

# AISES NATIONAL CONFERENCE

OCTOBER 15-17 2026 ■ PORTLAND, OREGON



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## **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

### **Portland, Oregon**

The Oregon Convention Center is located in the heart of downtown Portland, Oregon in Multnomah County.

Today we honor the Indigenous people whose traditional ancestral homelands we stand on, the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Tumwater, Watlala bands of the Chinook, the Tualatin Kalapuya and many other Indigenous nations of the Columbia River. It is important to acknowledge the ancestors of this place and to recognize that we are here because of the sacrifices forced upon them.

In remembering the communities, we honor their legacy, their lives and their descendants.

## SAFE CAMP AND CODE OF CONDUCT

All conference participants are expected to adhere to the AISES standards of conduct. We invite all those who participate in any AISES event to help us create safe and positive experiences for everyone.

### Safe Camp

AISES events are a "Safe Camp," meaning this is a welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and safe environment for all our AISES family members regardless of race, color, sex, religion, sexual orientation, or gender expression/identity. Safe Camp includes recognizing the AISES Code of Conduct and anyone found violating the code will be asked to leave the conference immediately. Please contact any AISES staff member or board member if you have any questions.

### Code of Conduct

AISES was established with the goal of developing Indigenous professionals and leaders in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math. Considering this goal, the first student leaders of AISES developed a set of principles that prohibited alcohol, illegal drugs, and harassment. These principles have become core values of the organization and are incorporated as the Code of Conduct.

The AISES Code of Conduct promotes professional development and personal growth by strictly prohibiting the use of intoxicating drugs or alcohol, all forms of harassment and discrimination, and encourages respectful and civil dialog and group discussions. The Code is meant to reflect the ideals of our Indigenous communities by establishing an expectation that we agree to protect and promote the well-being and growth of all people.

The Code is expected to be honored when individuals are representing the AISES organization and by all persons participating in AISES activities, events, and conversations. To this end, each person is asked to consider the spirit of the Code and promote its intent by refraining from prohibited activities and encouraging others to do the same.

AISES will continue to maintain the Code of Conduct as a symbol reflective of the teachings and values of our ancestors. The Code of Conduct represents the ideas and visions set-forth by the AISES founders and the student leadership. AISES values and respects the rights and privileges of others and asks that you honor the AISES organization, its mission, and the family of AISES by adhering to the Code of Conduct.

## IN MEMORIAM

### Dr. Richard Sioui (1937-2026)

The AISES family was saddened to learn of the passing of Dr. Richard Sioui, Huron-Wendat Nation of Wendake, Quebec. After serving four years in the Air Force, Dr. Sioui earned a PhD in Chemical Engineering from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and built a distinguished career in industry, becoming a recognized authority in industrial diamond and cubic boron nitride technology. He held numerous U.S. and international patents and received the Outstanding Engineering Alumnus Award from UMass Amherst in 1995. A dedicated advocate for education, Dr. Sioui established a faculty award at Northeastern University to promote excellence in teaching. An Eagle Scout, he remained committed to scouting throughout his life, serving as a scoutmaster, and later a district level volunteer.



### Dr. Tiffany Smith (1982-2025)

In December, the AISES family marked the passing of Dr. Tiffany Smith with profound sadness. She was an extraordinary leader who served AISES and its members well beyond her role as director of research and career support. Dr. Smith mentored and uplifted countless students, colleagues, and partners during her years of service to the organization where she left an indelible mark and a legacy of professionalism, unfailing kindness, and dedication to Indigenous people and communities. We extend our heartfelt sympathy to her husband, Zach, and her children, Mya and Tytan.



### Dr. Selso Villegas (n.d.-2026)

Sequoyah Fellow Dr. Selso Villegas will be long remembered for his advocacy both for the Earth and for tribal sovereignty. For more than a quarter century, he served the Tohono O'odham Nation as the first executive director of water resources, steadfastly protecting his tribe's water rights. He also developed the Nation's Climate Change Adaptation Plan and worked to blend the community's traditional knowledge and cultural values with modern science. At the University of Arizona, he trained and mentored students in the Native Water Technician Program and at the Indigenous Resilience Center. In 2024 the Center bestowed an Indigenous Resilience Award on Dr. Villegas.



# SAVE THE DATE



**2027 NATIONAL CONFERENCE**  
**October 14 - 16, 2027 | Aurora, CO**



**Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center | Aurora, CO**

# WELCOME



Boozhoo!

On behalf of AISES — Advancing Indigenous Science and Engineering Society — we are excited to welcome you to Portland's LEED® Platinum Oregon Convention Center for the 2026 National Conference.

This year's conference theme "Weaving Innovation" reminds us that knowledge is built around the art of weaving. We each have the ability to contribute by weaving ancient wisdom with new resources, using innovation as a driving force. Through this process we find fulfillment and purpose.

We weave our traditions, lessons, learning, and storytelling into everything that we do. Weaving helps us to learn and strengthen our connections as we interact with the people and places around us. By honoring the knowledge of the past while embracing new possibilities, we weave a stronger, more connected future for generations ahead of us.

We are thrilled that Portland is the destination of the 2026 AISES National Conference where you can weave more, do more, and be more. Oregon, the ninth largest state, is home to nine federally recognized tribes, each with their own diverse cultures, languages, ceremonies, and histories. These Indigenous people relied on subsistence hunting and fishing, drawing from the natural abundance of the lands they have stewarded for centuries. Then as now, the tribes utilized science and technology to flourish in a changing world.

You will find that Oregon has exceptional STEM and stem-related opportunities in higher education institutions as well as corporate, tribal, and federal centers. Oregon continues to spur job development focused on key sector opportunities in research, agriculture, clean energy, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, and many more.

As usual, the AISES staff has assembled an exciting lineup of speakers, meetings, sessions, and special events.

- **Wednesday, October 14 (pre-conference):** STEM Activities Day (registration required) is free and open to everyone! Pick up your conference registration along with the complimentary Tri-Met or MAX light rail pass to get around the city during the conference. Familiarize yourself with the Portland Convention Center and plan the sessions you want to attend.
- **Thursday, October 15:** At 8:30 a.m., the Opening Ceremony will get the conference off to an exciting start with a compelling Plenary Discussion on Indigenous Futurism with Dr. Daniel Wilson, author of *Robopocalypse*, SME Josh Hammonds of Cisco Systems, and moderator Dr. Lee Francis, "Dr. IndigiNerd." Following the ceremony, you can stay busy with sessions, meetings, and tours. Thursday ends with the FIIRE Hackathon (registration required), Veterans' Gathering, Women's and Men's Talking Circles, and Graduate Student Reception. Be sure to stop by the Networking Suites — a great opportunity to ask questions and expand your connections.
- **Friday, October 16:** Rise early for the Morning Blessing with our esteemed elders or get energized with "Powwow Sweat." Other activities include the Graduate Student Panel and the College and Career Fair, followed by a full day of sessions and caucuses. Wrap up this full day by shaking your tailfeathers at the student social starting at 8:00 p.m.
- **Saturday, October 17:** The day is filled with a variety of sessions culminating in the Closing Talking Circle (all welcome), Closing Banquet, and ever-popular Powwow.

