles by More (1987) bear mentioning, even though his studies have been concentrated on younger elementary Native children. More's summary describes a typical Native learning style as follows:

1. strength in global processing in verbal and non-verbal areas
2. strength in simultaneous processing of information
3. strength in processing visual and spatial information
4. use of imagery for coding and understanding
5. weakness in verbal coding and understanding
6. reflective more than impulsive or watch-then-do versus trial and error.

More emphasizes that there is "not a uniquely Indian learning style. However, similarities among Indian student learning styles are found consistently enough to warrant careful attention by researchers and teachers" (p. 27). More also cautions that overemphasis on learning style differences may lead to new forms of inaccurate labelling and stereotyping of Native students.

Some studies and reports show that being more traditionally Indian oriented causes greater academic difficulty. Edgewater (1981), a Navajo graduate student, describes the stress Navajo university students experience as they become "caught in a maze of social acculturation" (p. 27). She explains how Navajos are taught that time is infinite, that one must cooperate with others, be submissive, humble, share with others, and work to satisfy present needs. When attending predominantly White colleges, different qualities are emphasized in order to succeed, such as rushing to meet deadlines, being aggressive and competitive, and planning and working for the future. Edgewater states that acquiring a new set of values may mean rejection of the traditional values, which may cause disharmony within oneself, which according to Navajo belief causes physical and/or mental illness.

Scott (1986) conducted a study of 72 Indian students who had enrolled in the fall of 1975 at the university of Oklahoma. Four years later 22 (21.8%) were still enrolled and 6 (5.7%) completed their degree in the spring of 1979. Responses by students to questionnaires mailed out in the summer of 1980 clearly showed that being a "cultural Indian" reduced the chances of academic success because this type of student was less likely to become integrated into the university community.

The implication from Scott's study and Edgewater's observations is that in order to achieve academically, assimilation is required. Lugan and Dobkins (1978) state that there have been many strategies by educational and government institutions to assimilate the Indian student. The assumption behind these strategies is that Indian characteristics and values are hindrances to progress or absorption of the dominant culture's values.

The alternative to complete assimilation into the White culture is becoming bicultural, which means acquiring the capability to live successfully in both Native and non-Native cultures yet still retaining Native values. In 1957 Havighurst observed that living in two cultures for Native people was a dilemma with which they would have to deal. He wrote:

We see that these young people learn one kind of attitude toward the rules of games that they see in the White culture... and they learn a different kind of attitude toward such rules that are part of their culture. Truly, they are growing up to be people of two cultures, subject to two contrasting kinds of education, and they must make their own combination or synthesis of the two cultures and the two kinds of education. (Havighurst, 1957, p. 2)

There are also studies that conflict with Scott's (1986) results and show that being more traditionally oriented is conducive to academic achievement. Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) conducted a study with 128 Indian students and

48 White students at the University of South Dakota. Their findings indicated that being more traditionally oriented aids in academic achievement. College achievement for White students was found to be related to their high school grades and parental encouragement to succeed at school, whereas with Sioux Indian students, retention of Native cultural traditions seemed to contribute to higher educational success. This meant that being traditionally oriented related to their cultural identity which facilitated a strong sense of personal self-identity and confidence. Another study by Jeanotte (1982) of Native students at the University of North Dakota showed that students who graduated tended to be more culturally involved than were students who dropped out. Students who persisted also tended to view their American Indian heritage as an advantage.

5. Institutional Environment:

Some studies have turned their focus away from the Indian student and to the educational institutional environment and are examining ways the institutional environment could change to enhance academic learning for Indian and other minority students. The task of making the college or university more accommodating to minority students from small towns and rural areas becomes more critical as the institution gets larger.

Astin (1982) states that as educational institutions get larger the more difficult it will be for Indian students to persist and achieve. This reflects an earlier study by Astin (cited in Astin, 1982), that students from relatively small towns are less likely to persist in large institutions.

McDonald (cited in Ponce, 1988) in interviews with Indian students who dropped out of post-secondary institutions found that among the reasons given for dropping out were factors related to negative encounters with the institution and its staff and faculty, which involved such things as institutional racism, individual racial discrimination, lack of role models, and cultural differences between students and their colleges.

Clewell & Ficklen (cited in Ponce, 1988), suggest the following institutional retention strategies to promote minority student retention:

- . presence of a stated university policy on minority student retention
- . a high level of institutional commitment to minority student retention
- . a substantial degree of institutionalization of the retention program
- . comprehensive services and dedicated services and staff

- . systematic collection of retention data
- . monitoring and follow-up of minority students
- . strong faculty support for minority student retention
- . non stigmatization of participants in retention programs (Clewell & Ficklen, 1986, p. 14).

Indian students have made suggestions on retention measures institutions could take to accommodate them. Falk and Atkin (1984) interviewed 125 Indian students on the subject of retention. The students suggested the following:

- . 100% suggested hiring of Indian faculty and staff
- . 100% suggested overt institutional commitment, which means minority student retention is not only a written policy but is accompanied by faculty and administrative action
- . 90% suggested special counseling programs
- . 75% suggested Indian student organizations
- . 69% suggested Indian studies programs.

In relation to the suggestion for special counseling programs, Hudesman et al. (1986) studied a structured counseling program for high risk students over a three-semester period. Those students who received a structured counseling program had higher grades than those who received nondirective counseling. The subjects were 247 first-year students who

participated at a large urban two-year college, where 85% of the student population were minority students. Structured counseling in this case meant the student met regularly with a counselor who monitored their grades and provided specific help with academic or social problems.

The research emphasizes that the entire educational institution, more than just the department of Student Services, has the responsibility of taking affirmative steps to promote retention of minority students. Ewell (1984) states that in order to effectively promote retention, an educational institution must have a "plain and visible commitment by its top administrators that the issue of improving student retention and success is a priority ... so long as the standard of managerial accountability remains efficiency rather than effectiveness, the likelihood of information about retention being utilized, regardless of its quality, remains low" (Ewell, 1984, p. 50).

The "Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education (1984)" (cited in Armstrong-West, 1988), states:

The power of the campus as an environment for fostering students' involvement is critical. The physical campus itself can attract or alienate students, but our uses of the physical campus can overcome many limitations. In addition, every college has a distinct culture - nonverbal messages that students pick up from virtually every aspect of campus life. Administrators' attitude towards

students, the degree of collegiality among faculty, the number and diversity of cultural events, the degree to which the college interacts with its surrounding community - all these factors and others determine the tone of the environment. (Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education, 1984, p. 40)

Bean (1980), Spaldy (1971), and Tinto (1975) (cited in Ponce, 1988), use the term "Student - Institutional Fit" to describe the ideal institutional environment that must be achieved in order for the student to feel comfortable enough to want to stay in college and perform academically. The models proposed by Bean, Spaldy, and Tinto to achieve the Student-Institutional Fit, consider three main areas, the student's characteristics, the college environment, and the degree of compatibility between the two. Compatibility is explained by the two key concepts of "academic integration" and "social integration".

Blustein et al. (1986) defines academic integration as being associated with cognitive ability and noncognitive factors such as classroom involvement and frequency of positive faculty-student contacts, which influences a student's perception of their intellectual value with peers and faculty. Blustein et al. conducted a study using interviews and surveys with 50 students at a culturally and socio-economically diverse suburban community college. They found that students who achieved good grades were most involved with the academic

aspects of their lives, such as having positive contact with faculty and using the support services of advisement and career counseling.

In order for a student to believe in their intellectual capability, the most significant person to reaffirm this belief is usually the teacher. Edmonds and McCurdy (1988) state:

Faculty expectations of minority students' performances are critical in their ability to perform academically... faculty often inhibit minority students' academic success by presenting distorted, naive, and oftentimes biased perceptions about them. This misperception can lead later to lower self-esteem and confidence which, as has been observed time and time again, is destructive to academic performance and achievement. (Edmonds & McCurdy, 1988, p. 58)

A low expectation of the teacher towards a minority student, in turn, tends to influence the grades given to the student. Armstrong-West and Teja (1988) wrote: "It is an axiom of education that the instructor's perceptions of a student affect his/her subjective grading; in other words, an essay test grade is often influenced by the instructor's expectations of the students' ability" (p. 30).

Social integration, the other part of compatibility between the student and the educational institution, is defined by Pascarella & Terenzini (1980) as being the kind of involvement a student has with faculty members outside the classroom. Kerbo (cited in Huffman et al., 1986), identified

social integration with Whites as one of the strongest predictors, second only to high school grades, necessary for academic success.

Barol et al (cited in Stennis-Williams, 1988), found that minority students, in this case Black students, on a predominantly White campus felt isolated. Their numbers were small and they had few Black faculty to serve as role models or provide them with specific services. There was little social contact between Black and White students in public places. Black students felt isolated and alienated which affected their academic performance. Sanders (cited in Ponce, 1988), also cited isolation, rejection, anxiety, and cultural value conflicts as being major reasons that Indian students did not persist in college. Lin (1988) conducted a study with 616 students, 81 of whom were Indian, at a four-year college in Montana. The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast American Indian and White students with regard to factors that affected their academic performance. The findings appeared to indicate that Indian students had the perception of campus hostility against them, and the feeling of isolation in the predominantly White college. Lin found these perceptions and feelings contributed significantly, though indirectly, to the problem of their academic performance.

6. Summary and Analysis:

This concludes an overview of some of the reports and studies on Native student retention and attrition. The consensus is that many Native cultural values are at odds with the educational system and in order to give Native students an opportunity to achieve academically the institution itself will have to actively promote retention by tailoring its environment to accommodate not only Native students but other minority groups as well.

Many of the studies, such as Havighurst (1957) focused on the Native student with the intention of finding out the answer to the question, "Why was the Native student not succeeding in school?" The implication in these studies was that the educational system was satisfactory as it was, but the Native student would have to be the one to make changes in order to fit into the system, either by complete assimilation or by becoming biculturally capable. Biculturally capable means having the ability to function in two cultures, yet retaining Native cultural values. It seemed to be an anomaly when traditionally oriented Native students succeeded in school, as shown in studies by Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) and Jeanotte (1982). It would appear that only those with a firm sense of Indian self-identity had the stamina and

endurance to surmount the hurdles encountered in the educational system.

One area the studies seemed to overlook was the role residential schools had in Native experience with education. Poor teachers and inadequate curriculums have been a part of the Native student experience to the present day; and naturally, as the studies show, poor grades in high school put a student at an enormous disadvantage in a college or university setting. What was observed in the studies and reports was that the focus was always on the Native student with little if any attention paid to the environment in which the student was trying to learn.

This oversight was remedied somewhat when other studies focused on the educational institution and examined ways it could accommodate minority students to enhance their academic performance. The major concepts suggested were academic and social integration (Bean 1971, Spaldy 1971, Tinto 1975). It was evident from reading the studies that one person working in isolation to promote minority student retention can never be as effective as the institution which has the "power" to set the "tone" of the environment as mentioned in the "Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education (1984)". This support and commitment by college or university administrators is

pinpointed as the crucial requirement to successful minority student retention.

