Four Universities Unite in National Push to Increase American Indian Participation in STEM Fields

Sloan Foundation provides funds to University of Alaska, University of Arizona, Montana University System, and Purdue in a multi-million-dollar push to increase representation of indigenous Americans in STEM graduate study

(New York, NY) The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation announces that it will partner with University of Alaska (Anchorage and Fairbanks), University of Arizona, Montana University System (University of Montana, Montana State University, and Montana Tech), and Purdue University in a three-year, $2.4 million collaboration to increase the number of indigenous Americans obtaining advanced degrees in STEM disciplines.

The new national network, the Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership (SIGP), will strengthen and expand successful initiatives at each of the four partners to recruit, train, and graduate American Indian and Alaska Native students in STEM disciplines. “When it comes to meeting the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students, Alaska, Arizona, Montana, and Purdue are truly exemplary programs,” says Elizabeth S. Boylan, Program Director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. “Now they’re coming together to forge new opportunities and expand their already measurable impact.”

Most of the $2.4 million in grant funds will go directly to American Indian and Alaska Native students in the form of stipends, providing support to an estimated 59 Master’s and 20 Ph.D. students. Other funds will support programming, recruitment, and retention activities at the partner institutions; the collaborative development and sharing of best practices for the recruitment and support of American Indian/Alaska Native graduate students; and the creation of professional development opportunities such as student exchange programs.

American Indian and Alaska Native students have traditionally been underrepresented in graduate education. Though they make up 1.2 percent of the U.S. population, American Indians earned just 0.3 percent of all doctorates in 2012, less than the 0.5% share earned twenty years before. In engineering plus all science fields other than the social sciences, only 48 research doctorates went to American Indian/Alaska Natives in 2012 among the 11,764 Ph.D.’s awarded to all U.S. citizens and permanent residents. The 20 Ph.D. students who will be funded by the SIGP over the three years grant will
contribute meaningfully to diversifying the national STEM workforce with additional American Indian and Alaska Native graduate-degree holders.

This historically low level of participation is in part due to the unique challenges graduate study poses to American Indian students, which often include feelings of cultural and social isolation. The national SIGP network aims to reduce these difficulties by creating supportive, welcoming environments. In addition, scholarships help students focus on degree completion, reducing or eliminating the need to earn extra money for living expenses.

The Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership (SIGP) developed from an initial grant to Maria Teresa Velez, Associate Dean of the Graduate College at the University of Arizona in 2003, who continues to lead the Arizona SIGP program. The other institutions received grants from Sloan starting in 2005-2008 and their SIGP programs are now led by Herb Ilisaurri Schroeder (University of Alaska), Aaron Thomas (University of Montana), Beverly Hartline (Montana Tech), Karlene Hoo (Montana State University), and Kevin Gibson and Ken Ridgway (Purdue). Over 200 American Indian/Alaska Native students have been part of individual SIGP campus programs to date, and graduates are providing expertise and leadership important to their communities.

“We are at a significant transition point in the history of the SIGP,” says Dr. Elizabeth S. Boylan, Program Director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. “The campuses are now funded to work cooperatively to leverage their individual efforts into a national presence, to enhance mentoring and professional development across the network, and to continue enabling indigenous American graduate students to succeed in STEM Master’s and Ph.D. programs. We are pleased to have the SIGP as one of the signature elements of Sloan’s STEM Higher Education program.”

About the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

Established in 1934 by Alfred Pritchard Sloan Jr., then-President and Chief Executive Officer of the General Motors Corporation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is a philanthropic, not-for-profit grant making institution that supports original research and education in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and economics. This grant was funded through the foundation’s STEM Higher Education program which aims to increase the quality diversity of U.S. higher education in STEM fields.

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