



CIRCLES
ALLIANCE

Newsletter

Spring 2026

Quarterly Notes from the Cultivating Indigenous Research Communities for Leadership in Education and STEM (CIRCLES) Alliance

Spotlight on the Faculty Nation Building Institute

The CIRCLES Faculty Nation Building Institute is underway with its second cohort of nine University of Idaho faculty from six academic departments who recently participated in a program orientation with the CIRCLES team. This initiative is designed to build faculty and institutional capacities for practicing balanced community-Tribal-University partnerships.

This year's cohort will engage in the (Re)Connecting with the 6 Rs workshop series, facilitated by Idaho EPSCoR, with a focus on three elements of the 6 R's framework: Responsibility, Representation, and Reciprocity.

In response to guidance from Idaho's CIRCLES Tribal Advisory Committee, the program is evolving its in-person experience. Rather than convening on campus, the culminating summer session is being planned as a community-based gathering with the Nez Perce Tribe, allowing faculty to connect concepts about Indigenized research practices with community-based learning and real-world outcomes. •



A gathering of last year's FNBI cohort

Prior Evaluation Findings from the CIRCLES Faculty Nation Building Institute

The CIRCLES evaluation team's preliminary findings from the first FNBI cohort indicate that:

- Faculty reported increased confidence in integrating Indigenous knowledge and research.
- Participants valued the opportunity to build relationships with tribal communities and colleagues across disciplines
- The in-person session was highlighted as essential for deepening understanding and commitment to Indigenous led research.

A Visit with Jorja Short and Madison Mundy

North Dakota CIRCLES' undergraduate research assistants are key players in the team's Indigenous STEM programming and events. They sat down recently to interview each other.

Madison's Questions for Jorja

What's one skill you developed from working with the CIRCLES Alliance?

One skill I've developed through my work with the CIRCLES Alliance is confidence, both in myself and in sharing my culture. Before joining CIRCLES, I never saw incorporating my Native identity into teaching as a priority. But through this organization, I've learned how important it is to bring cultural knowledge and perspectives into the classroom.

Being surrounded by supportive mentors and peers has helped me realize that people do value and want to learn about Native culture. This new confidence has shaped the way I approach teaching and learning. I now see cultural integration not as an extra, but as the foundation of my work. Sharing my traditions and history with both Native and non-Native students has made me a stronger educator and paraprofessional. Confidence might not always be listed as a "skill," but it has been one of the most powerful tools for my growth, helping me speak up, teach with pride, and represent my community authentically.



Short (L) and Mundy (R)

What's your favorite part about going home to your community or visiting family?

I really enjoy seeing my siblings when I go home. They are my whole world, and I love when I get to hang out with them. As for my community, I like to hear about good things that are happening, and I enjoy visiting the small businesses scattered about.

What song or playlist gets you motivated to work or study?

I like to listen to soft alternative songs when I am working or studying. It keeps me focused, and it is quiet enough to not distract me. It also depends on the seasons. Right now, I am playing a lot of Girl in Red and Smashing Pumpkins, but artists like The Marias, Clairo, and Tv Girl are all year round.

What's something you've learned from being part of a Native-centered research community like CIRCLES?

Being part of a Native American-centered research community like CIRCLES has taught me so much. I've had the opportunity to assist Dr. Conn with lesson plans and help

organize a national teaching conference for educators across the U.S. However, the most meaningful lessons I've learned have come through public speaking and collaboration. Speaking in front of large groups has challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and build confidence. Through working closely with Dr. Conn, for the past seven months, I've also witnessed that the power of collaboration deeply resonates with my culture. In traditional Native communities, everyone had a role: women cared for the village, men provided through hunting, and elders taught the young. That same spirit of working together toward a common goal lives on in CIRCLES, and it's shown me how important community and cooperation are in any kind of meaningful work.

How do you plan to use your educational background in teaching to help Native communities?

With my educational background, I plan to encourage others to reach for the stars. I want to teach my community related to my degree, but I also want to teach them important life lessons I have learned along the way. I was raised by my grandparents much like many of my other relatives. I had parents who were lost and never found their way back home. My siblings and I weren't dealt the best cards of the deck, but all three of us have beaten the odds and continue to work hard every day. I am here at Minot State getting the same degree my grandmother worked so hard for at the same institution. My sister is going to school at Turtle Mountain College and is planning on going to the University of North Dakota. My younger brother is graduating from high school and planning on going in computer science. We dedicate all our success to our grandparents because they always encouraged us to do more. They taught me a lot before they passed, and I would love to share that knowledge and wisdom with my community.

Jorja's Questions for Madison

Tell us the story about how you joined the CIRCLES Alliance.

