



IMPROVING NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION

Improving Native American Education

Programs aimed at Native students draw on the unique culture, traditions and history of tribal communities.

by [Steve Moore and Max Williams, M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust and The Oregon Community Foundation](#)

At a time when communities of color are challenged at every level of education, the problems facing Native American communities stand out. The high school graduation rate for Native Americans is barely above 50 percent. Of the few who do attend college, less than 40 percent earn a Bachelor's degree in six years.

There's never been a magic fix for Native American issues because each community is unique. What works in Montana might not work in Alaska, and what's effective in Alaska won't necessarily be effective in Oregon or Washington. Furthermore, within each community the solution that might seem obvious isn't always the best solution.

Too often in the past, foundations have dropped into Native American communities, distributed money and left – with very little understanding of the community’s priorities and hoped-for outcomes. That’s why the [M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust](#) and [The Oregon Community Foundation](#) (OCF) are pursuing a different strategy. While different in structure – one a private foundation and the other a community foundation – what our two foundations share is the belief that the knowledge of how to change outcomes comes from those on the frontlines.

In the Native community, we learned, for example, that cultural activities are especially important – and yet many people working with Native communities are not knowledgeable about that community’s culture. So Murdock supported the Juneau-based [Sealaska Heritage Institute](#). The Institute runs orientations for local public school teachers focusing on Native American culture and language and guides them in how to make Native American kids feel comfortable in the classroom. The Institute also created an afterschool program to teach math and measurements through traditional basket weaving and canoe building.

Another area where we took a different approach is in STEM education—science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In Bellingham, Washington, [Northwest Indian College](#) identified a need to increase technological literacy. It would have been tempting—and certainly more glamorous—to put a laptop or a tablet in the hands of every student. It would also have been largely pointless. What we heard when we sat down to talk through the issues facing the school was, “That doesn’t really help us, because most kids don’t have connectivity at home.”

In the Native community, cultural activities are especially important – and yet many people working with Native communities are not knowledgeable about that community’s culture.

What they needed was to get students easy access to better wireless services, as well as more computers. In 2012, Murdock partnered with the college through a grant of \$400,000 to build out its infrastructure so students can have access to technology on campus. The result has been a unique melding of old and new. For example, Native environmental science major Amy Irons uses modern technology to keep track of her data in order to study the “ancient technology” of creating clam gardens. “I want to show how these ancient technologies are important not just for food, but for a tribe’s history, culture and how important it is for elders to teach them to future generations to preserve part of their culture,” said Irons. Now Irons is engaged in a growing regional research program at universities across the region that is also funded in part by Murdock.

A third example is our work with the [Native American Youth and Family Center](#) (NAYA) in Portland, which has offered education and culturally specific programming for Native youth and families for the past 40 years. Last year, NAYA offered services to over 750 Native Americans and Alaskan Natives ages 6-24. Services included an Early College Academy, academic mentoring, summer camp, gang outreach, homeless services and cultural activities.

Many kids don’t come to NAYA thinking they want to improve their education. They’re tired of being on the street. They want to break the cycle of hopelessness. Opportunity and education can

help do that, but more important is having a place to come to that feels like home – with staff that feels like family. NAYA offers that and more. OCF has invested more than \$300,000 in NAYA over the past five years to support summer learning programs, leadership development, parenting education, dance and sport. In that same period, Murdock has invested over \$400,000 to support STEM education and programs for youth and families. Murdock’s support also facilitated an upgrade of technology, which enabled NAYA to better distribute its curriculum to students, materials that were developed as a result of OCF’s support.

What makes the approach unique is that we try to come alongside and learn from our non-profit partners. We aren’t here to tell NAYA how to do their work or serve their population. We’re here to learn and provide a catalyst that allows them to grow their impact.

A final example is our work in Central Oregon, where a multi-year OCF grant is helping the [Warm Springs Tribe](#) work together with its local school to expand during- and after-school programming focused on building cultural resiliency and academic success for middle school students. Students participate in culturally based writing and math programs serving the dual purpose of improving academic skills and helping them connect to their culture.

In the post-secondary arena, OCF is helping more students aspire to, and prepare for, college and career training. The OCF Howard Vollum Scholarship is just one example of how we’re doing that. Vollum, a cofounder of Tektronix, Inc., noticed a lack of Native Americans with the skills to be hired by his company. He created a fund to do two things: make grants to give elementary and high school students access to science and math classes at Portland’s [Saturday Academy](#) and to award scholarships to Native American students in Metropolitan Portland Metro or Clark County, Washington, who were enrolled in STEM undergraduate or graduate studies. Ten students each year receive these scholarships, renewable each year for seven years. The scholarship has transformed the lives of literally hundreds of students. One of those is Theresa Monteverdi, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, youngest of nine – and brought up in 11 foster care homes. Theresa received a Vollum scholarship to go to medical school. Monteverdi now sits on an OCF committee to help decide the next Vollum scholars.

“We’re the first people in this nation and we have many strengths, but we’re still disenfranchised,” Theresa said. “This type of scholarship creates and maintains this path for Native youth to be anything they want to be.”

Supporting cultural competency, STEM education, mentoring and parenting: these are just a few examples of ways we can affect change. We’ve been in these communities a long time and plan to be in these communities for much longer. When we’re back at Northwest Indian College for the third time this year, for example, we’ll ask, “What are you seeing? What are you hearing? Whom should we be listening to?” That’s when people begin to introduce you to their friends and those friends introduce new ideas, new perspectives and new solutions to problems that have to be solved. Truly effective change starts with a conversation.

We know we need strong partnerships with the communities, multi-year investments in effective programs, continuous evaluation and a coalition of those in the philanthropic community to