Thank you for joining us in Portland, the perfect setting to experience new flavors and cultures — be sure to sample the city's famous food carts (you'll find some at the Portland Mercado). Or visit Powell's Books — occupying four stories on a full city block, it's the largest independent bookstore in the world. With 12 major bridges crossing the Willamette River, Portland is also called "Bridgetown." You're sure to cross one or two while you're here.

Enjoy this fascinating city and discover why locals have adopted the motto "Keep Portland Weird." Throughout the conference we ask that you stay safe and **have fun!** We know all our "beautiful AISES Nerds" will fit right in with Portland's creative vibe.

Michael Laverdure  
(Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa)  
AISES Board Chair

Sarah EchoHawk  
(Pawnee Nation)  
AISES President



Daniel Wilson

## OPENING PLENARY DISCUSSION: INDIGENOUS FUTURISM

Technology is changing so fast that truth can be stranger than fiction. Unless you're multiple bestselling author Daniel Wilson, a Cherokee citizen who has written Robopocalypse, How to Survive a Robot Uprising, and Hole in the Sky, his latest book. Wilson is an author and engineer with a PhD in robotics and other schooling in Artificial Intelligence. Wilson will be joined by Josh Hammonds (Lumbee), a lead engineer and subject matter expert with some 20 years working at Cisco Systems. The AISES 2026 Blazing Flame awardee, Hammonds leads 190 engineers globally on Cisco's Collaboration Apps TAC teams. Joined by moderator Lee Francis, EdD (aka Dr. IndigiNerd), they will discuss the promises and challenges of A.I. and other technological trends.

### BIOS

Daniel H. Wilson is a Cherokee citizen and author of the New York Times bestselling Robopocalypse, its sequel Robogenesis, and many other books, including How to Survive a Robot Uprising, Amped, and The Clockwork Dynasty. He earned a PhD in robotics from Carnegie Mellon University, as well as master's degrees in Artificial Intelligence and robotics. Wilson lives in Portland, Oregon.

Josh Hammonds is a multi-dimensional leader at Cisco Systems across technical, organizational, and volunteer areas. Leading nearly 200 global co-workers, Hammonds oversees the Cisco TAC (CX Centers) organization, based in the Research Triangle Park North Carolina office. He is a highly regarded thought leader and Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert. Joining the company in 2007, the Lumbee tribal member is global co-lead for the Native American Network, Cisco's Native employee resource group, championing technical support of tribes and recruiting of Native talent.



Josh Hammonds



## CONFERENCE DJ

### DJ ELEMENT

#### Salt River Indian Community

el·e·ment [el-uh-muhnt] –noun

*A component or constituent of a whole or one of the parts into which a whole may be resolved by analysis.*

DJ Element is an eclectic DJ from Phoenix, Arizona with a repertoire to encompass hip-hop, funk, soul, neo-soul, reggae, EDM, moombahton, trap, twerk, 80's, electro and everything in between. He has guested at worldwide events and venues in Korea, Japan, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy to name a few. He has opened for heavy hitters such as James Brown, A Tribe Called Quest, Nas, Krs-One, De La Soul, Big Daddy Kane, Rakim, Slick Rick, The Roots, Jane's Addiction, Incubus, and Audioslave. DJ Element was named the B-Boy City King of Scratch Champion in 2019 and recognized in 2015 by the Native American Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona for his contribution and dedication to music. Notably, DJ Element was the official 2020-2021 tour DJ for Supaman. DJ Element is a member of the Salt River Indian Community and began his career in 1996.

## DRUM GROUP

Bad Soul is a contemporary drum group based out of Grand Ronde Oregon who proudly represent the Pacific Northwest. They have a diverse group of singers from more than 10 different tribes throughout the US and Canada. Bad Soul's goal is simply to bring a positive, healing, energy through their music that makes the people want to dance and celebrate.



# MASTERS OF CEREMONIES



## LEE FRANCIS IV, PhD

Lee Francis IV, PhD (Pueblo of Laguna) aka Dr. IndigiNerd is the Founder and Chief Imagination Officer of the Indigenous Imagination Workshop, an organization dedicated to sparking and cultivating the Indigenous Imagination. He is an educator and entrepreneur and the founder of the Indigenous Comic Con, Indigenous Worlds of Wonder, the Indigenous Futurisms Festival, Native Realities, and Red Planet Books and Comics.

Dr. Francis also has a considerable background in organizational development, facilitation, and evaluation work that has spanned the United States. In his professional capacity, he has worked as lead writer and facilitator with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the LANL Foundation, the State of New Mexico, and numerous tribal nations. His work focuses on approaching organizational design and development through an Indigenous framework while asserting Sovereignty and self-determination.

He is also an award-winning writer and editor and has been published in multiple publications ranging from poetry to short stories. His first comic book, *Sixkiller*, debuted June 2018. His follow up, *Ghost River*, was published in 2019 and has both been lauded throughout the US and abroad. He has also contributed to numerous RPGs, including *Devil's Run* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. His most recent work *Mapping Lenapehoking*, takes the reader on a journey of dispossession and was developed in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania and Lenape/Delaware elders.

Dr. Francis has also had a significant presence in the digital world as well. He was the host and lead writer for *IndigiGenius* on New Mexico PBS and the co-producer for *Sovereign Innovations* on PBS Digital. He is also the creator of *Sovereignty Gardens*, a Native American kids puppetry show that teaches youth about gardening and food sovereignty.

He continues to be a strong advocate for Native American youth, especially in helping them with creative entrepreneurship and has expanded his work to incorporate economic development and the Native creative economy. He lives in North Carolina with his family.



## LILLIAN SPARKS ROBINSON

Lillian Sparks Robinson is the CEO and Owner of Wopila Consulting, LLC, an American Indian and woman owned small business that provides a wide range of specialized consulting and strategic development services to federal, state, and tribal government clients.

A member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Lillian has worked in Washington, D.C. for over 20 years, devoting her career to supporting the educational pursuits of Native American students, protecting the rights of Indigenous people, and empowering tribal communities. In 2010, Lillian was appointed by President Obama, and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, to serve as the Commissioner for the Administration for Native Americans. In this role, she worked on programs and policy impacting Native languages and education, social development, and economic development for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. Prior to her service at ANA, Lillian served as the Executive Director of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), where she worked extensively on education policy and appropriations impacting American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. A former staff attorney at the National Congress of American Indians, Lillian has received numerous awards and recognition, including being named as one of seven young Native American Leaders by USA Today Magazine, one of "40 Under 40" from the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, and American Indian Woman of the Year. Lillian now serves as the Vice Chair for the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, Vice Chair for Native Forward Scholars Fund, Board of Directors for the American Indian Cancer Research Foundation, and Co-Founder of The Indigenous Fashion Collective.

A graduate of Morgan State University and Georgetown University Law Center, Lillian resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her husband, Corey and son, Connor.

