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AIR News

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"OUR MISSION IS THE PROMOTION AND SUCCESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS WITHIN EDUCATION"

Celebrating 33 years of community service to our Native Communities



We are so excited to welcome you to the San Diego State University community!

You're about to join the SDSU family, where you'll find inspiring mentors, lifelong friends,



Congrats to our 2026 High School Graduates

We begin this newsletter by congratulating our 2026 High School graduates and wishing them the very best as they embark on an exciting new chapter as college freshmen. We are honored to have been part of your academic journey and being witness to all that you have accomplished. While many of our students benefited from the support of their families, communities, mentors, and educators, it was ultimately their dedication, perseverance, and hard work that made these achievements possible. This fall, members of the Class of 2026 will be attending an outstanding group of colleges and universities, at some of the top-ranking public universities (see the following page).

We are incredibly proud of each of these students and the paths they have chosen. We look forward to watching them grow into future leaders who will strengthen our Tribal Nations, serve their communities, and help shape a brighter future for our country. Congratulations to the Class of 2026—we wish you every success in the years ahead!

Finally, a special Congrats to Jeremy Billy, from High School to SDSU to ASU Law School and completion! Wishing you the very best-on taking the CA State Bar Exam!



I've always had a passion for working within Tribal communities and I felt that by going to law school I can better help with important issues present in Indian law today and in the future.

Jeremy M. Billy
Navajo Nation
ASU JD '26, Indian Law Certificate



Where our students are at in Fall 2026

When our AIR Programs started, in 1993 the pathway to higher education for our students was extremely limited. For many students who knew they wanted to pursue a four-year degree, their choices were limited—not by their ability or ambition, but by a lack of guidance, advocacy, and support. Even today, our Native Youth are hindered by those who withdraw their support, limiting the potential and futures of these young people. AIR Programs, along with a growing number of organizations, are here to stand with them, provide the support they need, and help our Native Youth pursue their aspirations for a brighter and better future.

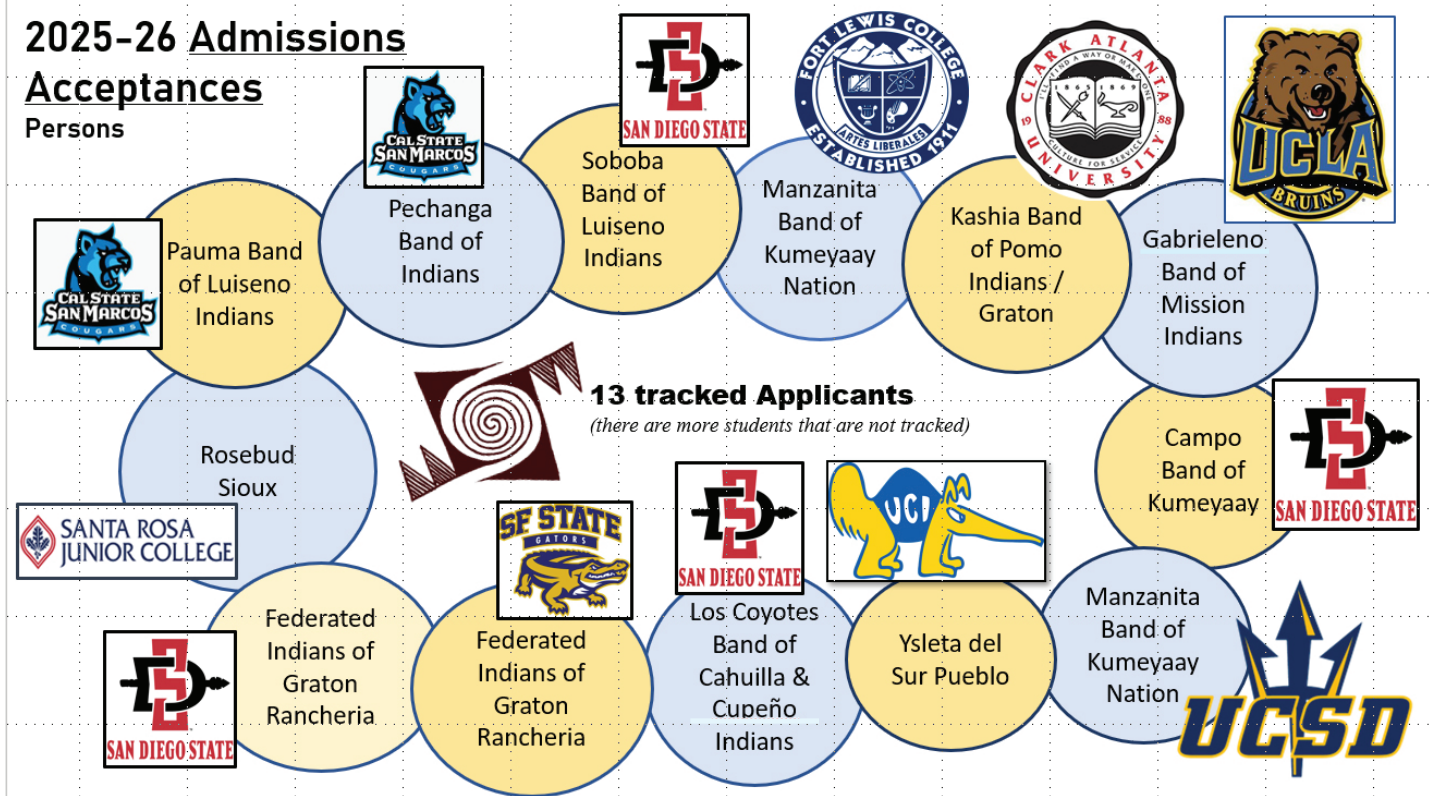
Today, our students have accepted admission offers from universities throughout the United States. They are making informed decisions based on their individual needs, goals, and visions for the future. No longer are they settling because of limited support or allowing those who seek to impede their progress to define what is possible.