7. Topics for Discussion in Interview:

Few of the studies really attempted to obtain the subjective perceptions of Native students. The majority used questionnaires to gather their data. Blustein et al. (1986) did use an interview as part of their study and were able to cover a wide range of themes in the interviews. These themes and others mentioned or alluded to in the other studies gave me excellent ideas on areas of information I could pursue in an interview. Some of these areas are:

CAREER GOALS (West, 1988, Astin 1982)

The student's career goal influences their academic achievement. This relates to employment and its reality to the student. Very often we who are employed, take for granted that everyone else is as comfortable as we are, when in fact most Native adult students, especially at the college level, are among the more than 85% unemployed Natives we often hear or read about. To them, to have a job in the future is almost unreal. To reach grade 12 is unreal enough and to actually achieve grade 12 with the freedom to pick and choose which program to enroll in is quite an accomplishment, just as it was

for Ruth, a student, who burst into my office overcome with exaltation, knowing she had reached and finished grade 12.

FACULTY EXPECTATIONS OF MINORITY STUDENTS (Edmunds & McCurdy 1988, Nettles, 1988)

Nettles states that Black students receive lower grades, have less interaction with faculty, and feel that colleges are socially discriminatory. Nettles also feels that Black discontent with undergraduate education has been overlooked because experts tend to focus on quantitative rather than qualitative equality in higher education. It would be interesting to hear how Native students perceive their quality of education. Experience indicates that most Native students are very reluctant to talk about any prejudicial encounters mostly because:

1. The Native cultural way seems to be not to make "trouble". A common Native phrase is "That's the way it is".
2. Fear of repercussions.
3. They don't want attention but would rather stay in the background.

SELF-PERCEPTION REGARDING ACADEMIC ABILITY

This information is best accessed through interviews where the student can speak of experiences in school from elementary to post-secondary.

There were excellent suggestions made in the studies with regard to promoting retention of not only Native students but other minority students as well. However, it is necessary to find out what L.C.C. Native students themselves really want first before planning retention measures. Nettles (1988) states, "The social and educational problems facing one group are not always the same as those facing another even when they are similar, the paths to their solution may vary" (p. 8). This is important to bear in mind when dealing with Native students at L.C.C. whose problems and solutions, though similar, may vary from those of other Native students in California, Dakota, or elsewhere.

In summary, it would seem that non-Native sociologists, anthropologists, and educators have been the researchers. Very seldom has a Native been given the opportunity to actively research their own situation in their "own way". This "way" may sometimes mean transcending the traditional academic guidelines for research to get at the truth of the matter, which was what this creative project attempted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

1. Initial Procedure:

Before the interviews took place, I often spoke to students about my project. There were a lot of discussions about their ideas and thoughts regarding how they felt about their experience at College. This informal process of talking with the students provided a clearer focus of how I should proceed in gathering the data I was searching for. I had originally intended to do both, a questionnaire and interview. However, these means of collecting data were incompatible because one was a quantitative and the other a qualitative assessment. Both methods would have been feasible however, if time had allowed first for the questionnaire assessment, followed by the interviews, where each would have been conducted separately. I finally decided to concentrate on interviewing a few students who would give their personal opinions and views regarding their educational experiences and suggestions on promoting Native student retention.

2. Selection Process:

I compiled a general profile of L.C.C. Native students to provide a basis for selecting students. For example, the general profile indicated that the majority (65%) of Native

students were in the Upgrading program and this suggested that there ought to be more Upgrading students or students who had been in Upgrading interviewed. I consulted lists of Native students from each program and selected 11 students who I felt would give valuable information and suggestions on promoting Native student retention.

3. Requesting Student for an Interview:

I approached each student and had an informal conversation with them regarding the purpose of the interview. This discussion provided the student with the knowledge he or she needed to make a decision on whether or not he or she wanted to participate in a taped interview. If the student accepted the request for a taped interview, he or she selected a time and place that was most convenient. The date set for the interview was usually one to two weeks after the request. Five chose to do their interviews at the College and one at my home. Of the eleven names selected seven were contacted and all verbally agreed to an interview. Six showed up for their interview.

4. Actual Interview Process:

Because I had discussed the background of the project previously with the students and they had a week or two to think about what they would say, all six students appeared relaxed and ready to talk. Before starting the interview, I

again reviewed the purpose for the interview and discussed the release form (Appendix B). The release form was not signed until the student had read his or her transcribed interview and made changes or deletions, usually about a week after the actual interview.

The interview was unstructured and had no specific set of questions. I informed the student that he or she was free to talk about their academic experiences from grade school on up to the present. The interview began from where the student wanted. One student spoke about College experiences first and another spoke about their early elementary experiences first. Questions arose from points in the discussion. Each interview lasted from two to three hours. The interview was concluded when I felt the student had exhausted what he or she wanted to say.

5. Transcribing:

I transcribed three interviews and three interviews were transcribed by my assistant. However, in reviewing the three I did not personally transcribe, I found instances where words, phrases, or Blackfoot words were omitted, or where there was a misunderstanding by the transcriber of the student's meaning. These oversights were understandable because the person transcribing was not familiar with the student's style of speech, Blackfoot, and the context within which the student

spoke, whereas in listening to the tapes, I could visualize the facial expressions and underlying meaning in what the student said.

Each interview was shared with the student for changes or deletions. The student was shown the release form and informed of its' meaning which insured his or her confidentiality and anonymity as a participant in the project. All six students signed the release form.

6. Interpreting Data:

Interpreting the data was difficult. Each interview was sifted through for words, sentences, phrases, opinions, stories, concerns, and suggestions, which I felt were important. The initial reading of the interview where I read only the surface or manifest meaning resulted in a "so what" reaction; however, in subsequent readings the latent meanings came through to give meaning to isolated words, phrases, and humor. The deeper meaning of what the student said became clear when I understood and was familiar with the context within which he or she spoke.

The information was organized into a general time frame of before and after College, trends, common experiences, critical points in school experiences, and other general findings as is reported in "Chapter IV: Result" section.

7. Uses of Interviews:

1. The suggestions and ideas of the students will form the basis for future Native student support services plans to assist the student, such as in the academic area.

2. The information found will form the basis of funding proposals for future planning.

3. The project will be the basis and model of an ongoing monitoring of Native student academic progress and retention.

8. Interview Elaboration:

I chose the interview approach rather than a questionnaire because I wanted the student being interviewed to be allowed to give in-depth comments regarding their academic experience and suggestions on Native students retention. In the studies reviewed, very seldom were Native students given the opportunity to give personal opinions about the issue under study. As educators we need to clear our minds of assumptions and listen openly to students because there seems to be a tendency to presume too much regarding Native students. Long, Paradise & Long (1983) state:

We begin to make claims about people and speak for them in ways that conceal the truths of their existence and corrupt the images and remembrances we have of these people and their circumstances... We face the dangers of romanticizing people (p. 23).

In other words, as educators, we can unknowingly become condescending and patronizing.

8.1 Strengths of the Interviews:

1. Both interviewer and subject can explore the meaning of what is said.
2. There is a shared meaning in the good interview to what is said.
3. Misunderstandings or unclear statements can be checked immediately.

8.2 Disadvantages of the Interviews:

According to Cottle (1977) the disadvantages are:

1. An interviewer must have effective interviewing skills.
2. Biases are present and have to be acknowledged.
3. It is difficult to interpret the data without prior knowledge of the subject area.
4. The data is immense in taped interviews and is difficult to organize.

Another difficulty I see in an interview situation, or for that matter any verbal interaction with Native students, is that educators sometimes tend to take for granted, that which took them years to learn and develop clearly in their minds is also equally clear to the student who is listening. For example, we may speak too fast, use words that are incomprehensible to the student, or not leave room for reflections by the student. Common complaints by Native

students regarding teachers is that they "talk too fast" or "talk at a higher level". Long, Paradise & Long (1983) wrote, "when asking questions as educators, we tend to assume that the client shares the meaning, vocabulary, and syntax of our questions in formulating a reply." (p. 20)

8.3 Personal Advantages Regarding the Interviews:

1. I had the aid of a typist in typing the results.
2. I am experienced in interviewing skills due to my work as a student counsellor.
3. I am confident I can accurately interpret the information from the interviews because I am Native and have also experienced life as a student. I also speak Blackfoot and feel comfortable conversing with Native students in a "relaxed way", which sometimes involves speaking Blackfoot. For example, I may have an agenda of questions in mind but I am also aware that for ideal communication to take place I must "flow" with the conversation. My agenda is met eventually in a round about way. Douglas (1985) writes: "To flow with the tide in order to gain control of the absolute outcome, 'truth', versus the ignorant swimmer who fights a powerful tide and finally succumbs to the tide because of exhaustion" (p. 22).

To strictly enforce my own agenda of questions may result in the usual "interrogation-type" of question and answer

conversation. This interrogation-type conversation could result in getting off track. For example, when an interviewer is at a loss for something to say, the natural tendency is to ask another question of the interviewee and consequently this may lose the focus of the topic. Long, Paradise & Long (1983) state that this type of an interview shifts the responsibility to the interviewer; which means that instead of listening, the interviewer devotes energy to thinking up new questions.

8.4 Other Points to Consider in an Interview:

Maintaining the dignity and privacy of the student cannot be over emphasized. Cottle (1977) writes: "The matter of simultaneously wanting to write about the lives of those with whom one speaks while preserving their dignity and privacy is a delicate one" (p. 9). This relates to the concept of "saving face" so important in most Native cultures. This means you never overtly embarrass another Native person, in private and especially in public. Public humiliation was and is still considered the greatest punishment. An interviewer has to be sensitive enough to detect when a student is uncomfortable discussing certain things. It takes great intuitive skill to circle back and forth until it "feels right" to again approach the topic. Long, Paradise & Long (1983) write: "During our lifetime we learn a variety of defense mechanisms and those

habitual, often primitive reactions, are easily elicited by confrontation or perceived threat... We therefore suggest that confrontation be approached cautiously, gently, with successive questioning" (p. 3).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This section gives a general profile of L.C.C. Native students. The six students interviewed were closely representative of this general profile. However, following this, each student had a unique educational history as told under their ascribed pseudonym. It would be a disservice to these students to try to homogenize their individual natures into a "Native way" of being as is common in academic writing. These individuals cannot be categorized to fit any popular academic ideal of "Native" but rather their individual profiles celebrate their unique personalities and ways of viewing the world.

However, I felt there were some common characteristics, such as humor, that was a result of a shared understanding of the Blackfoot language and mutual experiences as a Native person. This shared humor made the interviews very pleasant.

Another common experience is that because they were Native they entered a school system where certain visible and invisible restrictions and assumptions were imposed and prevented some of them from fully actualizing their intellectual capacities and completing high school. It is my belief that had it not been for these restrictions most

would have excelled in school and completed their education long before now.

1. General Profile of L.C.C. Native Students:

AVERAGE AGE: 29 years

BAND: 80% Blood

15% Peigan

5% Other

GENDER: 60% Females

40% Males

MARITAL STATUS: 90% Married with dependents

PROGRAMS: 65% Upgrading

8% Business Administration

6% Secretarial

4% Agricultural Technology

17% General Studies & Other Programs

Note: Averages are based on averages from Fall semester 1986 to Winter semester 1989.

