

## American Indian Student Internships and the Pursuit of Equity in Education

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### **Abstract:**

In 2003, the US Commission on Civil Rights found that American Indian students do not receive the same educational opportunities as other American students. To address this inequality, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council, in partnership with Allyson Kelley and Associates PLLC led an American Indian college student evaluation internship experience from May 2015 to August 2017. Methods: A qualitative case study design was used to examine how the summer evaluation internship impacted students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author in February 2018. Interview questions focused on skills and knowledge gained, interest in public health-related professions, and recommendations for improving the internship experience. Results: Qualitative themes highlight the importance of internships to increase skills, support career preparation, find meaning and cultural connections, facilitate community engagement, and increase communication skills. The results of this evaluation underscore the importance of reservation-based programs that provide equal and equitable education and opportunities for American Indian students.

**Keywords:** student internships | American Indian students | reservation-based programs | equitable education

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

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## American Indian Student Internships and the Pursuit of Equity in Education

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## American Indian Student Internships and the Pursuit of Equity in Education

### Cover Page Footnote

Kelley led the evaluation, conception, data curation, mentoring, and supervision. Kelley, Fatupaito, Witzel, Restad, and Bingham supported student internships and assisted with writing of the manuscript. Posey was an evaluation intern and assisted with conceptualization and validating results. We wish to thank the tribal communities we work with for leading culturally-based prevention in a way that has impact and meaning. We honor the interns and their voices our work. Thank you.

### Authors

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## **Introduction**

American Indians experience the most severe health disparities in the Nation (Jacobs-Wingo et al., 2016). Previous researchers and policymakers have called for increasing the diversity of the health workforce as a primary method to address these health disparities (Phillips & Malone, 2014). Lack of diversity within the health workforce can be remedied as part of a broader approach to addressing the social determinants of health.

In 2003, the US Commission on Civil Rights found that American Indian students do not receive the same educational opportunities as other students. Gaps in educational attainment, skills, and career development opportunities negatively impact American Indian populations. American Indian youth have the lowest high school graduation rates and the highest college dropout rates in the Nation. American Indian students earn just 0.6% of all associate's and bachelor's degrees (Lee et al., 2017), and 0.2% of all doctorate degrees (National Science Foundation & National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Reasons for the lower educational attainment are numerous; Jones and Wong reported that educational disparities were due to the lack of access to resources (Jones, et al., 1975). Other research findings suggest that lower educational attainment is due to a lack of administrative support, faculty misconceptions and stereotyping, and a lack of funding (Harrington & Harrington, 2012). Few American Indian students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to continue in

quantitative disciplines, and even fewer of these enter into these fields (Campbell & Hoey, 1999).

Based on previous research, it is clear that lower educational attainment contributes to the lack of representation of American Indians in health-related professions. To address this, policymakers are calling for initiatives that build the capacity of American Indians students through research and internship experiences (Dankwa-Mullan et al., 2010). Most universities that offer health-related degrees require students to complete an internship to graduate (Hernandez et al., 2014). Although these requirements vary by institution and degree, most are designed to give students experience in a professional setting that is planned, supervised, and evaluated (Council on Education for Public Health, 2011). Internships allow students to gain experiences in health-related professions, develop professional networks, use and apply knowledge from college courses, and participate in various health-related programs and services. There is consensus among researchers and policymakers that the student internship experience is valuable and beneficial; however, there is limited information about how American Indian students access and complete college internships and the impact that these internships have on their careers. Understanding how American Indian students access, experience, and complete college internships is an essential first step in building health equity and a public health workforce that is diverse, experienced, mentored, and supported.

Internship programs have demonstrated promise to increase diversity of students in health-related fields, yet few American Indian students participate in these programs. Without sufficient academic preparation, American Indian students may not qualify for health-related internship programs (Lee et al., 2017). This paper focuses on how internship experiences among American Indian students in reservation settings can support career development and college success in health-related professions. The current evaluation of the Tribal Prevention Initiative summer internship program (TiPI) aims to fill gaps in the existing literature and support continued funding and the creation of internships for American Indian students.

### **TiPI Summer Evaluation Internship Program**

The TiPI internship program began in May 2015 under the direction of the lead evaluator (Allyson Kelley). With funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the lead evaluator developed an evaluation training and internship experience designed for undergraduate American Indian students from reservations in Montana and Wyoming served by the TiPI.

