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In Search of Young American Indian/Alaska Native Scientists

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, minority scientists in biomedical/public health research are significantly underrepresented (Villarejo, et al., 2008). Because minority groups are less likely to engage in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education, they are subsequently less likely to pursue careers in the biomedical research workforce (McGee, Saran & Krulwich, 2012). The need for American Indian/Alaska Native's (AI/AN's) in the biomedical, behavioral, clinical and social sciences research workforce has never been so pronounced. This particular workforce is sorely needed in addressing the type 2 diabetes burden that AI/ANs face nationwide. AI/ANs are 2.2 times more likely to have diabetes as non-Hispanic whites of similar age (CDC 2011). Moore, et al., (2009) stated that building tribal capacity to eliminate diabetes disparities is closely tied to the education and professional development of the next generation of researchers, and teachers.

Recruitment, engagement and immersion programs are important components in changing the status quo of diverse races and ethnicities in the biomedical sciences. Thus, investing in AI/AN students will support the development of a biomedical workforce capable of designing culturally grounded health promotion and chronic disease prevention strategies and research within tribal communities. Davis (2000) stated that in order to reduce health disparities within AI/AN communities, it is imperative to include them in research education, research plans and discussions of the potential impact of the research.

The American Indian Research and Education Center (AIREC) is a University of Nevada, Las Vegas, (UNLV) Board of Regents approved Center (2002) whose mission is to enhance the ability of the University community, Tribes, and the general public to understand and address issues affecting AI/AN populations. AIREC focuses on research, education/health activities, outreach, higher education, and informational exchange; all targeting issues of concern within American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations.

AIREC became one of four national Coordinating Centers for the NIDDK/NIH Short-Term Research Experience for Underrepresented Persons (STEP-UP) program in 2012. Dr. Carolee Dodge Francis is an enrolled member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. She is an Associate Professor, within the School of Community Health Sciences, UNLV. Dr. Dodge Francis has

been the Executive Director of AIREC for the last nine years, and is the PI for the NIDDK/STEP-UP grant. Dr. Dodge Francis has over 30 years' experience in community/public health programming, health prevention and qualitative research among rural and urban American Indian/ Alaska Native communities nation-wide.

The AIREC STEP-UP Coordinator is Ms. Eudora Claw. Ms. Claw is Diné and Zuni from Cahone Mesa, Utah. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Evolutionary Biology from the University of New Mexico in 2012, and her Master's in Public Health from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Ms. Claw is working towards a Ph.D. in Public Health with a concentration in social behavioral health within the School of Community Health Sciences, UNLV. Ms. Claw is a student research fellow with the Northwest Native American Research Centers for Health. AIREC is immensely appreciative to be involved with the Short-Term Research Experience for Underrepresented Persons (STEP-UP) (grant number 1R25DK098067-01) program. STEP-UP allows American Indian/Alaska Native students to weave the rigor of science and indigenous knowledge into meaningful research for themselves and their Tribal communities. The effort put forth in order for STEP-UP to succeed, comes from the collaborative effort of the other three Coordinating Centers, and selfless giving of time, patience, and wisdom from our mentors across the nation, waewaenen (thank you).

Keywords: American Indian, STEP-UP, NIDDK, Biomedical

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