We proudly congratulate all of our students who are pursuing their dreams and wish each of you continued success as you prepare to graduate from high school. Your accomplishments are a testament to your determination, the support of your families and communities, and the possibilities that open when our Native youth are given the guidance, advocacy, and opportunities they deserve. We believe in you. We are proud of you. And we look forward to all that you will accomplish!

2025-26 Admissions

Acceptances

Persons



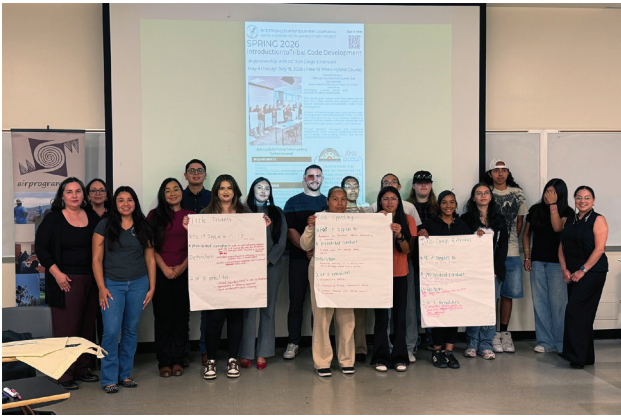
UC San Diego

Thank you to the SDSU Department of American Indian Studies for working with us from the very beginning, and to the SDSU Native Resource Center for their continued support. Finally, a tremendous thank you to the incredible crew at UCSD Extension—your support and collaboration are creating change. Thank you!



We thank the Jamul Indian Village, Soboba Band of Luiseno Indians and Procopio for all their support and charitable giving for these many years. Their support has not only strengthened our work with Native youth but has made them future leaders among our Tribal Nations.





May 1st is Tribal Law Day

Law Day is celebrated annually on May 1 to honor the rule of law and promote greater understanding of our legal system. Established in 1958 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Law Day encourages civic engagement and awareness of constitutional principles.

In Indian Country, AIR Programs was proud to sponsor Tribal Law Day, with the goal of creating a space specifically focused on Tribal law, sovereignty, and the unique legal systems that serve our Tribal communities.

