

UWO teacher-ed collaboration with Wyoming tribal college to graduate first students

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A three-year-old collaboration that connected teacher-education students at a tribal college in Wyoming and faculty at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh will see its first graduates cross the stage and earn diplomas at Kolf Sports Center on Dec. 14.

Graduates from Wind River Tribal College in central Wyoming will participate in the Midyear Commencement ceremony at UW Oshkosh – the collaboration’s first cohort to reach graduation. The students took the opportunity to earn credits toward an associate’s degree and a bachelor’s degree at Wisconsin’s third-largest institution two years ago and are now reaching the program’s finish line.

The tribal college serves primarily nontraditional students from the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone tribes. In fall 2010, Wind River and UW Oshkosh established their relationship and partnered on the elementary-teacher-education endeavor – a collaboration fueled by the Department of Education and Office of Indian Education grants. Fourteen Wind River students began the journey and committed themselves to achieving a degree from UW Oshkosh.

Like any cross-country collaboration of its kind, the program experienced its share of bumps in the road, and the students involved faced their share of challenges.

But Marlin Spoonhunter, Wind River Tribal College president, said the commitment of his students and UW Oshkosh faculty was stellar. The students – most have jobs as Head Start instructors on the reservation where Wind River is based – were determined to finish, even taking six-to-seven-hour-long classes over the weekends and in summers while their families made sacrifices. Meanwhile, UW Oshkosh College of Education and Human Services professors Susan Finkel and Suzanne Doemel made trips to the Wyoming reservation to teach the courses.

“There were times we couldn’t find instructors to teach the classes,” Spoonhunter said. “(UW Oshkosh faculty) really went far beyond what they had to do. It’s because of the love of teaching and what they do.”

The grant enabled Wind River students to receive their education on the reservation and remain in their current jobs. It also supported the students’ books, child care costs and some other expenses.

“In the end, it paid off for all their families,” Spoonhunter said.

He said eight Wind River Tribal College students will make the trip to Oshkosh to participate in Commencement ceremonies on Dec. 14. Eleven students fulfilled the requirements to graduate.

“One man said it was the beginning of the end,” Spoonhunter said. “He gave us an analogy that it is like ‘you get ready for this big play, and you practice and practice, and you get ready for the final act.’ That’s kind of how he said he felt about the cohort. He said they all became family.”

It’s a reflection fitting for the program’s UW Oshkosh faculty members, too.

“I am so proud of the students who are coming through this program and feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to work with this project,” Finkel said.

“One of the reasons I became a teacher myself so many years ago, is that I wanted to have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the children I worked with in my classroom,” she said. “I’ve been lucky enough to have had that opportunity many times. The Wind River project, however, has made a difference in my life.”

Wind River student Judy Tizump is making the trip to Oshkosh for commencement. A Head Start teacher with eight students of her own all under age 3, Tizump said she has already been able to apply the early-childhood-learning knowledge imparted in the collaboration in her current classrooms. Like other Head Start teachers involved in the program, she will serve two more years in Head Start per the program agreement before exploring new opportunities with her bachelor’s degree.

“The classes (UW Oshkosh faculty) had to teach – I think that we got more of them than you could possibly imagine.” Tizump said.

“It was a wonderful opportunity,” she said. “We didn’t think we ever make it, and here we are, and it’s great.”

Christine Woolet is currently working as a tutor and substitute teacher in Wyoming. She said the Wind River-UW Oshkosh program marks her second return to school, but the new degree represents the first bachelor’s degree for a member of her immediate family.

“My biggest thing is when I first got into it -- it was like, ‘Oh my gosh; what did I get into?’” Woolet said. “I think if I didn’t have the support of both Suzanne (Doemel) and Susan (Finkel) and the huge support of my husband and my family in general, just supporting me throughout the time I was going to classes, that would have made a huge difference. Having my grandchildren cheer me on also made me want to do it.”

“I can’t even tell you how gratifying I feel just inside myself,” Woolet said. “... I want Oshkosh to know that I am ever so grateful that they were able to make this happen. Without them and their support, and the collaboration with the tribal college, it would never have happened... I can never tell them how grateful I am.”

Finkel said knowing the impact the collaboration will have on the pupils of the Wind River teachers is inspiring.

“I have learned so much from these students and their experiences that it is difficult for me to know where to begin,” she said. “I am a changed person because of this program. I also know that these

graduates are going to be leaders in the early childhood community and in their Head Start classrooms and will be responsible for making a difference in the lives of all of those children and their families. I am grateful to have been a part of this all.”

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- [Amid record stats, another 1,000+ to graduate at Dec. 14 Commencement](#)
- [UW Oshkosh Commencement](#)