

Wassaja Oidag - Progress Report

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Project Manager Name

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Requested Metrics

Community Engagement & Participation

- Total participants engaged through volunteer days, workshops, educational activities, and project programming: 84
- Total documented participant hours contributed: 244
- Volunteer workdays/events hosted: 4
- Traditional Medicine educational workshops facilitated: 2
- University of Arizona student participants engaged: 29
- Total project team members: 5
- First-time volunteers/community participants engaged: 21
- Educational site visits and technical learning exchanges completed: 10+
- Volunteer survey responses collected across three events: 23
- Participants interested in future programming/events: 100% of survey respondents
- Over 100 traditional medicine offerings created and distributed to students and community members
- Approximately 20 Native/Indigenous participants engaged through American Indians into Health Professions (AIHP) programming and traditional medicine workshops
- 1 Oidag Blessing and Three Sisters Planting Ceremony hosted and led by a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation (participation metrics were intentionally not collected due to the ceremonial and cultural nature of the gathering)

Garden Infrastructure & Sustainability Outcomes

- 4 raised garden beds established
- 2 medicinal planting areas established
- 1 traditional Indigenous food plot established
- 1 pollinator/desert habitat garden established
- 1 vermicomposting system installed
- 1 rainwater harvesting feature integrated into the site
- 1 irrigation system with electric and solar-powered components installed
- 1 trellis system established for food production
- 1 community gathering and outdoor learning space created
- Approximately 24 plant species represented throughout the site
- Approximately 13 native desert and pollinator-supporting species established
- More than 50% of all plant species incorporated are medicinal and culturally significant plants

Student Learning & Leadership Outcomes

Pre- and post-survey data demonstrated measurable growth in student and staff confidence, sustainability literacy, and Indigenous land stewardship knowledge.

- Confidence caring for native medicinal and food plants increased from 3.2/5 to 4.2/5
- Understanding irrigation and water conservation practices increased from 2.4/5 to 4.0/5
- Understanding Indigenous land stewardship practices increased from 4.0/5 to 4.8/5
- Comfort participating in outdoor and land-based work increased from 4.0/5 to 4.8/5
- Understanding environmental sustainability increased from 4.6/5 to 5.0/5

Participants also reported growth in:

- Leadership and project coordination
- Collaboration and communication with campus and community partners
- Confidence facilitating volunteers and community engagement
- Hands-on gardening and sustainability skills
- Connection to land, healing, and community wellbeing

Volunteer Day Community Impact Outcomes

Based on 23 survey responses collected across three volunteer events:

Overall Experience

- 96% rated their experience as Excellent
- 4% rated their experience as Good
- 100% reported a positive overall experience

Community Connection & Belonging

- 96% reported feeling more connected to community
- 87% reported a stronger sense of belonging
- 74% reported building new relationships through participation
- Participants consistently described the space as welcoming, healing, collaborative, and community-centered

Sustainability & Land-Based Learning

Participants reported gaining:

- Gardening and planting skills
- Irrigation and water conservation knowledge
- Experience working with native and medicinal plants
- Environmental sustainability knowledge
- Deeper connection to land and outdoor spaces
- Understanding of Indigenous stewardship practices

Additional Outcomes

- 74% reported learning something new
- 78% reported feeling more connected to the land and garden space
- 96% reported feeling good contributing to a shared sustainability project

Future Engagement

- 83% reported being Very Likely to attend future volunteer days and events
- 17% reported being Likely to attend future volunteer days and events

Team Assessment Participation

- Pre-survey participation rate: 100%
- Post-survey participation rate: 100%

Project Accomplishments

The Wassaja Oidag: A Place of Healing project successfully accomplished and exceeded the goals outlined in the original proposal by transforming an underutilized area west of the Wassaja Center into a thriving Indigenous medicinal and food garden rooted in sustainability, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Indigenous food sovereignty, cultural connection, student leadership, and community healing. During the January–June 2026 reporting period, the project created a sustainable outdoor learning environment where University of Arizona students, staff, faculty, tribal and community partners, and volunteers engaged in hands-on land stewardship, environmental education, cultural programming, and relationship-building.