The lead evaluator began recruiting American Indian students by contacting TiPI site coordinators, local tribal colleges, area colleges and universities, and AIAN student organizations. This internship process included the following steps: (1) outreach to tribal health directors, tribal leaders, and tribal

colleges and universities in Montana and Wyoming to advertise positions (2) interview and hire American Indian student interns, (3) develop individual internship projects, (4) support interns as they experienced health evaluation first-hand in reservation communities throughout Montana and Wyoming, and (5) share results with tribal leaders and policymakers.

### **Internship**

After interns were recruited, they began working with the lead evaluator, the local TiPI project team, and site coordinators on various culturally-based substance abuse prevention activities. All students lived in their communities during the summer months and received hourly compensation for their work. Travel funds were available when students wanted to attend conferences, events, and meetings. Internships were culturally tailored to match community needs and American Indian student interests and skills.

### **Methods**

A qualitative approach guided this evaluation because it was most appropriate for documenting the contextual factors that American Indian student interns experienced (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

### **Participants**

The participants in this evaluation were eight American Indian students who completed an evaluation internship between 2015 and 2017. Students represented two tribes in two different states.

## **Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with interns by the first author. A list of interview topics with guidelines was used to document experiences and perceptions (Patton, 1990). Interviews were conducted in-person and over the phone, lasting between two and six minutes. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and interpreted by authors using qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2007). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of record determined the TiPI was exempt and did not require additional IRB review.

## **Interview and Transcription Procedures**

The lead evaluator contacted interns via email, phone, and text message to request participation in the evaluation. Interviews began with an overview of the evaluation and verbal consent was obtained before continuing with the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the authors. All identifying information was removed.

## **Interview Guide**

Interview guides included a variety of topics on internship experiences. Questions focused on skills and knowledge gained, interest in public health-related professions, and recommendations for improving the internship experience (Supplemental File 1).

## **Analysis**

Data analysis was completed using NVivo version 11.0. The authors



reviewed transcripts for meaning (Jackson & Patton, 1992). Themes emerged throughout the review process. Authors then compared themes and determined if they should be retained based on how they were represented in the data.

Validation of the evaluation results occurred by sharing results of the thematic analysis with American Indian students, comparing results with the existing literature, and consensus of results through agreement by authors.

## **Results**

Themes from the analysis were separated into two different categories, the first theme category was the impact of evaluation internships on students, the second theme category was recommendations for improving internships. We discuss each theme below.

### **Impact and Meaning of Evaluation Internships**

#### *Increased Skills*

Most American Indian students felt the internship increased their skills and increased their career readiness. American Indian student internships require skills and knowledge sets that are not typically learned in a classroom-type setting. Students gained evaluation skills such as planning and organizing, math and statistics, leadership, interviewing, data use and analyses, computer skills, and communication skills. The most frequent theme cited by all students was building communication skills. One student said, “Personally I think I have learned how to communicate more with the public and be involved with the community.”

Another said, “I learned more about talking in front of people and presenting my own ideas and the interviews.”

### *Impact on Careers*

American Indian students talked about the profound implications the student internship had on their career choice. One student said, “For me it changed my college major and it helped me find what I wanted to do and what I liked to do. That’s why it was important for me, it helped me find out what I wanted to do with my life. Before I wanted to be in the health field and help, but I did not know how to do that based on my personality, now I have found it.”

Another student said, “I was able to understand what different options I have as a career. This helped me create connections in the area and reservation that both have a positive impact on Natives, and possible job opportunities.”

### *Meaning*

Student perspectives on the meaning of internship experiences varied. The majority of students felt the internship reinforced the belief that education is essential. One student said, “It meant a lot being able to be a part of a program like this and reach out. It actually increased my interest in public health and community, and I am very passionate about that.” Another said, “They don’t teach you these things in school. In our program planning class, they teach you the process of how to plan a program... but it’s not like here is how you write a report and how you distribute it, and why it is important to do it.”

### *Cultural Connections*

Most students felt internships helped them connect with their community and culture. One student said, "...we work in our community, and I am not super traditional. I learned a lot about my culture because that is what my work environment was, it was coordinated." Another student said, "You get to learn new things. Not only about evaluation, but the program you are working with and also about your community, it is a great way to connect."

