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UM College of Education, Bitterroot College Partner on New Master’s Program

Bitterroot College in Hamilton, Montana.
MISSOULA – The University of Montana’s Phyllis J. Washington College of Education and Bitterroot College are partnering to bring a Master of Arts in Education program to Hamilton.

The core of this partnership focuses on four areas: educational research, learning and assessment, critical social issues. The program will be offered with 12 credits, a three-credit thesis and 15 credits of electives. Students can select from a broad range of topics, including literacy, library, special education, early childhood, gifted education and leadership all taught by UM faculty who are renowned experts in the field of education.

“This meaningful partnership gives the college of education the opportunity to have a presence in the Bitterroot and get broader reach for the Master of Arts in Education program,” said Angela McLean, Bitterroot College interim director. “Courses are offered in a high-flex, accessible format, with options for students to take courses online, in-person, remote and hybrid, and can be completed in as little as 15 months.”

Bitterroot College will act as the main informational hub for the partnership, providing individualized support to interested parties and enrolled students.

The Hamilton cohort and initial course will begin in the spring of 2023, and there will be a special registration and advising window for interested applicants.

For more information, visit umt.edu/education or email edadvising@mso.umt.edu.

Contact: Angela McLean, Bitterroot College interim director, amclean@montana.edu.

Launch UM virtual tour.
UM College of Education, Bitterroot College Partner on New Master’s Program
MISSOULA – The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) announced that the University of Montana’s Phyllis J. Washington College of Education received accreditation for its educator preparation programs in teaching and educational leadership.
The decision by the CAEP Accreditation Council resulted in full accreditation for the College of Education for meeting all of the CAEP Accreditation Standards – rigorous, nationally recognized standards developed to ensure excellence in educator preparation programs.

“Our students and faculty should be very proud of the work they are doing,” said Dr. Adrea Lawrence, dean of the college of education. “We’ve set a very high bar for our educator prep programs and CAEP accreditation validates the hard work we are doing. Our students and their families are investing in an education program that is designated as nationally accredited for educator preparation.”

CAEP is recognized as a program accreditor by the U.S. Department of Education based on peer review that serves the dual functions of assuring quality and promoting improvement. CAEP updated the educator preparation standards in 2020 as part of its commitment to reviewing the standards at least every seven years.

The changes to CAEP standards reflect the board’s commitment to equity and diversity and also places an emphasis on the importance of technology in preparing future educators. Standards include content and teaching knowledge, clinical partnerships and practice, candidate recruitment, progress, support, program impact, and quality assurance systems and continuous improvement.” These institutions meet high standards so that their students receive an education that prepares them to succeed in a diverse range of classrooms after they graduate,” said CAEP President Dr. Christopher A. Koch. “Seeking CAEP accreditation is a significant commitment on the part of an educator preparation provider.”

In addition to CAEP’s national accreditation, the Montana Board of Public Education sets educator program standards, reviews educator preparation programs and grants accreditation to Montana programs based on the recommendations of a review team coordinated by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. UM’s education college is slated to be accredited by Montana’s Board of Public Education, having met all standards for its teaching and educational leadership programs at both the state and national levels.

UM offers 29 teaching programs ranging from early childhood education to middle and high school programs in the sciences, arts, math, world languages, language arts, social studies, special education, reading and library. The cumulative GPA of all students admitted into the Teacher Education Program significantly exceeds national accreditation requirements, with the most recently admitted cohort holding an average GPA of 3.36, and elementary education students on average score 13 points higher than the required Montana score on the Praxis
UM’s College of Education Recognized for National Excellence

“We believe in continuous improvement, and we will use the information we received from the accreditation process to help us to better prepare future school teachers and leaders,” said Dr. Daniel Lee, UM education associate dean.

Contact: Adrea Lawrence, dean of the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education, adrea.lawrence@mso.umt.edu.

Launch UM virtual tour.
MISSOULA – Monica Difort grew up in Kalispell and graduated from Glacier High School. She attended college in upstate New York as a pre-med major, but she came to realize “there is so much more to health care than just interactions between patients and health care providers.”

Inspired by classes that examine the intersection of science, technology and society, she found herself hunting for public health graduate programs on the East Coast. Imagine her surprise when she Googled that one of the best programs originated back in her home state at the University of Montana.

