

LETTER OF INTENT
July 20, 2018

Laura Horton, Co-Chair
Ray Barnhardt, Co-Chair and the
Board of Accreditation/Affirmation
World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium

RE: Letter of Intent.

Dear Accreditation Board:

The Department of Native American Studies (NAS), Montana State University (MSU), Bozeman, Montana, is pleased to submit this Letter of Intent, to affirm our desire to seek accreditation from the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC).

The Native American Studies Department applied for and received provisional accreditation in December of 2008. There were no conditions set for the removal of the provisional status, as the recommendations of the Review Team was that WINHEC reexamine its criteria “to meet the needs of NAS programs, departments and colleges in mainstream universities” (Draft Report of the Review Team to the Native American Studies Department, Melbourne, Australia, December 2008). We then assume that this Letter of Intent is being offered as a new application, not a renewal or re-accreditation, as no resolution of the original provisional status has yet occurred.

We are, herein, addressing three questions as per your procedures. They are:

1. Who are you as an Indigenous/Native education organization?

The Department of Native American Studies is an academic unit within the College of Letters and Science at Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana. The department was established in 1974 as the Center for Native American Studies and was awarded departmental status in 2004, following the establishment of a Master’s degree in Native American Studies.

There is an obvious deeper question about what constitutes an Indigenous or Native educational organization that we endeavor to address in our self-study and more formal application for accreditation. Obviously, the Review Team in 2008 struggled with how an Indigenous Studies department within a mainstream educational institution can be compared to institutions that are wholly Indigenous, like Tribal Colleges.

A simple response to the question, who are you, as an Indigenous educational organization, might be that we serve 712 Native students and 12 Native communities. More deeply is that we acknowledge that our institution sits in tribal homelands of multiple tribes and that, as a Land Grant Institution, we have a commitment to serve the citizens of the State of Montana. Our departmental values are specific to our commitment to the Native communities and are rooted in the following: Honesty, Generosity, Kindness & Inclusivity, Hard Work, Family, Spirituality, Humor and Respect. We embrace four guiding principles of our collaborative tribal college partners, *vis.*, Holism (integrated, multi-disciplinary and team-oriented approaches); Sacredness of Land and Food (environmental stewardship and sustainability); Cultural Identity (the promotion of understanding and respect of cultural difference and sustainability); and Cultural Visibility (seeking problem-oriented solutions with direct benefits to our Indigenous communities). Our “Indigeneity” does not derive from one tribal orientation as our program serves multiple tribes, but the cultural values we venerate are recognizable to many Indigenous communities.

2. Whom do you serve?

Our constituents include the general student body at MSU (with Fall Semester enrollment of 16,703), Native students (Fall Semester enrollment of 712), the seven tribal colleges, tribes of the seven Indian reservations in the State of Montana, and Native people of Montana. Montana has a Native population of ~ 66,000 which represents 6.7% of Montana’s general population; more importantly, Native children represent 16% of K-12 school population. And, of course, we are an academic unit within the College of Letters and Sciences at Montana State University, within the Montana University System, and so serve the citizenry of the State of Montana.

Montana State University is a land grant university, founded in 1893, its mission rooted in ideals embedded in the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, that a land-grant university education should be open to all qualified students, regardless of class, ethnicity, race or gender. In 1994, tribal colleges in the United States were designated as tribal land grant institutions. We value our partnerships with the tribal colleges to better serve the needs of tribal communities in a spirit of true equality.

3. Why are you seeking WINHEC accreditation? How will this WINHEC accreditation advance your Institution/org/school/program’s purpose?

While we pride ourselves on the quality of our program and the services we offer our constituents, WINHEC accreditation affirms that our programs are grounded in traditional cultural values. Accreditation will assure applicants that MSU’s Native American Studies programs value indigenous ways of thinking and doing, while maintaining high expectations of quality in teaching, outreach, integration, and research/creative activities. We support tribal

sovereignty and strive to honor Indigenous communities as the custodians of cultural knowledge. Thus, WINEHC accreditation assures the World that the Department of Native American Studies takes seriously its responsibility to provide quality educational experiences with consideration of Native philosophies and worldviews. We employ Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Indigenous methodologies in Indian Country and in its research mission, the Department of Native American considers and embraces relevant cultural and linguistic needs as identified by the community members, themselves.

WINHEC accreditation will also assure that the Native American Studies program has credibility within the Academy as having met and exceeded measures of quality. We recognize the necessity and desire for growth and improvement that a rigorous external review can provide.

Lastly, accreditation is a measure of our success in “indigenizing” our campus as we have pressed for meaningful inclusion of Native perspectives in the MSU Academic Strategic Planning process, Diversity Implementation, Core Curriculum Revision, as well as other institutional efforts to better meet our goals in Learning, Discovery, Engagement, Integration, Access, and Stewardship.

Thank you, WINHEC Accreditation Board members, for the unique opportunity to present our case for the applicability of our program to seek accreditation.

Sincerely,

Walter Fleming

Walter C. Fleming, PhD
(Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas)
Department Head and Professor
wflaming@montana.edu
(406)994-3881