2. Personal Landscapes:

The students interviewed were carefully selected to represent L.C.C. Native students in the above categories.

NUMBER INTERVIEWED: 6

AVERAGE AGE: 31 (22 - 52 years)

BAND: 4 Blood
2 Peigan

GENDER: 2 Males
4 Females

MARITAL STATUS: 1 Single
5 Married with dependents

PROGRAMS:

<u>PROGRAM</u>	<u>UPGRADING</u>	<u>SUSPENSION</u>	<u>CURRENT STUDENT</u>
General Studies	yes	yes	yes
General Studies	yes	yes	no
Agricultural Tech.	no	no	yes
Business Admin.	yes	no	no
Upgrading	yes	no	yes
Upgrading	yes	yes	yes

All students, except one, were presently taking or had gone through Upgrading at L.C.C. before entering a College program. Three out of the six were suspended at one time or another. Four were current students, one was suspended for a semester, and one was a graduate of a College program.

The following is a descriptive overview of each student under an ascribed pseudonym before he or she came to L.C.C. The emphasis in the interview was on their school experience; their thoughts and recollections of teachers, courses, and other students; however, other important factors in their lives such as work and people were also included to get a more complete view of each student. This is only a glimpse of a part of their lives that involved elementary, junior, and in some cases senior high school.

SUSAN:

Susan is married with one dependent. Her goal is to train in the medical field and she is close to starting her training. This lifelong ambition to be a care-giver seems to be her greatest motivation in going to school.

Most of her schooling took place in a non-Native school. She says: "I interacted with White kids all this time... I hung around with White kids". There were Native kids in the school too, but she did not mention associating with them. In grade ten she was expelled from school due to an argument with the Social Studies teacher over an assignment. Apparently she did not fully understand the directions to do an assignment and the teacher refused to give her further directions. This was one incident she seemed to recall clearly. She never took a

Social Studies course again and says, "That is part of the reason I hate Social Studies, he (teacher) just turned me off to the subject."

After her expulsion she tried to get back into school and eventually transferred to an all-Native school to continue her education and describes the school and the students:

It was so strange to be put, all of a sudden with just a bunch of Indian kids and being among these Indian kids was so different... I found it quite strange, the atmosphere was quite different. I felt I always had to be on my guard, because there were two or three (other students) that wanted to pick on you. I found it really strange there. If they found one student to be smarter than them they had a tendency to pick on that student; that's when I dropped out because I couldn't handle that pressure.

An example of that pressure which caused Susan to drop out from the all-Native school was that she was often referred to by some of the other Native students as "honkey lover" because she had associated primarily with White students in her previous school.

Susan's negative experiences in an all-Native school seemed to have resulted in distrust of her peers, but also her early school years in a southern Alberta school, where she had "hung around with White kids", may have influenced her views to the point where she felt that in order to succeed in education, or life for that matter, one had to assimilate into mainstream society; there seemed to be no middle ground. She says, "I'd

rather have my child interact with White people" or "I find these Native students that go to these all-Native schools, they don't seem to progress... although they have the potential to be somebody." Susan's experiences in school appear to demonstrate the negative impact of group identity. Giving, sharing, and cooperation are positive sides to group identity; however, in some instances individual expression, whether it be in excelling in class or being friendly to non-Native students, is sometimes frowned upon and that individual may be ostracized from being a part of the group.

After dropping out of high school, Susan didn't bother with school again until she took a Life Skills course on the reserve. This event seemed to be the redeeming factor that caused Susan to once again enter the educational stream. She speaks very highly of the Life Skills program:

If I was to recommend it to anybody, I would tell them to take it, because it works on yourself, how to improve yourself, and your self-esteem. It takes you apart and sort of puts you back together to see who you are as a person... to look deep inside you to see who you are... what I'm capable of. I really enjoyed that class.

Also, in reference to the Life Skills program, Susan said it taught her "how to ignore people... those ones that want to put you down" and "how to control yourself". In other words, how to avoid being manipulated by the intimidation and opinions of

others and taking control of your own life.

The Life Skills course not only helped her with her self-esteem but also helped her get a clearer focus on her career goal. She states: "I started looking at all these opportunities (careers) of what I could do and one thing that really stuck in my mind was a medical career. Even when I was a little girl I always wanted something in this field; it's the thought of helping people." Helping people seems to come easily for Susan because whenever a volunteer is needed, for example by the Native club, she will be the first to offer her services.

Susan then took Upgrading to prepare her for her medical career and when she had met the qualifications she started her training in a city. The long trips home every weekend and the loneliness of the city resulted in her failing her courses. She says, "I just couldn't function anymore." But this failed attempt didn't deter her and she came to the College to take further Upgrading to qualify for her career and is now at the stage where she will soon be training.

The critical moments in this student's school life were being expelled as a result of an argument with the Social Studies teacher, dropping out of school, experiencing an all-Native school, dropping out again, taking Life Skills,

Upgrading, training in a city, and finally, further Upgrading at L.C.C. She will be successful in achieving her career goal because despite the obstacles she has encountered in her education, her motivation to be a care-giver has always kept her going.

MARY:

Mary is an older student. She came from a very traditional Native background and had nine years of residential school experience. She has completed one semester at the College. She is still uncertain about which program to enter after Upgrading. She has had extensive work and volunteer experience, mainly working with people in a helping capacity. She is a member of various clubs and organizations that deal with Native and Womens' concerns.

Mary's schooling began at the age of seven when she entered a residential school and ended at the age of 16 in grade eight when she began working. She performed various types of work such as housework, cook, supervisor, and general helper at the residential school she had attended. She moved to another reserve to work at a residential school. From there she moved out of province to work at another residential school and at this time assisted the Friendship Centre to promote cultural awareness about Native people in the non-Native

schools. This was an effort to combat the racism that was rampant in the town. After a period of about five years, these efforts proved effective and non-Natives started making visits to the Friendship Centre. Other than her work, Mary has lived in and travelled to various places in Canada, which she claims has broadened her horizons, especially her knowledge of people.

She remembers her feelings when she first entered the residential school at the age of seven; she says, "I felt like I walked from one world into another, from the relaxed way into the rigid life... I'd smell this sanitary smell... a really sterile smell." Residential schools were run by Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

When Mary started residential school at age seven, she didn't speak English except for words like yes, no, go, and washroom. She stated that many times she had had her mouth washed out with soap for speaking Blackfoot. She and other new students at the residential school had to rely on older students to interpret and explain things using methods other than translation into Blackfoot. Mary said, "You think in your own language and you just automatically say in your own language. Boy, that was uncalled for and you got strapped, you got your mouth washed with soap and things like that."

One of her vivid recollections from this period in her life was the cutting of her hair for the first time:

She (supervisor) started cutting my hair, the first snip it just freaked me out, I jumped off the chair and I ran around the chair and she grabbed me and threw me back in the chair... Even though I couldn't understand what she was saying, I knew she was mad... It was like a horror movie for me. (laughing) The next thing I knew was I went into the dining room for a meal and all the boys had no hair, their hair was just shaved.

Later when Mary asked her aunt why all the students had their hair cut, her aunt replied, "They (supervisors) were afraid that we had bugs... there was no such thing as that."

Another story was her first encounter with the strap, which was the usual form of punishment at the residential school. "I have this scar here on my hand", said Mary and explained how during a hygiene inspection at the school the teacher mistook the scar for ink:

I was pretty proud of my hands; they were clean, and all of a sudden she (supervisor) pulled me out of line and told everybody else to sit down, then pulled out this strap, great big strap, it was about this big and then she said, "Put out your hands", and I didnt know what she was going to do with it. I put my hands out, I was very innocent... Then all of a sudden she strapped me on both hands, I didn't even feel the pain..., I was too scared to cry... wondering what she was going to do to me next... I remember this very, very vividly.

I asked her, "Were you ever struck at home?" She said, "No, no, I was never struck". This incident resulted in the student's father persuading the principal of the school to

remove the supervisor, who had been known to terrorize other children with physical punishment.

Mary described the teachers at the residential school as being very cold and impersonal and as, "Those people were the people who'd just stay by themselves; there was no way we could get inside... their minds... it was like a cup sitting there." There were a few caring individuals who made friends with the Native children and as a result, were able to more effectively teach them. Mary spoke of Beatrice in this way:

Like Beatrice used to give us hugs and things like that... She'd teach us and we learned more from her than the other teachers. She used to take her pointer and ask, "What's this?", and she'd say the words first and then we'd repeat after her and that's how I learned most of my English.

The teaching of Christianity was a major part of residential school curriculum and Mary compares it to what her grandmother had taught her:

Going to church... that guy (minister) that did the sermon, I could never understand how those people talk... Sometimes it was on trusting, honesty, and things like that, but I knew that was different from... it's not the way,... the Indian people said it or did it; it was being respectful and things like that... These ceremonies (Native) I used to go to; to me you could get so much from them, the feeling... you don't have to say anything, you're understood mentally.

By this statement she meant that to Native people religion was a way of life and not something that happened occasionally such as in the form of a sermon; it was the doing rather than the saying.

A major influence in Mary's early life was her grandmother who taught her many things about living a good life, such as learning to live among the White race yet still retaining Native values. Mary said of her grandmother, "She used to tell me... the power (White people) that was coming... it was too strong to fight back... you have to flow along with it." Values such as giving and sharing were constantly stressed and her grandmother told her, "You can always use them (values)". This meant that these values were never outdated.

Another thing Mary remembered was what her grandmother said regarding the concept of respect:

We were taught to have respect even for the most humble person because they have something to offer... in order to get that respect for yourself. She said the reason our people survived... we're respecting everything around... because it's all Natoi (holy in Blackfoot)... as a flower grows... the sun feeds it and all the other plants that have decayed, feed it... it grows and it blossoms and it's beautiful... and then it wilts and then it dies... all go back to the earth to feed other plants... and that's how our people were...

This means that if respect is given to a person, to an animal, or to nature, that respect is given back. Each has something to offer that is vital to survival.

When asked what her impressions were of Lethbridge as a newcomer to the city, she states:

Some Indian people, they're uptight about their own people. I see a lot in the city, like they look down on their own people; they have the same attitude as the White

people towards Indian people... that's what I see... Maybe because they've been programmed to have this attitude... that Indian people are no good. I think in this town, the whole town is like that... I can see it... people just yell at you. I feel the uptightness... it's like, but maybe not as bad, as the southern states.

Views similar to the above have been expressed by newcomers to Lethbridge. Minority people seem to be especially sensitive to feeling the "uptightness" that Mary refers to. It is worth noting here that, during my experience as a counsellor at L.C.C., the same impression has been communicated to me by a number of students from various ethnic minorities, as well as Native students from other areas. The overall impression conveyed by these students is that there is an underlying hostility towards, and an uneasiness in the presence of non-Whites, which is particularly apparent in Lethbridge. Moreover, an element of hostility and mistrust with each other appears to exist within the Native community itself.

