

## **Better Together: Coeur d'Alene Reservation Communities and the University of Idaho**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes the University of Idaho's partnership with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation Communities, which was awarded a 2010 Outreach Scholarship/W. K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award for the Western Region.

### **Introduction: Setting the Context**

The Coeur d'Alene Reservation spans 345,000 acres of mountains and farmland in northern Idaho. Most people on the reservation live in the communities of Worley, Plummer, Tensed, and Desmet, which are spread north to south along 20 miles of State Highway 95. The combined population of the four small towns is about 1,500.

Located about 135 miles from the U.S.–Canada border, the reservation is governed by multiple jurisdictions, including the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, a sovereign nation with a direct relationship with the federal government. Other jurisdictions include two counties, three incorporated towns, and the state of Idaho. Complications created by these multiple jurisdictions have sometimes divided local residents. And though the Coeur d'Alene Tribe has prospered financially, local residents face social and economic challenges. The poverty rate is around 16%, school dropout rates are high, substance abuse is a problem, and many youth are disconnected from family and community.

Roughly 50 miles south of Plummer is the University of Idaho's main campus in Moscow. The university is Idaho's land-grant institution, with a statewide mission of teaching, research, and outreach. Through its strategic plan, the university is committed to partnerships like Better Together, a university-community partnership in which university faculty members and students work across disciplines to address critical issues, side by side with communities (*University of Idaho, 2011*).

Better Together brought together two university programs—Horizons and the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative (BSCI)—with people in communities on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation. The communities partnered with the university

through University of Idaho Extension's Horizons program to expand leadership capacity and reduce poverty. For its part, the university partnered with the communities first as part of its outreach mission (through Horizons), and then, building from the Horizons relationship, to give its students real-world learning experiences.

From 2006 through 2009, local residents interacted with University of Idaho faculty members and students in a variety of settings—community leadership training, broad-based community visioning, activities to reduce poverty, land use planning sessions, and social events. Two years after the main programs ended, there are positive outcomes for the communities as well as the university.

### **The University-Community Partnership: Better Together**

The main beneficiaries of Better Together were intended to be, first, the communities, and then the university students. Starting in 2006 with the University of Idaho Extension's Horizons program, the goal was to develop effective community leadership that would in turn reduce poverty. As the 18-month Horizons program wound down in 2007, the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative's bioregional planning and community design program brought graduate studio courses to the communities. The goal for the students was to learn by applying classroom theory to real-world land use and community development issues that were complicated by multiple jurisdictions and a legacy of exploitation."

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### **Horizons**

Idaho Horizons, which formed the foundation for Better Together, was one of seven Horizons programs from Washington State east to Minnesota and Iowa. Horizons began in 2003, when the Northwest Area Foundation partnered with land-grant

universities in the seven states to implement the 18-month program. Designed to help communities reduce poverty, Horizons was targeted at communities with fewer than 5,000 residents and poverty rates of at least 10%.

In each Horizons community, the program was led by a volunteer steering committee and guided by a part-time coach hired by Extension. Over the course of 18 months, local residents organized community conversations about poverty, learned new leadership skills, created a long-term vision, and took action to reduce poverty. The role of the university was to provide coaching, technical assistance, and other learning opportunities intended to build capacity to solve problems, especially those related to the causes and impacts of poverty.

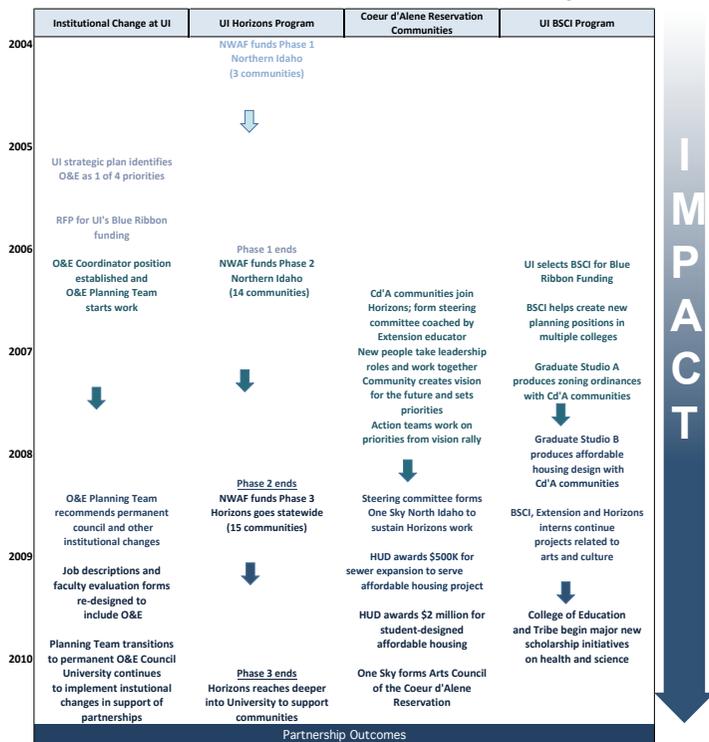
Between 2003 and 2010, almost 300 communities across the seven states completed the Horizons program. This included 31 communities and clusters of small towns in Idaho. To stay in the program and receive \$10,000 at the end, communities had to make a significant commitment of time and energy. They also had to meet relatively high participation thresholds. At least 30 people were required to participate in community conversations about poverty, 25 had to participate in a nine-module leadership development program, and at least 15% of all local residents had to be involved in developing a community-wide vision.

