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INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES  
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CASE  
STUDY  
2018

## Montana State University: Digital Storywork Partnership

## ABOUT THE DIGITAL STORYWORK PARTNERSHIP

Montana State University researchers responded to a series of requests from the Piikani (Blackfeet) tribe that addressed preservation of language, artifacts, and oral histories. The first came from a teacher on the Blackfoot Reservation, asking for assistance in documenting repatriated artifacts that were important to the tribe. This was closely followed by another request where MSU professors and students collaborated with students and faculty at Blackfeet Community College to document stories from the Piikani community. Many of the native languages and stories could be lost as fluent speakers die and younger generations lack the tools to learn Native languages and cultures.

MSU researchers are providing tools to American Indian tribes across the state to help those communities record important oral histories and bring storytelling to life through the [Digital Storywork Partnership](#). Led locally by a high school teacher in Black Butte, this project connects youth with community elders. In addition to leading the collaborative work at Blackfeet, the teacher is currently finishing his doctorate at MSU in educational leadership through the Indian Leadership Education and Development ([I LEAD](#)) project, an MSU program designed for career development and local empowerment for Natives.

MSU professors, students and other partners are also part of the Digital Storywork Partnership, offering a series of filmmaking and research workshops to members of tribal communities who request them. Professors in the Department of Education and in the School of Film and Photography have helped design and implement this program.

One iteration of the partnership, the Piikani Digital Histories project, resulted in a 21-minute film, "[Full Circle](#)," which focused on language revitalization in Browning. The film was featured in fall 2015 in a special "Days of the Piikani" showcase.

It's noteworthy that all editorial decisions on these projects are made by the tribal participants in consultation with elders. Those decisions include choosing whether to invite MSU professors and students to deliver workshops, selection of the film topic, storyboarding, content, order, and whether to film the elders who share their stories.

Learning to follow the lead of the tribal communities is a humbling cultural and educational opportunity for participating MSU students. They begin to realize that collective decision-making about story and history and experience, especially in a tribal context, is important. They learn that the story's subject and the story teller must be treated with respect and integrity. They learn to recognize the unique expertise and contributions of others. The cultural implications and growth for MSU students are significant. Simultaneously, tribal students learn key technological skills and cutting-edge editing and creative techniques. The combined interaction is powerful.

Another film in progress as part of the Digital Storywork Partnership was commissioned by the Blackfeet tribe and Blackfeet Community College. This film focuses on commemoration events

related to the Bear River (aka Marias/Baker) Massacre of 1870. Research conducted by tribal college students revealed that there are differing viewpoints throughout the community about whether the story should be told at this time, and so the film may not be completed — again honoring the viewpoint of the tribal members.

MSU's Digital Storywork Partnership also has an ongoing project on the Apsáalooke Reservation in Pryor, with the 21st Century Community Learning Center, an after-school program that provides leadership opportunities for youth in the community. The center's film club is working on research and a film investigating traditional uses of tobacco. The film will be a tobacco prevention piece that addresses both smoking and chewing tobacco usage while recognizing the ceremonial role and historical use of tobacco in the community.

A third project in the works is a collaboration with the Little Shell Nation in Montana. The project is focused on documenting language, and specifically including elders from within the community who are fluent in a dialect of Chippewa (Ojibwa).

The urgency for documenting many Native languages is real. It is believed that there may be only two living people who speak this particular dialect of Chippewa. The primary goal of this project is not to make a film or develop filmmaking techniques, but to gather footage and document the tribal members — and potentially others from out-of-state who speak Chippewa — speaking the language. The footage gathered will be held by the tribe. Faculty and staff from MSU's [Center for Bilingual and Multicultural Education](#) are directing this project. Film footage may be used to create language curricula and learning skills materials for tribal schools, with the hope of capturing and retaining a nearly extinct language.

These partnerships are significant examples of listening to the tribes' needs and hopes first and always, while also providing unique and exciting teaching and learning opportunities and creative scholarship. Six tribal colleges and schools are currently involved in these projects. Collectively, more than 18 planning sessions were conducted, and more than 38 Indigenous participants and more than 42 non-Indigenous participants were included in the planning and production of the films, involving education and training of the Indigenous peoples and increased cultural awareness by the non-Indigenous (MSU students) people. Two films are available publicly, while several are only available on the reservations where they were researched and produced.

The Digital Storywork Project undertaken by MSU faculty illustrates MSU's commitment to its land-grant mission. Preserving culture and cultural awareness requires time; trust; careful communication and interaction; and an ongoing, sustained relationship. MSU faculty involved in this suite of projects are committed to engaging in respectful, mutually beneficial partnerships — even though that may not fit neatly into tenure and promotion guidelines and cycles — because Native language, artifacts and histories are vital to the tribal nations and to the state of Montana.

## ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America's oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU's mission is to: expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

## ABOUT THE IEP UNIVERSITIES PROGRAM

APLU and its **Commission on Economic and Community Engagement (CECE)** established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Universities Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The **IEP designation program** recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The **IEP awards program** recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- **Talent** and workforce development
- **Innovation**, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- **Place** development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: [www.APLU.org/IEP](http://www.APLU.org/IEP)