

Engaging in Student Research in a Time of COVID-19

By: Micaryn Begay



Dr. Carmella Kahn

Diné College's Summer Research Enhancement Program (SREP) is a 10-week program that provides research opportunities to American Indian college students who are interested in public health and health research. SREP students develop skills and interests in prevention research and participate in community-based research on the Diné College's campus and other campuses in the Navajo Nation. SREP was first created in 2000 as a student training component for national diabetes prevention. However, the program saw a need for public health research within the community, especially for public health workers in the Navajo Nation. Primarily, SREP functions as a training program to educate Native American students about public health research methods to raise awareness of public health issues, as well as to collect health data. Native American students of SREP are able to work with local organizations throughout the Navajo Nation and engage with research programs to address health concerns in the Navajo Nation.

Carmella Kahn (Diné) grew up in Mariano Lake, New Mexico and Pinesprings, Arizona, both located on the Navajo Nation. Dr. Kahn graduated from Gallup High School and continued her educational journey at the University of Arizona where she received her doctorate in Public Health. Dr. Kahn is currently a faculty member and an instructor at Diné College in the Public Health Department. She also is the co-director for SREP, which she believes is a stepping stone for her teaching career. Dr. Kahn was first introduced to SREP by her mentor Dr. Nicolette Teufel-Shone, where she began to guest lecture and co-instruct at the program. She started to engage herself more in the program and soon was asked to instruct for the entire summer. Using the skills and experiences she learned throughout her educational journey, she was able to apply her knowledge to help her own community. Dr. Kahn plans to give back to the Navajo community by teaching Native American students about public health, as well as increasing the numbers of Native American public health workers.

Dr. Kahn believes that public health is essential within the Navajo Nation community to ensure safety and implement preventive measures – especially for elders and individuals with immunocompromised systems. More than ever, she believes that public health is highly needed and imperative with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation needs more public health workers that can combat this pandemic to ensure the safety and health of the people. The threat of COVID-19 affected SREP's ability to conduct their program in person. However, Dr. Kahn stated that the program went well despite SREP's modified curriculum so that students were able to conduct research projects online. During the program, students were trained to become contact tracers for COVID-19, which was a joint collaboration with the Community Outreach Patient and Empowerment (COPE).

“SREP is strength, kinship and culture preservation. Every day I learned a new way to incorporate my Diné culture and values into public health research methods. I will continue to utilize Diné Education Philosophy in my academic and professional career. I am truly grateful for my SREP family.”

-Shelby Kinlichee (Diné)



SREP Student Summer 2020-Shelby Kinlichee



SREP Student Summer 2020-Karianne Jones

“SREP gives you a chance to build your network and it inspires you to pursue greater and better things. At the end of the program, you’ll be impressed of what you were capable of.”

-Karianne Jones (Diné)

The students who attended summer 2019 said they joined SREP for many reasons, but the main reason was the opportunities provided for the students who completed the program. They heard numerous positive feedback about the program and how beneficial it may be for their future careers. The students also enjoyed the bonds that were created with their mentors and how each mentor prepared each of them to conduct primary data research. Their main research focus for the program during summer 2020 was COVID-19, which primarily focuses on recruiting participants, collecting data, analyzing data and presenting the findings. Karianne Jones (Diné), Krishayna Smith (Diné), and Shelby Kinlichee (Diné), had the amazing opportunity to present their research at the SACNAS 2020 conference in October.

Lastly, each student was trained to work as contact tracers for COVID-19 within the Navajo Nation. They made daily calls to people who were affected by the virus, whether they were a case themselves or someone who was in close contact with someone who was. Each student who joined SREP this summer played an essential role in following up on individuals and families by providing resources during the time of isolation.

SREP has opened so many doors of opportunities for each student such as continuing their educational journey in research and public health and work in organizations that focus primarily on COVID-19. Lastly, each student has gained the passion of giving back to their own community as public health research and focus are needed for the Navajo Nation.

“SREP challenged me in various ways that will help me climb my educational ladder. I learned more about my Diné culture and how it can be incorporated in public health. I gained lifelong friends and mentors. I am grateful for them”

-Krishanya Smith (Diné)



SREP Student Summer 2020-Krishanya Smith



For more information visit:
<https://tinyurl.com/ISSREPArticle>

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