

News Release

U of M Crookston to Partner with White Earth Indian Reservation for Educational Program

By Deb Zak, Elizabeth Tollefson, Kathryn Webster on Thursday, May 31, 2007

CROOKSTON, Minn. (May 30, 2007)- The University of Minnesota and the White Earth Reservation are holding the ninth annual White Earth Reservation Academy of Math and Science from June 4-29, 2007. This innovative summer program provides opportunities for students and teachers to learn science and math using a curriculum that is relevant to the Ojibwe culture and landscape leading to improved academic performance. Approximately 70 students in grades 5 through 7 are enrolled in the summer program, which is the largest number ever in the program's nine year history.

Instructors for the White Earth Academy of Math and Science include faculty from the University of Minnesota, Crookston (UMC); county extension staff; natural resource faculty from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus and Regional Extension Educators. Natural resource managers and elders from the White Earth Reservation team teach with the University of Minnesota faculty to provide the cultural components to the daily lessons. Some of the educational themes include culture, traditional foods including wild rice, berries, maple syrup and venison. Natural resource topics include soils, forestry, bird identification and wildlife topics. Students also learn how to make Native crafts such as moccasins, black ash baskets and birch bark canoes.

UMC faculty and staff members who are teaching at White Earth are John Loegering, Ph.D., Laura Bell and Tom Feiro. Experience is key when providing a four-week educational program. Feiro has been working with the summer program since its inception in 1999, Loegering since 2001 and Bell since 2006. The classes which UMC faculty will teach include bird identification, feeding and habitat, wildlife identification and habitat and insect identification.

In the course of the four-week program, students will be touring the UMC campus, including the equine center, athletic facilities, horticulture buildings, the airport and the Natural History Area. The students will also be staying overnight in Skyberg Hall on Thursday, June 14. The UMC campus experience is designed to help students start thinking at a young age about the areas of study that interest them while meeting University faculty and experiencing college classes with their peers.

The 21st Century Community Learning Center grant funds the program for students attending schools in Naytahwaush, Mahnomen, Ponsford and White Earth communities on the White Earth Reservation.

According to Deb Zak, U of M, Crookston's Campus Regional Director, "The partnership has given the Reservation teachers and students a unique summer educational opportunity to make learning math and science enjoyable while creating connections to the university so they can encourage their students to consider enrolling at the U of M once they graduate from high school. The partnership provides U of M faculty with an opportunity to learn more about American Indian education and the types of support that American Indian students need if they decide to attend the U of M. The partnership helps the Reservation and U of M understand each other better and to find ways to partner on other topics such as nutrition education, horticulture and natural resource management issues."

Background

The collaboration between the University of Minnesota and the White Earth Reservation began in 1998 when campus faculty visited the Reservation to explore ways in which the two entities could work together in areas of mutual interest. Areas of greatest concern to the Reservation were such things as the high dropout rates from schools serving American Indian youth and the erosion of traditional skills and knowledge of their Ojibwe culture. In response to these concerns, Reservation natural resource managers, tribal teachers, elders and University faculty pooled their talents and resources to design the White Earth Reservation Science and Math Summer Program that was launched in 1999.

In response to requests from other reservations to work in partnership with the University of Minnesota on a variety of issues, an American Indian Task Force is charged with developing more programs in partnership with Minnesota's northern reservations in areas where Extension has the expertise that matches reservation interests. The first full-time position that Extension will fund to reach this goal is a 4-H Regional Extension Educator, American Indian Youth Development Program. The new extension educator is scheduled to be hired during the summer of 2007.

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