It was a program she could take online during evenings and weekends without disrupting her current job in Utica, New York. When she reached out to UM, the program’s director, Tony Ward, called her personally.

“He explained everything to me, and it just felt like a good fit,” Difort said. “Everyone was super nice, so I decided to go for it.”
She jumped into a program that recently was named the No. 16 best online Master of Public Health Program in the U.S. by EduMed.org. A public health degree prepares graduates to work in a variety of settings, including public health departments, hospitals and clinics, nonprofits, worksite wellness programs, human resource offices and community-based health agencies.

EduMed.org studied more than 7,700 accredited schools to compile its list. UM was one of only 6% of regionally accredited colleges and universities earned a ranked position. The online public health programs making the list were honored for quality, affordability and commitment to student success.

“Recent events with the pandemic really highlighted the importance of public health,” said Ward, a professor and chair of UM’s School of Public and Community Health Sciences. “We are seeing a significant increase in the number of public health and health care job opportunities. I know Monica is entering a growing career field.”

Earning a degree online is a new experience for Difort. She usually starts her day working full time from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at her local county health department. Then in the evenings, she works on her readings and logs into online discussions with other students. She also invests time completing her online degree on weekends.

“With online learning, you need to plan things out and make sure you are logging in every day,” Difort said. “You need to be disciplined, but the great thing is you can do it on your own time. It can work, even if you are working or have a family.”

She was surprised by the different backgrounds of her fellow students.

“People are from all over the place,” Difort said. “There are people from Alaska, Colorado, Virginia and Alabama … some of them are pretty rural. And there are so many different backgrounds. Some people already have MDs, and they are taking the class. It can be a little intimidating, but it’s really cool to learn from so many other people who have so much more experience, but also different experience.

“I can contribute among these people I really look up to, and we all learn from one another. So I think that has been the coolest part.”

Difort needs to complete one more online class to finish her degree, as well as two capstone
projects.

“I’m really kicking it down right now, hoping to graduate in December,” she said. “I’ve just been working so much – working and going to school. It’s been tough, but I know it will be rewarding in the end.”

###

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Launch UM virtual tour.
UM Honored for Online Public Health Education
Wild Sustenance: Innovative Course Introduces UM Students to Hunting

UM students hunt for sharp-tailed grouse on the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch in Dupuyer, Montana.
MISSOULA – As a salmon pink sunrise bathed the nearby Rocky Mountain range, a group of University of Montana students gathered, bundled against the chill, with their instructors and two eager pointing dogs for an introduction to upland bird hunting.

When the sun rose and their lesson began, they learned about gauges, chokes and how to read cover before setting out to hunt sharp-tailed grouse. Most of the students had never hunted before. Although they carried no guns and no birds were harvested on the two-hour foray, the students came away with a better understanding of what draws people to hunting.

“Almost all of us who are hunters learned from relatives and friends. We had opportunities,” said course instructor Joshua Millspaugh, UM’s Boone and Crockett Professor of Wildlife Conservation. “There is such an impediment to those who didn’t have that opportunity. The students that are here say, ‘I’ve always been interested in learning more, but I don’t know where to start.’

“And we give them that introduction,” he added. “But what we’d ultimately like to create here is a knowledgeable citizenry that understands the role of hunting in society and in conservation.”
Hanson had limited experience hunting. It wasn’t until the New Hampshire native transferred to UM last year that he decided to dive deeper into a sport that last year attracted more than 15 million Americans and generated more than $800 million in revenue nationally.

The first night at the ranch, Hanson reflected on his interest in hunting.

“There’s a bunch of different reasons why I want to learn how to hunt,” he said. "There’s ethical and environmental reasons and I guess spiritual reasons, too. I just want to be more connected to the land and more connected to my source of food.

“But I didn’t know the first thing about what I need to buy, and I don’t know what to do with it, once I buy it,” he added. “Hunting equipment is very expensive, and I’m a college student trying to just pay rent and buy groceries.”

During their stay at the ranch, 200 miles north of Missoula and owned by the Boone and Crockett Club, students learned about grizzly bears and how to avoid them, the basics of cooking wild game, firearm safety and archery, how to properly dress a white-tailed deer and why lead-free ammunition is better for wildlife, the environment and consumers.

