Listening, Learning and Responding: Community-University Partnerships in Minnesota Indian Country

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The American Indian Task Force

University of Minnesota Extension American Indian Task Force (AITF) was established by the Dean of Extension in 2006 to improve access and representation of American Indian communities to the University.

Interdisciplinary Task Force

Visited five tribal nations to listen, learn and build relationships. As a result tribal representatives joined the AITF.

Staff Development

Led to the development of partnerships focused on community interests and university expertise and resources.

Responding

• Create systematic ways of listening and learning from community members.
• Learn about current Extension work in the community.
• Learn about the history of the community; each is different.
• Build relationships with community members.
• Meet with organizations that have a similar mission or interest.
• Recognize and provide professional development for staff through immersion experiences, workshops, conferences and websites.
• Become familiar with the literature on community-university partnerships and best practices.

Outcomes

• Extension’s $30,000 initial commitment to the AITF operating fund for three years has helped leverage over $460,000 in additional funding.
• Extension’s presence in communities improves communication and expands employment opportunities. Six Extension educators including an American Indian Tribal Partnership Liaison were hired based on the needs identified by the Indian Nations. Four of the six educators are American Indian.
• The staffing plan is critical to the scope and sustainability of the community-based partnerships. The liaison coordinates the partnerships, provides leadership for the newly hired team, and co-chairs the AITF.
• Over 100 university faculty have participated in professional development to enhance understanding of tribal governments, sovereignty, and culture.

Listening and Learning

Practices:

• Seek internal and external funding to hire positions that meet the mutual self-interest of the partners to build sustainable programs.
• Collaborate with regional and national organizations to grow the depth and breadth of the program.
• Consider past successes and failures in determining the infrastructure and support needed to assure success.
• Create work teams to avoid isolation that can result from one educator working in a community.
• Engage community partners in recruiting and hiring qualified candidates for new positions.
• Mentor newly hired educators to develop community-university partnerships.
• Consider ways to strengthen a new team, such as hiring a liaison position.
• Design interdisciplinary approaches to expand programming beyond a single effort.
• Create interdisciplinary success with opportunities the team call rally around.

Program Sample

• Culturally-appropriate 4-H club organized at Red lake Nation, programs developed based on youth interests—shooting sports and photography.
• 90 septic systems a year are inspected, problems identified, and solutions taught at Leech Lake Nation.
• Financial literacy program offered at the Red lake Nation’s homeless shelter assists transition to independence.
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