

Fort Lewis College

Identifying and Empowering Community Values through Reconciliation Work at a Native American-Serving College

This Action Applies to Rubric Item(s):

Rubric #8: Identifying and Reinforcing Community Values

Description of Work:

As noted, Fort Lewis College has special mission to serve indigenous students, and over 40% of our students are Native American, representing over 175 nations, tribes, and Alaskan villages. This diversity results from our complex history. Fort Lewis College traces its origins to the 1878 Fort Lewis army post, which was converted in 1891 to a federal Native American off-reservation boarding school. The boarding school separated Native American children from their families, forbid the expression of indigenous culture, and forcibly assimilated students to white educational and cultural practices. In a 1911 treaty, the fort's property and buildings were transferred to the state of Colorado on the condition that it provide an education to Native American students "free of tuition and on an equality with white students." Over the next century, the school changed location and evolved from a high school to a two year-college to an agricultural college, to a four-year school, to public liberal arts college. Throughout this history, the institution provided a tuition-free education for Native Americans, and Fort Lewis College continues this responsibility today through a tuition waiver program. Designated as one of seven public, four-year Native American-serving, non-tribal colleges in the country, Fort Lewis College now awards more degrees to Native American students than any other four-year college in the country. As an institution, we must engage in a reconciliation of our history; we must confront our history of forced educational assimilation while strengthening our current role as a provider of educational opportunity. This reconciliation work clearly aligns with NASEM's rubric #8 emphasis on creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive institution that reinforces shared community values.

In Fall 2019, Fort Lewis College President Tom Stritikus asked Dr. Jesse Peters, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, to lead a project designed to examine and reevaluate the ways FLC engages with and articulates its history as an institution. The project asked how an understanding and recognition of FLC's past can and should inform our present and future. In particular, the project needed to address the portrayal of our history in a series of display panels mounted in our signature, highly visible Clock Tower building. In order to address these concerns, an inclusive committee structure was developed that would ensure widespread representation and involvement of all members of our community. A **Committee on FLC**

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History (12 members) was formed and supported by a **Core Advisory Group** (12 members), a **Student Advisory Group** (13 members), and a group of seven **Representatives of Tribal Nations**.

The project necessitated a clear articulation of the larger educational commitment of FLC and how that commitment can be enacted through specific engagements with our history. The Committee developed a **Guiding Principle** for its work:

- Fort Lewis College has a distinct commitment to provide educational opportunities and pathways for Native American students, and to support each student's determination and the choices they make for their education and career. Recognition of our history and steps towards understanding how the past affects the present and future are part of FLC's commitment to student success.

The Committee also developed a specific **2019-2020 Committee Charge**:

- The Committee will work with Faculty, Staff, Students, Tribal Leaders, and Community Members to develop recommendations for changes to the public displays of FLC history, particularly with regards to the Boarding School.

The Committee formed the Advisory Groups to seek broad-based input on several key concerns, including how to articulate FLC history, articulate the FLC tuition waiver, understand boarding school history, create public displays at FLC, and increase inclusivity for all FLC students. These concerns were also addressed by four **Working Subgroups** that engaged in research, wrote a report, and provided insights on the following topics:

- The History of Boarding Schools and the Fort Lewis Boarding School
- The Fort Lewis College Tuition Waiver and History/Framing Discourse
- Other Colleges' Strategies for Recognizing/Discussing Complex Histories
- Possible Ways to Represent and Display Complex Histories

The Committee, Advisory Groups, and Working Subgroups gathered ideas and information through a year-long series of high profile and well-attended public listening sessions, committee discussions, stakeholder input sessions, conversations with tribal representatives, and research projects conducted by the working subgroups. The Committee/Groups held several highly meaningful and often emotional listening sessions where Native American students and alumni were able to share their experiences on campus and in the community, explain the legacy of boarding school history in their families, and express their hopes for a more inclusive future. The ability to hold in-person listening sessions was interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak, and there is hope to continue in-person work with students, alumni, and tribal representatives when the pandemic allows. In particular, plans to

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hold sessions off-campus in Native American communities was interrupted and is crucial to this project.

The Committee/Groups submitted a detailed list of preliminary recommendations. Highlights of these recommendations, stated in general terms include:

- Representation of history at Clock Tower: remove current panels, archive panels at Center of Southwest Studies, alter public space around Clock Tower, create a more accurate and respectful articulation of FLC history, create new way to memorialize original students of the Fort Lewis School
- Articulation of FLC institutional history: create informative historical account and timeline of FLC as an institution for website and public material, create statement that welcomes input into articulation of history, revise all FLC statements of history for consistency
- Expansion of educational engagement with institutional history: develop course and/or course unit that explore complex history of FLC, provide training to instructors that want to engage with FLC history, invite guest speakers to educate faculty and staff on Native American boarding school history, partners with institutions addressing similar historical concerns
- Continuation of strong support for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives: continue campus-wide DEI advisory councils, continue faculty and staff DEI training, expand indigenizing the curriculum training, expand understanding and respect of indigenous way of knowing, diversity of contemporary indigenous peoples, sovereignty of indigenous nations
- Engagement with community: work directly with city and county officials on ways to improve sense of community connection and belonging for faculty, staff, and students of color

The reconciliation work on FLC history has been a focused effort for the past year; although there is much more to be done, meaningful advances have been made. The FLC Committee/Groups looks forward to continuing this important work this upcoming year.

Website for further information (if applicable): <https://www.fortlewis.edu/fort-lewis-college-news/videos/news-detail/reconciliation-of-flcs-history>

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