In partnership with the Department of American Indian Studies at San Diego State University, AIR Programs welcomed an outstanding group of guest speakers, including Michael Connolly, former Campo Band of Kumeyaay Tribal Councilman; Angela Medrano, Cahuilla Band of Indians Councilwoman, Professor of Law at the University of San Diego, and former Tribal Judge; and the Honorable Devon Lomayesva, Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel and current California-appointed State Judge.

Our Native Youth participants took part in a series of engaging workshops focused on understanding Federal Indian Law, the concepts and foundations of Tribal Law, and the development of Tribal legal systems. These conversations provided our youth with an opportunity to learn directly from Tribal leaders, legal professionals, and judges about the importance of sovereignty, justice, civic engagement, and the future of Tribal communities.

AIR Programs has proudly sponsored this event for the past three years alongside many of our valued community partners. Each year, Tribal Law Day continues to grow, creating an even greater opportunity for education, dialogue, and connection among Tribal communities and Native Youth.

We look forward to Tribal Law Day 2027, when we intend to expand this event through deeper collaboration with our university and Tribal partners to create an even greater and more robust experience for our Tribal communities and Native Youth.

We look forward to seeing you on May 1, 2027, as we continue to honor Tribal sovereignty, strengthen our communities, and empower the next generation of Native leaders.



NASAI Presentation: From Experiment to Educational Model: A Decade of University-Level Learning

Roughly a decade ago, AIR Programs partnered with the UCLA TLCEE program to develop an idea that was both simple and ambitious: provide Native youth with the opportunity to experience a genuine university-level course while they were still in high school.

Our course was *Introduction to Tribal Legal Studies*. We were not necessarily expecting every student to master the entire course. Our initial goal was for students to understand at least half of the material while, perhaps more importantly, experiencing what it meant to be a university student. We wanted them to encounter the rigor of university academics, manage deadlines, complete substantial assignments, and develop the habits necessary to succeed in a demanding academic environment.



Honors Project: Student Admissions

NASAI (Cont. from pg 3)

What happened next surprised us -- Rather than simply completing the course, the majority of our participants began passing the university course—and some began excelling academically in their own high schools. The experience caused us to reconsider some of our assumptions about how Native youth learn and, more importantly, what conditions help students succeed in higher education.

Rethinking What Students Are Capable Of

Too often, educational programs begin with assumptions about what students may not be ready to do. Our experience suggested that a different question might be more productive:

What happens when students are given access to rigorous academic opportunities and the support necessary to meet those expectations?

Our model did not depend upon lowering the academic standards of a university course. Instead, we sought to provide students with the structures and encouragement needed to navigate those standards.

In many ways, we began to see parallels between our approach and the way scholarship athletes are supported. Student-athletes are expected to perform at a high level. They are not successful because expectations are lowered for them; they are successful because they have systems around them that help them manage demanding schedules, develop discipline, receive guidance, and remain accountable.

We began applying a similar philosophy to academic achievement.

Our students were expected to meet deadlines, complete assignments, participate in class, and engage with challenging material. At the same time, they were provided with support designed to help them understand how to succeed within a university environment.

The goal was not simply to pass a class. It was to learn how to be a successful university student.

Learning That Connects to Identity and Community

Another important element of our model was the subject matter itself.

Federal Indian Law is rigorous and complex, but it is also directly connected to Native communities, tribal sovereignty, history, government, and contemporary issues affecting Native people. Students could see connections between what they were learning and the communities in which they lived.

This raised an important question for us: Does academic rigor become more accessible when students can see themselves, their communities, and their experiences reflected in what they are studying?

Our experience suggested that it can. This does not mean that every course needs to be specifically about Native communities. Rather, it suggests that students may benefit when their identities and lived experiences are recognized as assets in the learning process rather than treated as something separate from academic achievement.

For Native youth in particular, the ability to connect academic concepts to community, culture, history, and personal experience can create a bridge between the classroom and the world students already understand.