In the evening, students shared their thoughts on the day’s events by writing in their class-required journals.

Madison Crane enrolled in Wild Sustenance having no issues with firing a rifle. It was what she would do with an animal after the harvest that was her concern.

For Madison Crane, a wildlife biology graduate student, it wasn’t so much firing a rifle that was front and center in her concerns.

“It’s what I do after,” she told the group. “Having the skills to properly care for an animal after I take the shot, whether it be tracking it or processing it.”

Crane, who grew up in New England in a family that didn’t hunt, said her exposure to the world of hunting came while working for a number of wildlife agencies over the years.
“I’ve had some really great opportunities to work with hunters,” said Crane. “And I feel I’ve finally been in Montana for enough years where I can feel comfortable on the landscape and feel like I’m ready to take that next step.”

Crane, one of five women in the class of 11, said finding mentors and fellow hunters is key for her to achieve a comfort level with a sport still dominated by men.

“I am hoping to get out with some of the people who are actually here,” she said. “And, I’ve got enough friends that also go hunting that I know I can trust and who are ethical hunters.”

The subject of ethical hunting, in fact, is central to the weekend activities and the campus classroom instruction that accompanies it. So, too, is respect for the animals that are harvested – a respect that includes using every part of the animal possible and the proper disposal of the parts that aren’t.

“We lead with ethics, because we feel strongly that is where hunting should start,” Millspaugh said. “Ethics should be a critical feature that people consider before they ever step in the field and identifying what their own individual code of ethics are and what they view as acceptable.”

Throughout the course, students are strongly encouraged to express their views on hunting no matter where they land on the subject.

“It’s important we put everything on the table when we are talking about this,” said course instructor Libby Metcalf, Joel Meier Distinguished Professor of Wildland Management at UM and associate dean in the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation. “We don’t want anything off limits. We want an open dialogue and set a stage to be a place for inviting conversation.

“Some students come in with a degree of skepticism,” she added. “And for some it’s a profound experience. We’ve had students at the end of the course say ‘Hunting isn’t for me.’ And that’s OK.”

Peter Whitney understands the valuable role that many hunting organizations have played in the conservation of game species, but as an outdoor enthusiast and
longtime vegetarian, he said he struggles with the idea of hunting.

As a graduate student in UM’s Parks, Tourism and Recreation Management program, Peter Whitney understands the valuable role that many hunting organizations have played in the conservation of game species. But as an outdoor enthusiast and longtime vegetarian, he struggles with the idea of hunting.

“The idea of eating meat brings up a lot of things to me that challenge my values. It feels selfish, like something I don’t necessarily need to connect with the environment more broadly,” Whitney said. “I enrolled in the class because I wanted to color the picture with a bit more nuance and think about my own values and not being so black and white, and explore the gray area in between.”

As the semester wound down, all three students said they learned as much about themselves as they did about harvesting game, and that their comfort level with the logistics of hunting had grown considerably.

Like many experienced hunters, each student said fitting this newly acquired sport into their busy lives presents more of a challenge than reading animal cover, but even if they never step onto a field again, their understanding of the role of hunting in society has been set.

And that, said Millspaugh, is what Wild Sustenance is all about.

“We try to be very clear up front that this class is more about how the student comes out on the other side,” Millspaugh said. “They may not ever hunt, but they will have a much better appreciation and touch point for what it is and the roles it serves.”

###

Major funding for the wild sustenance program is provided by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Missoula MT. The University of Montana is grateful for their continued financial
support and partnership.

**Postscript:** As Wild Sustenance drew to a close, students had an opportunity to hunt on land owned by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Jack Hanson harvested a four-point, 250-pound buck. He credited his instructors and the course with giving him the tools for success. “This was the coolest and most practical class I have ever taken,” Hanson said, “and my freezer is the proof.”

**Editor’s Note:** To learn more about UM’s Wild Sustenance class and view photos and videos from the weekend retreat to Teddy Roosevelt Memorial Ranch visit Wild Sustenance.

A feature film on the class also is available on YouTube.

**Contact:** Dave Kuntz, UM director of strategic communications, 406-243-5659, dave.kuntz@umontana.edu.

Launch UM virtual tour.
MISSouLA – This fall, University of Montana students are studying this question: What will lunch taste like in 2100?

