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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



2025 and looking forward to 2026

2025 has been a whirlwind year of accomplishments for AIR Programs. We served more than 208 participants across our programs, marking a year of meaningful growth and lasting impact.

One of our most significant achievements was the groundbreaking progress made through the collaborative development of a Tribally Based Youth Court. Through this initiative, our partnership successfully completed diversion wellness programming with Native diversion participants. With continued support, these youth are demonstrating positive outcomes and sustained success in their lives.

Throughout the year, we strengthened our partnerships with San Diego State University (SDSU) and the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) by continuing to offer Tribal Leadership courses through the AIR Honors Project. The knowledge and skills gained through these courses are being reinvested by our youth to support wellness initiatives within our Diversion programming. AIR Programs also expanded collaborative efforts with Miramar College and hosted Cornell University, engaging students across the San Diego region in meaningful dialogue and learning opportunities.

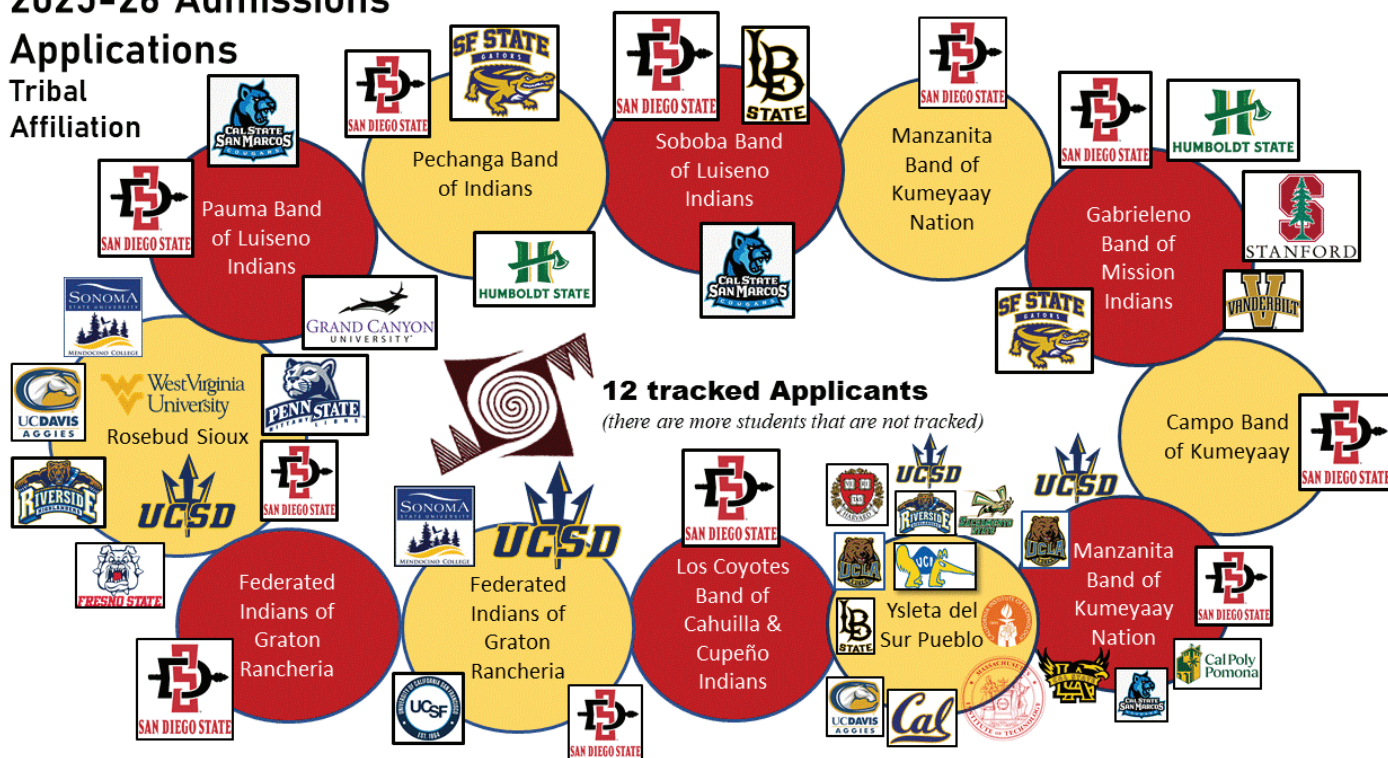
We celebrated another outstanding summer program, featuring curriculum focused on environmental and cultural preservation. This programming further reinforced identity, stewardship, and leadership among our participants.

Additionally, AIR Programs expanded our Law Day initiative by hosting our Third Annual Law Day at UCSD, continuing to provide Native youth with pathways to understanding Tribal Law and civic engagement.

All of these accomplishments are made even more meaningful as we celebrate AIR participants who were accepted to—and began their university journeys at—Harvard University, UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, San Diego State University, and other institutions.

We extend our deepest gratitude to our community supporters and collaborative partners who make this work possible.

Together, we share a vision of empowering Native youth with opportunity, wellness, and leadership, so they may one day guide our Tribal Nations toward an even stronger future.

Tribal
Affiliation

As we close out 2025, our students have applied to universities across the nation, reflecting a powerful shift in opportunity and access to higher education.

When we began our journey in 1993 with the development of AIR Programs, the pathway to higher education for our students was extremely limited. At that time, community college was often the only option available, locally and nationally. While community college remains one of the strongest and most valuable options for students who are exploring academic interests or vocational paths, national transfer statistics show that only 1 in 4 students successfully transfer to a university to complete a degree. For many students who knew they wanted to pursue a four-year degree, their choices were constrained, not by ability or ambition, but by a lack of guidance, advocacy, and support.