# BANQUET PERFORMERS

## WEAVING INNOVATION: VOICES OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER PLATEAU

**Presented by Nez Perce Tourism**

Step into an immersive cultural journey honoring the deep relationship between Indigenous heritage, homelands, and the dynamic knowledge that continues to weave innovation. Gathered in Portland along our sacred Columbia River—an ancient highway and trade center shared by the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) and neighboring Pacific Northwest Tribes—this special presentation welcomes AISES through ceremonial protocol, beginning with a shared traditional song invocation and explanation. A Grand Entry will initiate the dance exhibition, demonstrating our dances and the textile engineering woven into traditional regalia. Through storytelling highlighting regional seasonal lifeways, intertribal trade, and ancestral stewardship of the Columbia River basin, we celebrate the generations of knowledge that have sustained the Plateau peoples since time immemorial. The presentation concludes with an Honor Song dedicated to all AISES attendees who are weaving innovation for their communities and collective homelands.



# 2026 NATIONAL CONFERENCE SPONSORS

## MEDALLION



## JADE



## TURQUOISE



## CORAL



## LAPIS



## ONYX



## EAGLE



## BEAR



## SAGE



## CEDAR



## PINON



# ADDITIONAL SPONSORS

## SIGNATURE GATHERING EVENTS

**Plenary Luncheon-** Apple

**Kickoff Event-** Indian Health Service

**Student Award Ceremony-**  
Gaming Laboratories International;  
Indian Health Service

**Corporate Advisory Council & Tribal Nations  
Advisory Council Reception-** Cisco

**Graduate Student Reception-**  
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

**Professional Networking Reception-** Kyndryl

**PK-12 Educator Day-**  
The Lemelson Foundation

**Buffalo Bump Business Plan  
Challenge-** Aristocrat Gaming

**Hackathon-** Chevron Corporation

**Graduate Student Research Oral and Poster  
Competition-** Burroughs Wellcome Fund

**Undergraduate Student Research Oral  
and Poster Competitions-** Mayo Clinic

**Networking Suites-** American Chemical  
Society; Common Fund Data Ecosystem  
(CFDE) Training Center; General Motors;  
Indian Health Service; Stellantis;  
Synchrony; USDA-Natural Resources  
Conservation Service (NRCS)

**Resume Room-** Indian Health Service

**Industry Tours-** Nike, Inc.; Portland  
State University; Oregon Health &  
Science University (OHSU)

## KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS SESSION TRACKS

**Computer and Information Science  
Engineering-** Common Fund Data  
Ecosystem (CFDE) Training Center

**Health and Medical Sciences-** Oregon  
Health & Science University (OHSU)

**Professional & Workforce Development**  
– Department of Energy

## WELLNESS AND CARE

**Elders Lounge-** Chahta Foundation

**Coffee Break-** Double Rafters

## VOICES AND VISIBILITY

**Mobile App-** Indian Health Service

## JOURNEY MAKERS TRAVEL SCHOLARSHIPS

Boston Scientific  
Chevron Corporation  
Chahta Foundation  
Common Fund Data Ecosystem  
(CFDE) Training Center  
Dragonfly Consulting, LLC  
FanDuel  
Indian Health Service  
INGAA Foundation  
Koniag Government Services  
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation  
Merck  
Microsoft  
NewRange Copper Nickel  
NV5, Inc  
Phillips 66  
Travel Portland  
Toyota  
USDA-Natural Resources  
Conservation Service (NRCS)





## CONFERENCE LOGISTICS

*All times listed are local time.*

### AISES National Conference Wi-Fi

Network: **OCC Free Wi-Fi**

Open network, no authentication/password required.

### AISES National Conference Mobile App

The AISES National Conference App will allow you to get up-to-date notifications, connect with other attendees, post messages, complete session and post-conference evaluations and plan your visit to the College and Career Fair and more! The app is available on Android and Apple devices.

To download the app visit: [www.aises.org/app](http://www.aises.org/app)

To access the mobile app, you will need:

- **Email address** used during registration
- **Event Password** (attendee reference number, will be emailed to conference attendees)

If you require technical help with the AISES mobile app, please email [app@aises.org](mailto:app@aises.org).

### AISES Council of Elders Lounge

Stop by room C120 in the Oregon Convention Center to seek wisdom, strength, love, or personal guidance from our Elders.

### AISES Merchandise

AISES gear gets scooped up fast! Make sure to stop by the AISES Merchandise Booth located near the conference registration desk in Lobby C to purchase AISES-themed items. Cash and credit cards are accepted for all purchases.

*Wednesday, October 14: 9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.*

*Thursday & Friday, October 15 & 16: 7:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.*

*Saturday, October 17: 8:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.*

### AISES Photographer and Videographer

We enjoy capturing the "faces of AISES" throughout the National Conference. Therefore, an official professional photographer and videographer will be on-site during major conference ceremonies, meetings, and sessions. Images and video will be used for AISES promotional purposes only.

### Closing Banquet

The Closing Banquet will pay tribute to the AISES Professional and Service Award recipients on **Saturday, October 17: 6:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.**

### College and Career Fair

AISES hosts the largest College and Career Fair in Indian Country. The Fair attracts professionals and college recruiters from 235 corporations, government agencies, colleges and universities. This mix encourages mentoring and sharing that is unparalleled at any other event. Check out the [booths](#) on the exhibit floor. *Interact with exhibitors on Friday, October 16: 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.*

### Conference Check-in Desk and AISES Membership Information

The conference check-in and registration desk will be in Lobby C of the Oregon Convention Center. Stop by to pick up your conference badge or connect with event staff or volunteers with questions. Your name badge allows you access to all daily conference functions, including Saturday night's Closing Banquet. Your badge must be always worn during all the conference activities.

### Conference Name Badges

Your name badge allows you access to all daily conference functions, including Saturday night's Closing Banquet. **Please always wear your badge.** If you lose your badge, please go to the conference registration desk for a replacement at a \$5 charge.

### Feedback and Prizes

Your feedback and observations are important to us as we continue to design programs and events to best serve our members and friends. Please take our National Conference post-conference survey to be eligible to win prizes after the conference. The post-conference survey is available on the conference mobile app. Also, complete the evaluations at the end of each session to participate in drawings for great prizes which will be announced through the mobile app!

### Good Medicine Room

#### Honoring Wellness in Our STEM Journey

A space for rest, reflection, and reconnection, the Good Medicine Room supports the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of our AISES relatives in STEM. Guided by Dr. Glenna P. Stumblingbear-Riddle, this space blends Indigenous ways of knowing with practical tools for navigating academic and professional life.

AISES is offering this type of dedicated wellness support at the National Conference - an important step toward centering holistic, culturally grounded care in our shared journey.

Rooted in community care, offerings include one-on-one **Medicine Talks** and **Group Talks** focused on collective healing and skill building.

#### Outcomes:

- Reduced stress and stronger coping skills
- Deeper sense of belonging and cultural identity in STEM

Wellness is ceremony. This space invites us to walk forward in balance, together.

Check the agenda to sign up for Medicine Talks and view the Group Talk schedule.