On Friday, Nov. 18, students will team with UM Dining to participate in a group cooking class to actually experience the projected meal of diners 78 years from now. They will start cooking at
noon in the Missoula Food Bank and Community Center’s Learning Kitchen.

The cooking class is part of a semester-long course, Soil-to-Soil: Food and Climate. The course is being taught by Peter McDonough, the UM Climate Change Studies director, and Caroline Stephens, a PEAS Farm lecturer with UM Environmental Studies Program.

Ingredients may be unexpected, like bison, prickly pear, lentils or mushrooms. Each animal and vegetable has been selected by students for resilience to future climate models for western Montana, as well as nutritional quality and accessibility.

“Climate change and an unsustainable food system are creating an unprecedented challenge – and golden opportunity – to reimagine what we eat and how we get it,” McDonough said. “Soil-to-Soil is the first course of its kind at UM. It gets into the weeds, so to speak, on issues of climate – from food production to distribution to consumption to waste.”

Stephens said the course is experiential and field-trip based, following food from the soil where food is grown and then, ideally, to the soil it becomes once composted. Since August, students have visited farms, ranches, seed libraries, food hubs, restaurants and grocery stores, trying to understand Missoula’s food system and its vulnerability, resilience and adaptability in regard to the climate crisis.

Soil-to-Soil is a collaboration between two areas of expertise on UM’s campus: climate solutions with the Climate Changes Studies minor program, and food systems and sustainable agriculture in the Environmental Studies Program.

Laura Granlund, a registered dietician, and Brian Heddlesten with UM Dining will partner on the Nov. 18 class. Environmental Studies graduate student Elyse Caiazzo is the teaching assistant for this course.

###

**Contact:** Caroline Stephens, PEAS farm lecturer, UM Environmental Studies program, 502-797-8266, caroline.stephens@mso.umt.edu.

Launch UM virtual tour.
Innovative UM Farm Class Imagines Future Food
Beginning in middle school, MT Aims participants receive exposure to science, technology, engineering and math to help build an accessible pathway to college and STEM careers.
MISSOULA – University of Montana programs that support the success of Montana’s Native American population through STEM and higher education have received a $250,000 gift from the Cognizant Foundation.

The gift ensures the continued growth and sustainability of the Montana American Indians in Math and Science program. Known as MT AIMS, the program provides early exposure to STEM fields for Native middle and high school students and supports students’ transition to higher education, helping build an accessible pathway to college and careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

The Cognizant Foundation support also will help UM launch the Indigenous First-Year Experience program, new for the 2022-23 academic year. That program will foster a supportive cohort of first-year American Indian students while connecting them with critical resources to ensure a successful start to their college experience.

“These initiatives address the fact that Native American students face barriers to higher education and that Native American students are far less likely than their non-Native peers to major in a STEM field,” said Aaron Thomas, a UM associate professor of chemistry and director of Indigenous Research and STEM Education.

MT AIMS starts at the middle school level, when student interest in math and science begin to decrease. Only a third of Native students are considered math and science proficient by the end of eighth grade. By 10th grade, even fewer are proficient in these areas and continue to fall behind their non-Native peers.

Entering its fifth year, MT AIMS provides opportunities for students from Montana’s Tribal reservations to engage in STEM activities through free summer programming on the UM campus and academic year follow-up visits to students’ home schools.

Middle school students begin in Gatherings, a 10-day immersion into STEM disciplines that includes computer assembly and community building through residential living on campus and fun evening and weekend activities. Middle school students return for Journeys, a five-day residential program where they dive deeper into a single STEM discipline.

High school students attend Pathways, a 12-day program of morning classes and project-based learning, such as building solar cars or rockets. High school graduates then participate in summer programming before their freshman year, preparing them for their college
UM Native Excellence Programs Receive $250,000 Cognizant Foundation Gift

Thomas said MT AIMS has been enthusiastically embraced, with the camp growing exponentially to capacity each summer. Nineteen students enrolled in the first camp as middle schoolers in 2019. The 2022 camp saw 85 students in grades between six through 10 participate. Next summer will see the first cohort of Pathways students in 11th and 12th grades. Within a decade the program’s vision is to serve 500 students annually.

UM’s new Indigenous First-Year Experience includes a freshman seminar class, weekly study tables and tutoring, and mentoring by peers, faculty and tribal community members.

