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Tribal Partnerships

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY AND TRIBAL PARTNERSHIPS

MSU trains Native students and impacts Native communities through many programs. MSU has the ability and the obligation to touch every life in Montana. We work with citizens and communities to define needs and build success, particularly in indigenous communities, rural counties, and widely-dispersed small towns.

Montana is home to twelve tribal nations, seven reservations and seven tribal colleges. MSU's Council of Elders, representing the tribes and Tribal Colleges in Montana, advises MSU's President and cabinet on unique challenges and opportunities of the state's Native American communities and students. The reservations in Montana are a world apart from the rest of the state, with disproportionately high levels of poverty, unemployment, isolation, and mental and physical health care shortages. The unemployment rate for Native Americans in Montana ranges between 50 and 80 percent, and significant health challenges and food insecurity issues face many Natives. In 2009-10, twenty-five middle school students on the Fort Peck Reservation attempted suicide: five were successful. Montana Native Americans experience life expectancies 22-25 years shorter than white Montanans. Historically, universities have unilaterally determined what tribal nations need, sometimes without ever stepping on tribal soil. MSU takes pride in its collaborative approach with tribal partners, who together with MSU, have developed numerous programs to empower Native students and Native populations in their home communities with mutual academic and research benefits.



One partnership between MSU's College of Nursing and Kenneth Smoker, the health programs specialist with the Fort Peck Tribes and Indian Health Services, seeks to help nursing students reach their educational goals and reduce health care disparities for the reservation community. Nursing students travel for one week each term to the remote reservation, located in northeast Montana, 450 miles from Bozeman. Barriers to health care for this population include lack of local health care providers and a lack of cars or gas money to travel long distances to adequate health care facilities. The MSU Nursing program brings health care provision to the local community, if only for a short period, at least twice each year. While in Fort Peck, the students provide well-child exams in school-based clinics and in-home exams for elders. To date, more than 10,000 medical exams and patient visits have been performed through this collaboration. Working with the health programs specialist, nursing students educate the community on prevention efforts for widespread reservation health concerns. The reservation reports that because of this program, [children are healthier and show improved academic achievement and decreased school absenteeism](#).

At the same time the MSU nursing students who participate receive valuable pediatric clinical experience in a non-hospital setting. They immerse themselves in another culture, learning beadwork and Native dancing in the evenings, which provide them with interaction with the Native population on a personal level and a greater understanding of Native tradition, language, art, and contemporary life. Through this program, nursing students gain understanding of: historical trauma and its impact on health, lifestyle, well-being and social justice; the complex link between poverty and health, and ways to work collaboratively to meet identified needs of a host community in a cross-cultural setting. By working in an underserved area, they gain high-impact clinical experience and more indelible and educational understanding than in a health-care-rich

community closer to the university. Nursing students report increased confidence in working with and caring for children and benefits from working in a cross-cultural environment.

The partnership is mutually beneficial, widening the educational and cultural experience of non-Native nursing students, better preparing them for the workplace, improving health outcomes among the tribal residents and providing additional mentors for Native children with interest in attending college and perhaps entering the health care profession. MSU and its tribal partners are working to bring this clinical model to Montana's other six reservations.



Similar partnerships exist in other MSU programs and tribal communities as well. In one project with the Crow/Apsáalooke tribe, researchers from MSU's Department of Health and Human Development have established a national model for cancer research and prevention that has been adopted by the American Cancer Society. This program is designed to educate the healthcare community about traditional healing and wellness approaches and philosophies of Native Americans and how to appropriately work with Native American women. One key aspect of this program that has made it effective is that it [trains Crow women to work with fellow members of their tribe, eliminating the White culture telling Native women what to do with their bodies](#). Previously taboo topics such as PAP smears and cervical cancer are now addressed. Tribal women have an increased understanding of issues that have caused too many community deaths and know that early detection is key.

Another partnership between the Crow Nation and MSU, through MSU's Center for Biofilm Engineering, has focused on providing safe drinking water. After many years of listening to and learning from the Crow about their needs and learning which solutions would not cause unintended negative consequences for the social fabric of the community, an MSU research team and Amway have identified and validated an inexpensive water filter for wells that can provide potable water to those on the reservations, reducing intestinal diseases and the number of sick days for students and employees. Additional health-related projects include providing local, low-cost dental care to the reservations and supporting community gardening and food assistance programs.

Other programs focus on educational partnerships that increase attainment rates among tribal members and increase the number of American Indian students at MSU. These include working with math and science teachers to integrate engineering concepts into high school classrooms on the reservations; articulation and advising agreements between tribal colleges and MSU; pairing tribal students at the high school and college level with university researchers in STEM areas, specifically in biomedical-related areas; joining MSU classes with tribal communities on nutrition projects; and peer and faculty mentoring for Native students at MSU. These efforts have resulted in a 6 percent increase in American Indian enrollment and a nearly 50 percent increase in degrees awarded to American Indian students at MSU in five years. For this body of work MSU was [recently named to Indian Country Today's list of top Universities for Indians](#).