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ALERT

TOP STORY

First cohort of Indigenous teacher education program graduates from NAU

ABIGAIL KESSLER Sun Staff Reporter
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A Northern Arizona University student snaps photos from the floor of the Walkup Skydome Friday morning while waiting to take part in her graduation ceremony.

Jake Bacon, Arizona Daily Sun

The first class of PITAS scholars was among those graduating from Northern Arizona University over the weekend, each receiving a teaching degree to further their educational careers serving students in primarily Native American schools across Arizona.

PITAS, which stands for Preparing Indigenous Teachers for Arizona Schools, is a program from NAU's College of Education in which Indigenous paraprofessionals from across Arizona can earn their teaching certificate alongside their work.

The first cohort of students started in PITAS in October of 2022. All 20 were set to graduate with a K-8 elementary certification, about half at the bachelor's level and half with a master's.

The cohort includes: Arlinda Ben; Ashley Brown; Andrea deRivera; Jo Nell Hanley; Paulita Kewanwytewa; Kraig Shirley; Kourtney Shirley; Evereta Thinn; Chandi Toledo; Isabell Bahe; Rachel Hendricks; Sheila Machuse; Michelle Mitchell; Angelica Sandoval; LaTonya Shebala; Verlaine Six; Patricia Tsinnie-Engle; Tanya Tso; and Tomah Welch.

A second cohort of students started in PITAS last year, and the program has added PITAS Bridge, which helps education professionals earn the credits needed to enter the main program. It is currently recruiting for a third cohort, which will start this August, and Angelina Castagno, professor and chair of NAU's Department of Educational Leadership, said the program plans to continue.

Applications are open through June and can be found online at in.nau.edu/ine/pitas-2/.

PITAS is designed to help paraprofessionals and educational assistants from Arizona's 22 Native nations become certified teachers in Native-serving schools across the state. The current cohort includes educators with as many as 20 years of classroom experience.

Earning a degree to become a certified teacher can further these students' careers while helping address Arizona's teacher shortage, Castagno said.

She described PITAS as a "grow-your-own program."

The majority of PITAS students are from the Navajo Nation, with others coming from Hopi, San Carlos Apache and Gila River. Each of the graduates has plans to continue teaching in their home community, according to Castagno.

"In Native communities, paraprofessionals are often members of those local communities," she said. "They're tribal members, they've been living in those communities their whole lives, they have deep relationships and are committed

long term to those communities ... We're really thinking about partnering with tribal members and local community members that are already working in schools, but maybe haven't had an opportunity to pursue a bachelor's or a master's with teacher certificate, largely because of financial constraints or geographic constraints."

The program has been designed to address those constraints, offering tuition coverage from the Arizona Teacher's Academy and providing an additional stipend for expenses.

Classes are offered online and in the evenings so participants can continue their work in schools while studying. The curriculum follows the Arizona Department of Education's elementary certification requirements, with an additional focus on culturally responsive schooling and materials created by Indigenous people.

"Within those classes, we are really intentional about making sure the materials and the conversations and the examples are specific to teaching in Indigenous communities," Castagno said. "For example, in the children's literacy class, we might be using children's books by Native authors especially, because those are going to be the most relevant and meaningful to the communities where PITAS students are going to be teachers. ... [We're] being very focused and intentional on centering cultural responsiveness and Indigenous cultures, languages and histories in the classroom."

She said her hope with this program is to add to Arizona's total of Indigenous teachers, in turn improving school experiences for the students taught by those teachers.

"Ultimately," Castagno said, "we hope to have an impact on young people across the state -- specifically on Indigenous students across the state -- to ensure that their schools have highly qualified, culturally responsive teachers who can relate to the students that they're teaching in really meaningful way."

PITAS is seeking applicants for its next cohort through June. More information about the program, including how to apply, can be found at in.nau.edu/ine/pitas-2/

"I think there is probably also a positive impact on the college of education here at NAU, in that we're really making an effort to think about what does it mean to prepare teachers from diverse communities across the state in ways that are

culturally responsive," Castagno said. "That's good for all of our students and for all of the teachers that we're preparing to serve schools across Arizona and beyond."

Abigail Kessler has been a reporter for the Daily Sun since 2021, covering education, health, science and more. Reach her at AKessler@azdailysun.com.

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