“We are so grateful for this gift from the Cognizant Foundation,” Thomas said. “Their support helps build an accessible pathway to college and careers in STEM fields.”

Since its founding in 2018, the Cognizant Foundation has served historically excluded communities through the delivery of industry-relevant education, technical skills training programs and critical research needed to modernize the ways we educate and employ our workforce.

UM has a longtime partnership with ATG, a Cognizant company founded and based in Missoula, which provides consulting and implementation services focused on the Salesforce Platform. Their work together includes a joint program that provides upskilling to Montanans to prepare them to work for companies like ATG and Cognizant.

“The University of Montana has been an integral part of Cognizant ATG’s growth, and we are thrilled Cognizant has invested in the University’s MT AIMS and Indigenous First-Year Experience programs to bolster pathways to college and STEM careers for Native American students across the state of Montana,” said Tom Stergios, ATG senior vice president of strategy, IP and offerings.

MT AIMS and Indigenous First Year Experience programs support UM’s focus on student success and its goal to steward its Excellence in Native American Education Plan, which provides a roadmap for UM’s path to inclusive excellence.

The Excellence in Native American Education Plan, together with the work of President Seth Bodnar’s Native American Advisory Council, build upon an already significant array of resources for Native American students at UM. In addition to a dedicated American Indian
UM Native Excellence Programs Receive $250,000 Cognizant Foundation Gift

Student Services department, resources include financial scholarships, cultural clubs, events, mentoring, tutoring, resources referrals and dedicated advising.

For UM’s and the state’s sizable Native American population, the results achieved through the plan and the advisory council are promising. Since 2018, the University’s Native American student enrollment has increased by 26% and Native American student first-to-second-year retention has increased by 17%.

The UM Foundation is an independent nonprofit organization that has inspired philanthropic support to enhance excellence and opportunity at UM since 1950.

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Launch UM virtual tour.
UM Native Excellence Programs Receive $250,000 Cognizant Foundation Gift
Foreign scholars visit Glacier National Park as part of a program administered by UM’s Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center.
MISSOULA – The University of Montana’s Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center was awarded a $7.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of State to lead a series of institutes dedicated to enhancing global understanding of the U.S.

The funding will allow UM to design and oversee six multiweek integrated institutes serving more than 300 foreign faculty members, scholars and practitioners over the course of three years.

“Earning this grant contributes to the center’s ranking as the top UM unit in research expenditures so far this year in support of the University’s R1 research status,” said Deena Mansour, the Mansfield Center executive director. “The funding highlights our capacity to compete not only on the merits of our Montana programming, but also on our proven nationwide and global capacity.”

The institutes fall under the Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI) branch, offering a nonpartisan, interdisciplinary approach to areas critical to national foreign policy goals. SUSI promotes a U.S. National Security Strategy recognizing that perceptions of the U.S. by people around the world have a significant impact on our freedom and prosperity. By promoting an understanding of the people, institutions, and culture of the U.S., foreign audiences are better able to appreciate issues germane to U.S. national security priorities.

In addition to implementing an institute on contemporary American literature, the Mansfield Center will oversee institutes at Arizona State University, the University of Delaware, the Institute for Training and Development in Massachusetts, the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute and New York University. Partner themes include the media, U.S. foreign policy, economics and sustainable development, American politics, and U.S. culture and society.

The Mansfield Center was awarded the grant in part based on its successful performance in implementing a prior three-year grant for scholars with a local theme of workforce development.

“The shift in theme is critical to supporting global understanding of the United States,” said SUSI program officer Anne Hanson. “There are few better ways to understand people than through reading their stories.”

Nearly 60 scholars have attended the Mansfield SUSI program over the past three years, with
UM’s Mansfield Center Awarded $7.5M to Support Nationwide Scholar Exchanges

demonstrated impact in their home countries.

“During SUSI, we were provided an understanding of the U.S. educational system as it relates to workforce development, including instructional strategies, the linkage between innovation and better job opportunities, and the importance of a partnership between universities and employers to develop curriculum,” said Dizimalta dos Santos Miquitaio of Mozambique. “This was a paradigm shift and reinforces the importance of early job exposure and creating permanent internships, which are key to my project, which is focused on reevaluating curriculum development at my university.”