### Industry Partner Site Tours

All attendees who have registered for a tour will meet outside at the main entrance of the Oregon Convention Center on NE Martin Luther King (MLK) Jr. Blvd. at 1:15p.m. to check in and begin the tours. All tours depart on time, so be early to claim your spot.

### Lost and Found Protocol

Any items that are found during the AISES Conference will be turned in to the Oregon Convention Center welcome desk located in the MLK Lobby.

Lose something? Please call the welcome concierge at **503-731-7800** or email [guestexperience@oregonccc.org](mailto:guestexperience@oregonccc.org) with a detailed description of the lost item. Please include any photos of the item in your email.

## Native Artisan Marketplace

Artisan booths will be in the Ballroom Lobby located on the main level of the Oregon Convention Center. Get a jumpstart on your holiday shopping or just indulge yourself with a treat from the AISES Marketplace where Native artisans have wonderful items available for purchase.

*Thursday - Saturday, October 15 to  
October 17: 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.*

## Resume Room

The Resume room is available for students to fine tune their resumes for upload to the AISES Career Hub and to distribute at the AISES College and Career Fair. The room will be equipped with computers and printers and staffed by experts from sponsor organizations to help you polish your resume.

*Thursday, October 15: 11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.  
Friday, October 16: 7:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.*

## Safe Camp and Safe Camp Zone

The AISES National Conference is a "Safe Camp," meaning this is a welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and safe environment for all our AISES family members regardless of race, color, sex, religion, sexual orientation, or gender expression/identity. Safe Camp includes recognizing the AISES Code of Conduct and anyone found violating the code will be removed from the conference. Please see the resource center for a copy of the [AISES Code of Conduct](#).

Whether you're a first-timer or a veteran at the AISES Conference, we have resources available for everyone in the Safe Camp Zone located in **Room D139**. Need a private spot to take refuge? Here, you will find lots of useful information to make your time at the Conference more comfortable.

## Sessions Tracks

While sessions are grouped by track, these are just suggestions! Explore the program, read the descriptions, and attend any sessions that spark your interest. With so much to choose from, plan thoughtfully - and don't forget to connect with fellow attendees and presenters along the way!

## Student Research Presentation Competition

Middle School, High School, Undergraduate, and Graduate students will showcase their STEM research at oral and poster presentation sessions during the AISES National Conference on *Thursday and Friday, October 15 and 16*. We encourage all conference participants to show their support by attending the oral presentations (see agenda for times and locations) and poster presentations in **Exhibit Hall B** next to the College and Career Fair exhibit floor.

## Oral Presentations

Presentations will take place on *Thursday and Friday, October 15 and 16, between the hours of 9:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.*

## Poster Presentations

Presenters are expected to setup their posters on *Friday, October 15, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. in Exhibit Hall B* of the Oregon Convention Center.

Presenters must be present at their poster during the entire presentation time, *9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. on Friday, October 16*.

All posters are to be removed by the presenters on *Friday, October 16, between the hours of 4:30 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.*





## AGENDA AT A GLANCE

All events take place at the Oregon Convention Center unless noted as Hyatt Regency. Concurrent breakout session times list the number of session offerings running at that hour; see the full program for session titles, speakers, and room assignments. Access the official AISES conference app at [www.aises.org/app](http://www.aises.org/app).

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15

| TIME                | EVENT                                                                    | LOCATION                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 7:00 AM – 5:00 PM   | Conference Check-In, Registration & Merchandise Booth Open               | Lobby C                           |
| 8:30 AM – 10:00 AM  | Opening Ceremony                                                         | Portland Ballroom                 |
| 8:30 AM – 5:30 PM   | Native Artisan Marketplace                                               | Lobby A                           |
| 9:30 AM – 5:00 PM   | Oral Research Presentations (periodic sessions throughout the day)       | C121/122 & C125/126               |
| 11:00 AM – 11:45 AM | Student Orientation                                                      | Portland Ballroom                 |
| 11:00 AM – 11:45 AM | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 10 sessions                               | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM | 2SLGBTQIA+ Talking Circle                                                | Exhibit Hall A1                   |
| 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM  | Resume Room                                                              | G130                              |
| 12:00 PM – 12:45 PM | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 10 sessions                               | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 1:00 PM – 1:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 6 sessions                                | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM   | Extended Workshops & Council Meeting — 4 sessions                        | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 1:30 PM – 5:30 PM   | Industry Partner/University Site Tours (Registration Required)           | Offsite                           |
| 2:00 PM – 2:45 PM   | Plenary Session                                                          | Portland Ballroom                 |
| 2:00 PM – 2:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 6 sessions                                | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 3:00 PM – 3:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 7 sessions                                | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 3:00 PM – 4:00 PM   | Academic Advisory Council Meeting & Professional Chapter Council Meeting | B114 & B115                       |
| 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM   | Women's Talking Circle                                                   | Exhibit Hall A                    |
| 3:00 PM – 4:30 PM   | Men's Talking Circle                                                     | Exhibit Hall A1                   |
| 4:00 PM – 4:45 PM   | Plenary Session                                                          | Portland Ballroom                 |
| 4:00 PM – 4:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 7 sessions                                | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 4:30 PM – 9:30 PM   | FIIRE Hackathon with Dinner (Registration Required)                      | C123-124                          |
| 5:00 PM – 6:00 PM   | Veterans' Gathering                                                      | Exhibit Hall A1                   |
| 5:00 PM – 7:00 PM   | Networking Suites — 8 rooms                                              | Oregon Ballroom                   |
| 6:00 PM – 7:00 PM   | Judges Orientation for Research Presentations                            | B117-119                          |
| 7:30 PM – 9:00 PM   | Gemstone Sponsor Reception (Invitation Only)                             | Hyatt Regency                     |
| 7:45 PM – 9:15 PM   | Graduate Student Reception                                               | Hyatt Regency, Deschutes Ballroom |



