

NAU program aims to help build pipeline of Indigenous educators in Arizona



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Tanya Tso's first experience as a classroom assistant was in her son's Head Start classroom on the Navajo Nation. She delighted in the bright eyes looking up at her with questions and helping students speak their tribal language. Over the next decade, she went in and out of working as support staff in Salt River Indian Community schools and on the Navajo reservation.

This school year, she plans to finish a journey to turn her decades of experience in the classroom, plus her extensive knowledge of Indigenous cultures, into a new, high-demand role: classroom teacher in a Native American community.

Tso is one of about 20 future educators on track to receive their degrees this coming school year through a program called PITAS, or Preparing Indigenous Teachers for Arizona Schools.

Developed by Northern Arizona University's Institute for Native-Serving Educators, in collaboration with NAU's College of Education, the program is designed to help paraprofessionals, educational assistants and other support staff in tribal community schools become certified teachers.

The teacher shortage in Arizona is widespread. Rural areas, in particular, struggle to fill all of their teaching positions with certified educators. While about 4% of Arizona students in 2020 were Native, only 2% of teachers were, according to a state report on the teacher workforce.

To expand access to teacher training, PITAS does not require students like Tso to quit their full-time jobs or relocate to get their degrees. The program, which has bachelor's and

master's routes for elementary education, is funded by the Arizona Department of Education. Student tuition is covered by the Arizona Teacher's Academy, a state-funded tuition scholarship for students in state university or community college teacher preparation programs.

Last year, there were 12 undergraduate and 13 graduate students in PITAS. This year, the program has secured funding for a new cohort that will begin classes in mid-October and be on track to graduate as certified teachers in May 2025.

"We are taking the university to the community," said James Snyder, assistant director for the Institute for Native-serving Educators. "What's unique about PITAS is that folks are from the home community. They're not going anywhere."

The program is virtual but hosts one in-person weekend in Flagstaff each summer. Its instruction focuses on teaching Native students using storytelling, studying Indigenous history and discussing how non-Native teachers can be respectful of their Native students' backgrounds.

The culturally relevant parts of the program are a key reason why Tso says she took the plunge into full-time teaching.

"It's all geared toward how it can align with teaching Indigenous children," said Tso, who is Paiute and Diné. "How can I use an Indigenous book to still teach vocabulary? It's geared toward teaching Indigenous children using their background knowledge."

Bringing Indigenous knowledge and experiences into the classroom

Most of the program's classes take place in the evening hours. In one online session on an April evening this past school year, instructor Courtney Rath spoke to her PITAS class about letting students share their knowledge with their classmates.

"What does it mean to make a small shift so that students are positioned as being experts in themselves, in their lives, in their culture?" she asked. "Once that power dynamic is a little different, you can have students tell each other about something that they know a lot about."

Snyder hopes the PITAS program can blend Indigenous knowledge with teaching students how to write lesson plans and structure learning units. In 2022, Indigenous knowledge was defined in guidance for federal departments and agencies as "a body of observations, oral and

written knowledge, innovations, practices, and beliefs developed by Tribes and Indigenous Peoples through interaction and experience with the environment."

Snyder, a citizen of the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas, has been in education his entire career. He spent two decades coaching high school and college football, taught social studies on the Kickapoo reservation and worked in a tribal college for years.

Those experiences have taught him how to weave Indigenous viewpoints and practices into various subjects. For example, Snyder tells the PITAS participants to try using storytelling, instead of lecturing, in their lessons.

"As often as possible, we try to center the Indigenous culture and approach to education," Snyder said.

Teachers learn more about their longtime communities

Most PITAS participants are intimately familiar with the communities where they plan to continue working and have decades of experience as classroom support staff.

That's by design, said the institute's leadership.

"You gain incredible insight working in a supporting role," said Snyder. "You are in the classroom every day. You are experiencing the classroom from the perspective, in many ways, of your students."

Tso still sees students she met as young children over a decade ago.

"I still have a strong connection with a lot of the students that I have taught since Head Start," she said. "That's part of what keeps me teaching: I know I'm part of their growth."

Most, but not all, of the people in the PITAS program are Indigenous. For those who are not, the program has helped them deepen their understanding of Native communities and history.

Jade Pickings, who works at a middle school in Pinal County, was initially hired as a school counselor. But consistent staffing shortages in her school district meant she kept getting called in to oversee a classroom, she said. She decided she might as well become a teacher of record.

“It has made me want to step up to be a teacher,” said Pickings. She is well versed in the emotional support that students need, but classroom management and building a curriculum are new skills she's developing, she said.

Learning about Native history has also helped Pickings, who is Black, think about culture in her own life.

“Growing up Black, we kind of had to make our own culture because our culture was stripped from us,” she said. “I learned so much about Native culture through this program.”

For Andrea deRivera, a special education aide for more than 10 years, PITAS has been an opportunity to learn about her longtime community in new ways. She teaches in Flagstaff Unified School District, where the student population is 26% American Indian or Alaskan Native, according to enrollment data for the 2022-23 school year.

“I want to know as much as I can about the community where I live and teach,” said deRivera, who is white and originally from Illinois.

deRivera has worked with many of her students since first grade and is now helping them build skills for middle school. She and the other PITAS participants plan to occasionally meet up, visit each other's classrooms and lesson plan together.

“I'm loving it,” she said.

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