Today, that reality has changed. Our students are applying to and receiving offers of admission 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 due to limited support. Instead, they now have choice, the same choice afforded to most high school graduates.

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.

2025 marks the conclusion of our collaboration with the Intertribal Court of Southern California, as the grant supporting our joint work has come to an end. We extend our sincere gratitude to the Court for its partnership with AIR Programs. Together (along with many other programs), we created a “first-in-the-nation” diversion model through the development of a Tribally based Youth Court.

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The foundation for the Youth Court originated through AIR Programs' longstanding work with Native youth, particularly through our Tribally based law and governance courses and training offered throughout the region. At the program's height, Native youth participated from across the country, from the Dakotas to Florida, and from Yurok to Campo, making this a truly nationwide initiative. Now in its 11th year, this training continues through our AIR Honors Program.

What began as a small project sparked a powerful idea: that Native youth who gained knowledge of Tribal law, governance, and community responsibility could serve as leaders within a Tribally based Youth Court. These youth were uniquely positioned to assist peers diverted from state and Tribal courts—bringing cultural understanding, community connection, and a wellness-centered approach to diversion.

Has this approach been successful? Yes, overwhelmingly so.

In 2025, we implemented our first series of diversion cases, with more than twenty Native youth serving on Youth Court juries. Youth who participated in diversion successfully completed their wellness plans, with no recurrence reported. We observed measurable improvements including increased academic performance, empowerment, accountability, and a genuine willingness to change and grow.

Within the AIR Honors Program, students involved in this Tribally based law and governance program are also experiencing significant academic gains. Several school districts now recognize these courses for dual credit, and universities view participation as an admissions index boost, recognizing the rigor, discipline, and university-level coursework involved.

Are our Native youth benefiting from this work? We cannot say it enough, YES!

We are deeply proud of what has been accomplished through this collaboration and extend our heartfelt thanks to former Chief Judge Devon Lomayesva (now a Superior Court Judge) and former Chief Judge Gregory Thompson for embracing this vision with us. Together, we built a truly one-of-a-kind Tribally based Youth Court that stands as a model for culturally grounded, youth-led justice and wellness.

Moot Court at the University of San Diego

Throughout the eleven years of developing courses within our Honors Program, a central goal has been to create meaningful and unique opportunities for Native youth to demonstrate their knowledge through rigorous academic work and formal presentation.

Within our "Introduction to Tribal Legal Studies" course, students complete a capstone experience that challenges them to engage deeply with Tribal and federal law. For their final assessment, students analyze existing American Indian Supreme Court cases and develop legal arguments both for and against the decisions. These arguments are then formally presented during our Moot Court Final.

Despite encountering some logistical challenges, the Moot Court was highly successful. Participants joined via Zoom from Northern California, while others traveled from across San Diego County to take part. The level of preparation, critical thinking, and professionalism demonstrated by the students was truly impressive.

Once again, we congratulate our students on successfully completing their final and commend them for their dedication, academic growth, and commitment to excellence.



We thank the Jamul Indian Village 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.



AIR Annual Banquet

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians for their generous sponsorship of the AIR Programs Banquet. This annual event provides an important opportunity to celebrate and honor the students who have participated in our programs over the years, while also showcasing their achievements to our collaborative university, community, and Tribal partners. These partners recognize this honor as a reflection of the students' dedication to community-centered values, their commitment to learning about Tribal governance, and their willingness to go beyond traditional academic pathways to grow through education and pursue higher education.

As highlighted throughout this report, our students continue to demonstrate that Native youth can compete with the best in our nation. During the banquet, we honored six outstanding students representing communities from Northern to Southern California. We also awarded eight university application scholarships, provided six general education scholarships, and highlighted the many accomplishments of our students and AIR Programs throughout the year.

Most importantly, the banquet allowed us to reconnect with long-time supporters of AIR Programs and with former participants from previous years. These meaningful connections remind us that this work is deeply rooted in community, and that supporting our Native youth together is truly one of the greatest purposes of working in Indian Country.



We extend our sincere thanks to Colusa Indian Energy for their generous contribution to our scholarship efforts. In 2026, we will unveil 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 continuing this meaningful partnership in the coming year.



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!

UC San Diego



In Memory of Paul Cuero

We close the year on a somber note with the passing of Mr. Paul Cuero, former Campo Chairman. AIR Programs has had the honor of working with Mr. Cuero since our earliest years of development, and we will deeply miss his wisdom, humility, and gentle humor.

While his service as Tribal Chairman reflected his leadership, it represented only a portion of who he was and the compassion he carried for Indian Country. Mr. Cuero was a vital part of the revitalization of Kumeyaay cultural practices, particularly through his deep knowledge, teaching, and singing of Kumeyaay Birdsongs. Over the years, countless Kumeyaay youth had the privilege of learning from Paul, carrying forward traditions rooted in identity, responsibility, and community.

For many years, Paul opened the AIR Programs Annual Banquet, lifting his voice in song to celebrate the success of our Native youth through a cultural practice unique to this region. Words cannot fully capture the depth of what he gave to our communities, but many will remember his smile, one that quietly reassured us that things were going to be okay.

AIR Programs is grounded in the belief that empowerment comes through cultural identity. In that truth, we can say with certainty that Paul Cuero was empowerment to all who knew him. His legacy lives on through the youth he inspired, the culture he preserved, and the community he strengthened.



AIR PROGRAMS

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