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NEWS RELEASE

June 27, 2007

Contact: Diane Friend, UM program director, 406-243-4299; Regina Sievert, SKC program director, 406-885-7520.

AREA TEACHERS BRUSH UP ON SCIENCE SKILLS THIS SUMMER

MISSOULA –

The classroom setting was familiar for the 30 or so students, but it was their places in it that were so strange.

A group of K-8 teachers from around Missoula and the Flathead Valley are in the midst of a two-week course in which they are learning college-level geology and wrestling with ways to explain the science to their young pupils.

The class is part of the inaugural year of the Big Sky Science Partnership, a National Science Foundation-funded program that joins universities, tribal colleges and K-8 schools around the state.

The University of Montana is paired with Salish Kootenai College, and Montana State University is partnering with Little Bighorn College on the Crow Indian Reservation and Dull Knife College on the Northern Cheyenne reservation.

“Our main goal is to improve student achievement in science,” said Regina Sievert, program director at SKC.

Teachers applied for the program – for which they are paid and graded to receive college credit – which includes a two-week session during the summer and a two-day class

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once per quarter during the school year.

Sievert said an increasing emphasis on reading and math in primary education because of the No Child Left Behind Act has left many students without any substantial science education. The Big Sky Science Partnership is a three-year commitment for teachers. Sievert said organizers hope the teachers will go back to their schools and lead other instructors.

This year's focus is geology, next year's is astronomy and the third year's is physics – three disciplines notoriously difficult to grasp.

The class went on an all-day field trip Friday, June 22, around the Bitterroot Valley to observe geologic features and see firsthand what they had spent the week learning about.

The teachers also heard traditional history from Bitterroot Salish elder Louis Adams.

The intermingling of hard science and Native traditions is imperative to reaching across cultural gaps in education, said Adams and class speaker Iris Pretty Paint.

“I've had to live in two different worlds,” Adams said. “My kid, grandkids, they use computers, but you can't forget who you are.”

Pretty Paint encouraged teachers to take a moment to realize how they approach their material when teaching and be aware that the way they enter into a concept might be different from their students, many of whom have grown up in different cultures.

“You have to know yourself first to be culturally competent,” she said.

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The class continues this week, mostly at SKC, though the group will take a field trip to Milltown Dam on Thursday.

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Editor's Note: Media is welcome to attend the field trip to Milltown Dam at 2 p.m. Thursday, June 27. Call Diane Friend or Regina Sievert for more information. Photos of the Bitterroot field trip are available upon request. Please e-mail Alex Strickland at alex.strickland@mso.umt.edu.

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