After a Horizons community developed its vision statement, local residents assembled action teams to achieve specific elements of the vision. The Coeur d'Alene communities developed four Horizons action teams: communication and leadership; life-long learning; community vitality; and community pride. Projects launched by these action teams and aided by Building Sustainable Communities Initiative students resulted in tangible outcomes for the communities, as described below.

**Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities.** Plummer, Worley, Tensed, and Desmet joined Horizons in 2006. Throughout the 18-month program, the local steering committee worked with their community coach, a local resident who was also the University of Idaho Extension's educator for the reservation. Local residents' role were to create a community-wide vision; identify and take priority actions to reduce poverty; create an entity to continue the work after Horizons ended; and link with University of Idaho Extension, Building Sustainable Communities Initiative students, and faculty members.

The Extension educator on the reservation played a critical role in bringing all the partners together. In her coaching role, she worked with a steering committee made up of local volunteers from Plummer and the other three towns. She was familiar with the intent of the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative after helping to organize listening sessions when the program was first launched. She was also a graduate student in the first cohort of BSCI's M.S. program in bioregional planning. Based on her knowledge of the community's action plans developed midway through Horizons, she and the lead faculty for the BSCI began discussing the potential of the Coeur d'Alene Reservation as a pilot community for BSCI's first collaboration.

**Partnership activities.** The Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities joined Horizons at a time when the University of Idaho was making outreach and engagement a higher priority (see Figure 1). This was reflected in the university's 2005–2010 strategic action plan, in which the University of Idaho committed to strengthening outreach and engagement by connecting all academic areas with the needs of constituents and stakeholders throughout Idaho.



O&E: Outreach and Engagement  
 Blue Ribbon Initiative: Internal funds allocated for multi-college engagement projects  
 NWAF: Northwest Area Foundation  
 Horizons: UI Extension program aimed at building leadership to reduce poverty, funded by NWAF  
 BSCI: Building Sustainable Community Initiative (graduate program in Biorregional Planning and Community Design with service-learning classes and internships)

Figure 1. The evolution of engaged scholarship

A few months before the Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities joined Horizons, the University of Idaho president awarded \$1.6 million over 5 years to a blue ribbon initiative, "Building Sustainable Communities: A New University and Community Partnership." The Building Sustainable Communities Initiative, as it would be known, developed a new graduate program in bioregional planning and community design. In addition to involving eight colleges, BSCI worked at the intersection of teaching, research, and outreach, bringing students and faculty members into communities to conduct engaged scholarship.

Building Sustainable Communities Initiative's first collaborative project with communities was with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation. Thirteen graduate students participated in service-learning and internships in the communities. The products of their work include a bioregional atlas, updated zoning ordinances, site plans for a 10-unit affordable housing development, and predesign plans for a tribal education institute.

Two graduate students worked an additional year for the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Housing Authority to complete design sketches that would be used in federal grant proposals. One of the students also worked with the Horizons steering committee as it transitioned into an independent nonprofit, One Sky North Idaho. She also helped start a reservation art council by researching other Native-oriented art councils and learning how local artists could identify their work as authentically Native American.

## **Measuring Impact of the University-Community Partnerships**

Several studies have analyzed the extent to which the university-community partnerships' goals have been achieved. Overall, impact on the communities has been analyzed more systematically than impact on the University of Idaho students.

## **Impacts on Communities**

The Northwest Area Foundation, which funded Horizons, contracted with an external evaluator to examine the program's sustained effects (*Morehouse, 2010*). With Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects approval from each of the seven participating universities, the evaluator surveyed a sample of Horizons community members who were identified using a two-stage, purposive sampling design. In Stage 1, university partners identified a key contact in each Horizons community. In Stage 2, the evaluator

contacted the local individual, who then identified five potential respondents for the evaluation survey. Over 80% of all Horizons communities elected to participate in the survey. The survey response rate (the percentage of individuals in the Stage 2 sample who completed the survey) was 79%. Finally, to further explore the survey results, the evaluator conducted follow-up focus groups with a small sample of survey respondents.

