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American Indian College Fund Announces Historic Grant from Lilly Endowment to Strengthen 'Wisdom of the People'

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\$17.5M Tribal College Initiative Will Build Intellectual Capital

DENVER, Feb. 15 /PRNewswire/ -- The American Indian College Fund (Fund) is at the forefront in promoting higher education for American Indians. For Kyla Young, this meant receiving a scholarship in just the nick of time in 2006: she only had \$18 left in her bank account. For Dr. Daniel Wildcat, Fund support allowed him to complete his doctoral degree at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. For Zachary Underwood in Montana, the designation of a Fund scholar means he attracted the attention of recruiters from Yale University for graduate work.

To continue providing financial support to individuals such as these and the nation's tribal colleges and universities, the American Indian College Fund announced a historic grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. The five-year, \$17.5 million initiative named Woksape Oyate, Lakota for "Wisdom of the People," aims to build the intellectual capital of tribal colleges. The initiative will allow the highly diverse tribal colleges to tailor their programs to address their individual needs, while simultaneously strengthening the entire tribal college system.

Through a multifaceted approach, Woksape Oyate will dramatically enhance recruitment, retention and development of highly qualified tribal college faculty, staff and students. Leadership development programs, increased fellowship and sabbatical opportunities for staff and pipeline programs to bring the best and brightest students back to teach at their tribal college will all be developed during this initiative. Institutional capacity will also be enhanced by creation of development offices and recruitment of highly qualified faculty.

Further, the initiative will strengthen academic programs at the tribal colleges by growing tribal college academic centers of excellence in reservation communities, developing honors programs for students and encouraging exchange programs to attract internationally-renowned instructors to tribal college campuses and to provide professional development opportunities for tribal college faculty. Finally, the initiative will provide much needed scholarship support to the best and brightest American Indian students in the United States.

Tribal colleges, called "the most significant development in American Indian communities since World War II" by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, currently serve 31,000 degree-seeking and community education students on 27 reservations in the U.S. With enrollment numbers rapidly expanding, tribal colleges rely heavily on private funding from supporters such as the American Indian College Fund and the Endowment to keep competitive with mainstream institutions.

Current statistics paint a staggering picture of challenges that tribal colleges and their students face.

- * Only 12 percent of Native Americans aged 25 and older have attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27 percent of the U.S. population.
- * The average family income of first time entering tribal college students is \$13,998, compared to the federal poverty threshold for a family of \$19,157.
- * When inflation is considered, federal funding for tribal colleges has decreased by 30 percent since the passage of the Tribally Controlled College and University Assistance Act in 1978.
- * Tribal college faculty members routinely earn \$20,000 less each year than their community college counterparts.

Fund President Richard B. Williams lauded the vision behind the new initiative stating, "Woksape Oyate: Wisdom of the People, will capture the intellectual spirit at the tribal colleges by providing resources to strengthen all members of tribal college communities. Lilly Endowment has long been a strong ally of traditionally underserved populations. Through its vision for a stronger and better future for Native communities, we can significantly support the unsung heroes of the tribal college movement who seek to help our people through education."

With its credo "Educating the Mind and Spirit," the Denver-based American Indian College Fund is the nation's largest provider of private scholarships for American Indian students, providing 5,000 scholarships annually for students seeking to better their lives and communities through education. More information on the American Indian College Fund can be found at www.collegefund.org.

Lilly Endowment is an Indianapolis-based private philanthropic foundation created in 1937 by three members of the Lilly family -- J.K. Lilly Sr. and sons J.K. Jr. and Eli -- through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company. The Endowment is a separate entity from the company devoted to the causes of education, religion and community development. More information about the Endowment can be found at www.lillyendowment.org.