

## Final Report to HDR Foundation

**Project Title:** Building Healthier Communities and Pathways to Higher Education with Native American Youth

**Grant Period:** May 20, 2013 – May 20, 2014

### *Project Implementation and Adjustments:*

The ISYS Center was to coordinate a 10-month long mentorship program with 3-4 high school aged Native American youth as a follow-up to the Summer AIR (American Indian Recruitment) program in 2013. This project was to connect youth participants to relevant tribal leadership organizations in their home communities to seek input and support and identify the participants as potential leaders as well as provide academic counseling and support to enhance participants' opportunities to pursue higher education. The main challenge to implementing this project was that college-bound high school students, who could be identified through school and program contacts, were overly committed to other extra-curricular activities. Through connections with tribal leaders, AIR, and high school administrative staff, the ISYS Center was unable to identify high school students who were interested in higher education and were not already involved in time-intensive academic and extra curricular activities. High school administration and tribal organization leaders recommended community college as a level where support would be welcome and helpful.

The ISYS Center reached out to two local community colleges with significant Native populations and connected with Cuyamaca College's newly formed Native American Student Alliance (NASA) in November 2013. After two introductory meetings, nine Native America community college students were recruited in the mentorship program. Participants received a tablet to assist in the facilitation of the mentoring program. So while we experienced delays because we were unsuccessful in engaging the participants we originally targeted, we were excited that we were able to double the number of participants based on the enthusiastic response from students, faculty, and administrators at Cuyamaca.

### *Project Activities:*

The re-focused and condensed mentorship program had two main objectives: 1) provide individual academic counseling and support to enhance participants' opportunities to pursue higher education or enter the workforce and 2) host four informative workshops. Mentors met with NASA members regularly to discuss coursework, go over scholarship applications, and network with scholars and professionals in the community. The mentors included Dr. Thomas Herman, Dr. Denise Goerisch, and doctoral candidate, Lydia Wood. There were four workshops during the 2014 Spring semester on the following:

- 1) **Financial Aid** (Led by Dr. Denise Goerisch and Lydia Wood). This workshop covered different types of financial aid including federal and state grants, scholarships, work study programs, and loans.

- 2) **Meet with SDSU Faculty and Staff** (Led by Dr. Thomas Herman, Dr. Denise Goerisch, and Lydia Wood) Faculty and representatives from the following departments and programs met with students to discuss different majors, course requirements, internship possibilities, and career opportunities: American Indian Studies, Child and Family Development, Geography, History, and Public Administration and Criminal Justice.
- 3) **Student Life at SDSU and UCSD** (Led by Dr. Thomas Herman and Lydia Wood) Diversity and admissions officers from UCSD and current Native American students from SDSU discussed student life at UCSD and SDSU including available campus resources and support for Native American students.
- 4) **Majoring in Public Health** (Led by Dr. Denise Goerisch and Lydia Wood) Two current Native American students from SDSU discussed potential career opportunities with the Native American Research Centers for Health (NARCH) as multiple participants are interested in pursuing a career in social services or public health.

Additionally, three NASA members, along with two mentors, attended Explore SDSU, an open house event at SDSU. There was an end of the year celebration recognizing the accomplishments of the participants and NASA organization at the Heritage of the Americas Museum at Cuyamaca College in May 2014. Despite ending the program in May 2014 (at the conclusion of the Spring semester), the mentors still have on-going relationships with several of the participants.

***Project Outcomes:***

Based on participant input and feedback from mentors, the ISYS Center believes that the mentoring program with Cuyamaca College was successful. In an online survey, participants stated that the program contributed positively to their experiences during the Spring 2014 semester. Participants found the most valuable component of the program to be the relationships they formed with their mentors as well as forming connections with current San Diego State University students, faculty and staff. One participant said having a mentor helped form their own decisions about college; another said they were appreciative of having someone listen to them. Participants also found the guest speakers, particularly the students from SDSU, to be helpful as they were able to speak to some challenges Native American students face on college campuses such as navigating through financial aid and finding support on and off campus. Additionally, participants found the tablets that were provided as a participant support and incentive to be beneficial to their participation in the program, especially in regards to helping them complete coursework and maintaining organization. Participants and Cuyamaca College staff were so pleased with the outcomes of the program, they invited ISYS to return the following academic year.

Members of the SDSU team collaborated with the Cuyamaca EOP Director to culminate the program with a special graduation celebration for the three native students who completed their associates' degrees during the Spring 2014 term. This was an excellent way to wrap up our involvement for the year and it also showed how the values that we brought into the project resonated with the student participants and other leaders and role models within the San Diego native community. We are very excited about the strong

relationships we have built with partner organizations and the excitement students showed about continuing their education at SDSU and/or other universities.

***Project Limitations and Lessons Learned:***

The most significant limitation was that some participants were unable to meet with their mentors as often as they wanted to due their demanding schedules. Many participants held jobs and/or had families in addition to attending school. When participants were unable to physically meet, mentors checked in on their progress via email or phone messages. Since the program was not initiated until the beginning of the Spring semester, there were limited opportunities to meet with mentors as well as organize and host the workshops.

Many participants stated that they found the mentoring program to be beneficial overall but offered a few recommendations to help improve the program. For example, while students appreciated the financial aid workshop, they would have preferred a much more in depth workshop detailing how to read/understand financial aid awards as the language is often confusing and contradictory. Additionally, one student suggested more information on how to attain scholarships for Native American college students. Students also wanted more diversity in terms of departments and programs represented; one student suggested bringing faculty and staff from sciences, technology studies, engineering, and mathematics departments, as they were completely absent from that workshop. Students also suggested bringing more community members to speak of potential internship or career opportunities.

***Future Research:***

ISYS will continue to build on the relationships built through this project and collaborate with others to provide supports to Native American students at all levels. This will include maintaining and strengthening relationships with both the NASA Program and EOP Office at Cuyamaca College, with the American Indian Studies department and AIR Program at SDSU, and with tribes and programs serving the local population.