

Seven Generations Center of Excellence:

By Kristine Morin

The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy states, “In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.” These words of wisdom inspired the naming of the Center for Rural Health’s (CRH) recently funded Center of Excellence in Native Behavioral Health. For Jacqueline Gray, PhD, and those who worked to put this grant together, the new Seven Generations Center of Excellence in Native Behavioral Health (SGCOE) provides a culturally appropriate namesake and reinforces the importance of “growing our own” health professionals for the future of Indian Country. The SGCOE five-year grant for \$3.5 million from the federal Bureau of Health Professions will support Native



Jacque Gray

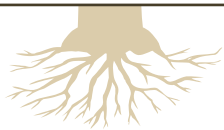
Americans are some ways the Seven Generations Center will support students through the pipeline and back to where they want to be: serving their people. North Dakota has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the nation for white students (82 percent). In contrast, American Indian students have one of the lowest graduation rates, at 39 percent. According to research, at the undergraduate level, the American Indian dropout rate for 18- to 24-year-olds is sixteen times that of their white counterparts. The SGCOE will work to address the academic, social, and personal needs of students by drawing on the skills and expertise of campus experts.

The spirit of the Seven Generations Center originated from Gray’s passion for changing the future of Indian Country by supporting, mentoring, and inspiring students to become mental health professionals. Before having a multimillion dollar grant focused directly on students, Gray supported students for several years by piecing together funding, where she was able to find it, and providing mentoring that, for Gray, is a task of many meanings. As she puts it, “For many, I’m mom—not just advisor or faculty member. Sometimes I’m the one that has the difficult talks with students.”

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students at UND through the academic “pipeline” so they can return to a Native community to provide mental health care.

The SGCOE will develop Native health professionals in many ways. Seven Generations’ long-term goal is to bolster the matriculation of a cohort of American Indian health professionals in medicine, behavioral health, and nutrition and dietetics to support the health care needs not only of the American Indian community but also the nation. “It will build the workforce pipeline by filling the gaps and plugging the leaks so, essentially, more students flow through it,” Gray said.

The SGCOE will forge a strong partnership between the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, the Office of American Indian Student Services, and programs in behavioral health and nutrition at UND. Recruiting and retaining students interested in the health sciences, providing internship positions, and offering training and specialized assistance in research with Native

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similar to students from rural areas, are the first collegians from their families and come to the academic world with little to no understanding of the structural impediments that can accompany academic programs. “It’s not the training and research, it’s getting through the bureaucratic things like organizing a committee or obtaining the needed signatures for forms,” Gray said. “It’s more of a stumbling block for Native and rural students who don’t have family members who know how it goes. They or sometimes their families don’t understand—especially family responsibilities. They are pulled between their school and social responsibilities, and it can be a real struggle at times. They just need to know how you make it through.”

Gray provides a support network by being the voice telling them to stick with it, make it through, and succeed. The essential feature of the SGOE is to provide the needed support and encouragement for Native American students to complete high school, enter college, matriculate with baccalaureate degrees, and enter into health professional programs and careers. The dedication that has been put into this effort by Gray and others has already shown what success Indian Country can hope to glean from this effort. In 2011, Gray mentored 12 students: six PhD, two master’s level, and four undergraduates. She notes that at least four were falling through the cracks and were running out of time to graduate. With support and a bit of guidance from Gray and others, they were able to graduate. “There were lots of dinners and talks with students,” she said. 🍓



Members of the Native Health Research Team are
First row, left to right: Paula Carter, Emmy Scott, and Stephanie Parisien.
Second row: Whitefishwoman, Pearl Walker, and Janie Schroeder.
Third row: Jacob Davis, Colleen Kagan, and Patty Stensland.
Fourth row: Twyla Baker-Demaray, Robert “BJ” Rainbow, and Damian Webster.



For more information about this grant, go to sgcoe@med.und.edu, or call 701.777.6084.
sgcoe.org



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Center of Excellence
in Native Behavioral Health