Native American professors hired to tenure-track jobs at UM

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It took 120 years for a Blackfeet Indian to receive a tenure-track position at the University of Montana, and while Rosalyn LaPier wonders what took so long, she doesn’t mind being first.

LaPier is one of four Native American professors recently hired to a tenure-track job at the university. The new hires weren’t brought on to teach Native American Studies, but rather chemistry, journalism, environmental studies and pharmacy.

“We have more Native faculty than we’ve had in the past,” said Dave Beck, professor and chairman of Native American Studies at UM. “They’re in three different schools and departments. It’s really exciting to be hiring Native faculty across disciplines, and they’re all in tenure-line positions.”

LaPier joins an increasingly diverse faculty at UM, where more than a dozen American Indians representing several tribes now hold academic positions. While not all are on track for tenure, those watching and marking the university’s push for diversity are pleased with the progress.

LaPier earned a bachelor’s degree at Colorado College in physics and a master’s degree in religious studies at DePaul University. She’s now completing her doctorate at UM, where she teaches environmental studies.
While her father is Métis, her mother is Blackfeet. She identifies with the latter and became the first Blackfeet tribal member to receive a tenure-track position at UM.

“We’re in the 21st century, so you’d think it would have happened a long time ago,” said LaPier. “Hopefully I’m not the last one here, but there just isn’t a large pool of Native professors out there.”

And therein lies the challenge. LaPier and others credit UM for actively recruiting American Indian candidates for professorship, along with Native students looking to pursue a postgraduate degree.

But they also say the number of qualified American Indian candidates remains small, and the competition between universities to recruit them can be fierce. Schools with money to spend typically win the bidding war, leaving universities like UM striving for faculty diversity but unable to fully achieve it.

“It’s difficult for schools in the Montana University System to compete with other institutions,” LaPier said. “It’s extremely rare to have a state university go out and try to hire a number of Native faculty. UM has actually gone out to see who was available, and then worked to hire Native people.”

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The U.S. is home to more than 565 Native American tribes, each as diverse as the next. Montana has 12 recognized tribes and seven reservations.

“There’s great diversity in Indian country,” Beck said. “There’s great diversity even in the state of Montana. To have some of that diversity reflected, in terms of the perspectives they bring to the classroom, is very valuable to us.”

When Beck arrived on campus 12 years ago, 300 Native American students attended the university. The population has since grown to 800 American Indian students pursuing 88 different majors, from education to business.
Despite the growth in the student body, Beck said, the numbers fall short of matching Montana’s demographics, where Native Americans represent roughly 10 percent of the population. The new faculty members could help raise interest among American Indians considering college.

“Their interactions with faculty will give non-Native faculty members an opportunity to learn more about Native perspectives on campus,” Beck said. “It also gives students an opportunity to see people from their tribal communities in those kinds of faculty positions.”

The new hires include journalism professor Jason Begay and Chemistry Department professor Aaron Thomas, who runs the Native American Research Lab. Both men are Navajo and join fellow newcomer Annie Belcourt-Dittloff, an assistant professor of pharmacy, who stems from Mandan, Hidatsa, Blackfeet and Chippewa tribal heritage.

After graduating from UM with a doctorate in clinical psychology in 2006, Belcourt-Dittloff completed an internship at the Veterans Administration in Denver. She joined UM in 2010 and found inspiration in clinical psychology professor Gyda Swaney, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

As Swaney did for her, Belcourt-Dittloff hopes to do for other American Indian students – serving as a role model and inspiration to a younger generation.

“I hope I’m able to bring a different perspective and provide a voice to indigenous people in the area,” she said. “I strive to do that and I hope to be an inspiration along the way.”

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**Reaching this point** was years in the making. Beck credits past Native Americans who, in the 1970s, first envisioned a more diverse campus, one that reflected the state’s rich Native heritage.
Included in their vision was an American Indian center on campus. It became a reality in 2010 when the Payne Family Native American Center opened its doors.

In doing so, UM provided the first center in the nation built solely to house a Department of Native American Studies, along with an office for American Indian Student Services.

The center’s programs look to advance the public’s understanding of Native American history, issues and perspectives.

“When you look at it all, there’s an increasing recognition that whoever you are and whatever you do, it’s important to have an understanding of Native people and Native communities,” Beck said. “If you don’t have insight and knowledge from within those communities, you’re missing part of that heritage.”

Those at the center believe the university is on the right track in its push to recruit Native students and American Indian faculty. They note that Montana is the only state with a tribal college for each Indian reservation. UM, they add, was the first university to establish dual-mission agreements with each Montana tribal school.

But there’s more to be done. Staying competitive in the recruitment and retention realm, Beck believes, may be the next big challenge.

“We have to figure out ways to be competitive in order to attract Native people,” he added. “The other side of it is, once people are here, we need to be competitive in retaining them. They’d be easily poached by other institutions.”