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Grant to involve American Indians in environmental biology

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GRANT TO INVOLVE AMERICAN INDIANS IN ENVIRONMENTAL BIOLOGY

MISSOULA —

Salish Kootenai College and The University of Montana have received a \$250,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to involve more American Indian students in environmental biology.

The four-year grant will fund Project TRAIN – TRaining American Indians in Environmental Biology. This collaborative program will increase the number of Indian students entering graduate school and careers in environmental biology by providing research experiences, career mentoring and appropriate course work.

“This is one of the first true collaborative efforts between UM and SKC,” said Judy Gobert, College of Math and Sciences dean at SKC. “We have never co-taught classes together. It’s a good start. It shows there are a lot of things we can be doing together and that there are a lot of things we should be doing together.”

Goals of Project TRAIN include formalizing and sustaining collaborative relationships

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between SKC and UM, educating UM faculty and students about minority issues, improving undergraduate mentoring at both institutions, and disseminating information throughout Indian country about the relevance of training in environmental biology.

UM's Cathy Zabinski, program director for Project TRAIN, said, "This is as much for training our faculty and students about tribal issues as training SKC students about research methods."

Zabinski said the project is vitally important for attracting and retaining Indian students in science education. Indians now represent about 1 percent of the U.S. population but make up only about .5 percent of people nationally who earn bachelor's degrees in science and engineering and about .2 percent of practicing scientists and engineers. Additionally, even though there are seven tribal colleges in Montana, there is only one Indian instructor of math and science at these institutions. Moreover, most biologists employed by the tribes are not tribal members.

Gobert said the program will give at least five undergraduates a year an intensive research experience. Project TRAIN will take SKC students into labs and field settings for summer research projects. Some projects may be conducted year-round.

The program also will offer lectures and seminars at both institutions, and increased mentoring opportunities for students. Additionally, the Distinguished American Indian Science Seminar Series will begin next semester, bringing Indian scientists to both UM and SKC.

"This should give our students a more direct pathway to (UM) and more research experience," Gobert said.

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