When Dr. Conn approached his advisee, Jorja, to tell her about CIRCLES and if she would be interested, she mentioned my name, saying that I would be perfect for this position, as I had done previous work trying to increase Indigenous representation within STEAM fields. This prior work included my involvement in re-establishing and leading the AISES (American Indian Science and Engineering) Chapter at Turtle Mountain College, where Jorja and I were previously.

Have you faced any challenges navigating college or research spaces as an Indigenous student? How have you overcome them?

I really didn't experience challenges in college until I transferred to Minot State University.

Family and friends have warned me that I might experience culture shock when I move to Minot to further my education. I had only ever lived on the reservation, a small community where everyone knows everyone, and I was one with the majority, not the minority. I often experienced imposter syndrome, feeling like I wasn't good enough to be here, feeling like there was a target on my back, and often leading to depression, especially with the loneliness of missing home. If it were not for my joining in CIRCLES with Dr. Conn, I wouldn't have found my place on campus. Not only did I find my place and people, but I also found meaningful work that I am passionate about.

What song or playlist gets you motivated to work or study?

Often, Jorja and I have songs stuck in our heads while working, so we usually play those. One that was stuck in our heads this past summer was 'I'm Like a Bird' by Nelly Furtado.

What's something you've learned from being part of a Native-centered research community like CIRCLES?

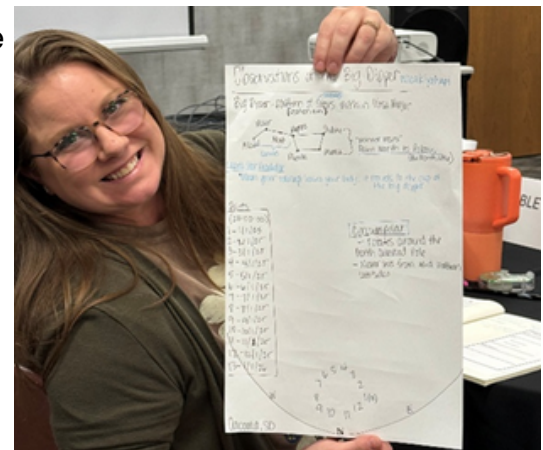
I've learned the importance of having Indigenous-focused lesson plans within Native community schools and the importance of mentorship within Native communities and Native individuals who are in non-Native communities. Having Indigenous-focused lessons empowers Indigenous students to learn and can stick with those students better than lesson plans that don't have an Indigenous tie to them. Our ancestors never had to 'meet standards' or 'pass assessments.' Instead, we learned through showing and doing. I think if we present more Indigenous-focused lesson plans to Indigenous students that can meet the standards, we can become the descendants our ancestors dreamed of. Mentorships are important because, as an Indigenous student, I often need an individual who 'looks like me' to look up to. In the media, we often see many Native individuals who have gone down the wrong path. I find that there is an importance in highlighting Indigenous individuals who have done good, as we can tend to become numb to the bad. Especially for Native students who are in the minority, I find it helpful to have a small community or an individual who is also Native to lean on and share struggles with.

How has CIRCLES built a connection between psychology and education for you?

After I receive my bachelor's in psychology this spring, I plan to continue my education at Minot State University within a master's in school psychology. I have had no teaching background prior to joining CIRCLES. I feel like what I have learned and experienced from CIRCLES, especially with having hands-on experiences with teachers and students, rounds out my education and will help me in my future career as a school psychologist. •

CIRCLES Workshops in Full Swing

The South Dakota CIRCLES team continues to engage educators from across the region with Indigenous STEM resources and professional learning. In November, the team hosted the Effective Teaching Practices with Connections to Indigenous STEM workshop in Oacoma, SD. This was the fourth time the facilitation team hosted this workshop, this time hosting 28 educators from across the state. The topics in this workshop focus on reflecting on multiple perspectives, and creating open, supportive and brave learning communities that foster student belonging and STEM identity. Educators engage in tasks throughout the workshop that promote this learning community. In the Resilient Designs Engineering task, educators work in teams to design and develop a model of a home to withstand given weather events. In the Observing the Stars task, educators use a star gazing site to follow observe and record patterns of the stars over the course of a year and reflect on different perspectives.



In February, CIRCLES Curriculum Development Facilitator Stephanie Higdon co-presented “Teaching Culturally in Math and Science” at the South Dakota STEM Education Conference with Ally Bowers, a high school teacher in Lyman County School District and Mary Mitchell, a seventh grade science teacher at Cheyenne Eagle Butte Junior High School and a CIRCLES advisory board member. Participants learned the importance of prescribed burns to maintain healthy ecosystems and about regrowth rates following fire depending on location. The facilitators used this discussion as a metaphor for student learning, making mistakes and growing from their errors. •



Educators and co-facilitators at winter CIRCLES workshops

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation grant EES 2217344. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

