In May 2010 the Native American Studies Department took two students, Matthew Flatlip (Crow tribe, NAS student) and Moses Yellow Robe (Crow and Northern Cheyenne, art student), on a two week field school to visit indigenous communities and study the cultural and historic heritage of Mexico. We traveled with students and faculty from partner universities in Canada, Mexico and the United States, including Trent and Vancouver Island Universities (Canada), Colima and Mezquital Universities (Mexico), and New Mexico State. We made this trip under the auspices of a trinational consortium funded in the United States by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and by its counterparts in Canada and Mexico.

The purpose of the trip was to bring Native and non-Native students together to interact with indigenous communities in Mexico and to share perspectives with each other. Four Native students from Vancouver Island University joined us, as did five Native and non-Native students from Trent. Four students from Universidad Tecnológica del Valle del Mezquital in Hidalgo joined the group for part of the trip as well. Just before the trip New Mexico State University imposed a travel ban on its students denying them the opportunity to visit Mexico, although Don Pepion (Blackfeet) of their faculty was able to join us, serving in the role of elder statesman.

We flew into Ciudad de Mexico, the second largest city in the world, just after UM’s graduation in May. Almost one-fourth of Mexico’s 110 million people live in Mexico City. Fifty million Mexicans live in poverty, with approximately 23 million people not getting enough to eat. Many of the most impoverished Mexicans are indigenous.

We spent several days visiting archaeological sites that pre-dated the Spanish arrival to Mexico. We stayed within walking distance of the Templo Mayor, an Aztec temple that the Spanish

forced local Indians to tear down to build a Catholic Church, which sits behind it. We visited the site of a vast ancient market and we visited a modern vegetable market (Central de Abasto) through which 45% of all vegetables grown in Mexico pass. The market employs 70,000 people and never closes, with 300,000 visitors daily buying and selling these wares. We also went to the modern basilica where Juan Diego had his vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which is now a major pilgrimage site. So many people visit that a conveyor belt is used to shuttle visitors past the shrine. Some two million people visit this pilgrimage site on the 12th of December alone.

At our visit to the Comisión Nacional para Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (similar to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States), we learned of a major shift in the Mexican federal attitude toward indigenous people. When I had last visited with representatives of this office in the mid-1990s, we were told that its major focus was helping Indian people assimilate into Mexican Society. In the new millennium, and after Mexico signed onto the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights, a shift occurred. Mexico’s new constitution recognizes the value of cultural diversity, and the Indian Office now exerts its efforts to help promote this through tribal language preservation and protection of cultural practices. Of course, the actual change in relation to local communities is slow in coming, in many cases. Tribal communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca and Michoacán have pushed these efforts to the forefront, but we visited tribal communities in two very different places — Hidalgo and Colima.

From Mexico City we traveled to Ixmiquilpan, in the state of Hidalgo. On our way we visited Teotihuacan, the largest city in Mexico some fifteen hundred years ago, with perhaps 200,000 residents. There we climbed the Temple of the Sun, now believed to be a temple of the God of Water. In

Otomi cultural leader Francisco Luna Tavera lecturing at the site of ancient Otomi rock art.
Ixmiquilpan, at the Universidad Tecnológica del Valle del Mezquital, we learned from Otomi cultural leader Francisco Luna Tavera, who took us on guided tours of both traditional Otomi and Catholic religious sites. He interpreted ancient rock paintings for us and discussed their use in Otomi ceremonial life. A highlight of the trip was a day-long symposium of presentations on Otomi cultural, social and economic conditions at the university by UTVM professors and community knowledge-holders. This was a ground-breaking conference in a region where the indigenous culture, though vibrant in many ways, has long been ignored in educational settings.

A day-long bus ride took us to Colima where we visited indigenous community sustainable economic development projects supported by the university extension service. These included a crocodile farm, the touristic ruta café (coffee route) and a remote beach-side resort in Michoacan. We also visited the busiest seaport on the Pacific in North America, at Manzanillo. Several students from Ixmiquilpan joined us on this journey, which included a tour of El Chanal, an ancient archaeological site.

We used state department reports of the status of safety in the places we visited in Mexico, and our two partner institutions there took careful precautions to ensure that our travel plans were appropriate. Our hosts were generous and kind, and our students served as marvelous ambassadors for UM, the state of Montana, and their tribal communities. Mexican indigenous cultural leaders and the representatives of our partner institutions all commented at various times on the decorum and respectful interactions of Matt and Moses with the indigenous communities and peoples we visited. This trip provided an unparalleled cultural learning experience for all involved and for the students, new insights into native community life south of our national border.