The first critical event in Mary's life was going to residential school, going from "the relaxed way into a rigid life". The other events were, getting out in grade eight, then years of work, raising a large family, and travelling; all of which probably involved numerous other critical events. She seems to be very advanced in her thinking in terms of human understanding, and not at all daunted by the prospect of going

to school again after all these years. Mary's maturity seems to come not only from her experiences but also from her grandmother who taught her traditional Native values as a young girl.

CAROLINE:

Caroline is single and was the youngest of those interviewed and, like Mary, came from a very traditional Native background, and participates in cultural events such as pow wows. She is uncertain about her career goal, but thinks she would like to work in an occupation where she is helping people. She has travelled extensively with her parents to other parts of Canada and the United States. She attended non-Native schools in southern Alberta for elementary, junior, and part of senior high. One year, grade 11, was spent in a school outside Canada.

She is considering a business career but is also becoming increasingly inclined to being of service to people as a social worker. She spoke of what she had thought of being in the past:

Well, (laugh) at one time, I was serious about becoming a florist. I really like plants and taking care of them and... I'd say a nurse... As I started getting into my teens I started thinking more about counselling, and I think that's what drew me to the social work program. Also, I'd really like to take that Nechi program. (Nechi training is on addictions counselling for Native people.)

Her experience with her friends from high school influenced her decision to enroll in some social work courses and she says:

They (friends) were always telling me to go partying with them and now... I'd say about three or four of my friends from high school have children. I feel sorry for them because a few of them,... haven't remained with the fathers of the children... so that's sad to see... I think more like reaching out to people is really one of my goals.

I asked Caroline why she did not end up like her high school friends. She replied:

Well... definitely my parents, like my upbringing and I thank them now that I didn't end up in that situation because they never wanted me to go out on weekends with my friends. ... and I think the benefit was from the Faith (religion), because most weekends there would always be something to do... someplace to go... We did quite a bit of travelling and that was fun.

Her family also participated together in pow wows throughout Canada and the United States, which involved a lot of traveling together.

Caroline spoke about her relationship with Native and White students in the non-Native schools:

Well... I got along with them (White students), I found, quite well but when I went into my high school years, when I started hanging around with one of my White friends and then... like my other Native friends would get after me... I think it's like that for the White students too, like they might see one of their friends talking to a Native person and their other friends will act snobby and say, "why are you hanging around with that Native?"

Caroline seemed to demonstrate a caring nature with her ability to see both sides of a situation.

One critical event occurred in grade 11 when she went to school in another country. This was a time of experiencing living with other races and learning in a new environment. The greatest obstacle for her was the extreme loneliness she felt at first. The school work was manageable and familiar and involved much rote learning. She came back to Canada, a more mature person, did her grade 12 in the school she had attended previously, and came to L.C.C.

BEN:

Ben has a family and came from a very traditional background which has been contrasted by very non-traditional experiences in his life. This may be the reason why he seemed to be such an interesting, complex, and at times difficult to understand individual. He is sincere in his efforts to get an education and undertakes tasks which will benefit himself and others. He has a definite career goal in business.

He attended all-Native schools during his elementary and junior high school and then attended an off-reserve school for a short time. He talks about his first unusual experience which occurred in his elementary school years, "I lost Blackfoot (language) because I spent about three years in a

hospital... You couldn't just go there for a week... once you were there you were like in an institution. I was about eight years old..."

He says the major influence on his attitude towards school were his relatives and parents:

My great admiration is my mother. She goes to work; she's got another three or four years, then she'll retire... My grandfather was the one that really gave me the encouragement. He said, "Don't live on this reserve, there's a world out there, experience it", he saw the future, saw the change... I think our inspiration is also through my aunt, and part of it through my grandfather because they were hard working people. They said, "Don't take things for granted."

Another major influence in Ben's life was working in correctional services for a number of years. He states, "I learned a lot. I always respected that place no matter what anybody says... The system was good... but I learned a lot from the staff members, I learned to accept ideas there... their way of arranging things." I asked Ben, "So you were sort of looking at your own people, but from the outside." He replied: "Yea, some people tend to say that's bad, but if you want to really explore you have to see these things... for myself I saw a lot... that's why I tend to say, I won't get involved in anybody else's business... If you follow through a system, the system will work for you". What Ben saw were the people who got in trouble with the law, usually through alcohol

abuse, and it seemed like it made him very determined to never be in that situation.

Two critical events in Ben's life that seemed to influence his views, not only towards school but also about his own identity as a Native, was his long illness at an early age and working in correctional service for a number of years. During my interview with Ben I was often taken aback by what appeared to be extremely conflicting and confused attitudes that he expressed. For example, while speaking of a conversation he had had with a refugee student from South America, he said:

I will never run from my country no matter what. I'm not a coward, but I told them (refugees), "I sympathize with you people because you would do the same thing if it was the other way around. I hope for your benefit that while you're in Canada what you've learned... you go back and help your people. We're struggling through the same thing, but we don't run. We've never been slaves to the non-Natives and we'll never be. We used to kill ourselves because we wouldn't look up to the non-Natives".

Ben went on to say to this person, "If somebody told you that back in your country they'd put a bullet through your head but here you have the freedom to get mad and we have the freedom to say whatever we want".

Later in the interview with Ben, while recommending ways to improve the Native club, this same student strongly recommended that a White student be on the Native club executive. I asked him, "So you feel that if a non-Native were

part of the club executive, they would be a catalyst (for Native students to be on time and do things quicker)?" He replied in Blackfoot, "To embarrass Native students into being on time", and said in English:

... maybe they (White students) could give us that boost and the Noapiikoaiksi (Whitemen), you know they tend to be very prompt. They always get things out of the way and they're very helpful by that. With them on the executive and that, we'll learn.

He seemed to imply here that a White person on the club executive would take the position more seriously and handle matters more authoritatively and that the Native members should submit to that individual's way of doing things. I had the impression that this attitude derived from his experience in correctional services. Nevertheless, it contrasted sharply with his previously expressed idea that Native people would "kill themselves" before submitting to non-Natives, before "looking up to them".

The reason I have emphasized this contradiction is because it clearly illustrates a dilemma in which many Native students find themselves, though perhaps to a lesser degree, which is that of reconciling socialized dependency with the desire for self-determination.

Significant people in Ben's background such as his grandfather, aunt, mother, all hard working individuals

greatly influenced Ben. Their influence may have been what motivated Ben to continue his education despite early setbacks such as his illness at an early age. His experience in correctional services seemed to further impel Ben to complete his education. I feel confident Ben will succeed.

FRED:

Fred has a family, is a fluent Blackfoot speaker, and comes from a very traditional background. He has earned several diplomas from the College and is an "A" student. He plans to enroll in university courses to further his knowledge in his field of study.

He attended a non-Native school for elementary, junior, and grade ten. Grade nine was important in that he went to a non-Native school outside southern Alberta. He came back to do his grade ten and then dropped out. He worked for a number of years in factory type jobs, then took Upgrading courses, and then enrolled in a College program as a mature student.

In elementary school Fred found it very difficult at first because Blackfoot was his first language. He says: "The language at home was Blackfoot and when I went to school in grade one I didn't know how to speak English and it was really difficult... half the time you don't know what they're talking about." (laughing)

Fred has clear recollections of his early encounter with prejudice in the school he attended:

It (prejudice) bothered me quite a bit back in grade three. A few of my friends in grade one and two... some were real buddies... all of a sudden I was being treated differently (in grade three). It took me a long time to figure out that it was because I was an Indian. (laughing)

In grade nine he had a very positive experience when he attended a non-Native school outside southern Alberta. He says:

That was probably the best school I ever went to, like the environment, the students, and all that... There was only about three or four Native students there, so we were well appreciated... I guess with all the moral support from the students and the instructors, I was doing really well; in fact I was doing a lot better than I ever did in all the past eight years that I was going to school.

For grade ten he moved back to the school he had attended before because his family wanted him back home. It was during grade ten that he dropped out and he explains:

The reason I quit, it didn't do me any good, was through anger... I guess being treated a little different because I was an Indian... One of my school mates (non-Native) asked, "How come you're not taking matric?" I told him because of my marks in grade nine. He showed me his grades (from grade nine) and they were worse than mine (yet he was in matric)... so I went to see the principal... I showed him my marks and the other student's marks; mine were higher... He (principal) got defensive. We got into an argument... it ended, I walked out of his office and I never went back to school again... I told my mom, she said, "... your uncle, your grandfather, they did well without an education (laughing) so you don't need an education" ... Right away I started working... at a potato factory... Later on I worked for quite a number of years at a trailer factory. We did the

same thing every day;... I was thinking, "I don't want to do this all my life." So that's when I decided to go back to school.

Fred's first critical event in school was going to a non-Native school in grade one and not understanding English. The next major event was a positive experience in a new school in grade nine and perhaps for the first time realizing his intellectual capacity as equal to others, then the event of dropping out of school in grade ten, and then the years of work, and finally the decision to go back to school.

JEAN:

Jean was single when she attended College. She graduated from a program and has been very successful in her work with various organizations. Her goal is to get a university degree in her area of expertise.

She attended non-Native schools in southern Alberta for elementary, junior, and senior high school, except for one year at an out-of-province school. Her recollections of her early school years, except for the out-of-province school experience, were not positive:

My elementary school years were a real nightmare... it was just horrible. I used to get teased. I wasn't accepted by the teachers. I was used as punishment. I was stuck in classes for children with learning problems. They just took all the Native kids and stuck us in there... I'd work extra hard in my other classes to get taken out of this class that everybody said it was for dummies and they would never put me out of it no matter how hard I tried.

By being "used as punishment", she meant that if a non-Native student was misbehaving, she or he was threatened by the teacher who would say, "If you don't behave you're going to have to sit by that Indian."

This experience with prejudice was not isolated to any grade but occurred throughout her stay at elementary, junior, and senior high. She recalls her first year of school:

Even in grade one you know it, like they don't tell you but you know it. They have a stupid group, the average middle group, and the smart group and the expectations of all those groups are different. The thing I noticed with the teachers is they spend all their time, most of their time with the smart group, a little bit of time with the mediocre group, and hardly any time at all with the group that are a bunch of dumbos. It seems like the group that aren't academically inclined are the ones from lower income families. Like with me, I really enjoyed reading as a kid before I started school. I couldn't read that good but I really liked to look at books and there wasn't a lot.

By Jean's statement "Even in grade one you know it" she meant that she knew she was automatically placed and associated with the dumb group.

Another incident she recalled was when a few Native girls in a race during track and field came in ahead of the White girls and the physical education teacher scolded the White students and said, "You guys got beat by those Indians... come on you can do better than that", without even acknowledging the Native students who came in first.

Attendance was always poor for Jean mainly due to the harassment at school. She says:

I found my report card from grade two and for the month of February, I missed 13.5 days... It seemed they just passed me from grade to grade... The White kids used to wait for me to get off the bus and then they'd all start teasing me... I still remember this... I was in grade three. I used to hate going (to school),... I just didn't want to go into that hostile environment.

