

Setting Research Roots

Dr. Jacque Gray cultivates the growth of American Indian researchers.

By Kristine Morin



Jacque Gray, PhD, an assistant professor at the University of North Dakota's Center for Rural Health, is the leader of the Native Health Research Team. This eclectic group of students, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral level, have come together to form the NHRT in order to meet a need that has been prevalent in Indian Country for far too long.

Gray is a Choctaw and Cherokee descendant, and has worked with tribes throughout Indian Country over the past thirty years. She has research experience with American Indians in the areas of health, depression, anxiety, veterans' health services, spirituality, suicide, career counseling, and nutrition.

To Gray, the importance of having a Native Health Research Team is as simple as "growing our own." The Team is about building a support network to help American Indian students in many ways, and teaching these students how to be researchers. For undergraduate students, it might be about finding a niche at the University to help them along in their studies, or it might be about learning how to do graduate-level research. For post-graduate students, the Team can provide resources to help with research, scholarships, funding, and networking, which can be invaluable.

"Teaching Native students to work with Native populations in health care is important because most of the research in the past has been done by non-Native researchers who may have exploited the communities or not understood

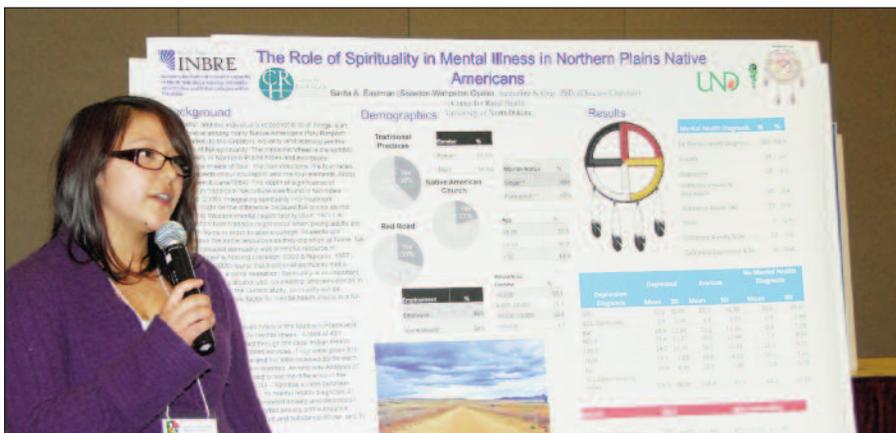
the data they collected within the cultural context," Gray said. The work of the Native Health Research Team has gained national recognition.

- For the American Psychological Association's annual conference in Washington, D.C., this year, Gray's students submitted nine research posters. All nine were selected. In addition, Melissa Wheeler, an undergraduate student at UND, received an award for the Outstanding Poster for Psychologists in Indian Country at the Psychologists in Public Service meeting.
- Three NHRT students were invited to attend the Center for American Indian Health 2011 Winter Institute at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland.
- Eight members of the Team attended the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board Summer Institute held in conjunction with Oregon Health Sciences University. Along with Gray, attendees from the National Resource Center on Native American Aging at UND included Paula Carter, PhD, (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), Patty Lambert (Spirit Lake Dacotah), and Jacob Davis (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa). Attendees from the undergraduate research program were Jason Champagne (Red Lake Band of Chippewa), Melissa Wheeler (Diné), Sarita Eastman (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), and Sierra Davis (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation).

"I understand research much better because of being with the Team," said Michael Mudgett, an undergraduate student. "I can look at things and add my own suggestions. Now, we don't need as much help 'holding our hand' as we did when we first started [with the Team]."

Students are learning to become researchers, but they are also getting life experience by being on the Native Health Research Team. "We talk about careers, and ask students what they want to be doing in the future to help them make decisions about their education," Gray said. She spends time learning about the students' interests and where they might fit in. If students are interested in research, having the experience and networking opportunities Gray can offer can be invaluable. For one student, the contacts he was able to make through Gray helped him to gain a prestigious spot in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, with scholarships to cover most of his schooling and living expenses.

Gray teaches more than just the analytical side of research. "If you're working with me, you need to know what you have to do, and how it has to be done," she said. "It's important the students are not exploiting tribes with the research they are doing and that they get to know the tribes before they ask to do research. I have had students volunteer in a number of ways on reservations." These include working in classes on domestic violence, parenting, and behavioral health, as well as learning some tribal heritage if the students aren't familiar with the tribe. The relationships the students build are as important as the data they hope to collect. Many students do research with their own reservations. The hope is that they will do research on the health needs of the people in their home communities and return to apply that research when they finish school. The greatest health concerns in Indian Country are diabetes, heart disease, cancer, youth suicide, depression, and anxiety. American



Sarita Eastman, a member of the Native Health Research Team, presents her findings at the American Indian Health Research Conference.

Indians serve in the armed forces at the highest rate of any ethnic group, but are served at the lowest rate by the Veterans Health Administration hospitals and clinics. Part of what the Team does is to look into why this is so and how the barriers they find can be reduced.

The Team works in partnership with the community to address critical health issues. It is important the community have a part in the interpretation of the data; they receive and approve the publications that come about from that research, and the community understands how they will benefit from the research. Conducting ethical research is a very important part of what students learn on the NHRT. Members of the NHRT learn that their responsibility is to the tribe first not the research.

Much like the relationships the students build with the communities they hope to help, Gray and her students have built strong ties with each other. So much so that their group is like a home away from home.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm raising twenty-five children," Gray states, "It's more than just talking with the students a few hours each week. It becomes like a family."

Starting with just one graduate student four years ago, the Native Health Research Team has grown and flourished, graduating Native students at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctorate levels. Initial support for the Native Health Research Team came from the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant and the

Native American Research Centers for Health Mood Disorder Assessment Validation Study supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. In addition, Donald Sens, PhD, professor in the Department of Pathology, working through the North Dakota IDEa Network on Biomedical Research Excellence has helped to support the students and their research through the UND Indians Into Medicine program and Research Experiences for UND Undergraduates, which is funded through the National Center on Research Resources at the National Institutes of Health. Students also have Marilyn Klug, PhD, associate professor at the Center for Rural Health, assisting as a biostatistician for the group, and Sandi Bates, MLIS, head of reference and user education with the Harley E. French Library of the Health Sciences, providing support in finding and using literature for research.

"[When I was going to school] I didn't have anyone to help me, so I can get them a start so they can do better and are offered more opportunities," Gray said. "I learned more about my Native heritage as an adult, so I'm not as well versed, but I can be a person with a foot in each world. I want the students to survive the academic world to return to their own world to make things better."

What is the one thing that Gray would want to share with others about her Team? "We grow Native researchers who know how to do ethical research in Native communities."



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