### **Recommendations for Improving Internships**

#### *Engage Community*

Students felt that future internships and programming could benefit if they engaged the community more. One student said, "I think we need to reach out to people who are actually substance abusers, instead of reaching out to people who aren't. We have meetings but we don't do much for people who are addicts. We don't change much; we are just talking...get more people involved who have substance abuse problems." This comment was related to both the program implementation and the evaluation, where increased engagement with the target population for prevention is needed.

#### *Increase Communications*

Student interns live and work in different reservations on various prevention-related evaluation tasks. One student felt that increasing communications between interns and program staff is needed, "I think the weekly

calls would have been good, because like I kind of like lose sight of everything, like what we are supposed to be doing, just to keep us on our toes, the weekly calls would have been good.”

*Just Do It*

One student said, “I would tell [future students] to DO IT! You learn so much about research and working with people, and you get paid for your hours. Sometimes work can't get done in a specific timeline but that's ok, that's why we all are assigned our own project. You get to work at your own pace and your own level of understanding. In the end, no one knows more about your topic than you do.” Another said, “I would say stick with it, do your best, have fun, go with all of the opportunities.”

**Strengths and Limitations**

This evaluation has several strengths and noted limitations. Purposive sampling allowed for interviews with various student interns to support local evaluation of substance use prevention programming. Their knowledge about their communities and recommendations for future internships adds to the depth of information provided but threatens the external validity of evaluation findings. Interviews occurred after internships were completed; in some cases, 2-years after the experience. This may have resulted in recall bias. Finally, this evaluation represents eight student intern perspectives; their experiences and perspectives cannot be generalized to other tribal nations or internship experiences.

### **Discussion and Lessons Learned**

The current evaluation utilized a qualitative case-study method to explore American Indian student internship impacts and recommendations. Based on the themes identified and the interviews, the authors identified three lessons learned that may help build future American Indian student internship programs and academic success in health-related fields.

First, when developing an internship program for American Indian students, flexibility is needed. American Indian students are challenged by multiple social, economic, and cultural factors that impact their ability to engage and complete internships as designed. For example, some interns started but then had to leave for a month due to family responsibilities (being a single parent or a primary caregiver for elderly family member). Deadlines, logistics, and overall internship plans were modified to meet the unique circumstances of American Indian students to ensure their success.

Second, relationships and trust are critical for building solid internship programs and positive student internship experiences. Internships taught students about health research, evaluation, and supported student career development. Interns report they trusted the lead evaluator and appreciated the relationship established through their summer internship. Interns remain in contact and have co-authored papers, presentations as a result of the relationships established. Interns also seek letters of recommendation for employment and scholarship

endeavors.

Third, financial compensation is required. Although some internships do not compensate students for their internship hours, this was a critical aspect of the program's overall success. There are limited jobs in reservation communities. Many students want to return home during the summer months but cannot do so because there are no jobs available. By paying student interns for their work, they received the benefit of being home for the summer, serving their community, and saving for college expenses.

### **Conclusion**

The paper aimed to summarize the internship process, document knowledge gained and intern experiences, and provide lessons learned for future work. Outcomes of the TiPI evaluation internship are encouraging. All student interns reported a positive impact and increased interest in health-related careers. Two student interns graduated with bachelor's degrees in health-related fields after completing the internship. One is now working as a registered nurse for her tribe, and the second intern is working in community health.

Continued efforts are needed to address the 2003 US Commission on Civil Rights finding that American Indian students do not have equal educational opportunities. Increased funding for American Indian student internships, professional support, and flexibility will promote positive change and health equity for future generations.

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### **Supplemental File 1: Interview Guidelines and Sample Questions**

These interviews were conducted using an unstructured format. Reflective listening and minimal encouragement will be used to maximize participant responses and increase the depth of interview content. In each area, efforts will be made to help participants address areas of interest (the experience of reservation-based evaluation internships). The actual wording of the questions was adapted to be appropriate to context and the flow of the interview.

Questions focused on skills and knowledge gained, interest in public health-related professions, and recommendations for improving the internship experience. Please describe your experience during the evaluation internship.

1. What did you learn?
2. What skills did you gain?
3. How did the internship help you?
4. Why are evaluation internships like this important to American Indian students?
5. How did this internship help prepare you for a career?
6. What did the internship mean to you?
7. What advice do you have for other students interested in completing an evaluation internship?