

# VALENTINA VAVAGES

Natural Resources • Tohono O'odham Community College

**V**alentina Vavages, Tohono

O'odham, grew up surrounded by nature on the reservation in Arizona's Sonoran Desert. She recalls hiking up nearby mountains during the summertime and picking cactus fruit to turn into jam. Now that Vavages is a student at the Tohono O'odham Community College in Sells, Ariz., she has continued to immerse herself in nature by pursuing a natural resources major and participating in a summer internship program with the Student Conservation Association.

For Vavages, the decision to major in a STEM field came after taking her first science class, Biology Concepts, during her second semester. As part of the biology class, Vavages was encouraged to participate in the traditional plant competition for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Conference (AIHEC). After attending the conference, Vavages quickly committed to the science program at her college.

Vavages is also secretary of the school's AISES chapter. "AISES has given me the opportunity to travel and expand my knowledge of the different branches in the world

of science," she explains. Vavages describes one of the chapter's recent initiatives, a recycling project at the 74th Annual Tohono O'odham Nation Rodeo and Fair as "a great opportunity to represent AISES and the Tohono O'odham Community College to the people of this nation."

Vavages' involvement with AISES and her classes have broadened her science knowledge, but it was her internship with the Student Conservation Association (SCA) as part of their Tribal Intern Program that gave her hands-on experience with conserving nature. After her Biology Concepts professor

handed out a flyer for the SCA internship

opportunity with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Vavages was immediately interested. Vavages admits that she was at first a bit hesitant about applying out of fear that she might not get the position. But she decided that it was worth trying and was pleasantly surprised when she heard back two days later; she chose to intern at the Ouray National Wildlife Refuge in Randlett, Utah.

Over the course of her 13-week internship, Vavages worked on a variety of projects, most of which involved land conservation. "A typical day on the refuge was filled with cool weather, loading up our ATVs and

going out to the worksite where we would separate and continue working on our assigned projects," she says. Vavages' major projects included conducting migratory bird surveys, assisting with the removal of an invasive plant species, monitoring vegetation test plots, and utilizing a GPS device to map treated weeds. She says that one of her favorite parts of the internship was becoming certified to drive and maintain her own ATV.

Vavages says that the internship experience not only provided her with numerous skills, but also helped to shape her future plans by showing her "the importance of the preservation and conservation of wildlife."

After her impactful summer with the Student Conservation Association, Vavages has been actively encouraging other students to apply for the

internship. She is currently working on a PowerPoint presentation to let other students know about the internship opportunity and the skills they will need to be successful in the SCA program. In addition to promoting the SCA internship, Vavages takes an interest in the younger generations in her village. As the first of her four siblings to go to high school and college, Vavages sees the importance of intervention when students are at a young age. "Recently I spoke with a group of juniors at our local high school and shared my success story and the importance of getting a college education," she says. If Vavages has it her way, the SCA internship program may be seeing many more applications from Tohono O'odham students in the near future.

— Liana Magro

