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NEWS RELEASE

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UM VISIT TO TRIBAL SCHOOLS, COLLEGES STRENGTHENS BONDS

MISSOULA –

Nine representatives from The University of Montana in Missoula – including UM President George M. Dennison – recently traveled to four high schools and two tribal colleges on the **Rocky Boy's** and **Fort Belknap** Indian reservations in northcentral Montana.

The Sept. 15-16 visit to these rural communities reinforced ties between the state's flagship public university and the Gros Ventre, Assiniboine and Chippewa Cree tribes. UM administrators, faculty and staff visited Rocky Boy High School, Box Elder High School and Stone Child College on the Rocky Boy's reservation, and Hays-Lodge Pole High School, Harlem High School and Fort Belknap College on the Fort Belknap reservation.

"We try to visit the tribal colleges every other year, but also have regular communications," said Dennison, who is an honorary member of the Blackfeet Tribe. "Experience shows that we can best serve Native American students by collaborating with the tribal colleges.

"However, we also know that it helps a great deal to meet with and talk to students and school teachers and counselors," Dennison continued. "In that regard, our recent visit proved very successful."

In addition to President Dennison, the UM contingent included Jim Foley, executive vice president; Teresa Branch, vice president for Student Affairs; and Jed Liston, assistant vice president for enrollment.

UM representatives participated in a variety of activities that included presenting informational sessions about the University's new Payne Family Native American Center and admissions and financial aid, touring campuses, teaching and visiting classes, meeting with administrators and faculty, and holding interviews with school reporters.

Shane Sangrey earned a degree in social work at UM in 2006, then returned to the Rocky Boy's reservation, where he is now an academic counselor and adviser at Stone Child College. He gave the UM visitors a tour of the tribal college campus.

"It was nice to have the University visit us and see what we offer," Sangrey said. "I think our students enjoyed it as well. It was nice having everyone together under one roof. It gives our kids inspiration.

"Our vision is to give academic success to our students so they can come back and make a difference in the community," he said. "Having the UM dignitaries visit our campus was a great thing, because sometimes I feel we are left out."

Sangrey said UM's president hit it off with Stone Child College's president, Melody Henry, and that tribal members enjoyed Dennison's sense of humor. "They teased and joked throughout the presentation," he said. "We had a great meeting. George is a huge advocate of American Indians, not only on campus but in general."

The visit to Rocky Boy's and Fort Belknap wrapped up a 14-month effort by UM to visit all seven Montana reservations and to introduce the University's new Native American center. The \$10 million, LEED-certified building is currently under construction and scheduled to open next spring. With numerous design elements honoring Native culture, the center will be home to UM's Native American Studies Department, American Indian Student Services, other relevant programs, and, most important, to UM's Indian students.

Sangrey recently toured the new center.

"It already felt like home," he said. "I was so excited that it is a state-of-the-art building looking over the Oval with one of the best views on campus. It's going to be an amazing building. Our future generations are going to be supported by this building."

Juana Alcala, director of marketing and recruitment for UM Enrollment Services, also went on the trip. She said Dennison presented a slideshow that featured images of the new Native American center and explained some of the symbolism involved in its design.

"Native American students on campus will be able to maintain their culture through the design of this building," Alcala said. "The president was also very good at acknowledging that while we want to celebrate our accomplishments, such as this building, there's still a lot of work to be done."

According to the latest enrollment figures, 545 Native American students attended UM in fall 2008. While numbers keep growing, Dennison's goal is to enroll 1,000 or more Native students to more accurately represent Montana's population. Most important is the need to retain and graduate Native students, which is a struggle nationwide.

Dennison said, "We have taken a strong commitment to assure student success, and we extend that commitment to all students. For that reason, we established American Indian Student Services, with Fredricka Hunter as director, to make certain we provide the support students need to succeed. We must assist our students to persist and graduate for their as well as our benefit."

Building strong relationships among Montana's universities, reservation high schools and tribal colleges is another important way to boost Native graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in Washington, D.C., Native students who transfer from tribal colleges to four-year universities are 75 percent more likely to graduate than those who go directly into the four-year system.

An evening reception at Stone Child College gave everyone a chance to mingle, including numerous UM alumni who live and work at Rocky Boy's.

Sangrey said: "It inspired a lot of the alums to create a Chippewa Cree alumni group from UM and to work on creating a scholarship fund. It inspired us because we see one another from time to time, but it brought us all together under one roof. It gave us a chance to collaborate."

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