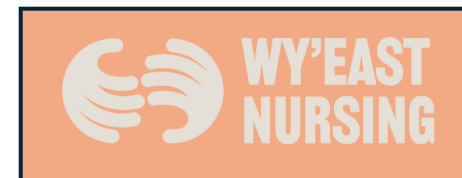




# Wy'east Nursing: Advancing Cultural Safety by Addressing the Social Determinants of Learning

Morgan A. Torris-Hedlund, PhD, RN



## Introduction / Problem Statement

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) nurses comprise less than 1% of the U.S. nursing workforce. At OHSU, limited recruitment, absence of Native faculty, and lack of culturally grounded education have contributed to low AIAN student enrollment and retention. In 2024, the Wy'east Nursing Pathway was launched to address these structural gaps.

## Background / Significance

AIAN communities face persistent health disparities tied to structural exclusion from healthcare education. Increasing AIAN nurses is critical for advancing health equity and Tribal self-determination.

Most institutions lack culturally safe environments and meaningful Tribal partnerships. The Wy'east Pathway addresses these gaps through Indigenous-led, culturally grounded student support.

The Wy'east Pathway directly responds to those barriers, offering a culturally grounded approach to preparing and supporting AIAN nursing students. This project responds to urgent calls for sustainable, Indigenous-led change in nursing education.

## Review of Literature

Indigenous scholars affirm that educational equity must center Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems, and lived experience. Smith and Kovach call for decolonizing education through community-rooted, accountable research. Wilson's *relational accountability* and Ramsden's *cultural safety* challenge institutions to prioritize relationships and confront systemic racism. Alfred emphasizes self-determination as essential to transformation, while Moss critiques inclusion without structural change. These frameworks guide Wy'east to support AIAN students while reshaping academic systems toward justice, integrity, and healing.

## Framework / Theoretical Lens

This project applies the **Social Determinants of Learning™ framework**, highlighting how non-academic factors, such as health, housing, financial stability, and social connection, shape educational success.

## Innovation

The Wy'east Nursing Pathway is a 10-week, cohort-based preparatory program designed to increase enrollment and retention of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) nursing students. This capstone expands Wy'east by developing targeted, culturally safe outreach strategies to identify and support AIAN applicants earlier in the recruitment pipeline.

## Key Participants:

- Prospective AIAN nursing students
- Tribal education offices and pre-health advisors
- OHSU Wy'east faculty, admissions, and advising teams
- Community mentors and Native nursing leaders

## Implementation Setting:

Oregon Health & Science University School of Nursing (with virtual and in-person outreach across the Pacific Northwest and nationally)

## Timeline / Process Steps:

- Winter 2025:** Develop and pilot culturally grounded recruitment materials and virtual info sessions
- Spring 2025:** Implement outreach plan, track interest, begin early mentoring
- Summer 2025:** Evaluate outcomes, adapt strategy, integrate into Wy'east admissions pipeline

## Evaluation Plan

A mixed-methods evaluation will assess the reach, effectiveness, and sustainability of the expanded Wy'east recruitment strategy.

## Short-Term Goals:

- Increased engagement with Tribal education partners
- Participation in info sessions and recruitment events
- Student-reported relevance and cultural safety of outreach materials

## Medium-Term Goals:

- Growth in AIAN applicants to Wy'east
- Increase in early mentorship connections
- Positive feedback from Tribal partners and community stakeholders

## Long-Term Goals:

- Sustained increase in AIAN enrollment in OHSU's nursing programs
- Strengthened relationships with Tribal communities
- Institutional policy changes supporting culturally grounded outreach

## Evaluation Tools:

- Surveys of prospective students and Tribal partners
- Attendance tracking at events and info sessions
- Interviews with mentors, advisors, and applicants
- Content review of recruitment materials
- Review of application and enrollment data over time

**References:** On request ( [torrishe@ohsu.edu](mailto:torrishe@ohsu.edu) )



## Wy'east Nursing: Advancing Cultural Safety by Addressing the Social Determinants of Learning

Morgan Torris-Hedlund, PhD, RN, FAWM

### Biography

---

**Dr. Morgan A. Torris-Hedlund is a public health nurse, educator, and scholar whose work is grounded in relational engagement with Native communities and a commitment to equity in health education and service. His academic journey began at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where he first cultivated his passion for Indigenous health and education. During his time in Hawai'i, he worked on the island of O'ahu, collaborating with local leaders and health professionals to support culturally grounded care, educational pathways, and disaster preparedness in Native Hawaiian communities.**

**Today, Dr. Torris-Hedlund lives in Portland, Oregon, where he serves as an Assistant Professor at the Oregon Health & Science University School of Nursing. He directs the Wy'east Nursing Pathway, a state-funded program designed to support American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) nursing students through a 10-week preparatory curriculum, intensive mentorship, and long-term academic support. Wy'east is grounded in a model for culturally safe, equity-driven education and has grown under his leadership to include early recruitment, faculty development, and community-engaged evaluation strategies.**

**An advocate for Indigenous knowledge systems, Dr. Torris-Hedlund serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Indigenous Research and is an active contributor to academic and policy discussions on Indigenous methodologies, cultural safety, and the structural transformation of nursing education. His work critically examines epistemic injustice and methodological gatekeeping while advancing frameworks rooted in relational accountability, sovereignty, and ethical community engagement.**

**In addition to his academic career, Dr. Torris-Hedlund serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. He is a board-certified public health nurse and currently holds a dual role as a Public Health Nurse with U.S. Army Civil Affairs and as Deputy Consultant to the Army Surgeon General for Public Health Nursing. His military service includes contributions to strategic health governance, interagency disaster response, and global health engagements, particularly across the Indo-Pacific region. In both civilian and military contexts, he is recognized for his ability to bridge systems and center community expertise in complex, resource-limited environments.**

**Dr. Torris-Hedlund brings a unique blend of academic, clinical, and operational expertise to his work, grounded in his values of respect, accountability, and cultural humility. Whether teaching students, working alongside Tribal health partners, or supporting military medical readiness, he remains focused on building systems that serve with integrity and purpose.**

**He lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and their nine-year-old son, where they spend time**

**exploring the outdoors, supporting local community initiatives, and staying connected to their extended 'ohana across the Pacific and Pacific Northwest.**

### **Contact Information**

---



Morgan Torris-Hedlund, PhD, RN, FAWM  
Assistant Professor  
Oregon Health & Sciences University  
[torrishe@ohsu.edu](mailto:torrishe@ohsu.edu)