The project successfully established the foundational infrastructure needed to support a long-term Indigenous garden and learning space. Major accomplishments included the creation of four raised garden beds, two medicinal planting areas, one traditional Indigenous food plot, one pollinator and desert habitat garden, one vermicomposting system, a rainwater harvesting feature, irrigation systems incorporating both electric and solar-powered components, a trellis system for food production, and a community gathering and outdoor learning area centered around an existing mesquite tree. These improvements transformed the site into a living classroom that supports ongoing education, sustainability practices, cultural knowledge sharing, and community engagement.

The garden now contains approximately 24 plant species representing culturally significant food, medicinal, native, and pollinator-supporting plants. More than 50% of the species established throughout the site are medicinal and culturally significant plants, supporting the project's goal of reconnecting students and community members with Indigenous plant relationships and land-based practices. The garden includes culturally meaningful food crops such as sunflower, tomato, pepper, Armenian cucumber, okra, amaranth, watermelon, Yoeme basil, and I'ittoi onion, as well as medicinal and native desert species including prickly pear, aloe, chiltepin, agave, milkweed, globemallow, desert willow, creosote, ocotillo, and brittlebush. These plantings contribute to biodiversity, pollinator habitat restoration, food sovereignty efforts, and the preservation of Indigenous ecological knowledge.

Community engagement was a central outcome of the project. Through volunteer workdays, educational activities, workshops, site visits, and project programming, Wassaja Oidag engaged 84 participants and generated 244 documented participant hours. The project hosted four volunteer workdays/events, two Traditional Medicine educational workshops, and more than ten educational site visits and technical learning exchanges with campus and community partners. The project engaged 29 University of Arizona student participants and was supported by a five-member project team consisting of graduate students, undergraduate students, and staff. Additionally, 21 first-time volunteers and community participants were introduced to the garden through hands-on learning and stewardship opportunities.

A significant accomplishment of the project was the development of Indigenous health and Traditional Medicine programming through collaboration with the American Indians into Health Professions (AIHP) program. Project leaders facilitated two Traditional Medicine workshops that incorporated medicinal plants harvested from the Wassaja Oidag garden. Through these workshops, participants created and distributed more than 100 traditional medicine offerings to students and community members. Approximately 20 Native and Indigenous AIHP participants engaged with the garden through these activities, creating opportunities for reciprocal learning, cultural knowledge

sharing, and connection between Indigenous approaches to health, healing, and land stewardship.

The project also supported the cultural and relational foundations of the garden through an Oidag Blessing and Three Sisters Planting Ceremony led by a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation. This gathering honored the spiritual, cultural, and ecological relationships connected to the land while recognizing Indigenous agricultural traditions and the importance of community care. Participation numbers were intentionally not collected due to the ceremonial and cultural nature of the gathering; however, the event represented an important milestone in establishing the garden as a culturally grounded space for healing, learning, and connection.

Student leadership and learning outcomes were another major accomplishment of the project. Through direct involvement in planning, implementation, volunteer coordination, garden maintenance, and community engagement, student team members developed skills in project management, environmental stewardship, Indigenous land-based education, partnership development, and collaborative leadership. Pre- and post-survey assessments demonstrated measurable growth in student and staff confidence and knowledge. Confidence caring for native medicinal and food plants increased from 3.2/5 to 4.2/5. Understanding of irrigation and water conservation practices increased from 2.4/5 to 4.0/5. Understanding of Indigenous land stewardship practices increased from 4.0/5 to 4.8/5. Comfort participating in outdoor and land-based work increased from 4.0/5 to 4.8/5, and understanding of environmental sustainability increased from 4.6/5 to 5.0/5.

