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STEP-UP: A Cultural Alaska Journey for Students and Staff

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Abstract

This manuscript introduces the abstracts from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Coordinating Center

KEYWORDS: Alaska Native; Culture; STEP-UP; NIDDK; Biomedical; Summer Bridge

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INTRODUCTION

The American Indian Research and Education Center (AIREC) located at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas is entering their 8th-year as a National Institutes of Health (NIH)/National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) STEP-UP Coordinating Center. AIREC is one of only 4 Coordinating Centers across the country with this particular R25 funding. AIREC's STEP-UP program "Journey" specifically targets and recruits American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Puerto Rico (PR) students across the nation in an effort to increase exposure of a summer research experience within the areas of science and research. The long-term objective of Journey is to provide mentored research opportunities to 11th & 12th high grade school students through the provision of hands on experiences which may include the range of biomedical, social science, behavioral, and clinical research. Journey's overall goal is to encourage AI/AN and PR students to explore further research experiences and professions, and to pursue biomedical degrees during their undergraduate journey.

High school STEP-UP students are immersed into an eight-week summer research experience within their own communities. While research preparation, scientific methodology, data gathering, analysis and making meaning of the results is crucial, so is the component of "giving back" through their research (Kovach, 2009). The ability of "giving back" is a circular process between AIREC staff and students. The learning that occurs during this process is valuable to the student (self), family, and tribal community. Thus, the relevance of the STEP-UP experience for Alaska Native students should have an overall purpose for their community and cultural identity.

Recruitment and inclusion of rural Alaska Native high school students into the STEP-UP program can be challenging due to various factors such as remoteness of geographic location, and a traditional subsistence lifestyle. The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) recognizes traditional subsistence lifestyles as the hunting, fishing, and gathering activities, which continues to flourish in many areas of Alaska today (Blair, et.al. 2014). During Alaska's summer months, traditional

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fishing, hunting, and gathering by all family and community members are critical for many tribal communities in Alaska due to several factors such as limited access to food during winter months, high food prices, and traditional ways of living. These familial and community obligations can create significant barriers for AI/AN participants within the summer STEP-UP program.

Keeping these cultural nuances in mind, the AIREC STEP-UP staff work closely with AI/AN high school students to make the summer research experience as fulfilling as possible. For example, typically Alaska Native high school students are released from school mid-May, three weeks earlier than their counterparts in the lower 48 contiguous states. This earlier public school release has implications for both an Alaska subsistence lifestyle and the STEP-UP start date. Due to overlapping dates, the STEP-UP program timeline is modified in order to accommodate Alaska Native students. The AIREC STEP-UP staff strive to balance cultural frameworks that effectively embrace their Alaska Native student's cultural norms with that of the program. The ability to minimize cultural dissonance is addressed by understanding that the student's success is influenced by the family and cultural context as it relates to the community. The cultural and traditional roles that a student is responsible for within the family and community hierarchy is critical to know and understand in order to create a meaningful summer research experience for the student.

Keywords: Alaska Native, Culture, STEP-UP, NIDDK, Biomedical, Summer Bridge

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