



Fort Peck Community College
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Poplar, MT - Engaging empowerment through social work education: FPCC partners with UM 2+2 BSW program

"We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away."

Gregory Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart

When you walk into a human services class on the campus of Fort Peck Community College, you will see an eclectic group; young adults right out of high school, hardened military veterans, mothers focusing on their own education and identity, and elders continuing a life of learning. You will meet people in recovery and working to find balance in their lives, students determined to find connection, support, and a sense of worth. You will find people with strong cultural, political, and social opinions looking for an outlet in which those passions can be put into service for others. And in the space between those stories you will see strength and hope and potential.

The college serves as a representation of community and cultural capacity and how we come to understand and engage social issues will have impact decades into the future. FPCC students want to better understand themselves, their community, and the world they live in. And they want to create meaningful change that is significant to rural and native communities.

In 2015, the Human Services department reached out to universities in Montana and North Dakota to collaborate and network with programs that could support FPCC students interested in social work. The vision was three fold: to create educational opportunities that would allow students to gain bachelor's degrees while continuing to live and work within their own rural and tribal communities, to identify funding and support for education and practicum experiences in those communities, and to create a strong cohort of social work professionals committed to exploring the effects of trauma while also engaging in compassionate outreach to build wellness and resiliency.

The response has been in keeping with the spirit of the Fort Peck Reservation, unwavering support. FPCC and the University of Montana School of Social Work have an agreement to create a cohort of students who will work together to complete their BSW degrees online. Federal, state, and tribal programs are

supporting work, education, and funding services for this cohort. And our communities will be witness to its own potential, home grown students engaged in exploring community strengths and needs while shaping relevant approaches to restoration and healing.

The first piece of the project allows students to complete a degree in Human Services from FPCC. Upon meeting the academic requirements through FPCC, students can then apply to the UM School of Social Work 2+2 BSW program. This allows students to complete the final two years of the BSW in an online platform with support from both UM and FPCC staff. The final year of the program gives students an opportunity to complete a practicum in an area of interest.

Social workers trained through this project will possess the knowledge, skills and expertise needed to improve generalist case management effectiveness, positively impact family systems, and improve physical, social, and psychological outcomes for many at-risk populations. As members of the community, they share a common identity and strong connection and commitment to strengths-based outcomes on the reservation.

Many of the students who have expressed interest in the program have a story in keeping with the profession; being raised in foster care and wanting to change the system, breaking the cycle of multi-generational trauma, the use of humor to heal, supporting others in recovery from addiction, engaging the challenges of parenting and mental health, improving community response and support for people coming out of treatment and prison systems. Social justice is also a strong objective for many students. Whether it is policy reform at the tribal, state, or federal level or a commitment to bringing awareness to oppression in all its forms, students at FPCC will have the opportunity to tap into their own capacity to effectuate social engagement and change.

For more information on FPCC's Social Work 2+2 program, contact Loy Sprague at 406.768.6383 or email her at lsprague@fpcc.edu.