Volunteer feedback demonstrated that the project created meaningful impacts beyond the physical development of the garden. Across 23 survey responses collected from three volunteer events, 96% of participants rated their experience as Excellent and 100% reported an overall positive experience. Additionally, 96% of participants reported feeling more connected to community, 87% reported a stronger sense of belonging, and 74% reported building new relationships through their participation. Participants consistently described Wassaja Oidag as welcoming, healing, collaborative, educational, and community-centered.

Participants also reported gaining practical skills and knowledge related to gardening, irrigation, water conservation, native and medicinal plants, sustainability, and Indigenous stewardship practices. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported learning something new, 78% reported feeling more connected to the land and garden space, and 96% reported feeling good about contributing to a shared sustainability project. Interest in continued engagement was exceptionally strong, with 100% of survey respondents expressing interest in future programming and events. Among participants, 83% reported being very likely and 17% reported being likely to attend future volunteer days and activities.

The success and sustainability of Wassaja Oidag was strengthened through collaboration with more than 20 tribal and non-tribal partners, organizations, and community collaborators. These relationships supported educational exchanges, technical learning, resource sharing, volunteer engagement, and knowledge exchange. Partners contributed expertise in areas including Indigenous agriculture, native plants, food systems, sustainability, ecological restoration, and community education, expanding the project's impact beyond the garden site itself.

Overall, the implementation of Wassaja Oidag exceeded initial expectations by creating a culturally grounded, sustainable, and community-centered space that supports Indigenous knowledge

systems, environmental stewardship, student learning, and collective wellbeing. The project successfully achieved its intended outcomes by increasing access to land-based learning opportunities, strengthening community connections, expanding sustainability education, supporting Indigenous food and medicine practices, and establishing a lasting campus resource for future generations of students and community members.

Next Steps

Although the CSF grant period has concluded, the Wassaja Oidag: A Place of Healing project will continue as an ongoing Indigenous-centered sustainability, education, and community engagement initiative housed at the Wassaja Center. The garden was intentionally designed as a long-term campus resource that will continue supporting Indigenous land stewardship, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), food sovereignty, traditional medicine education, environmental sustainability, student leadership, and community healing beyond the initial grant period.

The infrastructure and improvements established through this project will remain as permanent additions to the Wassaja Center and will continue to be used by students, staff, faculty, tribal community members, and campus and community partners. Project installations include four raised garden beds, two medicinal planting areas, one traditional Indigenous food plot, one pollinator and desert habitat garden, a vermicomposting system, rainwater harvesting infrastructure, irrigation systems with electric and solar-powered components, a trellis system, and an outdoor community gathering and learning space. These features will continue serving as a living classroom where participants can engage in hands-on learning related to Indigenous plants, sustainable agriculture, desert ecology, water conservation, and land-based knowledge systems.

Maintenance and stewardship of the garden will continue through a collaborative model involving Wassaja Center staff, student leaders, volunteers, and campus/community partners. Ongoing responsibilities will include seasonal planting and harvesting, irrigation monitoring, compost management, pollinator habitat care, garden maintenance, and continued cultivation of culturally significant food and medicinal plants. Student involvement will remain a central component of the project, providing opportunities for students to develop leadership skills while learning about Indigenous ecological practices, sustainability, and community engagement. Future student leaders will also be mentored by current project team members to support continuity and long-term sustainability.

Moving forward, the Wassaja Oidag will continue hosting volunteer workdays, educational workshops, cultural gatherings, garden tours, and community programming focused on native plants, Traditional Medicine, Indigenous food systems, environmental stewardship, and wellness. Building on the success of the AIHP Traditional Medicine workshops, the garden will continue serving as a space where students and community members can learn from Indigenous knowledge holders, traditional practitioners, and community partners. Future programming will expand opportunities for reciprocal knowledge sharing and strengthen connections between Indigenous knowledge systems, health, sustainability, and community wellbeing.

