Sustainable Development in Indigenous Communities in Mexico and the United States

By David Beck, Professor and Chair
Native American Studies Department

Tribal communities in the United States and Mexico share similar histories and challenges, and at the same time differ in significant ways. UM has partnered with two Mexican universities as part of a larger consortium to explore issues related to sustainable community development in indigenous communities. This partnership is funded in the United States by a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education) grant, which the UM International Programs office supplemented to support my travel to Mexico in case studies in community development among various tribal groups in the U.S., including the Blackfeet, the Menominee of Wisconsin, and tribes on Oregon’s coast. One of the reasons that the university rector worked so hard to encourage us to visit Hidalgo was to bring some legitimacy to the concept of indigeneity from the outside world to this community. We were the first scholarly visitors from a U.S. university to lecture at this school. Many of the students and faculty at this university, which is a three year and ten month technical school in a rural state, are indigenous. Most of the students are on 100% state-funded scholarships.

After a wonderful week with our marvelous hosts in Ixmiquilpan we returned by bus to the city of Colima, in the state of Colima, where Rosalyn and I participated in a much-publicized three day seminar at the Universidad de Colima entitled “Seminario Estudios de indigenismo y desarrollo comunitario en EUA y Mexico.” The state of Colima is home to a variety of indigenous groups. Dr. Renata Gonzalez Sanchez, a member of the Colima Economics Department, served as our host. He leads the rural outreach program and organizes community projects in the region, and has served as a close partner with us in our work. Another faculty member, one of the leading quantitative economics professors in Mexico, gave us a tour of rural indigenous communities that rely on coffee and agricultural products for development.

The Economics Department at Colima conducts the majority of the sustainable development work in surrounding rural communities, many of which are indigenous. Featured speakers at the seminar included members of the economics department, the tourism department and the social work department. Rosalyn and I both spoke the first night, and I was scheduled to present on all three nights. After Rosalyn’s first presentation, the faculty requested that she prepare and give another talk on her home community.
Beck cont. from pg 2
on the closing night of the conference.

Colima, like the rest of the Americas, is home to ancient indigenous peoples. Like many places in Latin America, and indeed even in the U.S., there is great pride in the indigenous past, with visible imagery in many museums and gift shops that is also recorded in history books and even popular magazines and newspapers. But here, as elsewhere, indigenous people in the modern world are impoverished, scorned, ignored, ill-treated and still live at or below subsistence level. However, Mexican universities and their concerned professors are working toward educating indigenous students and developing sustainable social and economic development within indigenous communities. We can only hope that efforts such as we witnessed at the two universities we visited may begin to strengthen the communities and their people.

Otomi cultural leader Francisco Luna Tavera (right) leading a tour of important Otomi tribal places. Pictured with him are Sandra Muñoz, coordinator of languages at Universidad Tecnológica del Valle del Mezquital in Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo; Abaki Beck, Ekoo Beck, David Beck, Rosalyn LaPier and Professor Norberto Alatorre Monroy.

Harrar cont. from pg 1

I hope that the activities to be undertaken during the exchange will also make a contribution to enhancing UM’s institutional partnerships with ECNU and AAU. Although ECNU has been an official partner of UM for a number of years, thus far no collaborative activities with this university have begun, although as one of China’s major universities, it holds promise for exchanges with my department and other units at UM. Its Department of Statistics and Actuarial Sciences has a strong graduate program with an emphasis on multivariate and mathematical statistics. It would be advantageous for UM’s Department of Mathematics to have a close working relationship with the faculty and students of ECNU.

Besides being a logical site for my research interest, AAU’s School of Public Health has demographic surveillance and practicum field sites that are of interest to UM’s School of Public and Community Health (SPCH). In addition, UM’s Intercultural Youth and Family Development (IYFD) Program, a Peace Corps Masters International Program, has a strong desire to use Ethiopia as one of its internship sites. Both the SPCH and IYFD programs would also welcome having AAU faculty participate in co-supervision of their interns and guest lecturing in their classes. However, the specific possibilities are yet to be explored. Of note is that I took part in the effort to form the AAU-UM partnership. In this process, we have developed a good working relationship with some of the key senior administrators on the AAU campus.

In summary, I envisage the experience to be gained from the exchanges leading to a number of peer reviewed publications, extramural funding applications and generating research problems for students besides serving as stepping stones to further research in my own and other departments at UM. On the recreation side, I plan to travels and learn more about the cultural heritages, not to mention the delicious foods, of these two ancient countries.

In personal communications, both ECNU and AAU have expressed strong desire to work closely with The University of Montana. As their way of showing commitment to the partnerships, both universities have agreed to grant me full access to their research resources as well as housing free of charge during my entire stay. I am grateful to both universities for their generous offers. Also I would like to express my gratitude to the Office of International Programs, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Department of Mathematical Sciences for their sponsorship and making this research endeavor possible.