

Four Corners Counseling Connection

American Indian Cultural Awareness & Competency Practicum

OCTOBER 23–25, 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an October 2015 professional development and networking conference, 100 school counselors and teachers increased their cultural awareness and knowledge of Native American Indian Tribes and developed skills to support and advocate for their students. This report describes the event, shares initial learnings, and touches on possible next steps. The elements that seemed to contribute most to the conference's success included frequent and varied cultural reverence sessions, information-packed presentations alternating with opportunities for reflection, and a mix of strategy-filled segments that highlighted relevant resources and materials.

The conference was sponsored by the West Comprehensive Center (WCC) at WestEd, Utah State Office of Education (USOE), and Utah Division of Arts and Museums in response to a request from school counselors in northeastern Arizona who desired targeted training to help them better understand and more effectively meet the needs of their American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students.

WCC staff modeled the conference on Utah's American Indian and Alaska Native Cultural Awareness Level One Certification Program, which has four focus areas: sovereignty, social structure, learning styles and process, and historical trauma and generational grief. For the October 2015 event, the Utah program's curriculum was adapted for a regional audience and presented by seasoned facilitators.

Each of the conference's three days commenced and concluded with moving cultural reverence segments that established

the tone for learning. Informational sessions addressed topics such as federal and state law, spiritual perspectives, learning and identity issues, generational grief, culture and history, relevant resources, and more. Sessions also included visual journaling and beading activities, and other opportunities for participants to experience different modes of engagement. Presenters shared personal stories, integrated details about their background and upbringing, and encouraged participants to validate and respect the unique heritages and perspectives of their students who often walk in two worlds. Several sessions emphasized the importance of culturally competent educators who provide meaningful and relevant experiences for AI/AN students.

According to participants' feedback, the experience enhanced their knowledge and understanding of American Indian history and culture, helped them develop skills to support and advocate for their students, and collectively built cultural awareness and competency. Participants also indicated personal growth in three areas: assessing the needs of AI/AN students, designing learning plan outcomes, and building a respectful environment for students. Participants especially valued the cultural reverence and spirituality of the event as well as the knowledgeable speakers who shared personal stories.

Practicum debriefing conversations indicate a need for additional cultural awareness and competency-building opportunities for educators in the region, and a desire to integrate cultural awareness activities into scheduled events.