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### Innovative online course trains teachers in Indian education

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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March 3, 2008

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### **INNOVATIVE ONLINE COURSE TRAINS TEACHERS IN INDIAN EDUCATION**

**MISSOULA –**

In 1999 the Montana Legislature passed the Indian Education for All Law, which states all educational personnel should have an understanding and awareness of Indian tribes so they can teach about the first Americans in a culturally responsive manner.

It's a lofty goal that hasn't been implemented in many Montana schools. Teachers often feel intimidated about integrating Indian education into their classrooms – especially when they received very little themselves.

Now The University of Montana offers a new tool to help teachers and administrators enhance their Indian-based curriculum. It's an online graduate course called Indian Education Leadership Training.

The two-semester, six-credit course started last fall. It's innovative enough that two participants are from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. The other 48 educators work at 10 high schools scattered across Montana – from Kalispell to Billings to Opheim.

“The course is rather unique,” said Sally Thompson, director of UM’s Regional Learning Project, which spearheaded creation of the new curriculum. “The depth and breadth of content we are exposing these teachers to is way beyond anything I ever had in my own education.”

The Regional Learning Project, part of UM Continuing Education, was founded in 2001 and has worked to produce educational resources about Indians such as films, DVDs, Web sites and study guides. Thompson and her staff also periodically put on Indian education workshops for 30 or so teachers.

“But it always felt like a drop in the bucket,” she said. “We started thinking a better way to do this would be an online course because it could affect so many more people than our traveling a couple of times a year to reach a small group.”

But why would Thompson, an anthropologist specializing in treaty issues, want to tackle a big project like this? She laughed and said, “A friend of mine from Browning claims her ancestors are dragging me around by the nose.”

Thompson’s department, with input from the state Office of Public Instruction’s Indian Education Division and tribal leaders, teamed with UM’s School of Education to start designing the course in 2005. The project was funded by Montana school districts, which had money set aside for such materials and personnel development.

The resulting course Web site has a main page displaying the flags of Montana’s 12 tribal nations. Click on a flag and it takes you to tribal Web sites. The site also

contains hours of streaming video, so students can watch mini-movie lectures by Montana's top Indian educators.

“By the time we started planning this course, I already had completed interviews with more than 100 Indian people for a Web site project about tribes along the Lewis and Clark Trail (<http://www.trailtribes.org>),” Thompson said. “Then we did some additional interviews to really focus on what we needed for the course. So now we can expose teachers to the best Indian educators in the state in this online forum.”

The course launched last June with a summer institute in Helena, allowing most of the first students to meet one another and lay the groundwork for the Web-based community they would become. The first online semester last fall was an immersion course in which educators studied the Seven Essential Understandings Regarding American Indians.

These understandings were developed by Montana tribes in 2000 under the direction of OPI. Essential Understanding 1, for example, states: There is great diversity among the 12 tribal nations of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories and governments. Understanding 3 discusses how traditional Native beliefs, culture and languages persist today, while Understanding 6 suggests history from an Indian perspective often conflicts with the mainstream.

Students now are well into their second “application” semester, using what they have learned to design content or curriculum they will take back to their real-world classrooms.

Thompson said all participants work on the class whenever they have time. Some, especially in the smaller towns, stay after school so they can use a computer with a faster Internet connection. The educators aren’t tested, but they are graded on how well they respond to questions and concepts on an online discussion board, as well as on their final projects.

Schools are encouraged to have teams of teachers take the course “because, obviously, this will go farther with more people in the district engaged in it,” Thompson said. “We also want people building relationships and working together, which is more in keeping with an American Indian worldview.”

She said Indian Education Leadership Training is designed for all school subjects – not just history or social studies. So a math teacher might explain how Indians erect a tepee lodge, with all the math and science that goes into understanding how many hides one needs, the shape of the structure and the angle of the poles.

“I think people have the idea that if you don’t have a complex number system, you must be simple,” Thompson said, “but what I think people start learning is maybe it’s the opposite. Non-Indians are really trapped in our worldviews without knowing there is a different way of seeing things. So we are often offensive without meaning to

be because we are just so ethnocentric. And it's sad because Indian children are unknowingly insulted by teachers all the time."

The fall semester was taught by Thompson and Darrell Stolle, an associate professor of curriculum and instruction in the School of Education. Stolle said he had more of a support role that semester, helping people "understand the psychosocial implications of a multicultural curriculum and the social-political forces accompanying this class. It's also about relating to people who are different from you. Can you recognize when your worldview perspective is invalidating another's?"

"Each Native culture has its own way of forming, using and constructing knowledge," he said. "When you start to understand that other people have valid ways of seeing the world, then you start seeing your worldview is only one of many, and you don't always expect students to see the world from your point of view."

The second semester is being taught by Stolle and education Professor Lisa Blank, who designed the structure for much of the online curriculum. Students are expected to create a unit for social studies, math or science or else come up with a leadership implementation plan for Indian Education for All in their school district. Administrators also may take a course option that offers an overview of how to implement Indian education in their curriculum.

Stolle said one of the primary goals for spring semester is to allow teachers and administrators from across the state to establish collaborative relationships as they seek

to create and implement curriculum. To facilitate this, students participate in online content-specific communities.

“For example, the math/science learning community might consist of teachers from Opheim, Missoula and Cut Bank,” he said. “They share curriculum ideas with one another and provide feedback on one another’s work.”

The course also makes use of Wikispaces, which allow participants to easily create and edit their own collaborative Web sites, which then showcase each school’s Indian Education for All curriculum and implementation plan.

“This technology is really helping bridge the distance barriers in our state,” Stolle said. “Also, teachers are busy, so this format makes it easy for them to have access to this material whenever they are ready.”

Thompson said the course offers a rich variety of online content. For example, it includes a PowerPoint presentation about treaty history developed by students of Maylinn Smith, head of UM’s Indian Law Clinic. Another section by UM law Professor Ray Cross, a Mandan-Hidatsa tribal member who successfully argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, covers tribal sovereignty.

UM intends to continue offering the online class as a graduate course, making it a part of the School of Education curriculum. Thompson said the Indian Education for All Law and new online course make Montana progressive in pursuing Native education for its citizens.

“Working on this has been an incredible privilege,” she said. “I think now we have a real opportunity to learn from one another and create a much better world for our children.”

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