This fall the Norwegian Sami legal scholar Øyvind Ravna will take up residence in the Native American Studies offices of the Payne Family Native American Center on a year-long research exchange visit to both NAS and the UM Law School. In May 2011, he was part of a group of Tromsø University faculty that hosted a team of UM faculty that visited this northern outpost to build on and develop a relationship established by Hayden Ausland and expanded by others over the last several years.

A UM delegation organized and funded by UM’s International Programs visited the city and university of Tromsø, which others have reported on in this newsletter before. The university was established in 1968 as Norway’s fourth university, and its farthest north. Tromsø is in the Arctic Circle. The sun briefly disappeared behind a mountain range for an hour or so each night but we never saw darkness. The city is connected to the ocean and consists of several pieces of land connected to each other by bridges. It is home to 67,000 people, of whom some 9,500 are students. The university offers a broad curriculum including undergraduate and graduate programs focusing on indigenous and Sami studies.

The Sami people are the indigenous peoples of northern Norway and their land base ranges also into Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sami are probably best-known for reindeer herding, even though only a small percentage of their population makes a living that way, now or historically. The Sami suffered the impact of several invasions of their traditional homelands which culminated in a forced assimilation effort that bears significant resemblances to that suffered by the indigenous populations of the Americas. The Norweginization efforts that lasted roughly from 1850 to 1960 were meant to eliminate the use of indigenous languages through the school systems. By 1950 a significant portion of Sami people no longer identified as such because of the disadvantages that brought in terms of making a living and facing racial discrimination.

A revitalization began to occur in the 1960s and 1970s as the Sami Movement gained strength, spurred on by international examples from people as different as Che Guevara and Vine Deloria, Jr. The movement was referred to locally as CSV after the three most common letters in the Sami alphabet. A museum operated by the university displays this history in a striking way, effectively portraying the politics of change. Interestingly, the museum itself was the subject of change as its previous Sami exhibits were dated natural history displays that would be familiar in style to visitors to many U.S. natural history museums. The museum has retained these displays – as a museum piece itself, showing the contrast in the history of museum exhibitions.

The Sami movement, in addition to its political and cultural statements, began to bring back the language in both written and oral forms. In the 1980s and 1990s the university recognized the deficiency of its work in relation to Sami communities and established a center for Sami studies, which draws on the multidisciplinary focus necessary to provide education to support community development and knowledge building. The faculty, staff and students include both Sami and non-Sami scholars. The campus itself has...
a daycare center in which children learn in the Sami language and sing Sami songs. The academic center has grown in prominence and now holds an increasingly important place on the university campus, which makes an ongoing partnership with UM's Native American Studies department a logical extension of both universities' global outlook and focus.

Øyvind and his wife both love to fish. They took us on a shoreline fishing expedition in ocean waters, complete with cookout and spectacular scenery. We'll be sure to return the favor on Montana's streams and rivers when they visit us this academic year. Øyvind will be here conducting research into tribal governance and resource issues as comparative work for his Sami studies research. Please, if you have a chance after their arrival in October, stop by the Payne Family Native American Center and offer a friendly welcome.