Although community-specific data are not available from the evaluator, findings for the program as a whole indicate significant and positive impacts. More than a year after the formal program ended, three impacts were identified.

- Community leadership was enhanced, with new people of more diverse backgrounds in leadership roles, many in elective offices.
- Decision-making on public issues was more inclusive, with more perspectives and voices included in the process.
- Community members continued to take action on a wide variety of community enhancement and poverty reduction projects several years after direct assistance from the university ended.

The external evaluator's findings, which pertain to all

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Horizons communities together, were consistent with data from informal interviews conducted with Horizons participants in the Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities. These informal interviews were conducted in April 2010 as part of preparing the University of Idaho's application for the 2010 C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award. In the words of one community member on the steering committee, “The bottom line is what Horizons has brought out in the community, in people who never thought they

could lead, people who never thought they could make a difference.” And according to the community coach, also a local resident, as a result of Horizons, “people took on more leadership and

became much better at defining what they wanted from the university.” People found their voice, “setting priorities and being clear about what they could do for themselves and where they needed help.”

A second assessment evaluated community-specific impacts in the Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities. Taking a sociological approach to understanding leadership development and relationship building, University of Idaho faculty members joined the coach and steering committee members to evaluate community-specific impacts using the community capitals framework (*Emery and Flora, 2006*). Emery and Flora describe community capitals (or assets) in seven categories: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built. They hypothesize that investing in human and social capital through leadership development and relationship building can reverse economic and population decline.

Using the community capitals framework (*Emery and Flora, 2006*), the Horizons steering committee mapped the community's accomplishments and changes from 2006 to 2008. They found that they had strengthened social, human, and political capital, but not financial or built capital. Prior to Horizons, the major investments in the region, generally led by the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, had focused on financial investments in business opportunities and infrastructure development. Horizons flipped the traditional community development approach on its head, focusing almost entirely on social, human, and political capital, and especially the development of new relationships between community groups. As a result, the committee reported, more and more departments and organizations were working collaboratively for common goals.

Engaging with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities midway through Horizons, the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative allowed the community to build on this social and human capital to begin achieving more concrete goals associated with financial and built capital. For example, as a result of Horizons, community members were more involved in city planning and zoning meetings. This civic engagement in turn allowed the students to easily solicit residents' input on their draft zoning ordinance, which was then adopted by city council members who knew of and trusted the community input process.

Another example of leveraging results from Horizons to achieve additional impacts involved affordable housing. Through broad-based involvement in developing the community vision and subsequent action teams, local residents identified affordable housing as a high priority. This in turn led to the opportunity for bioregional

planning students to work with the Coeur d'Alene Tribal Housing Authority on a design concept for a sustainable housing development. The conceptual design that resulted was then used to procure several million dollars in infrastructure grants.

Thus, evidence of impacts from Horizons and the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative supports Emery and Flora's hypothesis that investments in human, political, and social capital can lead to gains in financial and built capital.

## Impact on University of Idaho Students

From a University of Idaho student perspective, the primary goal of the partnership was to improve learning outcomes through experiential learning in communities. For most students in the graduate bioregional planning program, the partnership with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation was their first experience working in a Native American community. The students learned cultural competency, humility, and patience in

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the process of building social and human capital. Though these outcomes were not measured systematically, they were reported in anecdotes from the students.

Although the University of Idaho does not have good metric systems in place to track experiential learning outcomes, tangible evidence of the students' contributions suggests an increase in practical and useful skills, as the following examples illustrate.

- The town of Plummer adopted new zoning ordinances based on proposals from the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative students. These ordinances brought water quality and riparian buffer requirements in line with tribal environmental standards. They also matched the community's intent to preserve agricultural and open lands, as articulated in its comprehensive plan.
- The Horizons steering committee created a new non-profit organization, One Sky North Idaho, with the mission of developing a thriving community based on the creative economy, thus carrying forward a

priority strategy identified in Horizons. With help from a Building Sustainable Communities Initiative intern, One Sky North Idaho formed One Sky *tchnk'wasq't*, a reservation arts council focused on promoting tradition and values through collective art. The arts council, too, was a priority strategy identified in Horizons.

- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) awarded two major grants totaling \$2.5 million to the communities, one for wastewater treatment facilities and another for affordable housing. Both grant proposals were based on designs proposed by Building Sustainable Communities Initiative students. The infrastructure project is now complete, and the tribe broke ground for the new housing development earlier this year.

## Impact on the University

The primary goals of Better Together were to positively affect the communities and University of Idaho students. Unexpected impacts also occurred in the university itself.

Horizons and the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative operate at a scale large enough to attract the attention of people throughout the university. The programs have motivated often-heated conversations about community engagement, especially when they work in sequence as they did with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation communities. Administrators and faculty members are now wrestling with how to measure and reward community engagement, support it financially, and structure it within the university, especially in regard to University of Idaho Extension's traditional home in the College of Agriculture. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the university's lack of integrative structures to support community engagement, given that it relies so heavily on interdisciplinary, cross-college work.

The partnership has had an impact on university outreach, including Extension, and the role it plays in strengthening teaching and research. Extension is increasingly viewed as the link between communities and the rest of the university—especially for faculty members who want to give their students more useful learning experiences, and for informing research priorities. “This experience changed faculty’s perceptions of Extension,” according to the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative codirector.

Impact on teaching at the University of Idaho is mainly apparent within the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative itself. “Plummer had sovereignty issues, a legacy of tragedy, and cultural norms that we did not understand when we began the program,” said BSCI’s codirector. “It required much more of us as faculty members. We teach differently now and we’ve realized we need to understand the community better before bringing in students. Working with Extension faculty is the best way for this to happen.”

### **Lessons Learned**

Members of the university-community partnership learned five lessons from the Better Together partnership.

First, local Extension faculty members contribute to successful community engagement by helping teaching and research faculty members build local relationships and access local knowledge. “We could not have partnered with the Coeur d’Alene communities without Extension,” said Building Sustainable Communities Initiative’s codirector. Nevertheless, there have been challenges. Extension and academic faculty members do not understand each other well, in ways large and small. They rank the needs of students and communities differently, they have different ideas about what is required of authors on journal articles, and they do not always respect each other’s definition of scholarship. For the university, this means they should invest time and energy in improving relationships between Extension and academic faculty members.

Second, hands-on, place-based graduate programs attract high-quality, motivated students. Many are adults who bring valuable life and work experiences to their degree programs. As they develop more subject expertise through graduate work, they in turn have much to offer communities. Hence, community engagement can make academic programs stronger. For the university, this means they should work harder to bring students into real-world settings.

Third, capacity- and leadership-building programs like Horizons lay a sturdy foundation for effective university-community partnerships. Communities with good leaders and clearly defined priorities know what they want from universities and can offer much in return. In short, they make for good partners. For the university, this means they need strong capacity-building programs in Extension. Otherwise they must look to other state entities, typically with fewer resources, to build capacity in communities.

Fourth, the discipline-based structure in universities is not well-suited to working with complex community systems.

Academic programs that bring students to communities inevitably run into the need for interdisciplinary studies, for working across colleges, and for combining teaching and research with outreach. However, most universities are not set up to manage and support programs like this. Structures are needed (e.g., centers and institutes that are housed outside the colleges). Mechanisms are needed like joint appointments that reward faculty for working across units. Finally, a university-wide development strategy is crucial for community engagement. Fund-raising one unit at a time compartmentalizes rather than integrates efforts.

Fifth, members of the university community still stumble and have much to learn about being good partners with stakeholders, including tribes. Last fall, several faculty members launched a research project involving school districts across the state, including one on a reservation. They did not invite the districts to be involved until the research questions and design had already been finalized. This was not acceptable to the reservation-based school administrators, who declined to participate. This experience reminded the university that true engaged scholarship means including communities at the beginning of the project, not halfway through.

### **The Future of the University of Idaho's Partnership with the Coeur d'Alene Reservation**

The examples below reflect community priorities identified during Horizons. They illustrate what university-community partnerships can become when there is sustained support and good will.

First, the tribe, University of Idaho Extension, and other partners are collaborating to understand and improve the education pipeline from early childhood through lifelong learning. They are identifying gaps in educational services and studying the root causes of low educational outcomes.

Second, with National Aeronautics and Space Administration funding, teachers in schools on the reservation are working with University of Idaho faculty members and graduate students to develop and use new curricula that will bring students and the general public up to speed with the science and impacts of climate change.

Third, the tribe and University of Idaho Education faculty members are collaboratively developing a proposal to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to identify and implement interventions that will reduce obesity among school-age children on the reservation.

In summary, the Better Together partnership has resulted in engaged scholarship aimed at producing improved educational outcomes, a more sustainable environment, and healthier children for the community.

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