A year in an out-of-province school offered her respite and it seemed, incentive to stay in school afterwards despite the adverse circumstances in the southern Alberta school. She says, "The school I went to, I was the only Native... There were other races like Blacks, Chinese, and Italians,... but I was the only Native there and it was nice because all of a sudden I was marked as being special... instead of the old stereotype that Natives are drunks."

The teachers at the new school found that she was capable of handling regular school work and dismissed the recommendations from her previous school that she be put in remedial classes. When Jean came back to the school in southern Alberta, she found she was actually ahead of her classmates in handling the school work. She says, "It seemed I was relearning the stuff that I had done" (in the out-of-province school).

She felt that the positive interaction she had with the students and teachers were mainly what caused her to excel in her school work and she states:

I think going to a place where there wasn't so much harsh feelings against Natives and where I wasn't labelled as being a "dumb Indian", that really did a lot for me because when I came back I did really well in high school... Well, I still ran into it (discrimination) but I found I was able to deal with it better as I got older.

Jean remembers a few good teachers and one in particular she talks about:

... like there was one (teacher) that sat us in a seating arrangement and put these two non-Native boys on either side of me and... they were making a big deal over it and the other non-Natives in the class were laughing at them because they got stuck by me and the teacher said to them, "I wouldn't be squirming around like that because the feeling is probably mutual, but she's a little bit too mature to be acting the way you are..." ... like it was just that little action,... took him all of 30 seconds to say, that really... made me like him and enjoy his class and work hard to please him... he stuck up for me.

Jean was socialized to believe that if she was fortunate she would, in the future gain, employment working in menial type jobs and says:

The guidance counsellor and the other teachers always talked,... to me about jobs, like being a secretary or chamber maid or just real boring monotonous types of work. (laughing) When I used to talk about wanting to be a teacher, they'd kind of look at me like I wouldn't really be able to do it... so I went through school thinking I'll be lucky to get through school even to the College, going in something like secretarial, do good in that and get a job. That was basically as far as I saw.

Jean's experience of going to an out-of-province school for a year was the major critical event that may have caused her to try her best in school despite the odds. Once she realized that she was as academically capable as her classmates she was able to complete high school.

Another strong positive influence was her mother who worked and who, it seemed, provided the emotional stability she needed at home to soothe the emotional trauma she underwent going into a hostile school environment each day.

3. Summary:

The students interviewed had very diverse school and work backgrounds. None had gone to the same school and only two had achieved a general high school diploma from the school they attended. However, despite the differences in experiences, I noticed a common trend in all six interviews. This trend was that those who had an opportunity to move outside southern Alberta and experience school elsewhere, particularly in schools where there wasn't a high Native student population, were more likely to succeed in school when they came back.

It is interesting to note the similarities in background and present attitude between the oldest and youngest student interviewed, Mary and Caroline. Both had travelled fairly extensively and had contact with other cultures, both had a

well integrated traditional upbringing and values, and both had stable family relationships. They had a strong sense of cultural and personal identity and had a desire to change attitudes towards Native people in a positive demonstrative way and were able to look at situations from both sides and were helping people who wanted to be of service.

In the literature review there is mention of the academic and social integration that ought to take place if a student is to perform academically. This means that the teacher and other students must accept the student as an equal and intelligent being. The teacher shows the student that she or he is as intelligent as others and expected to perform accordingly in school work. The students accept the student as one of the group and provide the emotional support. Without these two critical factors in school a student is unlikely to succeed; dropping out is the usual response to non-acceptance by peers and teachers.

Academic and social integration in school took place for Caroline, Fred, and Jean. Mary also moved outside southern Alberta but to work and live amongst different communities, which resulted in her very mature attitude and human understanding. Fred spoke of his positive experience in the school he went to for a year: "I guess with all the moral

support from the students and the instructors, I was doing really well; in fact I was doing a lot better than I ever did in all the past eight years that I was going to school."

Jean explained more directly the reasons why she excelled in her new school:

I think going to a place where there wasn't so much harsh feelings against Natives and where I wasn't labelled as being a "dumb Indian", that really did a lot for me because when I came back I did really well in high school...

The implication from this trend, where the student had to move out of southern Alberta in order to experience a positive learning environment, is that in southern Alberta, particularly in schools in close proximity to reserves, a Native student is unlikely to experience social or academic integration as a result of racial tension. Fred and Jean were quoted extensively because they provided some revealing insights into this type of situation.

There are two counter tendencies Native people adopt when the subject of racism arises. For some Native people there is the scapegoat tendency, where everything that goes wrong is blamed on racism. The other tendency is to redefine it in more sophisticated or academically acceptable terms or even trivialize its impact. The fact remains, whichever way one puts it; racism existed and still exists in some southern Alberta schools.

CHAPTER V

L.C.C. EXPERIENCE

The intent of this project was to have the Native students speak about their experience at L.C.C. The students spoke of their families, financial problems, their social life, study skills, courses, classroom, and teachers. The informal interview method allowed them to freely express their thoughts and views on these subjects. The following are some of the direct quotes from the students, organized under topic areas. Third party comments were eliminated, such as, "So and so said this happened"; only direct experiences of the student are reported.

It has been my observation from seven years of working with Native students that there is some reluctance to talk about an unpleasant experience for fear of repercussion or being singled out as a troublemaker, thereby attracting attention. I felt the students interviewed were quite open in discussing all of their experiences at L.C.C. This may have been because trust was developed with the interviewer, anonymity was assured, or they had confidence in themselves to talk about an incident, which in most cases happened years before.

1. Family Environment:

The students felt that a stable and supportive home life was mainly what determines a student's general well-being. Fred said, "There has to be an understanding that this (going to school) is very difficult. They (his family) realize that I'm studying to get some assignments done or for a test coming up." Not only family members but friends and relatives must also realize that it is no longer appropriate to just drop-in for a visit during the school months. He also said, "Living on the reserve you can't tell them (people who drop-in), 'I've got to study, you go'... so you accommodate those kind of people; I study at the library." Visiting is part of the price a Native person pays when going to school. Visiting was, and still is, a valuable social function in reserve life because it not only strengthens human bonds but tones up the art of discourse especially in the Blackfoot language. Such things as television, bingo, and school have intruded on this valuable social function.

Young children in the home also make it difficult to study. Jean said of her husband, "He'll be trying to study and my child wants attention or be making noise, so a lot of times he takes off and goes to the library." Fred said, "The hardest thing is that my kids are both under ten and they expect me to

spend some time with them... but I usually make up for those times."

Jean said an unstable home life is not conducive to study and made the following observation:

I think a lot of Native students come in here thinking that they're going to change their whole life. They're going to get into school and that's going to be it. They're going to forget all their problems and bury themselves in their schoolwork, and it just doesn't work that way because if your personal life is a mess, it makes it really hard to do well in a career or academically... until you get some of that straightened away.

I said, "So get yourself looked after, like if you have a problem with alcohol or drugs, deal with that first." Jean said, "Yea,... or an unstable marriage... or with teenage kids... who are into all sorts of trouble..."

It was unfortunate that none of the students interviewed were single parents. The problems some two-parent families have appear to be magnified for a single parent. Mary expressed sympathy for a single parent who missed classes regularly because there was nobody to look after her children. She said, "I think if she didn't have any stresses (at home) she would be right at the top of the class... she's really a smart lady." Many L.C.C. students are single parents.

Children, spouse, and other family members suffer the consequences it seems more deeply if it is the mother going to school. For example, young children uprooted from a rural

reserve environment and put suddenly into a city school experience severe trauma, like the little girl in grade one who had to ride a city bus for the first time to go to a new school. She got physically sick after a week of strange new people and loud noise.

The death of a family or extended family member is often the cause for long absences from class, which results in low grades or dropping out. However, if there is support such as from other students and teachers at the College, a student may be able to continue and succeed in their courses, as was the case for Jean:

Something that just about made me quit College was the loss of my mother. I think Native people, more so than White people, suffer loss like that so often... even if it's somebody like an aunt or uncle, the Native family is so extended that it hurts a lot. Like sometimes your aunt or uncle is more like a mother or father, or like a second mom or dad.

I noted that when there's a death, not just the family but all the friends and relatives may miss class for a whole week or two and asked Jean, what helped her keep on when her mother passed away? She said, "Support from my instructors, counselling staff, and Native students. The Native students really helped me through the rest of the semester."

Fred had a similar experience:

It was towards the end of the semester, round about March when my mother died. After I went back and told the

instructors, "I've missed two weeks and the finals are already to start, there's no way I'm going to pass", but they said, "Don't quit, you've gone this far",... so they gave me some extensions, I withdrew from some courses... I did make it.

2. Finances:

Financial difficulties afflict the majority of students; however, for Native students the difficulty is compounded by the fact that many have to travel back and forth to either the Blood or Peigan reserves, mostly because they cannot find living accommodations in town. It has been my experience that some landladies and landlords in the city will not rent to Native families. Fred at one time was spending \$350 per month on gas. Bad weather, vehicle breakdowns, and lack of money often cause a student to miss class.

Those students that manage to find living accommodation in town still find it difficult to manage financially. Jean recalled, "I'd really be broke; I'd think, well I'm single, sure I don't have groceries (laughing) for the last week of the month... I'd have to start figuring out real creative ways of budgeting my money." But when it came to having a family later on, the lack of money became much more serious:

When my husband was in school and our child was just born, it was really hard, because after we paid rent we had \$250 to buy groceries, gas for the month, the phone bill, etc... Just to get an extra dollar for something seemed to be asking too much... There were months when, honest to God, we thought we weren't going to make it.

3. Social Life at L.C.C.:

The students all expressed feeling comfortable within the College. Mary expressed it this way:

It's the feeling of being together... we're doing the same thing and everybody is an equal with everybody else and that's the way I feel here, but I know there are some students who do not feel that way... Not because they're not friendly but because it's not in them; it's not their way to say "good morning" or smile or stop and talk... Maybe they're here just to learn and get out of here and go make lots of money and be rich, but that's not the way I'm thinking about it.

Part of the reason for the comfortable feeling within the College for some Native students is that there are other Native students. Fred said:

When I first started there was only a few of us... maybe for a whole week I wouldn't see another Native student... Now you see one every 30 feet (laughing)... it's a comfortable feeling... (Native student) and I, we're taking the same program... if something goes wrong we've got one another for support.

The students all felt that the Native Club served an important function in making Native students feel like they belonged to and were a part of the College. Fred said, "It (Native Club) boosted me when we set up a pow wow or invited some guests (Native) to speak... You need that to boost you up while you're going to school."

One aspect of socializing within the College that was brought out in the interview was the need to interact with students who were in the same class the student was in. This

meant that the student could then have support in handling the course. Jean experienced this social interaction with her classmates and says:

I found support not only with Native students but also with non-Natives. I think there were only three or four other Native students (in the program) and a lot of times we were never in the same class... I was with the same group all the time. I got really close with three of them (White students) and we used to study in the library every night for a couple of hours.

Caroline also mentioned the need for this type of interaction with classmates because she had the opposite experience of Jean. She said, "I felt like an outsider because the other students were in the program and they would get together to study in the library or at each other's house. (She was a part-time student in the program.) She was suspended and feels that if she enrolled again she would, "Get to know the students, so in this way I can study with them".

