



## **One Tribal College's Interdisciplinary Community Engagement Initiative to Combat Diabetes**

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Turtle Mountain Community College's interdisciplinary, community engagement initiative to combat the critically severe problem of diabetes on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in north central North Dakota originated out of a need to change and improve the composition program at the college.

Peggy Johnson, Associate Professor of Arts and Humanities at TMCC, was dissatisfied with the quality of the final papers her students were submitting in Composition II classes and felt changes had to be made. She required students to choose a problem and do research to arrive at an appropriate solution and then defend that solution in a paper. Many students, however, seemed more concerned about meeting the graduation requirement than they were about acquiring useful skills in researching and writing. They sought the easiest, not necessarily the most effective, way to complete the paper, paying little attention to the quality of the sources they found or the validity of the solution they advocated.

Peggy Johnson speculated that engaging students in a community effort to combat the ravages of diabetes might be a way to connect the college classroom with the world outside the classroom window. She hoped that doing so would help students understand the need for seeking good sources of information upon which to plan a course of action.

During the spring semester of 2005, Johnson's students researched the problem of diabetes and worked with community partners to make the public aware of the problem of diabetes and what could be done about it. The papers each student wrote advocating a solution to some aspect of the diabetes problem were encouraging. Not only did the quality of the papers improve, but more students completed the course than in previous semesters, and students responded positively to the experience.

Peggy and her husband Andy Johnson, an Assistant Professor of Arts and Humanities at TMCC who also teaches Composition II classes, decided after Peggy's encouraging results with service learning to include the problem of diabetes as a service learning project in all of the Composition II classes. They hoped that including service learning would improve the quality of the Composition II classes while also promoting long-term learning, rather than the short-term learning that faculty have long recognized as a problem at the college.

When the college received funding through a Learn and Serve Supporting Actions for Engagement (SAFE) grant via the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE), the service learning project was expanded to include other academic disciplines as well. The goals of the grant included

- Making faculty, staff, board members, and community partners more aware of service learning and leadership
- Getting more full-time and adjunct faculty and students actively involved in service learning and civic engagement activities
- Improving student retention by getting students actively involved in learning.

Initially the Johnsons hoped to have at least four full-time and two adjunct instructors include service learning (pertaining to the problem of diabetes on the reservation) in their classes by the end of the spring 2006 semester, with at least 175 students participating. They were pleasantly surprised when the actual number of full-time and adjunct instructors who included service learning in their classes was more than triple what they had hoped.

One of the most successful events of the years was a special day called Creating for Health in which many instructors involved their students. The event was held on March 28 for all of the third graders in the county. On that day, approximately 270 children went to various stations that were planned to educate them about the need for healthy lifestyle choices and how the choices they make impact their lives. This day was sponsored by the college along with the 5 + 5 Coalition and the Boys and Girls Club. Since March is nutrition month as well as art month, art instructor Cynthia Jelleberg suggested, and with the help of her students and community partners, planned activities that were appropriate for both. Children created food art (with the assistance of students from art classes) while also hearing from a nutritionist (a member of the 5 + 5 Coalition) about the ingredients in the foods and the importance of remembering the food pyramid when they choose foods. They also participated in a wide variety of physical activities (facilitated by members of a number of physical education classes taught by various instructors) and learned about the impact of exercises on the body. The science department taught the children about what is in the food they eat and had them use scales to weigh the amount of sugar in different popular foods. The early childhood classes shared a video on foods with the children and had them sample a variety of foods that most of them had not eaten before. Students from the English classes had done research and prepared a number of displays for the children showing them what is in the foods they eat and how long they would have to do various exercises to burn the calories in those foods. Others had gathered recipes to show ways in which popular foods can be made healthier. Business classes took care of the correspondence and created brochures for the event and also helped with registration the day of the event. Students from Student Government also assisted the day of the event to assure that everything would go smoothly. Full-time as well as adjunct faculty from a wide variety of disciplines, including science, art, English, business, math, physical education, and early childhood, involved their students in the activities.

One of the positive outcomes of the Creating for Health day was watching students take cues from instructors and assume leadership roles. Initially, students stood

back and watched the veteran teachers get the activities going, but once students saw how teachers were running the activities, they started to do more. Since each activity ran six different times so that all third graders could participate in each one, the college students had a great opportunity to see effective teaching modeled and to learn from it. By the end of the day, the teachers were the ones standing back and watching as college students assumed responsibility for the activities.

Another positive result of the Creating for Health day was students and faculty—both full-time and adjunct--from a variety of disciplines worked together with various community partners to make it a success. So often faculty are isolated from those who teach out of their particular discipline and even more so from the community, and doing something together has a positive impact on faculty relations and relations with the community. Adjunct faculty are also often left “out of the loop,” so the day provided a wonderful opportunity for them to be included.

While service to the community is not a new concept at Turtle Mountain Community College, the manner in which that service is provided has changed in recent years. Service to community has been part of the college’s mission since the college began as one of the original six tribal colleges established by various Indian Tribes in the early 1970s. In earlier years, community service was often volunteerism, which was not always tied to course goals and objectives. With the diabetes initiative, students and community partners have become involved in activities that benefit the community while also being relevant to the learning objectives of the courses students are taking. Faculty also see real service to the community, which draws upon learned skills in the classroom, as a way to ultimately better prepare students to take their purposeful places in society after graduation.

Service learning is also a culturally relevant and natural way to involve students in the community. The Ojibwa people have always believed in helping others and are quick to reach out and respond whenever a need arises. Family ties are also very important, and large extended families continue to be the norm. When students go home and share what they have learned with their families, they are having an impact on the community. When they go beyond their families and share their findings with the larger community, they are also having a positive impact on their community.

Since the students’ research includes looking at factors that contribute to the problem of diabetes, including genetic links as well as lifestyle changes in recent years, they are discovering things about the nature of Indian society and using that knowledge to make a difference. While providing service to the community, they are gaining valuable experience in leadership and can take their experiences with them when they graduate.

One of the advantages of the service learning theme being used at Turtle Mountain Community College is that it lends itself well to a variety of disciplines. For composition students, the theme has been used as they learn how to do research, prepare thesis-based papers, and improve communication. Learning more about diabetes and its impact on the body has fit naturally into many science classes, while as students in physical education classes have learned the role that exercise plays both in preventing and controlling diabetes, their courses have been enhanced. Early Childhood classes

have become aware of how parenting practices affect children's risk of developing diabetes later in life and have had the opportunity to work with the Boys and Girls Club to teach parents and young children how to make changes to lessen the risk of diabetes. Art students have expressed the theme through quilted wall hangings, and sociology students have acquired survey skills by creating and administering surveys about diabetes. Whatever the class, there has been a way to blend in the theme of diabetes while still meeting the objectives of the course.

At some point, faculty and students who have participated in service learning relating to the theme of diabetes in many classes may grow weary of the subject. If so, another theme for service learning may be chosen or the current one may be expanded to include other health issues. However, student reflections as well as comments from community partners and those who have participated in service learning activities suggest that the thematic, interdisciplinary approach to service learning is effective and is worth continuing at Turtle Mountain Community College.