From student advocate to campus leader, Francis-Begay continues to serve Native American students

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Karen Francis-Begay is personally fulfilling the ultimate hope she has for the Native American students she serves — finding success in a career that is meaningful while contributing to her community.

Francis-Begay will be doing just that in her new role as assistant vice provost for Native American initiatives.

Francis-Begay's efforts to improve the Native American student experience at the University of Arizona started during her own time as a student here, when she joined other Native Americans in advocating for a student center. The work paid off in the late 1980s, when the administration provided space in the Robert L. Nugent Building, which still houses the Native American Student Affairs office. Because the center opened after she completed her bachelor's degree, she didn't have a chance to use it. But she did get the opportunity to lead it, serving as its director from 2000-2007.

A second-generation Wildcat, Francis-Begay says she found her calling shortly after graduation when she worked in minority affairs at Pima Community College.

"I found that my passion was working in programs where I can help advance opportunities for underrepresented populations," Francis-Begay said.

Francis-Begay began her career at the University in 1993 in an interim coordinator position with the Native American Student Affairs office. She spent three months in that job before taking on a permanent position with the American Indiana Language Development Institute in the College of Education, where she focused on efforts to revitalize indigenous languages and support teachers that wanted to share those languages in K-12 classrooms. After serving as director of Native American Student Affairs, she was appointed as a special adviser to the president on Native American affairs, and then as assistant vice president for tribal relations.

"I grew up on the Navajo reservation and understand the challenges our students face coming to a big university," Francis-Begay said. "I also wanted to give back to our community by using my positions to be a voice for Native American students and make key decisions that impact native students."

Francis-Begay's new position, which she began in January, puts her in charge of student success initiatives for the University's approximately 1,400 Native American students.

"The work that Karen has accomplished over the last several years in her role as Assistant Vice President for Tribal Relations will be an asset for our team and the academic units
across campus,” Liesl Folks, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, wrote in a memo announcing Francis-Begay’s appointment. “One of Karen's many accomplishments includes her work with Regent (LuAnn) Leonard and the Native nations in Arizona to develop a Tribal Consultation Policy which has advanced collaboration between Arizona’s Native nations and the public universities, specifically the University of Arizona. She has also been key in strengthening partnerships with Arizona’s federally-recognized tribes.”

In her new role, Francis-Begay also will be leading efforts to connect Native American students with mentorship opportunities and financial resources. She says those are key factors in improving retention of Native American students.

"We are gradually growing our native student population. But the fact remains that we still have a lot of work to do to make sure they complete their degrees," Francis-Begay says.

She also works with the Faculty Affairs office to help the University's nearly three dozen Native American faculty members navigate issues including promotion and tenure. In addition, Francis-Begay leads the University's efforts to recruit more Native American faculty.

Like many University leaders, Francis-Begay is currently focusing in large part on the COVID-19 pandemic, which she says is hitting Native American communities especially hard. She made a recent trip to Phoenix to donate 800 pounds of produce to the Navajo Nation, contributed by the University's Controlled Environment Agriculture Center. A group College of Medicine ? Phoenix students has also collected essential supplies like diapers, hand sanitizer and toilet paper to donate to the Navajo Nation.

Francis-Begay also oversaw production of a public service announcement featuring President Robert C. Robbins outlining University resources available to Native American students and their families in the wake of the pandemic. The announcement aired on Navajo Nation radio stations in April, with plans to have it air on other tribal radio stations throughout the state in the future. (Click the link at the bottom of this story to hear it.)

When she considers what success looks like in her new position, Francis-Begay focuses on nation-building. She wants to go beyond efforts to help Native American students graduate; she wants to help connect them with careers and opportunities to give back to their tribal communities.

Ultimately, Francis-Begay says she values the opportunity to continue the work that began well before her time as a student.

"My father and other University of Arizona students paved the way for many generations to come," she says. "I don't take that for granted, which is why I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve as a campus leader, advocating for and serving our students."

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