Today, we continue our program in collaboration with UCSD and San Diego State, Dept of American Indian Studies. We continue to see success with our approach and work with our Native Communities. Of course, there is much more than this, with a lot of moving pieces. But overall, together with our community partners, we have developed a success, that is not only measured by the completion of a course, but more importantly, where our participants are going.

AIR Summer 2026-Complete

The AIR Summer Program was once again an enjoyable and memorable experience, providing opportunities for learning, friendship, and personal growth. This year, we condensed the program schedule to accommodate overlapping commitments while maintaining the meaningful and impactful experiences that make the program special. Throughout the summer, participants engaged in activities centered on higher education, Tribal sovereignty, cultural awareness, and community engagement.

Our program partnered with regional universities to introduce participants to college campus environments and help them explore opportunities in higher education. We also collaborated with organizations that provided driving safety education, as well as guest speakers who shared their knowledge of regional land stewardship and environmental responsibility.

We are proud of the meaningful experiences our students shared and the knowledge they gained throughout the program. Our Native youth brought enthusiasm, curiosity, and thoughtful perspectives to every activity, helping create an engaging and supportive learning environment for everyone involved.

We had a wonderful summer together and are already looking forward to welcoming the next group of participants in the year ahead.



Thank you to Pauma Band of Mission Indians, San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians and Southern CA Tribal Chairmen's Association for your support and contributions for our Native Youth. Together we are bringing a greater future for our Native Children.



We extend our sincere thanks to Colusa Indian Energy for their generous contribution to our scholarship efforts. In 2026, we unveiled a new collaborative scholarship opportunity for Native youth that integrates the principles of science and environmental protection. This initiative has grown out of our work with Colusa Indian Energy, and we look forward to the amazing opportunities these awards will bring out Native students.





Thanking Ross Frank (PhD) and Morgan Appel (PhD)

Our greatest successes have always come through collaborations with Tribes, universities, mentors and countless dedicated community partners. Among those who have been instrumental to our success are Ross Frank (PhD) and Morgan Appel (PhD).

Ross has supported our program since the late 1990s. As many know, Ross has consistently demonstrated that meaningful partnerships begin by listening. Too often, academia approaches communities with the mindset of, "I have the answers—what problem can I solve?" In reality, meaningful solutions come from listening first and working alongside communities to accomplish their own goals.

Ross has always exemplified this collaborative approach. He listens, learns, and then contributes his knowledge in ways that support the visions and priorities of the Tribes he serves. This philosophy has made a profound difference and stands in contrast to approaches that often fail to create meaningful community involvement or sustainable outcomes. Ross, thank you for your decades of dedication, partnership, and unwavering support of the AIR Programs. Your contributions have strengthened our work and the communities we serve.

To Morgan Appel, we extend our deepest gratitude and heartfelt appreciation. When we first arrived at UC San Diego Extension with an idea to bring our Leadership Program to the San Diego region, you believed in our vision and helped turn it into reality. Through your guidance, encouragement, and partnership, you played a vital role in establishing our San Diego-based Leadership Programs.

Your willingness to collaborate, your commitment to educational excellence, and your support of Native leadership development have helped create opportunities that continue to benefit Tribal communities and future leaders. We are sincerely grateful for your partnership and for the lasting impact you have made on the AIR Programs and the many individuals whose lives have been enriched through this work.

To both Ross and Morgan, thank you for your friendship, your collaboration, and your belief in our mission. Your support has helped shape the success of the AIR Programs, and we are honored to recognize the lasting legacy each of you has helped build. Happy Retirement!!!

Save the Date For AIR Programs Banquet 2026

Date: Thursday, October 15th, 2026, 5:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Save the date - AIR Programs has proudly served the Southern California Region for over 33 years, through our mentoring, tutorial and our after-school programming. Our programs provide our Native youth the tools needed to compete and succeed within the academic setting and create opportunities to expose them to higher education.

Support our AIR Programs by becoming a sponsor of this years' 33rd Annual Awards and Fundraiser Banquet!



AIR PROGRAMS

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