

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College's Woodlands Wisdom Nutrition Program

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Located in northeastern Minnesota, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is unique in the United States because it is jointly a tribal college and a member of the Minnesota State College and University System. The mission of Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is to provide higher education opportunities for its communities in a welcoming, culturally diverse environment that includes providing programs and baccalaureate degrees that fulfill our commitment to American Indian communities, our land grant status, and the union of cultures. Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is located three miles from the Fond du Lac Reservation in Cloquet, Minnesota.

Current enrollment at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is 1,700, with approximately 500 Native American students. Family housing and dormitories are available on this campus. Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is rich in Ojibwe culture; pipe ceremonies often start off an important event, such as graduation. Native American symbolism is abundant within the college design, both interior and exterior, and aspects of cultural teachings are incorporated in most college classes. Instructors, staff, and administrators hold talking circles for students to voice their concerns and opinions or share their stories.

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is a member of the Woodlands Wisdom Confederation, a collaboration between four Tribal Colleges and the University of Minnesota that seeks to address chronic health issues in Native American communities by integrating traditional Native knowledge with scientific methods of discovery in culturally relevant programs of teaching, research, and community awareness.

Four objectives have been identified to carry out the goal of Woodlands Wisdom:

- (1) To increase the number of Native American practitioners, educators and researchers in Nutrition and Food Sciences.
- (2) To improve research and education on the incidence of diet related chronic diseases of native people and the relationship of traditional food use to health.
- (3) To increase community engagement/involvement with links between diet and health,
- (4) To create a mechanism throughout the Woodlands region in order to share resources and information in meeting the above stated goals and objectives.

Diabetes is a relatively “new” illness among the American Indian population. As recently as fifty years ago, Indian mortality was caused by acute illnesses such as tuberculosis, measles, and smallpox. Because of this, many American Indians did not live long enough to develop other diseases; however, this trend is changing and the life expectancy of American Indians has been steadily increasing over the past thirty years. Today, Indians are dying of chronic health problems such as diabetes and other diseases like cancer, heart disease, and chronic liver disease/cirrhosis (Department of Health and Human Services, 1998–1999).

Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions among American Indians throughout North America. In 1991–1993, the age-adjusted diabetes mellitus mortality rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives in the Indian Health Service (IHS) was 41.4 per 100,000 (excluding three IHS areas with problems of under-reporting) (Department of Health and Human Services, 1998–1999). This is 348% more than the U.S. ALL Races (a rate for all races of in the United States) rate of 11.9 per 100,000. The Inter-Tribal Heart Project (a study of two Minnesota Ojibwa tribes and the Menominee of Wisconsin) estimated that 33% of adults ages 25 and over are diabetic (Centers for Disease Control, 1996). The adjusted rates for American Indian women, which began as the lowest of any group, increased 550% over the 30-year period, while the rates for American Indian men increased by 249%. In the state of Minnesota the American Indian diabetes rate is 600% greater than the general state population. These findings are not acceptable and have prompted the development of planning and implementation processes to address the diabetes health threat in Native communities. Tribal colleges are addressing this need by building pre-health professional programs at their colleges.

While addressing the disease of diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases is crucial, there are few Native American dietitians, educators and researchers to address this need in “Indian Country.” In keeping with Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College’s mission statement and Woodlands Wisdom objectives, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College has in place a two-year associate of science degree in nutrition with an articulation agreement with the University of Minnesota. This articulation agreement guarantees courses transfer into a four-year degree in nutrition/food science. The two-year nutrition program integrates personal experience, biomedical science and indigenous science. Ojibwe language classes are a part of the curriculum, as well as classes regarding the history and philosophies of the Ojibwe people. In addition, students are encouraged to take traditional dancing as their physical education requirement, where they not only learn how to dance, but they make moccasins to dance in. The nutrition class focuses on looking into a student’s own family tree and analyzing their family’s history in terms of health, culture, diet, and lifestyle and comparing it to their own life today. Professional experience is provided to students who attend Native American Health Conferences where they can network with nutrition professionals that work in Native American communities. In addition, students are given opportunities to work within the community under funding for work study positions. Our goal is to recruit more Native American students into the field of nutrition, so they can help combat this epidemic in their own community in a culturally appropriate manner.

Biomedical science classes include: food safety, risk and technology; biology; microbiology; anatomy and physiology; chemistry; and environmental science. A lecture on diabetes and prevention of diabetes is given at student orientation for students living in the dorm, and blood sugar testing is offered. (Eighty percent of dorm students are Native Americans.)

This year an educational play on diabetes was produced and directed by the first-year theater class. The performance was directed towards an audience of middle and high school students, written in “their” language about the role healthful eating and activity play in preventing diabetes.

The Indigenous Science part of the program focuses on the wisdom of elders, indigenous gardening, and culture classes. Wisdom Steps (www.wisdomsteps.org), developed through the Minnesota Council on Aging, is an indigenous group of state-wide elders who

focus on documenting their steps (health checks, pedometer readings, etc.) in taking responsibility for their health. They teamed up with Woodlands Wisdom and offered a health fair that focused on traditional knowledge and education for health and well-being. Speakers discussed the traditional use of tobacco, sage, sweet grass, and cedar, as well as the role of storytelling in healing. A traditional lunch was served, and the elders completed their healthy walk.

Woodlands Wisdom also has worked with the Gitagaan Gardening Program, which teaches Ojibwe history and the growing, preserving, gathering, and harvesting of food; each class involves a nutrition lesson. Families are encouraged to participate and a nutritious dinner is served. The Gitagaan Gardening Program offers a harvest feast in September, where “home grown” food is served and enjoyed by community members. Each year this program grows in the number of people knowledgeable about planting their own gardens.

Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College is in the process of creating a two-year degree in Fitness & Health as another way of combating the diabetes epidemic. This degree program will include classes rich in Ojibwe culture and will easily transfer to a four-year Community Health Education or Exercise Science degree.

The health of the Native people is important to this college, this community, and the region. In keeping with the college mission statement, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community will continue to provide programs and baccalaureate degrees that “fulfill our commitment to American Indian communities, our land grant status, and the union of cultures.”

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