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STUDY
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Montana State University: Messengers for Health

ABOUT THE MESSENGERS FOR HEALTH PROGRAM

Many partnerships exist between Montana State University and the Apsáalooke tribe. One MSU researcher has worked for more than 20 years on this reservation. By listening to the needs and concerns of the tribal members and involving them in the planning process as full partners, she has earned the trust of the tribal community and has worked diligently to develop [programs to improve health](#) among the tribal members.



Figure 1: A member of the Messengers for Health Program

In one such program, researchers from MSU's department of Health and Human Development have established a national model for cancer research and prevention that has subsequently been adopted by the American Cancer Society. This program, designed to educate the health care community on traditional healing and wellness approaches and philosophies of Native Americans and on appropriately working with Native American women, has changed the very language of tribal health care. Previously taboo topics, such as Pap smears and cervical cancer, are now openly addressed in this community. Tribal women now have an increased understanding of issues that have caused too many community deaths and know that early detection is key. This program is called the [Messengers for Health Program](#), developed to address health disparities such as low screening rates for cancers in Native women.

Unlike other reservation communities where traditional languages are dying, Apsáalooke is the first language for a majority of Apsáalooke in Montana. But there is no Apsáalooke word for cancer. Without a culturally appropriate way to discuss cancer, screening for cancers was not commonly discussed. As a result, Apsáalooke women were unaware that prevention and early diagnosis of cancers were possible. Apsáalooke have traditional cultures around health care that must be honored for successful integration with current American health care methods. It was found that Native women have a cervical cancer mortality rate of 4.0 per 100,000 compared to an all US races rate of 2.9 per 100,000. To make progress on cancer screening and prevention, a group of health care workers on the reservation developed a new tool to help health care providers understand traditional healing practices. The Messengers for Health, a group of Crow women who provide informal health care information through traditional tribal networks, has made "Akbalí'a

Balehawase' I'tchiok: Medical People Take Good Care of Us," a half-hour DVD that is being used to educate Indian Health Service (IHS) health care workers about Apsáalooke customs.

The group, funded by the American Cancer Society in connection with work at Montana State University, intends for the DVD to assist health care providers in communicating with tribal members. Likewise, they intend that informed health care providers will ease the doubts and mistrust that tribal members sometimes have about traditional American medicine and/or the Indian Health Service.

The video explains Apsáalooke healing traditions that health care providers might not understand. For instance, members of the tribe are filmed explaining the use of burning sweet grass, traditional herbs and traditional Apsáalooke relationships that affect patient care

The 35 women who make up the Messengers — now in their fifth year of health education — and the project's advisory board voted last year to make the video to tackle the fear that many members of the tribe have about going to the Indian Health Service for health care. Much of the fear stems from rumors of mistreatment many decades old, but other members of the tribe also complain that the health care providers at the health service don't understand some of their cultural needs when it comes to treatment. The clinic is the only health care facility for many people on the reservation. As a result, some Apsáalooke develop health care problems that are quite advanced before they seek care.

A recently retired filmmaker, from the Montana Public Broadcasting Station based at Montana State, produced the video in collaboration with a graduate of MSU's natural history and documentary filmmaking program. They worked for eight months with the Messengers' advisory board and university staff and students to ensure that sensitive cultural issues were approached appropriately.

In addition to the video, the Messengers distribute health care material through the same communication networks that the women of the tribe have used for decades. MSU researchers have successfully utilized the Apsáalooke women's network as a model for a new community-based health care technique to combat cervical cancer, which was at epidemic proportions on the reservation.

[The Messengers' technique works](#). Changes since the program began include a statistically significant increase: in women with knowledge about cervical cancer and Pap tests, in women becoming more comfortable discussing cancer and women's health issues, and in improved regularity in women receiving Pap tests.

The American Cancer Society says the team, composed of an MSU lead researcher and an Apsáalooke community leader, is so successful that ACS has used them for other programs across the country, and the innovative MSU researcher is now on an ACS funding review committee. In addition to the individual and public health benefits, the Messengers project propagated

innovation in research approaches. The Apsáalooke and MSU collaborators have spoken at the Mayo Clinic and the American Public Health Association Conference about community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR is the term used for research programs that are conducted in the field and in partnership between communities and universities, rather than in labs. CBPR is reported to be particularly effective in Native communities. This program is now set to spread to other reservations soon.

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