However, in order for a Native student to be able to interact socially with non-Native students in their classes there needs to be a willingness on both sides to interact. If a White student doesn't want to socialize with Native students, no effort will be made to interact, and the same is true for a Native student. In Jean's case it seemed she felt confident enough to initiate interaction with her non-Native classmates. It is quite probable that in most cases the Native student is

too shy to make any moves to promote social interaction and is more likely to withdraw and do the class assignments on their own.

4. Racial Prejudice:

Prejudice against Native people prevents amiable social interaction and Native students are keenly aware of its' presence and may be reluctant to speak with a person they suspect of being prejudiced. Most of the students spoke of being able to cope with prejudice, which meant either building up tolerance as one got older or ignoring it. This seemed to be a self-protective reaction. Fred said:

I'm getting used to all the differences because all my life I've been off the reserve (for work and school but lives on the reserve). I guess I've got a high tolerance for certain things you come up against while going to school... I don't let it (prejudice) bother me. I always look at the better side of things... I know that first year... it wasn't visible, it was kind of silent, but you could tell... With the help of the instructors... their support, I just kept going.

I asked him to elaborate on "silent" and he replied:

Well... by "silent"... you don't need any mystical power to know... I guess body language, their attitude... you can tell they want some distance from you because you're different... they'll talk to you... but you notice that. I guess I'm probably the best one to learn that because I started in grade one (meaning he experienced prejudice). You build up some tolerance... I ignore it because if it bothered me I wouldn't have gone this far. I could have just sat there... let it wear me down and I wouldn't be productive at all.

Specific instances of racial prejudice were also mentioned such as:

I kind of felt prejudice from Law Enforcement students... I'd walk down the hallway and there'd be "Hey!" There's your squaw"... I used to just hate going to the cafeteria and have to go through that... I thought, "My God! These are going to be the policemen of tomorrow"... that really made me feel insecure and brought my self-esteem down.

I asked, "Did you ever tell anyone about these incidents?" The student said she told some of the other Native students but they said just to ignore them (Law Enforcement students).

Racial prejudice was an underlying theme in the students' educational histories. This subject is analyzed further in the final "Summary and Analysis" section of this document.

5. Counselling:

Most students had positive comments regarding Student Services in general. Susan did mention that she was misled by a counsellor who gave her wrong information. However, she got very good information from another counsellor, who also took the time to inquire into her personal circumstances leading to her suspension. Ben said, "I try to stay away from it (counselling) as much as possible, but some students need to talk... they have problems." It seemed he didn't want to appear to his peers as having personal problems.

Fred mentioned how comfortable he felt at seeing a Native person in Student Services and why some Native students prefer to see a Native counsellor and said:

Some of them (Native students) will wait rather than talk to anybody and it may be an emergency... they'd rather not talk to the receptionist even though a lot of times the receptionist can help... I think we're comfortable with the same... like an Indian counsellor... I don't see anybody else, they're (Native counsellor) the ones I go see for information... I guess it's the comfort zone... more relaxed.

6. Study Skills:

Each student spoke of developing their own style of studying as time went on. For example, note taking was a skill developed only with practice and for Fred it was developing his own type of shorthand. Jean described the process of learning to take notes as, "I'd abbreviate... at first I tried to get everything the instructor said down and I found it was a total waste of time... The longer you're a student, the more you learn to just pick up what's important." One student vaguely recalled a counsellor coming to the classroom to conduct an introductory study skills lesson. None mentioned coming to Student Services for help in study skills. Study skills was a process they learned while doing their class work.

Time management was difficult for Mary to adjust to. The limited time between classes she felt did not allow for students to stop and socialize. She said, "My first observation was that everybody was always on the go... and didn't have time to slow down... The only time we slowed down was when we got home."

7. College Courses:

It seemed a student could appreciate and understand a concept being taught when they could relate it to experiences relevant to them; for example, Mary spoke about a math lesson:

Our teacher said a turkey that weighed 10.5 kilograms, about 25 pounds... it cooked in 9 3/4 hours... I said, "I don't think so, it would have to depend on the temperature of the oven, because that turkey, you would have to do it in a slow oven... like in the old days when we used to use wood stoves, it would take 9 3/4 hours but today it only takes about 4 hours. ...I've cooked a 30 pound turkey in 4 1/2 hours."

Mary also said she enjoyed her courses even though they were, "different from everyday living at home... it was different from working." This meant that some of her courses were removed from her reality of living.

Ben spoke about using his knowledge of Native culture and his personal experiences as content in his speech course. Another student said the reason she was motivated to attend a particular class on human development was because she could relate it to her own development, "It was a human development course and it was on... the changes you go through right into adulthood... You were able to find out the category that you were in and really understand why I felt like this at a certain time". (Meaning it gave her self-understanding)

Ben also spoke about his understanding of English in Hamlet:

I don't know about that (Hamlet), but the wording... sometimes when I think about Hamlet, the wording, in the early days Natives, they probably would have talked like that... not the wording, but the thought behind it. Just like our Native language, there were more directing words... a thought I kept to myself... you want to do something against an individual. I think we've experienced that; how we'd set up certain things... from my point of view things are expressed more direct (in Blackfoot), whereas in English it's hard to be direct... (in Blackfoot) you just say it directly to the idea.

Throughout his interview Ben expressed frustration with his inability to express himself fluently in English, "...it always bothers me the grammar part, that's always getting me mad. ...I always know that I'll have problems with my grammar." I felt this student was impressed with the power and potential of English, but felt confused and frustrated that where he had learned to speak it, he felt he had not learned to use it as he could use the Blackfoot language.

8. Classroom and Teaching:

The most important quality the students appreciated about a teacher was a teacher's ability to explain a concept clearly and simply. Susan spoke of it as, "high" versus "low" level of speaking, "They explain... a simple way of explaining" versus "He has a way of speaking in a higher level than what we can understand... maybe it's his education, his field..."

Fred spoke of it as, "Some instructors... they know all those things (what's being taught) but there's some detail..."

they don't fully explain to us, and then they give you a look that says they think you're pretty dumb (to be asking that question)." He meant the teacher takes for granted that the students' perception of the concept that is being taught is as clear as his or her own perception of it and, therefore, doesn't bother explaining the minor details. This oversight was referred to previously under, "DISADVANTAGES OF THE INTERVIEW" p. 37.

The teacher's use of visual aids was helpful in aiding understanding. Ben said, "She's a walking computer of history, but she has to keep to the topic... show more material... using boards (chalk) and handouts instead of verbal." He meant that although the teacher is very knowledgeable about her subject, she only talks about it and as a result may not convey to the student the excitement she feels for history.

Ben compared this to two other instructors who were able to verbally and demonstratively convey excitement in the subject they were teaching. "They really strived to get up and walk around... They'd go to the board and write it out... All their knowledge it seemed they try to drain it out to the students."

Active participation such as in discussion of the topic added to further understanding. Ben said, "They relate what

they're teaching to their own personal experiences and we talk about it... I used to never say anything in class... they would pick on students to speak out... Those were the two instructors I really enjoyed." The instructors Ben refers to were willing to personally relate the topic to themselves and this in turn made the students feel less inhibited in voicing their opinions. As Susan said, "Some teachers make you feel really important and others can be so impersonal." Discussion of the topic under study would also give the teachers an indication of how well the students understood the topic as Mary said, "She explains things... she'll write it down and... we have to be the teachers and she's the pupil. I really enjoyed her class."

9. Asking Questions:

Fred recalled that when he first came to the College he didn't ask questions. "I didn't want to look stupid... I was kind of afraid to talk to them (teachers)." Mary said, "I was afraid to ask questions... even being out working I still felt like a student." This meant that, although she had held very responsible positions in past work experiences, she was now in the role of a student, which may have implied a lower status to the teacher. To compensate for this fear of questioning, Caroline asked other students and said, "Most of the time I

would be asking afterwards (class), 'what was that?', just to make things clear with other students."

The reluctance on the part of Native students to ask questions in no way implies a lack of willingness to learn but is determined by other factors such as shyness, fear of appearing stupid, past experiences, or a socialized dependency. Dependency is the belief that if a White person in authority says something, therefore he or she must be right and is not open to question. It appears that the teachers who are most highly regarded by Native students are those who can awaken and respond to their questioning capacity.

10. Non-Verbal Communication of Teachers:

The students were very conscious of the teacher's attitude towards them, communicated mostly through the teacher's non-verbal behavior, such as in the way the teacher looked at them. If a teacher had a positive attitude towards a student, it helped in strengthening their self-esteem. For example, Susan said, "She'll (teacher) say, 'I know you can do it (class work)'... she really made a student feel good." She also said that this positive acknowledgment by the teacher was not confined to the classroom. "When you're walking past the office (teacher's)... if she sees you, she'll call you or if she sees you in the cafeteria, she'll talk to you, which I liked."

Susan recalled feeling scared in one of the first classes she attended when the teacher said, "If you don't understand it (concept/course) now, you're never going to understand it." She was also very hesitant to approach one teacher; she said, "You just don't want to approach her... like I feel I can't really go to her... but I can go to another teacher for help and she'll explain a lot better..."

Caroline spoke of her experience and said, "She (teacher) always seemed to look disgusted or like she just couldn't bother with my questions when I'd ask her after class... so it got to the point where I just didn't ask anymore." Fred said he felt he was asking a stupid question when the teacher would give you a look that says, "That's a pretty stupid question". The most blatant example of not acknowledging the student was reported by Jean:

I had an instructor who would not acknowledge I was in his class... I would follow him around, I would sit at a computer with my hand in the air all period, he would walk right by me. I'd go and ask him for help in his office and he'd say, "I'll be right with you", and then he'd leave... Finally I came down to Student Services... I just withdrew out of his class... It made me just want to forget about College...

I asked her, "How do you think we could work with these types of instructors to make them more accommodating?" She replied:

"I don't know, for those instructors it's their belief system and their value systems, and changing somebody's

beliefs is really hard to do... I guess they've got a stereotype of Natives and it's really hard to change that type of thing, especially when somebody like that instructor has it so ingrained in their mind that... "Why spend anytime with that student, they're not going to succeed anyway."

I asked, "If there was a workshop set up for professional development for teachers on relating to Native people, do you think teachers like that would go?" She said, "If it was voluntary the ones who need it the least would be the ones who would go and the ones that have the real attitude problems would be the least likely to go". In other words, it is not worthwhile to preach to the converted who already have positive feelings towards Native adult students and who are doing things to promote better relations. Perhaps it would be better to promote uncontrived situations where there is an opportunity for cross cultural relations to take place such as during International Week or Native Awareness Week.

CHAPTER VI

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY STUDENTS

During my interview with the six students I asked them to make any suggestions or recommendations that they thought would improve and enhance their experience at the College and help improve performance of Native students generally. The following suggestions, which I have chosen to put separately from the preceding section, is a summary of those recommendations.

1. Study Groups:

Caroline, Ben, and Jean suggested study groups; where a group of students taking the same class get together regularly to study class material. Participation would be voluntary. This seemed to be preferred over getting individual tutors with individual students. The instructor of the course or a tutor can come into these study groups once in a while to help the students.