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center was created to enhance mutual understanding between the U.S. and Asia and to foster ethical public policy and leadership. The center builds understanding among people and cultures, while fostering globally minded leaders of integrity in Montana and around the world.

For more information on Mansfield programs, visit www.umt.edu/mansfield

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Launch UM virtual tour.
UM’s Mansfield Center Awarded $7.5M to Support Nationwide Scholar Exchanges
UM EARNS $2.5M GRANT AS NATIONAL LEADER FOR PROMOTING STEM DIVERSITY

03 NOVEMBER 2022
UM earns $2.5M grant as national leader for promoting STEM diversity

Chemistry Professor Aaron Thomas helped UM earn a $2.5 million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to boost student diversity in STEM fields.

MISSOULA – University of Montana chemistry Professor Aaron Thomas continues to burnish his credentials as a national leader for helping diversify STEM fields.

In his latest effort, Thomas helped UM earn a prestigious $2.5 million grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to help increase the percentage of Indigenous, Black and other underrepresented students of color entering STEM fields.

UM was one of six universities nationally selected to receive the grant, and the only one in Montana. According to HHMI, these first Driving Change grants were “awarded to finalists who made strong arguments for their readiness to embark on a change journey with experiments that held the best promise for helping the whole community.”

A member of the Navajo Nation, Thomas directs UM Indigenous Research and STEM Education. In his own research, he studies mechanical separation of gases and biological species.
UM has a number of people, programs and initiatives to support our Native American students in STEM, but more needs to be done,” he said. “This new HHMI support will help us focus on student activities and programming across the institution that will help move UM to the next level.”

He said the new funding will help UM become a national model for preparing, supporting and learning from its Native students, faculty and staff. It will help the University acknowledge the uniqueness of its Native populations, while incorporating Indigenous cultural knowledge and historical experiences into the curriculum, teaching and administrative practices.

The grant also will cultivate reciprocal collaboration with tribal communities and ensure pathways to UM and meaningful careers. Additionally, it will help create systems of support and enrichment to help Native students excel at UM, Thomas said.

“This award is a major achievement,” said Scott Whittenburg, UM vice president for research and creative scholarship. “It demonstrates a shared commitment from both the University and HHMI – the largest, private, biomedical research institution in the nation – to support our STEM Native American students by broadening our instruction to include place-based knowledge and Indigenous ways of knowing.”

Thomas said UM will implement a number of activities focused on helping Native students succeed, including first-year programming in STEM, childcare opportunities and emergency funding. Across the University, programming will include place-based education for employees and creating Indigenous STEM curriculum in collaboration with tribal partners.

Thomas readily admits he isn’t a one-man show. The UM team of Julie Baldwin, Ke Wu, Frederick Peck, Naomi Kimbell, Brad Hall, Nathan Lindsay and Whittenburg all played key roles in bringing the HHMI grant to campus.

Black, Indigenous, Latino and other students of color initially select majors in science-related fields at the same rate as white students, according to HHMI. However, they graduate with STEM bachelor degrees at half the rate of white and Asian students. HHMI launched its Driving Change initiative in 2019 to help address this serious diversity problem.

From 99 research universities that submitted pre-proposals, 38 were selected as finalists, and those formed the “Driving Change Learning Community.” Since then the group, with 180
university representatives, has met every few months.

Awarding the first six Driving Change grants is just one early step in a much longer journey, according to Sara Simmons, the Driving Change program lead, and David Asai, the HHMI science education senior director. The expectation is that lessons learned from the grantees as they implement their programs will feed back into the larger community, “helping each one raise the bar for institutional change on their own campuses.”

The HHMI award is just the latest earned by UM and Thomas to increase diversity in STEM fields. This past August, Thomas helped land $10 million in funding to increase representation of Alaska Natives and Native Americans in STEM disciplines across the West. He was the principal investigator for the National Science Foundation award to fund a six-state collaborative called Cultivating Indigenous Research Communities for Leadership in Education, or the CIRCLES Alliance.

Thomas also helped secure a $740,000 NSF award for CIRCLES and STEM diversity efforts in October 2020. He also oversees a five-year $3.3 million Department of Education grant called Montana American Indians in Math and Science (MT AIMS), which encourages Native students across the state in grades six through 10 to consider STEM fields.

