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INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES  
AWARDS PROGRAM  
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CASE  
STUDY  
2018

## Montana State University: Fort Peck Nursing Project

## ABOUT THE FORT PECK NURSING PROJECT

Life at Montana's Fort Peck Reservation seems a world apart from the rest of the state. Widespread poverty, unemployment, isolation, and drug and alcohol problems are pervasive. In 2009-10, five middle school students committed suicide; another 20 students attempted suicide. But changes are underway as the positive effects of a collaboration between the reservation and Montana State University's College of Nursing ripple through the community.

With [this partnership](#), nursing students travel to the isolated northeastern Montana reservation (450 miles from Bozeman), reside in housing provided by the tribe, and deliver primary and preventative health care to Native American children served through tribally operated, locally controlled school-based health clinics. MSU nursing students provide well child screening, suicide prevention education, nutrition counseling, and dental screening. This partnership aligns with MSU's pediatric nursing course objectives and fosters learning and professional development in a cross-cultural setting. Nursing students gain understanding of the culture of two Native American tribes who live on this reservation, historical trauma and its impact on health, lifestyle, well-being and social justice, the complex interaction between poverty and health, and working collaboratively to meet an identified need of a host community in a cross-cultural setting. Since the advent of the partnership, children are healthier and show improved academic achievement and decreased school absenteeism. Nursing students report more confidence in caring for pediatric clients and in stepping out of their cultural comfort zones.

Native American children experience significant health disparities compared to other Montana children, creating a need for primary health care services. The geographic isolation and lack of economic opportunity often result in unaffordable or inaccessible health care.

The typical clinical learning experience for nursing students is in a hospital setting, but a common issue in Montana is that few children are hospitalized. In 2010, the College of Nursing had outgrown available clinical pediatric learning experiences in Bozeman, Montana, home of the MSU main campus. Concurrently, the public health director of Fort Peck was working to improve the health of children on the reservation by establishing school-based health clinics that would serve children at three public schools on the reservation regardless of insurance status, race, or ability to pay. The College of Nursing recognized that objectives and outcomes in the pediatric nursing course were an excellent fit for a community need identified on the Fort Peck reservation.

The collaborators explored a sustainable relationship that would provide nursing care in the school clinics. The need was great, as the health disparities of children on the reservation are profound. Primary health intervention by nursing students focusing on lifestyle, including diet and exercise, had the potential to change the health outcomes of the children.

As MSU explored the possibility of students traveling to Fort Peck, many barriers were encountered, including hundreds of miles, challenging winter weather, coordination with other courses, logistics of food and lodging for students, and anxieties about cross-cultural differences. MSU's lead nursing professor, a highly qualified nurse educator, refused to allow those barriers to deter implementation of this innovative service-learning experience for students.

Fort Peck (population 10,321) is one of seven reservations in Montana and home to the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes. Poverty, geographic isolation, and high health care provider turnover contribute to limited health care access. Extreme health disparities on the reservation result in a median age of death 22-25 years earlier than white Montanans. Youth suffer from high incidences of preventable illness, including diabetes, obesity, and tooth decay; unhealthy lifestyles such as smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse are rampant. Suicide has reached epidemic levels.

Today, 48 junior nursing students travel 900 miles (round trip) to live and work for seven days during different times of the academic year. Students bring teaching materials to be shared with the children, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, health-oriented coloring books, and stickers.

Nursing students are immersed in the Assiniboine and Sioux cultures for 12-14 hours per day, providing in-school care and making home visits. Nursing students also participate in cultural events offered by the tribe, including discussions with elders, PowWows, or beading sessions. Students are honored with traditional dancing exhibitions during which Indian students teach MSU students traditional dances.

Students identify projects to complete that will meet the needs of the residents such as suicide prevention, maturation, healthy lifestyles, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse. A pediatric dentist travels to the reservation twice a year to provide free dental care. A former MSU student and Fort Peck native, now licensed as a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner, has returned to Fort Peck and works providing mental health services with an emphasis on suicide prevention.

Since the inception of the project in 2010, more than 300 nursing students have had over 14,000 patient interactions. Although it is impossible to attribute improved health to one variable, a noticeable change was identified. Children are healthier and absent from school less often, and academic outcomes have improved. Consistent with the land-grant emphasis on applied, translational education and research, this project has had a discernible impact on participants from both parties.

## 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)