The project team will continue maintaining and strengthening the partnerships developed throughout the grant period with tribal communities, campus departments, sustainability initiatives, and local organizations. These collaborations will support continued educational programming,

resource sharing, technical assistance, volunteer engagement, and future expansion opportunities. Partnerships established through the project will remain essential to ensuring that the garden continues to reflect community needs, Indigenous values, and sustainable stewardship practices.

The team also plans to seek additional funding opportunities and institutional support to expand the garden's capacity over time. Future goals include increasing the diversity of native and medicinal plant species, developing additional educational signage and interpretation materials, expanding seating and gathering areas, incorporating additional cultural programming, and exploring the possibility of creating a teaching kitchen or expanded community learning space connected to the garden.

The Wassaja Oidag has become more than a physical garden space; it has become a gathering place rooted in relationships, reciprocity, healing, and connection to land. The continued stewardship of this space will ensure that future generations of students and community members have access to an Indigenous-centered learning environment where they can build knowledge, strengthen relationships, and engage with sustainability practices grounded in cultural knowledge and respect for the land. Through continued programming, collaborative stewardship, and community engagement, Wassaja Oidag will remain a lasting campus resource that advances Indigenous knowledge, environmental responsibility, and community wellbeing.

Challenges Faced

The Wassaja Oidag: A Place of Healing project encountered challenges related to infrastructure coordination, communication, environmental conditions, and managing a growing community-centered initiative. These experiences provided valuable lessons that strengthened project planning and long-term sustainability.

A primary challenge was coordinating irrigation installation and Facilities Management processes. Delays affected planting schedules and project timelines, highlighting the importance of beginning infrastructure planning early, identifying campus processes and contacts, and building additional time into project schedules.

As the project grew, coordinating communication among student leaders, staff, volunteers, and community partners required additional structure. Future projects would benefit from clearly defined roles, shared timelines, communication systems, and onboarding processes to support continuity and collaboration.

The Tucson desert climate also required ongoing adaptation related to heat, water needs, plant establishment, and volunteer comfort. Future improvements, including additional shade, seating, storage, and educational materials, will further support the garden's accessibility and sustainability.

The team also learned the importance of prioritizing relationship-building, cultural protocols, and community collaboration when developing Indigenous-centered projects. Despite these challenges, the project successfully adapted and established a strong foundation for continued stewardship, programming, and growth. Future applicants can benefit from early planning, flexible timelines, strong communication, and intentional partnership development.

Media/Links

[Wassaja Oidag Instagram](#)

[Wassaja Oidag: A Place of Healing & Community - Webpage](#)

[Wassaja Carlos Montezuma Center for Native American Health - Facebook](#)

Recommendations

Continued investment in infrastructure, stewardship, and project coordination will be essential to sustaining and expanding the Wassaja Oidag: A Place of Healing project. Ongoing student leadership opportunities and coordination support will help maintain volunteer engagement, programming, partnerships, and continuity as new students become involved.

Future priorities include improving irrigation efficiency, adding shade structures, increasing accessibility and seating, expanding native and medicinal plantings, adding educational signage, and developing additional gathering and learning spaces to support the garden as an outdoor classroom.

The garden also provides opportunities for expanded programming, including Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives, Traditional Medicine workshops, seed saving, rainwater harvesting education, composting and soil health projects, cultural storytelling events, health and wellness collaborations, and land-based learning and research opportunities.

An important next phase is the development of an Indigenous Knowledge Research component focused on exploring Wassaja Oidag as a site for Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Traditional Medicine, food sovereignty, and community-based learning. Future research and programming should continue centering Indigenous community members as knowledge holders and partners in shaping the garden's growth.

Overall, Wassaja Oidag has demonstrated that it is more than a sustainability project, it is a culturally grounded space for healing, learning, and relationship-building. Continued institutional support, partnerships, and investment will help ensure its long-term success as a resource for students, staff, faculty, and community members.