Scan this QR Code for the conference app



Scan this QR Code for a list of presenters



Scan this QR Code for the online agenda

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16

| TIME                | EVENT                                                              | LOCATION                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM   | Morning Blessing Ceremony with the AISES Council of Elders         | Hyatt Regency, Deschutes Ballroom |
| 7:00 AM - 9:00 AM   | Wellness Activity                                                  | Hyatt Regency, Willamette 1       |
| 7:00 AM - 5:00 PM   | Conference Check-In, Registration & Merchandise Booth Open         | Lobby C                           |
| 8:30 AM - 9:15 AM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 5 sessions                          | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM  | Extended Workshops — 2 sessions                                    | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 8:30 AM - 5:30 PM   | Native Artisan Marketplace                                         | Lobby A                           |
| 9:00 AM - 9:15 AM   | College & Career Fair Ribbon Cutting Ceremony                      | Exhibit Hall CD                   |
| 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM   | Poster Research Presentations                                      | Exhibit Hall B                    |
| 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM   | College & Career Fair                                              | Exhibit Hall CD                   |
| 9:25 AM - 1:05 PM   | STEMTalk Sponsor Sessions (multiple times)                         | Exhibit Hall B Stage              |
| 9:30 AM - 5:00 PM   | Oral Research Presentations (periodic sessions throughout the day) | C121/122 & C125/126               |
| 9:30 AM - 11:30 AM  | Chapter Advisors Meeting                                           | A106                              |
| 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM | Coffee Break                                                       | Exhibit Hall                      |
| 10:30 AM - 12:00 PM | Extended Workshops & Storytelling with the Elders — 3 sessions     | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 11:00 AM - 3:30 PM  | Resume Room                                                        | G130                              |
| 1:00 PM - 1:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 3 sessions                          | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 2:00 PM - 2:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 3 sessions                          | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 2:00 PM - 3:30 PM   | Buffalo Bump Business Plan Challenge                               | Exhibit Hall B                    |
| 3:00 PM - 3:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 2 sessions                          | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM   | Art of Possible Create-a-Thon: Gemini Academy Workshop             | B117-119                          |
| 4:00 PM - 4:45 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 2 sessions                          | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM   | Higher Education Committee Meeting                                 | C123-124                          |
| 5:00 PM - 6:30 PM   | College Sharing Circles (by region) — 3 sessions                   | Multiple Rooms                    |
| 5:30 PM - 8:30 PM   | 'Awa & Talanoa: A Pasifika Indigenous STEM Cultural Experience     | B114                              |
| 6:30 PM - 8:30 PM   | Professionals Networking Reception (Ticket Purchase Required)      | B117-119                          |
| 8:00 PM - 10:30 PM  | Student Social — DJ & Dance                                        | Portland Ballroom                 |

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17

| TIME                | EVENT                                                                                     | LOCATION                    |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 6:30 AM - 7:00 AM   | Sequoiah Fellows Ceremony & Breakfast Check-In                                            | Hyatt Regency, Regency AB   |
| 7:00 AM - 9:00 AM   | Wellness Activity                                                                         | Hyatt Regency, Willamette 1 |
| 7:00 AM - 9:15 AM   | Sequoiah Fellows Ceremony & Breakfast (Registration and Invitation Only)                  | Hyatt Regency, Regency AB   |
| 8:30 AM - 2:00 PM   | Merchandise Booth Open                                                                    | Lobby C                     |
| 8:30 AM - 5:30 PM   | Native Artisan Marketplace                                                                | Lobby A                     |
| 8:30 AM - 9:15 AM   | Weavers of Change: AISES Educator Day Kickoff (Opening & Keynote Address)                 | Oregon Ballroom 201         |
| 8:30 AM - 10:00 AM  | Extended Workshops — 4 sessions                                                           | Multiple Rooms              |
| 9:30 AM - 10:15 AM  | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 8 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 9:30 AM - 11:00 AM  | Ignite Teaching with NotebookLM                                                           | B113                        |
| 10:30 AM - 11:15 AM | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 6 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 10:30 AM - 12:00 PM | Extended Workshops & AISES Members Meeting — 4 sessions                                   | Multiple Rooms              |
| 11:30 AM - 12:15 PM | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 5 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 12:30 PM - 1:15 PM  | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 9 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 1:30 PM - 2:15 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 7 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 1:30 PM - 2:15 PM   | Canadian Members Meeting                                                                  | C125-126                    |
| 1:30 PM - 2:15 PM   | U.S. National College Student Meeting                                                     | B110-112                    |
| 2:30 PM - 3:15 PM   | Concurrent Breakout Sessions — 5 sessions                                                 | Multiple Rooms              |
| 2:30 PM - 4:00 PM   | Rooted in Resilience, Walking in Balance: Wellness Workshop Led by Lakota Winyan Veterans | B114                        |
| 2:30 PM - 4:00 PM   | Inspiring the Next Generation of Innovators with Invention Convention Worldwide           | B117-119                    |
| 3:30 PM - 5:00 PM   | Closing Talking Circle (All Welcome)                                                      | Oregon Ballroom 204         |
| 6:00 PM - 8:30 PM   | Closing Banquet                                                                           | Portland Ballroom           |
| 9:00 PM - 11:30 PM  | Traditional Native Social Powwow                                                          | Exhibit Hall A              |

# WEAVING INNOVATION

# EXHIBITORS AND SPONSORS

College and Career Fair



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| <b>Blue Origin</b>                                               |   | 719 | LIGO / Caltech                                                               |   | 450 | Princeton University Graduate School                                                |   | 659 | University of Oregon                                                                      | ■ | 834 |
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| Colorado School of Mines                                         |   | 455 | <b>Microsoft</b>                                                             | ● | 107 | Stanford Engineering                                                                | ■ | 446 | We Are Healers                                                                            |   | 247 |
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| Congressional App Challenge                                      |   | 254 | Mitchell Hamline School of Law                                               |   | 651 | Stony Brook University                                                              |   | 451 | Yale University - Undergraduate Admissions                                                | ■ | 654 |
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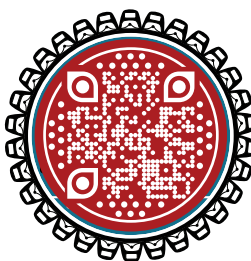
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## THE 2026 AISES PROFESSIONAL AWARDS

The AISES Professional Awards are always a cause for celebration. Through this unique program, the AISES family comes together to recognize and applaud outstanding individual achievement. The 2026 winners profiled here were selected from an impressive field nominated by AISES members. Making those difficult choices was a committee of leaders from organizations that partner with AISES. We are grateful to the members of this group who generously took time to carefully consider the many Professional Awards nominations. Selection of the Professional of the Year Award winner is based on overall leadership and technical achievement, while the remaining five winners are chosen on the basis of achievements in specific categories, with the Indigenous Excellence and Blazing Flame Awards going to individuals who have done substantial work to advance programs and opportunities for Indigenous students and professionals in STEM education and careers. Here are the winners.

## WEAVING INNOVATION



## PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR

### Dr. Katrina G. Claw - Diné (Navajo)

Dr. Katrina Claw experienced several “firsts” when she participated in a NAISEF (National Advancing Indigenous Science and Engineering Fair) competition in high school. The opportunity led to Dr. Claw’s first plane ride, from her home in the Navajo Nation to the event in Rapid City, S.D. It was also the first time she made a presentation to a large intertribal audience. Perhaps most importantly, the trip was the first time Dr. Claw grasped the opportunities and possibilities a scientific education and career could provide. “It really led me to want to explore what was out there,” says Dr. Claw, an associate professor of Biomedical informatics at the University of Colorado’s Anschutz Medical Campus and this year’s winner of the Professional of the Year Award. “I won an award there, and I realized, ‘Oh, people will give you things for doing good science.’”

Dr. Claw’s path from that high school insight to becoming a world-class scholar in bioethics, pharmacogenomics (the study of how an individual’s genetics affects their response to medications), and Indigenous genomics research was not straight and smooth. Though she always knew she would go to college, Dr. Claw struggled when she first got to Arizona State University, primarily because she was initially pursuing an engineering degree she wasn’t interested in. “I was barely passing classes in my first two years,” Dr. Claw remembers. “I lost all my scholarships and was really struggling to figure out how to pay for college.”