Ben suggested that the times selected for the study groups should be arranged within the 8 to 5 p.m. school day, rather than in the evening, so that students with children or those who live on the reserve can take advantage of it.

Caroline suggested that the organization of each study group should begin by first announcing the idea at one of the

Native club meetings and if the students felt they would benefit from being a part of a study group then they would decide whether to have one or not. She felt that commitment was the key to a successful study group. Also, she thought it would work best with students that didn't have children, because they wouldn't have to rush home to cook or look after their children. However, if Ben's suggestion was considered, to have the study group within the 8 to 5 p.m. time, students with children or who live on the reserve, would have the chance to be a part of the study group.

2. Resource Material:

There should be resource material in the library for the student who cannot afford a tutor or studies in the evening. For example, if a student wants to get background information on math, he or she should know that there is a place where resource material is available. This would be in addition to the tutoring help provided by the Learning Centre. This material is probably available already; it would be a matter of concentrating it in a designated place.

3. Native Instructors:

There was a definite need expressed for Native college instructors from the southern Alberta Blackfoot speaking community. The students felt that too often Native people from

the local reserves are overlooked and Natives from other areas are appointed to speak for the local Native people. The Blackfoot people can speak for themselves and be in positions where they can be of the most help to their people such as Native instructors teaching college courses. Jean thought that having Natives on faculty would encourage Native students to go and ask questions regarding their course work which she recalled was a problem for her at one time:

I took English 30... I didn't have a clue what the instructor was talking about half the time, and I think if there had been a Native instructor around I would have felt more comfortable going to them with my work from my other class and asking them what's going on here.

It was also felt that a Native instructor or instructors would be role models for the Native students.

4. Native Club:

The following were the suggestions made by the students regarding the Native Students' Association or the "Native Club" as it is more commonly referred to:

a) More cross-cultural activities should be held within the College.

b) More activities to make Native students feel they are a part of the College; for example, the Native student participation in International Week.

c) In order to encourage strong leadership within the Native Student Association, incentives such as designated parking, a plug-in, or some kind of recognition should be provided. This will hopefully encourage those students who have good leadership skills to run for the position of president.

d) Professional Native people or those who have really been successful in their profession, from the local area, should be invited to the College to speak on various issues. This will help in changing negative attitudes towards Native people.

e) Form the Native Student Association executive as early as possible in September.

f) Form communication links with Student Association, the University Native club, the Friendship Centre, and the reserves. For example, invite a member of the Student Association executive to a meeting once in a while to inform them of what the Native students are doing.

g) Welcome Native students from outside southern Alberta and invite them to become involved in the club.

h) Involve Faculty in the club.

i) Get a non-Native student to be on the club executive.

j) International Week should be a top priority for the club because it offers an opportunity to display the Native

culture along with other ethnic cultures within the College, and reminds people that the Native people are the original people of Canada.

k) During Native Awareness Week in March a teepee should be put up at the College to show that the College has a strong Native club.

l) Students elected to the executive of the club should be qualified. Ideally, a secretarial student should fill the secretarial position and a business student fill the treasurer's position. This would also offer practical experience to the students.

m) Consideration should be given to electing the Fall executive in January because by this time Native students are familiar with who is willing and capable of being on the executive of the club.

5. Orientation:

a) A buddy system should be set up for new students, where they are linked up with a Native student who was here before, to help them in the first two weeks of classes.

b) A potluck supper for the students and their families would provide new students with the opportunity to know who else is in College. This will promote friendships, possible baby-sitters, friends for the children in the same age

category, and a general support system. Such things as posters and flyers should be distributed the first week to announce the event to the students. Such things as a barbecue, baseball game, and children's games could compliment the event.

c) In letters sent out to new students regarding orientation the wording should be designed to make the student want to come to orientation because they feel it will benefit them and is worth the trip into town.

d) There needs to be a preparatory course before school starts to prepare the Native student to handle college courses.

6. Support Services - Counselling:

a) Jean's suggestion that students who have severe personal problems, resolve them first before coming to the College, has implications for counselling potential students.

Jean said:

I think a lot of Native students come in here thinking they're going to change their whole life; they're going to get into school and that's going to be it; they're going to forget all their problems and bury themselves in their school work, and it doesn't work that way because if your personal life is a mess it makes it really hard to do well in a career or academically or anything else, until you get some of that straightened away.

As counsellors, it is difficult to know what is manageable for the potential student; however, we ought to be more aware of this observation by Jean when talking to potential students.

b) Inform students of the support services, such as counselling, that is available to them because, as one student said, "If they need counselling, they may not seek it because they don't want the hassle of trying to find out how to go about seeing a counsellor." We in Student Services may assume that everyone feels free to come in and ask for help, but as this student said, it may be very intimidating for some students to go into Student Services and ask to see a counsellor.

c) A Native student services should be established.

d) Advertisement of Native counselling services as is done in universities; for example, a brochure with information about the counsellors, their office, and phone numbers.

e) Native counsellors being more accessible for those students who have to deal with an emergency situation or need specific information right away. This is also because sometimes a Native student will wait rather than talk to a non-Native counsellor or a receptionist, even though they may be able to help.

f) A Native counsellor should be in the reception area, especially during registration week, to answer Native students' questions.

g) A Native student should be able to more quickly enter a program while they still have the motivation, rather than spending a long time in Upgrading because this is discouraging and will result in boredom and losing sight of his or her career goal.

h) The crucial time for students is near the end of the semester when they are studying for their exams. If anything happens, either at College or in the home, to disrupt their study; this is probably the time they will drop out. Measures should be taken to assist the student to deal with the stress and tension they experience at this time.

i) One student strongly recommended Life Skills for students because it worked on, "improving yourself and your self-esteem". The implication for Counselling Services is that perhaps we can conduct groups of a similar nature.

j) Support groups for women was suggested by one student. She felt that they could be very successful if there was trust in the group. "A lot of it has to do with trust; can you trust this person to say whatever you're feeling... you have to be able to trust who's ever in there... talk about whatever you're doing, how you feel, if you're having problems.

7. Recognition of Native and Other Minorities by College

Staff and Administration:

a) In order for Native students to be successful in College there has to be a recognition by teachers that Native students have a special need. For example, they may need more than just a verbal explanation of a concept in order to fully understand it.

b) Administrators, such as the President, "are going to have to recognize that they cater to a Native population and are going to have to start accommodating them". This student mentioned that the University of Lethbridge President is seen by Native people as providing them with visible support, meaning the media will often report on the President actively supporting Native people.

c) The chairman or co-ordinator of a program should model a welcoming and accepting attitude to Native and minority students that is picked up and practiced by other faculty. For example, one student mentioned that the chairman of a program that has a lot of foreign students recognizes that they have certain limitations and need a lot of support. This student said, "I know he doesn't have to do that but he goes out of his way, like if you're sitting in the computer room and he goes by, he'll come in and talk to you and he does that with his

foreign students too. He reminds them that they're welcome. I think it (accepting attitude) has to come from the director or else the chairman."

d) International Week is a step in the right direction in acknowledging that the College has a student population from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. However, the acknowledgment has to go further and recognize that some of these minority students have special needs and require patience. One student mentioned that in talking with Costa Ricans, he used words that were not understandable to them, but that he felt they knew he was friendly and patient and would ask him what those words meant.

e) A stronger relationship should be established between the College and local reserve administrations. This student felt that if the College can give the V.I.P. treatment to visiting foreign dignitaries, it should also give similar treatment for local Native administrators and representatives of other ethnic minorities.

8. Blackfoot Language:

A Blackfoot language course would encourage Blackfoot students to come to the College and take courses. One student said, "The College has to recognize that there are approximately 200 Native students that come and that's quite a

bit of money that's coming in (to the College) and the College will have to do something to make them (Native students) want to come and stay, otherwise they're going to lose them."

9. Career Day:

Graduates from the College and University should go to the reserves and talk to the students and motivate them to continue their education.

CHAPTER VII

RECOMMENDATIONS BY AUTHOR

1. The suggestions and recommendations made by the students be examined and where feasible implemented.
2. Those suggestions or recommendations implemented be evaluated after a period of one year to determine their effectiveness in assisting the Native student to stay in College and complete his or her courses.
3. The monitoring of Native student enrollments be continued and refined. This includes follow-up on Native students who drop out or are suspended due to low grades and determining ways to assist them in continuing their education.
4. The hiring of local Native people both as professionals and support staff to act as role models and further assist Native students in completing their education.
5. A room be made available within the College for Native students where they could conduct their study groups for individual courses and personal support groups.
6. Workshops in professional development for faculty students, and support staff concentrating on promoting better communication and relations with the Native student population. For example, there ought to be workshops designed for specific program areas such as Law Enforcement where the issue of racial

prejudice is confronted and dealt with in a healthy positive manner.

7. Ongoing interviews by the Native student counsellor with selected Native students regarding their personal views on ways Student Services can better assist them in completing their education.

8. Recognition by Student Services, College administration, and faculty of minority students and initiating measures to accommodate them at L.C.C. For example, introducing Native content into existing courses such as Social Studies or creating Native studies courses for specific programs such as for Child and Youth Care and Law Enforcement.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The goal of the project, to examine with the students their academic experience, was achieved, along with their recommendations and suggestions for promoting Native student retention at L.C.C. More importantly, the goal of getting the subjective views and responses of the students, was achieved because the students seemed open and honest in their recollections of school experiences from elementary school to college. For example, many times they spoke about their intuitive feelings such as, "The feeling, you don't have to say anything, you're understood.", "It wasn't visible, it was silent, but you could tell... you don't need any mystical power to know.", or "She made me feel really good." These were very natural responses used to describe a situation.

Personal struggles with interpreting the students' statements were difficult to resolve. I wanted the students' subjective voice to come through, yet on the other hand I didn't wish to intrude too far or read too much into their statements. The concern was not to impinge on their private selves; their dignity. However, being thoroughly familiar with the context, or life as a Native in Southern Alberta, I felt qualified in finally giving, what I hope is a subtle, yet guarded interpretation of what the students said.

From the beginning it seemed I wanted to produce both an academically styled and creative personal report. This seeming incompatibility may have prevented me from pursuing a topic in further depth with the students. I believe I resolved this conflict by finally putting the entire focus on obtaining the subjective views of the students and reporting them within the context of the speaker.

I found that even though I had experienced life as a Native student, my insights can never be a total reflection of Native students in general, and therefore, it is crucial to listen openly to their views and concerns. I can appreciate the meaning of the statement by Long, Paradise, and Long (1983): "We begin to make claims about people and speak for them in ways that conceal the truths of their existence", that is, if we as counsellors and educators do not listen carefully to the student.

