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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Heritage University Awarded \$300,000 National Science Foundation Grant for Fisheries Science Curriculum to Boost Native American Student College Enrollment**

Toppenish, Wash. – Heritage University will use a three-year, \$300,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to develop curriculum that will prepare American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students for careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This effort known as Indigenous iNtegration of Aquatic sciences and Traditional-Ecological-Knowledge for Undergraduate culturally Responsive Education," or "i-NATURE," is a partnership between Heritage University, Yakama Nation Fisheries (YNF) Salish Kootenai College (SKC) in Pablo, Montana, Oregon State University and University of Idaho. Dr. Alexander Alexiades, assistant professor of environmental science at Heritage, will be the primary researcher, with Dr. Kazuhiro Sonoda and Dr. Jessica Black, also of Heritage and University of Oregon faculty member Dr. Michelle Jacob serving as co-researchers.

Three of the partners have long histories of providing educational and workplace opportunities for Native Americans. Heritage University, a minority serving institution (62% Hispanic, 10% AI/AN) located on the Yakama Reservation, is well poised to develop this new educational model because of its role as a trusted community-based institution with regional tribes, and its unique mission to provide quality, accessible higher education to underrepresented populations; YNF is a primary employer for AI/AN fisheries graduates in south central Washington state; and SKC is a tribal college with a strong track record of incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into STEM curriculum in the Pacific Northwest.

"The program to be developed will be tailored to meet the needs of Native American students in a culturally responsive manner," says Dr. Alexiades. "In addition, the program will simultaneously help students acquire the skills and knowledge which are critical for success in the STEM workforce or graduate school."

"Only 9% of Heritage's student population has declared majors in STEM fields, though the majority of those are minority, which mirrors the university as a whole," says Dr. Sinoda, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Heritage. "This gives Heritage the unique opportunity to bring more AI/AN students into STEM fields, as they currently represent less than 1% of STEM majors nationwide."

Along with increasing minority student recruitment and retention in the STEM fields, i-NATURE will provide an enhanced understanding of the ecological problems that threaten aquatic ecosystems in a heavily agricultural region that faces increasing pressure on water resources. Dr. Black, associate professor of environmental science and studies at Heritage, has years of experience in directing Native students to consider their cultural backgrounds when creating possible solutions for environmental problems. "The i-NATURE project will develop and innovate methods for incorporating traditional ecological knowledge and AI/AN cultural input into existing models for STEM education that could provide unique insights into approaches to environmental issues," said Dr. Black.

Heritage faculty involved are confident i-NATURE will increase AI/AN enrollment in STEM fields at the university level by boosting their interest in natural sciences and resource conservation, and will provide them an academic program that fosters their success in STEM fields.

For more information, contact Alexander Alexiades at (509) 865-0732 or alexiades\_a@heritage.edu.

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*Heritage University is a non-profit, independent, regionally accredited institution of higher education offering undergraduate and graduate education across the state of Washington. Visit our website, [www.heritage.edu](http://www.heritage.edu).*