Enrolling in a human anatomy class changed everything. Fascinated by the class, Dr. Claw refocused on biology and anthropology and saw her grades rise along with her enthusiasm for the work. As part of ASU’s Minority Access to Research Careers program, Dr. Claw found her way into a research lab with a mentor studying genetics with Indigenous Peruvian populations. It was around the time of the Human Genome Project, and Dr. Claw quickly realized that the combination of research and genetics was the perfect fit for her. “I’m a very patient person and meticulous,” she says. “I take detailed notes, which is perfect for research.”

Dr. Claw’s love of research led her to stay at ASU to study the evolution of disease genes for two years after earning undergraduate degrees in biology and anthropology. She then moved to the University of Washington, where she earned a PhD in genome sciences and did five years of postdoctoral work developing community-based tribal collaborations and doing research in bioethics and pharmacogenomics.

Focusing on pharmacogenomics has provided an opportunity for Dr. Claw to gear her research and teaching to supporting Indigenous communities. Much of her work today examines tobacco, which in its unaltered form is used as medicine and in ceremonies in tribal communities, but which has also been commercialized by industries and commercial tobacco now drives many illnesses in communities that already experience significant health disparities. Nicotine is the addictive component in commercial cigarettes, and people who metabolize the nicotine in cigarettes quickly will often smoke more cigarettes to maintain the pleasant feeling nicotine produces, thereby increasing the chance of cancer and other comorbidities in the future.

Determining how quickly someone metabolizes nicotine is key to personalizing effective ways for them to quit smoking. And that’s exactly the work Dr. Claw is engaged in right now. “I’m working with tribal communities to develop an intervention that will use a nicotine metabolism-informed approach that is culturally tailored to their Tribal community to personalize medicine for people who want to quit smoking,” she says. “Tribal communities want to keep tobacco sacred. It’s our sacred medicine, but we want to separate it from commercial tobacco. That means messages of strength and healing, rather than condemning someone for smoking.”

Another way Dr. Claw prioritizes what she calls an “Indigenous lens” in science is through her mentoring of Native students. She actively mentors Native students in her lab at the University of Colorado. Even if her lab is not the right fit, Dr. Claw mentors Native students more broadly by offering advice and support as they navigate higher education. One of Dr. Claw’s mentees, Dr. Carissa Sherman, received the 2026 Graduate School Outstanding Dissertation Award from the University of Colorado Anschutz.

Though she is still early in her career, Dr. Claw knows that combining research and engagement with Native communities has been the right path. “I have a privileged job that gives me opportunities to continually learn, investigate, write, and work with Tribal communities,” she says. “That’s a privilege a lot of people don’t have.”

— Chris Warren



## EXECUTIVE EXCELLENCE

### Cmdr. Juliane Junes-Harvey, P.E. - Navajo and Hopi

As a child, Juliane Junes-Harvey spent a lot of time with her grandmothers. Her own mother was often busy teaching kindergarten through eighth grade or studying for one of several degrees. Even though her grandmothers couldn't speak English and she couldn't speak fluent Navajo, Junes-Harvey managed to communicate and learned a lot watching them make a living sewing moccasins, creating beadwork, other crafts, and weaving rugs.

Despite the language barrier, one message came through clearly. "My maternal grandmother was adamant about her children and her grandchildren getting an education," says Junes-Harvey, a leader at the Indian Health Service (IHS) and this year's winner of the Executive Excellence Professional Award. "She was big on that because she didn't get that opportunity. My relatives were told to stay home and take care of their siblings and herd sheep."

Her grandmothers' emphasis on education set Junes-Harvey on a course to obtain a BS in Civil Engineering from Arizona State University (ASU) and a Master's in Engineering Management from the University of Idaho. But it's memories of the conditions that her family lived in for much of their lives that continue to motivate Junes-Harvey's work for IHS, whose mission is to raise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest level.

"My grandparents didn't have water, sewer, electricity, or solid waste facilities for a very long time," says Junes-Harvey, who serves as IHS Phoenix Area Division of Sanitation Facilities Construction (DSFC) Deputy Director for Project Support and the Phoenix Area DSFC National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) coordinator, while concurrently being active duty under the U.S. Public Health Service. "I remember the days when my grandmother had to haul water with a barrel, and that one barrel had to last all week." In her 15 years at IHS — a tenure that has included various engineering and management roles with steadily increasing responsibilities — Junes-Harvey has overseen 260 sanitation infrastructure projects that have benefited nearly 80,000 households in 46 Tribal communities.

Still, nobody is more surprised at her impact and career trajectory than Junes-Harvey. Although she had lots of family support for pursuing her education, Junes-Harvey struggled with culture shock and a feeling of isolation when she moved from community college to ASU. "My entire family was in the Four Corners area, and when I arrived on this big campus, I didn't know where to go, and there were no Native American services like there are now," she recalls. "I was failing an engineering physics class and I almost gave up. Then my brother took me aside and said, 'You're not giving up; you're going to keep going.'"

And keep going she did, even after she became a mother her junior year at ASU and took time out to care for her newborn, which meant losing scholarships that required full-time studies. A combination of intensely hard work and student loans eventually enabled Junes-Harvey to earn her degree. After graduation from ASU she worked in private consulting for a decade before landing a job at IHS.

Junes-Harvey's entire life experience informs both her work helping Tribal communities and the guidance she provides to colleagues as a leader. "Listen" is her main advice to junior engineers about to engage with Tribal officials. "Don't just say I have all the answers to your questions. They've heard that multiple times," she says. "Go in there and learn about their culture, their language, and their priorities. The solutions for the people you're trying to help have to come from everybody — they can't just flow from you."

Besides devoting her career to bettering the lives of Tribal communities, Junes-Harvey has volunteered extensively to support Indigenous students pursuing STEM careers, including through mentorships and informal conversations. One piece of advice she gives students, especially first-years, when they ask her how she has achieved so much in her education and career is don't try to go it alone. "You have to find the right network of people," she tells them. "If you don't find that quickly, you're going to feel lost and you're going to feel like you're in the corner alone, like I did. It doesn't have to be that way."

— Chris Warren

## MOST PROMISING ENGINEER OR SCIENTIST

### Dr. Kyle Yoshida - Native Hawaiian

Dr. Kyle Yoshida calls the Honolulu suburb of Pearl City home. Growing up, he dreamed about a high-tech solution to a uniquely Hawaiian problem. The nicest fruit on the mango and avocado trees in his backyard hung at the top, which the family's ladder was too short to reach. "I saw this growing field of robotics," recalls Dr. Yoshida, Native Hawaiian. "I thought, what if we had robots to help with that?"

Now an assistant professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at UCLA, he runs the Mohala Lab, which stands for mechatronics for outreach, haptics, agriculture, and living applications. Part of his research involves human-robot interactions. He foresees a day when instead of replacing humans, robots will expand people's reach, augmenting their abilities and horizons in many ways. "When we think about a caregiving robot, rather than replacing human connections, I still want to give hugs and interact with my parents and grandparents," says Dr. Yoshida. "One thing we must look out for in my field is making sure robots don't replace the interpersonal links we have."