I found that being so involved in the interviews at a personal level, I often failed to recognize there were instances where I overlooked the individual significance of some of the students' related experiences. It wasn't until later when these comments were viewed in the context of the entire interviews, that their significance became apparent. For example, the topic of racial prejudice was often in the

stories the students told about their hardships in going to school. A non-Native reader might say, "So what! I've had rough times too, but I'm not complaining or asking for special treatment." But what is significant about these stories the students tell is that they seemed so common place; stories you hear over and over again. The underlying theme from most, if not all, of the students is their history and continuing struggle with racial prejudice. I feel that the results of this project is that it shows, rather than tells of, the presence and the effect of racial prejudice in Southern Alberta educational institutions. Prejudice is so prevalent in Southern Alberta, it affects the entire Native community.

A non-Native reader might also think that Native people are being too paranoid, seeing racism in every little thing that doesn't go their way. This is true in some cases and there is a counter-tendency where Native people become very racist themselves against White people and treat them in the same manner they complain about being treated.

Then there is the non-Native reader who says, "Why brand or label the entire Southern Alberta region, Lethbridge, or a school as racist because of a few incidences of racism." This may be true and it must be acknowledged that there are exceptional non-Native people who have helped in eliminating

racial prejudice and I am optimistic in believing that those kind of people make up the majority in Southern Alberta schools.

The fact that Fred and Jean had to go outside Southern Alberta to experience a positive learning environment does not mean, I believe, that those places they went to were comprised of people who were less racist and better than Southern Alberta teachers. What it means is that those people have never had the opportunity to confront racism. If there were one or two Natives in the school, that was fine; they didn't rock the boat; they were even considered special or appreciated, as happened with Jean and Fred. Once the number of Natives increases in the school to a point where the system ought to change to accommodate them, and doesn't, then that is when tension, friction, and dropping out of school occurs.

Racial prejudice is a delicate topic for both Native and non-Native people in Southern Alberta and it uncovers a wide range of emotions. For most Native people it is a part of their reality; it never goes away, whereas for a White person, it is a thought acknowledged once in a while and which they can retreat from if things get too uncomfortable.

Native people have learned to cope with prejudice in a variety of ways like being counter-racist, tolerating, or ignoring it as Fred and Jean did. However, along with the

desensitization, probably for self-protective purposes, I feel anger is there in all cases in varying degrees, but some Natives choose to ignore prejudice because it expends so much negative energy. As Fred said, "If it bothered me I wouldn't have gone this far. I could have just sat there and let it wear me down and I wouldn't be productive at all."

The interviews gave a positive indication that the Native students were acknowledging prejudice in their lives and perhaps talking about it for the first time. They were also giving suggestions on ways to improve relations with non-Native people, not only within the College, but in the community. They were willing to initiate measures to improve the situation, rather than waiting for an external force to initiate the measures. I thought they showed a maturity in attitude that may be representative of other Native students.

The studies and interviews both emphasized the influence a teacher has on a student's self-confidence in learning. Edmunds and McCurdy (1988) state, "Faculty expectations of minority students' performances are critical in their ability to perform academically... distorted, naive, and often time biased perception... can lead to lower self-esteem and confidence... destructive to academic performance and achievement." Susan spoke of her teacher making her feel

"really good... really important", and she (teacher) didn't "make you feel like you were dumb." Jean told of the power of the teacher to motivate, when in grade nine the teacher spoke up on her behalf when she was being harassed by White students. She said, "It was just that little action, it took him all of 30 seconds to say... that really made me like and enjoy his class and work hard." Fred and Jean both kept on in College despite the trauma caused by a death in their immediate families, because of supportive teachers, whereas in most cases the Native student will drop out of College.

In the studies I found not only the element of Native input, but Native content in courses, in the suggestions Native students made when asked what retention measures could be undertaken by the institution. For example, Falk and Aitken's (1984) survey with Native students gave suggestions such as hiring Indians, Indian student organizations, and Indian studies programs. In another similar survey with faculty, Clewell and Ficklen (1986) suggested more administratively oriented retention measures such as a stated policy, institutional commitment, systematic collection of retention data, monitoring and follow-up, and strong faculty support. Both Native student input and administrative input are needed. It was evident from reviewing the studies that one person

working in isolation to promote retention can never be as effective as an administration that has as one of its' goals, minority student retention.

The theme that arose out of the students' suggestions and recommendations was one of self-reliance in promoting Native student retention. Nettles (1988) stated that in order to solve the problem of low representation of minorities in higher education, higher education was not the place to begin because the problems in higher education were only a symptom and could not be solved unless the root causes were dealt with. One of the root causes, I believe, is that it has always been the non-Native imposing externally planned solutions to the "Indian Problem", rather than Native people planning and doing things themselves.

The students suggested retention measures that would operate through the Native club, study groups, support groups, and a buddy system. For example, Mary offered to link up with new students for the first two weeks of school to help them in adjusting to the College. Her knowledge and experiences have given her the wisdom which will allow her to make a great contribution to Native student retention. Caroline, the youngest of the interviewees, also displays similar attributes as Mary. She wants to "reach out to people." Susan also said,

"It's the thought of helping others." This talent and willingness to help on the part of these students needs to be acknowledged and utilized for effective peer support.

One area the studies did not mention that the interviews revealed was a Native student's appreciation of teachers who took the time to explain things. This involved the teacher's receptivity to questions, their manner that determined their approachability, their ability to explain clearly and simply, being involved and excited about the subject taught, and using visual aids to explain. For example, the students were sensitive to the teacher's non-verbal behaviors, such as in the way they looked at a student asking a question and if the teacher looked "disgusted", as in Caroline's case, or gave a look that indicated the student was asking a stupid question, as in Fred's case, then it was unlikely the student would approach the teacher again to ask questions. Jean was the exception in that she pursued the teacher time after time to ask questions, until it reached the point of complete frustration and she dropped the class. Susan told of her difficulty in understanding one teacher who spoke at a "high level". It must be emphasized that as counsellors and teachers we may sometimes take for granted that what is clear in our minds is equally clear to the student and, therefore, careful

attention must be given to choice of words and speed in delivery when explaining.

An integrative rather than an assimilative college environment must be pursued if retention measures at L.C.C. are to be improved upon. The studies referred to an integrative environment as a place where academic and social integration occurred for the minority student. The "Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education" (1984) states that, "Students pick up from virtually every aspect of campus life, administrators' attitude towards students... the number and diversity of cultural events, the degree to which the College interacts with its surrounding community, all these factors determine the tone of the environment" (p.40).

The positive element at L.C.C. is that Native students generally already feel comfortable within the College. This could be because of several factors such as: Student Services is centrally located, has a friendly staff, and has Native people employed. Also, International Week and Native Awareness Week, both cultural events, are always enthusiastically supported by Native students. There are College faculty teaching courses on the local reserves. There is a Native Advisory Committee comprised of Native people from the reserve and urban areas and College personnel. There are

exceptionally good teachers who really support the Native students. The next step is to examine the suggestions and recommendations of the students and implement them.

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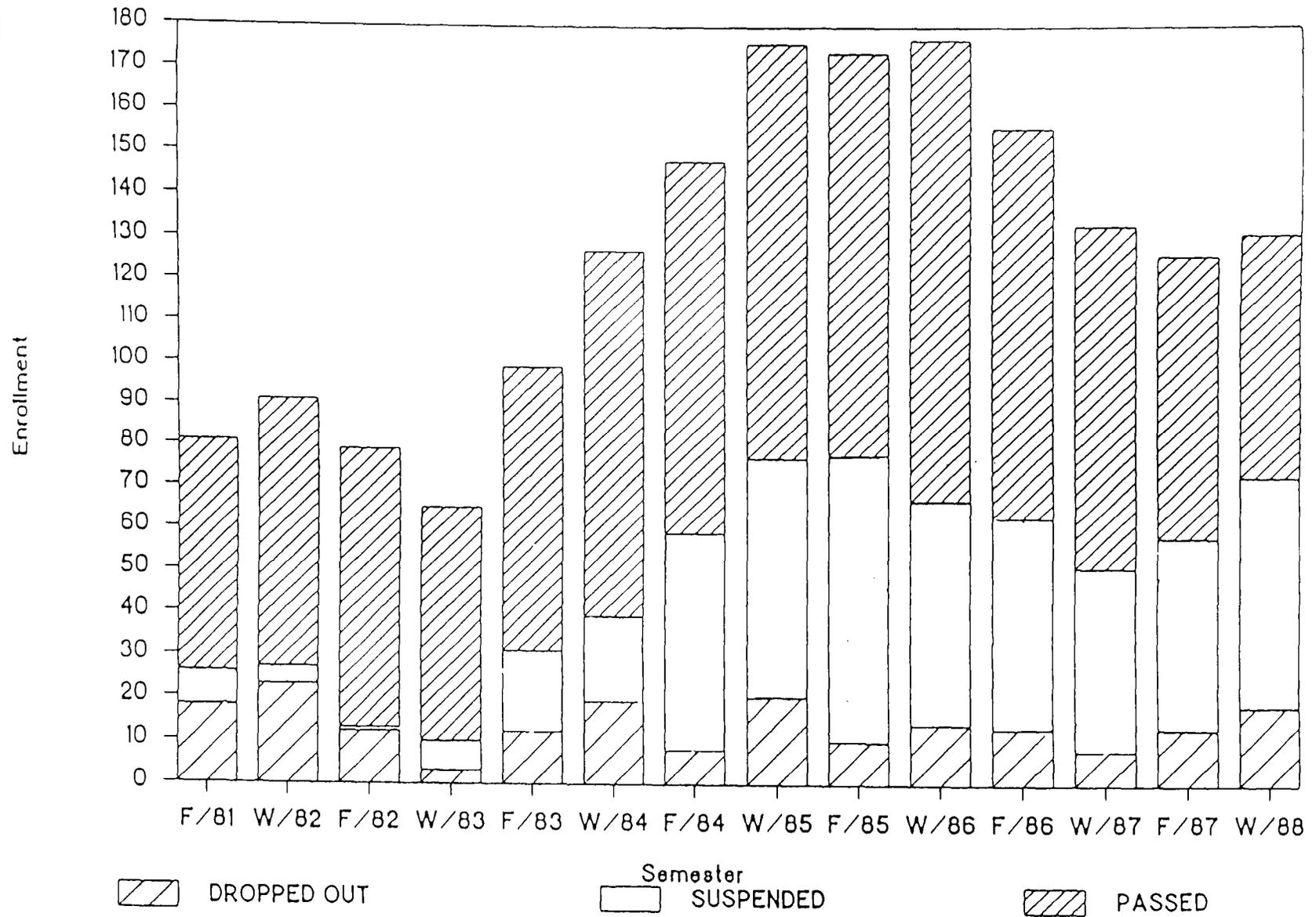
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APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B**RELEASE FORM**

Dear Student:

The answers and comments you make regarding your educational experience and your suggestions for improved support services is greatly appreciated. The information you provide will help in planning future assistance to Native students at the College.

Your participation in the interview is strictly confidential and before any information provided by you can be utilized your consent is required. A copy of the transcribed interview will be available to you to make any changes or deletions. You also have the right to withdraw without prejudice at any time. Please sign below if you wish to give your consent.

I, _____, understand the terms outlined in the above and give my consent to have the information I have given in the interview to be used in planning better Native student support services at Lethbridge Community College.

Interviewee's Signature

Date