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2-2021

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On Sept. 28, Andrews University was awarded a U.S. Department of Education grant for \$2.25 million. The initiative was spearheaded by Padma Tadi Uppala, chair of the School of Population Health, Nutrition & Wellness, and her team.

The grant aims to provide a path to success for at-risk students and improve enrollment of minority students, focusing specifically on the Pokagon Band of Native American students in Dowagiac, Mich. Implementation of the plan includes streamlining curriculum and faculty counseling at Andrews University in order to increase placement rates among students and help them graduate within four years. Twenty percent of the grant is designated for endowment funds, while an additional part of the funds will be allocated to scholarships for under-represented and at-risk students.

In describing the motivation behind pursuing the grant, Uppala explains, "When I observed the diverse racial and ethnic representation on the Andrews campus, I saw a potential for federal funds that support minority and at-risk students in colleges and universities." A lengthy process ensued, during which Andrews University was recognized as a minority-serving institution with a Title III qualification from the U.S. Department of Education. The team competed for the award with the rest of the Title III-designated universities in the U.S. After a year-long wait, they received word that the grant had been awarded to Andrews University.

The main issues addressed by the grant are those of college readiness and placement, inefficiency in mentoring and advisement, mental health issues and inability to pay tuition fees. The project intends to create a system of support that recognizes the challenges that struggling



▲ Andrews University campus entrance

first-time students face despite their intellectual potential and capabilities. Financial aid, career advising and academic support are key components of the grant.

Christon Arthur, provost, acted as a key figure of support in the development of the grant proposal. He reflects, "I think the added support services that the grant would provide to students, especially minority students, are most important. The greatest impact would come from the career services that we will provide to students. Every student should have the opportunity for an internship, and that opportunity is now more likely."

With such goals in mind, funds will target a number of strategies and interventions directed toward student access, support and success. These plans include the diversification of assessment for college readiness and placement, as well as the creation of an accelerated developmental work sequence within course design. Other methods include incentivizing participation in advising activities and teaching students how to become self-regulated learners. The main focus of the grant centers on the necessity of faculty and staff training, particularly in the areas of advising, testing, mentoring, alert systems and awarding prior learning credit. New positions for a career services advisor, student success advisor and educational development specialist will aid in the process.

Ralph Trecartin, associate provost and dean of the College of Professions, worked with Uppala to collaborate with the local Pokagon Band, and helped outline the grant budget. He expresses, "We are proud of all of our students — and want them all to succeed in life. Success includes academic success, career success and also spiritual growth and social understanding. This grant helps us strengthen the support for students from several backgrounds that will bring additional cultural richness to our campus."

The established measures will create integrated and long-lasting support systems and improve college and career readiness for Native American and at-risk students. After a one-year planning and preparation phase, which includes providing college-preparatory training for high school seniors, the first students will be accepted into the new program starting fall semester 2021.

Uppala highlights "the joy of serving at-risk and minority students and helping them succeed in life, reducing their college debts, as well as serving the Native American Pokagon Band students." Beyond the significant monetary value of the grant, it is this act of service that she and the team value the most. ■

Isabella Koh, University Communication student writer