His parents spoke only English at home, not `Ōlelo Hawai'i, the state's indigenous and official language. He is thrilled that the islands' native tongue is being reborn. "I recently watched the Kamehameha parade. All the narration is fully `Ōlelo Hawai'i now, which is awesome."

The Hawaiian value that influences him the most is *`O ke kahua ma mua, ma hope ke kūkulu* or "Set the foundation first, then the building." It harmonizes well with a quote from his seventh-grade band teacher — "to whom much is given, much is expected". "My teacher always mentioned that being both Hawaiian and a scholar means figuring out how you can create that change and impact in the community to improve the lives of everyone," says Dr. Yoshida, who co-founded the nonprofit Honua Scholars, which does STEM mentoring throughout Hawaii. "We can't affect change in the community without the entire community," he adds.

More Native Hawaiians live outside the islands than in Hawaii, according to Dr. Yoshida. "We're already a minority in our home — and a lot of other communities also face this," he says. "We should push to preserve land, treat our ocean well, and save coral reefs, but we need the backing of non-Hawaiians to make that happen, because they make up a large part of our community."

Dr. Yoshida believes that the outreach programs he's worked on have gained traction because the focus expands beyond Natives. "We get other people to incorporate different values and perspectives that are important to us," he says.

As a student, Dr. Yoshida had hard moments when he worried he didn't have what it took to succeed. But once, when he got a poor grade on a midterm, and impostor syndrome hit him, he learned another important lesson. "I didn't panic," Dr. Yoshida recalls. He told his teacher and classmates he was struggling and asked for help. Soon he joined a study group, took practice tests, and succeeded on the next test. The experience taught him what might seem like a strange lesson — he learned how to fail, something that happens to everyone.

Another mentor taught him that there's a difference between Indigenous in STEM and Indigenous STEM. "You can be an Indigenous person within the STEM construct going along and trying to fit into the Western construct," he explains. "Or you can shape STEM to make it what you want to be, Indigenize it, bring our values there, and be our full selves — unforgiving."

— George Spencer





## BLAZING FLAME

### Joshua Hammonds - Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina

When Joshua Hammonds was in grade school, he concluded that there were only a handful of jobs available to people in the Lumbee homelands of North Carolina. His parents held two of them: Hammonds' dad worked at a nearby hosiery factory fixing the machines, and his mom helped patch up people's lungs as a respiratory therapist. Plenty of others, including Hammonds' grandparents, were farmers, others could be a police officer and still live at home.

It wasn't until Hammonds reached fifth grade that a larger world of possibilities opened. Like a lot of kids, young Joshua decided his career trajectory was destined to go up into space, as an astronaut. The difference was that Hammonds' teacher, Mrs. Britt, believed he could. "She was the first person to say, OK, that's real. You can do it if you want to," says Hammonds, this year's winner of the AISES Blazing Flame award. "It completely changed my perspective because I saw that she wanted to be a teacher, went away to the University of North Carolina to become one, and came back."

Height and imperfect eyes eventually scuttled Hammonds' astronaut aspirations, but not his ambition to consider careers beyond the traditional menu in Robeson County. Hammonds knew that the only way he could go to college was if he earned a scholarship. That reality made him a serious student — serious enough to gain admittance to the nearby University of North Carolina at Pembroke. A full scholarship kept him close to home, where he earned a computer science degree, an accomplishment he credits to his academic advisor, Dr. Lilly, who stopped him from switching to a history major midway through his senior year. "You cannot do this!" he laughingly remembers his stunned advisor telling him. "It was a good thing I listened."

Not that a computer science degree came with a guarantee. After graduating with the assumption that he would work for the CIA or another government agency, 50 job applications earned him nothing but silence. Facing a tough job market, Hammonds decided to pursue Cisco certification, which required a two-hour drive each way from his job at a Lumberton jewelry store. Because he didn't have time to go home and change before class, he always showed up in the shirt and tie he wore to work. Hammonds is convinced that being dressed up for

class helped earn him an interview to work on the tech giant's help desk, troubleshooting employee technology problems.

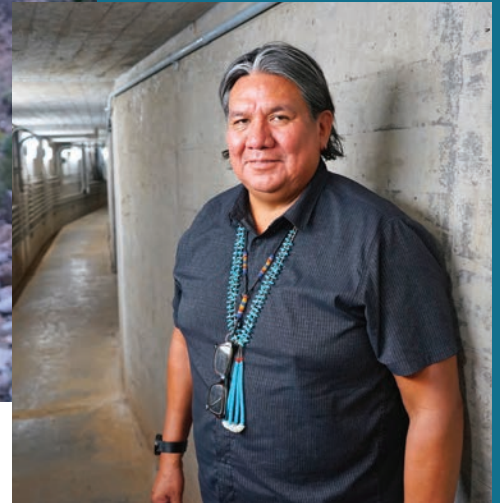
Hammonds doesn't give himself credit either for landing the job — he insists his interview was a trainwreck — or his nearly two decades in increasingly demanding positions at Cisco, where he is currently a technical leader. "I was in the right place at the right time," he says. "All the stars had to align."

Whether that is true, since joining Cisco Hammonds has devoted himself to making it far easier for other Native Americans to get hired. "Everything I've done in my career since then has been so Native American young professionals shouldn't have to have the stars aligned to work here," he says. "You should be able to be yourself and get hired."

Smoothing the pathway to join the company takes a lot of internal and external effort, work that Cisco encourages by providing paid time off and financial support for its Native American Network. Hammonds visits tribal communities around the country to give talks and raise awareness about career paths with Cisco. He recently brought students and teachers from Turtle Mountain College and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota to Cisco's North Carolina offices and is working to establish more internship opportunities for Native kids. Within Cisco, Hammonds launched the Native 101 program, a way for Cisco employees who work with Native people to better understand how to engage respectfully and productively with Indigenous communities.

Though Hammonds was eager to explore opportunities outside Robeson County, he has stayed tightly connected to his family and tribe. For 17 years, he would make the two-hour drive every other Saturday morning to get a haircut and see his family. When work takes him out of the country for weeks at a time, he calls his Lumbee family and friends to hear their distinctive Lumbee accent. "We all sound the same. When you hear that voice, it makes you feel so much better," he says. "You can leave and still be connected to your tribe and your family. It just takes effort."

— Chris Warren



## TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE

### Nathaniel Todea - Diné

Nathaniel Todea didn't set out to become an engineer. In his late 20s, working as an archaeologist for the Navajo Nation and ready to start a family, he laid out his options: doctor, lawyer, engineer. Medicine took too long. Law meant more of the reading and writing, he'd already done plenty of for his anthropology degree from Fort Lewis College.

Engineering became the clear choice, but initially he had no idea what specialty he wanted. "You've got nuclear, aerospace, mechanical, electrical, computer, civil — it goes on and on," says Todea. But growing up Diné, Todea had absorbed the idea that water is a gift given to the Navajo people — not just a resource but something to care for. That belief led him to his current role as a hydraulic engineer with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

Todea didn't fully understand what a career centered on water would look like. He just knew he wanted to work in a watershed and combine his Indigenous knowledge with the technical capabilities he acquired earning his master's in civil engineering from the University of New Mexico.