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Launch UM virtual tour.
UM Earns $2.5M Grant as National Leader for Promoting STEM Diversity
UM’s Defense Critical Language and Culture Program is one of nine Department of Defense Language Training Centers in the U.S. that provide critical language and cultural classes to the military.

MISSOULA – U.S. Air Force Maj. Evan Hanson felt so positive about his experiences as a University of Montana student he took to LinkedIn to promote his courses. He had just finished four weeks at UM’s Defense Critical Language and Culture Program in Missoula and wrote:

“Each day, I had the privilege of talking about #logistics, history, economics, security and public health in Sub-Saharan Africa. From the Belt Road Initiative to the Wagner Group, we covered it all … & we did it in French.”
As Hanson explains in his post, such language and cultural competencies provide military members like himself with the critical skills needed to navigate an everchanging world, whether they are posted abroad or not.

“I had some background in French before I took the class but wanted to reinvigorate my language skills,” said Hanson, who is stationed at Hill Air Force Base in Utah and is a member of the Language Enabled Airman Program, which develops service members with working-level foreign language proficiency. “You could drop me in France now and I would be fine.”

Launched in 2008, UM’s DCLCP is one of nine Department of Defense Language Training Centers in the United States. Housed in the University’s Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, it provides intensive language and cultural classes to all branches of the military, the Montana National Guard, U.S. Central Command and numerous intelligence agencies such as the FBI.

The list of languages that make up its curriculum changes as world dynamics ebb and flow, but its most recent offerings range from Modern Standard Arabic to Tagalog to Norwegian. The program’s 86 faculty members are heritage speakers, and most can converse in multiple languages.

“I like to say our success hinges on three factors,” said Don Loranger, a retired Air Force major general and DCLCP program director. “Faculty, faculty and faculty.”

All the instructors, Loranger said, are assistant or adjunct professors in linguistics and certified by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a national organization dedicated to the improvement of language instruction.

In the early days of the program, classes only were taught in Missoula, but as DCLCP’s reputation grew, so too did its geographic footprint. Today, UM’s faculty also teach at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Fort Campbell in Kentucky and Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington. Online instruction also is a part of DCLCP’s offering.

Although far from the Oval, studying on base is still very much a UM experience, said Shaima Khinjani, manager of DCLCP’s academic programs.

“When you visit the classrooms, you see a lot of Grizzly swag,” she said. “It’s really important to them to keep that connection to UM.”
As site lead for Chinese instruction at Fort Bragg, Tong Sun said she’s accustomed to training students with no experience in her native language, as well as much knowledge of Chinese culture.

“It’s extremely important to know both, because language and culture are inseparable,” she said.

Humor, Sun noted as an example, often doesn’t translate, and while pronouncing words correctly is important, being understandable is critical.

“I like to think that if my mom can understand them, they are good,” Sun said.

French instructor Bilguissa Mulder grew up in Senegal and serves as assistant site manager at Fort Bragg. She finds particular satisfaction in seeing the camaraderie that develops between instructors and students and the energy generated as students acquire a growing understanding of a country’s language and its culture.

“When we help them learn to actually love a language, it’s outstanding,” she said.

Federal Judge Don Molloy, a former naval aviator, has toured DCLCP’s classroom in Missoula and witnessed several U.S. Marine Corps students speaking Pashto and Urdu with senior officers from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“The look on the officer’s faces was extraordinary,” Molloy recalled. “It was a remarkable revelation to them that the American military engages in cultural and communication training so the students can talk just like you and I are talking.”

Loranger said measured outcomes, of course, ultimately matter, and the staff members continue to work closely with the Department of Defense to tailor the program to its requirements, including set levels of proficiency. Here, the quality of DCLCP’s staff and the immersive style of its teaching program has led to impressive test results, he said.

“The bottom line is our students learn their languages to assigned target levels 30% faster than the DOD standard,” Loranger said. “That leads to significant savings to our partner organizations.”
First Lt. Curt Smith spent part of his summer studying Spanish at DCLCP’s Missoula classroom.

A B-52 pilot stationed at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, Smith said he and fellow classmates studied more advanced lessons to take their skills to the next level. Like Hanson he sees great value in having service personnel versed in other language and cultures.

“The Air Force is deployed all over the globe,” he said. “We need people who can relate to the local populace and communicate with them in their language.”

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