

The very low college success rate of American Indians and Alaskan Natives has inspired a scholarly literature that seeks to explain this outcome and, more recently, to account for why some Native students persist in college. Few studies, however, look at Native students who actually have graduated from college, and these rarely reflect Native voices or examine the life histories of Indigenous students. To achieve a broader understanding of successful educational trajectories, this qualitative exploration moves beyond the category of students currently attending college and examines the lives of five Indigenous Marquette University alumni. Employing an archival oral history method to honor the oral-based traditions of Indigenous people and preserve and make accessible the stories for current and future generations, the rich descriptions of the experiences of these alumni will help to illuminate how, against the odds, they persisted in a four-year, predominantly white, urban, private institution. The path to college and post-college experience are inextricable parts of these alumni stories.

The findings of this project to a significant extent map onto the extent literature that suggests college persistence is related to cultural self-identity, the support of family and community, the presence and influence of mentors and role models, and the desire to give back to home communities and Indigenous people. Not stressed in the literature, however, is the powerful sense of self-determination that all five alumni exhibited and which enabled them to map out the resources they needed to succeed in college with a keen eye and an openness to discovery. This finding suggests an institutional responsibility to provide a road map for incoming Indigenous students so they are not exclusively responsible for surveying the campus environment for resource outposts that will scaffold their success.