Todea launched his second career at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, where he spent 16 years building expertise in dam safety, sedimentation analysis, and post fire hydrology. With few established methods to guide him, he developed his own approach for estimating sediment buildup and flood flows by comparing multiple models until the results converged, an approach he calls "concentric circles of accuracy."

Much of his early career growth, he says, was thanks to an advocate, the late Dr. Carol Vallee Crouch. A longtime USDA NRCS tribal liaison and AISES mentor, she enlisted him to participate in national trainings to help federal employees work more effectively with tribal nations. Dr. Crouch didn't hand him a plan, he remembers. She pointed the way, as she did for countless other Native students and professionals. "She just said there's a door here — what do you want to do?" Todea recalls. Dr. Crouch passed away in July 2025. "I would like to dedicate this award to her," he says.

That style of mentorship shaped how Todea leads today. Watching his own father work alongside community members throughout his childhood taught him a similar lesson early. "We show up. We help," he says.

Since 2019, Todea has operated key facilities in the Colorado River Storage Project for the Bureau of Reclamation, including Fontenelle Reservoir, Flaming Gorge Dam, and the Aspinall Unit, made up of three dams and powerplants. The job means translating hydrologic forecasts into daily and monthly decisions that ripple across seven states, dozens of tribes, and roughly 40 million people who depend on the Colorado River system.

As the region has moved progressively deeper into drought, his work has grown more urgent. For example, Todea helped plan and carry out a series of water releases from Flaming Gorge that benefit downstream resources, moving water over several years to boost Lake Powell and protect Glen Canyon Dam.

The forecasting models he relies on were not built for conditions this extreme. "We have 30 years of data, but if you're at or even below the bottom, do those data sets play into it anymore?" he asks. Rather than trust any single model, Todea uses his concentric circles approach and checks the results against instinct before acting. "It's my job as an engineer to say we need to look at it again," he says. "I call it a smell test."

Todea has spent as much energy investing in the next generation of Native engineers and students as he has in the region's water supply. He has mentored Native students through Earth Connection Camp and the University of Utah's Native American Research Internship, taking students fly fishing and kayaking as he teaches them self-reliance to trust themselves, to invest in themselves, and carry their heritage with them always.

Todea describes building a life and career as a king of giant flywheel, an idea he connects not only to a book *Good to Great* but also to the Navajo wedding basket and the four directions of self, community, family, and reflection. He explains the first push is always the hardest, but balance across these directions gives the well momentum: you strengthen yourself through learning and wellness in the east; you apply that knowledge in service to your community in the south; after bringing projects to completion you spend restorative time with family in the west; and you pause for reflection in the north; taking in a quiet moment that reminds you things are good. "When a person strives for this balance — never perfectly achievable, but often tangible — they begin to create their own," he says.

— Chris Warren

## INDIGENOUS EXCELLENCE

### Joshua Lelemia Irvine

#### Kānaka 'Ōiwi - Native Hawaiian

Though he certainly didn't know it at the time, Dr. Lelemia Irvine's Makuakāne (father) and his mother helped cultivate his son's approach to teaching during backyard Hawaiian music jam sessions. Kumu Lelemia, this year's winner of the Indigenous Excellence Award, recently left his position as assistant professor of physics at the University of Hawai'i— West O'ahu to teach at a Ka Waihona o Ka Na'auao, an 'Ike Hawai'i-centered Public Charter School in Nānākuli, O'ahu, serving students from kindergarten through eighth grade.

But whether his classroom is in a university or charter school, Kumu Lelemia is guided by his father's advice. A flute player, Kumu joined his makuakāne and uncles as they kanikapila, played traditional Hawaiian music on their guitars and ukuleles, a backyard jam get-together that often involved each musician playing a solo. "When it was my turn to play the first time, my dad turned to me and said, 'kani koko,' which was his way to say to play from the heart," says Kumu Lelemia. "When it's your turn to play, add to the creativity, the innovation, the birthing of this mele (the Hawaiian word for song or chant) for the enjoyment of those around us."

For Kumu Lelemia, teaching from the heart is not an abstract aspiration. It's also a reflection of the many lessons he has gathered growing up as Kānaka 'Ōiwi or Native Hawaiian, and as a devoted cultural practitioner and scholar. For example, the beginning of a course centers Hawaiian protocol and pilina (relationship) building rather than detailed review of the syllabus or immediately jumping into the first lesson.

Doing so helps both establish the classroom as a sacred space for learning from a Hawaiian worldview while acknowledging that students arrive with their own knowledge, not as empty vessels for a "guru" teacher to fill. Kumu Lelemia also writes personal letters to students and uses his own illustrations to help teach physics rather than being limited by the images in physics textbooks. He wrote an article detailing his approach titled "You are a Physicist: Creating a Gracious University Physics Learning Environment through Poetry and Art." "That's in response to the textbooks being bland and lacking the excellence of our land," he says.

Although Dr. Irvine is the first Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander male to earn a PhD in any engineering discipline at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, his professional identity extends beyond academic titles of "Dr" or "professor." In 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language), kumu means "teacher, foundation and source". For Kumu Lelemia, this culturally appropriate form of address recognizes him as a source of STEM knowledge whose pedagogy is informed by a Kānaka 'Ōiwi worldview.

Kumu Lelemia's STEM training, including his PhD in civil engineering, also reflects years of sustained effort, perseverance, and tenacity. He remembers being told more than once that Hawaiians couldn't do math, and that Indigenous knowledge did not amount to a real credential. A recent paper Kumu Lelemia worked on with other Native scientists was pulled at the last minute, after editors decided it was "too Indigenous."

Overcoming his own challenges may be why Kumu Lelemia now devotes so much energy to teaching and mentoring other Indigenous students. An AISES Lighting the Pathway to Faculty Careers for Natives in STEM Program (LTP) student once came to him in tears because she had lost her chance to learn a family song after her elder passed away. Kumu helped her turn her grief into an opportunity. "You've just answered your own question," he told her, guiding her instead to listen for the song already inside her, in her own Native language. She later told him it was an answer she had been searching for her entire life. When they met again at AISES the following year, she shared the song she had found within herself.

The instinct that the most important lessons are often ones a student already carries echoes something Kumu Lelemia's mother told him after he finally earned his PhD. Watching her son navigate years of institutional barriers in academic system not built for Native students, she offered a lesson of her own about how knowledge should be passed down. "The way the gift is given is just as important as the gift itself," she said. It's a concept any student who has stepped foot in Dr. Kumu Lelemia Irvine's class will recognize.

— Chris Warren



## Something Exciting is Happening at AISES!

The future is bright and we have launched an extraordinary effort to sustain our AISES family for many generations to come. With your help we can continue to help advance Indigenous students and professionals in STEM for the next seven generations. Sign up now to stay in the loop and be part of this transformative journey. You don't want to miss out!

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