A by-product of TENRM is the self-esteem, pride, and identity among students. They use terms like ‘my people.’ They know what it means to have a voice. They have their own ideas. They see people at eye-level rather than viewing themselves as inferior.

—Phil Duran, TENRM director.

TENRM is a multidisciplinary environmental studies program at Northwest Indian College (NWIC) in Bellingham, Washington, one of thirty-three tribal colleges in the United States. The two-year program prepares Native American and Alaskan Native students for tribal natural resources management and environmental work by emphasizing practical competency—the ability to understand and solve complex real-world problems. Graduates work for their tribes as technical experts or transfer to four-year institutions to complete undergraduate degrees, often in environmental studies, and then do advanced work for their tribes.

TENRM was designed to meet the needs expressed by leaders from twenty-six Pacific Northwest tribes who called on educators to train future leaders who could address resource management issues within the context of community and culture. With funding from the National Science Foundation—and in partnership with Huxley College of the Environment and Fairhaven College at Western Washington University (WWU) and The Evergreen State College—NWIC began to develop TENRM’s curriculum in 1997. The program’s first students, representing ten tribes from Washington, Alaska, California, and New York, started their studies in fall 1998. Most of TENRM’s students continue to be older, married with children.

The design and delivery of TENRM is based on a thematic and team-taught learning community model, an approach that most closely resembles Native American teaching and learning. Students and faculty enter the program as a cohort, the Native value of emphasizing the “interdependence of individuals across the community of learners” critical to the program’s success (Berardi et al. 2002, 51). Students take sixty of the ninety credits required for an associate of arts and science degree with their cohort group and the remaining thirty credits as separate NWIC courses. Field trips, group projects, and internships are integral to the six-quarter program.

TENRM curriculum combines natural sciences, political science, public policy, and management with cultural experience and support. The multidisciplinary core courses are taught in four- to five-hour blocks, four days a week, with a focus on “active connections within the natural world” rather than compartmentalized knowledge. Phil Duran, TENRM’s first director, describes how principles of learning communities and Indian values and learning styles inform the day-to-day activities of students and faculty.

The kind of learning we are trying to facilitate takes place in a circle. Our small circle of learning can merge with others springing up to form bigger ones. Because the schools have taught us to be linear thinkers, it may take a special effort to discover our other powers. The libraries and the Internet are full of resources we can search on our own at any time—and in TENRM you...
are required to use them—but the way of the circle is holistic, compassionate, spiritual, ecological, communal, experiential, practical, and oral. This kind of learning is active; it hones your critical thinking skills; it can only be experienced together. It works only if there is someone to listen when someone speaks, if there is someone who will speak when someone needs to hear it. This is an important part of the TENRM journey. (Berardi et al. 2001, 18)

Each quarter is organized with a unifying theme. For instance, “To Be the Eagle’s View” introduces an Indian and Alaskan Native perspective for examining similarities and differences between tribal and western science. This first quarter, which helps students develop an understanding of the relationship of scientific concepts and basic environmental sciences terminology to tribal issues, also focuses on developing students’ basic writing, reading, and computational skills. The next three quarters focus on the cultural and economic importance of water, land and land use, and oceans. The fifth quarter, “Making Connections, Finding a Balance,” explores the complex connections among cultural values, economic development, and environmental protection faced by tribal resource managers and leaders responsible for sustaining community development in Indian nations. The final quarter, “Bringing It All Together,” requires students to design, implement, analyze, and present a community-based, capstone group project on an environmental issue.

Since TENRM’s founding, three fundamental principles have guided the program: co-articulation of tribal and western knowledge, a policy of non-abandonment, and an emphasis on developmental education. The first describes TENRM’s efforts to align instruction in resource management with traditional values and knowledge, a curricular aim since TENRM’s inception. The program is strengthened by the cultural teachings of visiting and resident Indian and Alaskan Native scholars and leaders who are often present in the classroom. The second principle, the non-abandonment policy, became an explicit practice as a consequence of faculty’s struggle with students’ attendance and varying performance levels. While standards are not lowered for students who have difficulty with their studies, no formal action is taken to remove students from the program if they fail to attend class or complete their course credits on schedule. The third principle, developmental education, expresses the determination of the original six TENRM faculty, two WWU professors of environmental physical and social sciences and four faculty from NWIC—a biologist, a chemist, a mathematician and computer specialist, and a Lummi Nation member/cultural specialist/anthropologist—to build on incoming students’ knowledge and levels of preparation. While students work hard to develop basic academic abilities, their personal and practical experiences enrich the program’s integrated curriculum from the first day of classes.

Student success is based on work completed inside and outside the classroom. Conventional testing in written and oral formats occurs on a regular basis, but community members and faculty also observe how students teach one another complex material, work with the community during tribal internships,
and work with team members during their TENRM capstone project. Success includes whether a student stays grounded in cultural values, maintains self-respect and a healthy sense of self within the context of community, uses critical and integrative abilities to problem solve and imagine creative solutions, and makes substantial improvements in writing, reading comprehension, speaking, and mathematics.

In many Native American education programs, retention rates are low. As teaching team members note, students’ personal circumstances such as “family responsibilities, legal and financial problems, chemical dependencies, domestic abuse, lack of self-confidence, and coming to terms with one’s place in American society as a Native American” make staying in school very difficult (Berardi et al. 2002, 58). Of the nineteen students enrolled in the first TENRM cohort in fall 1998, ten were still enrolled in the last quarter of their two-year program (two students had died). Six received associate of arts in sciences degrees and transferred to universities; the other four stayed in TENRM until they completed their two-year degree. Student participation and retention continues to improve: after the first year, the second cohort’s retention rate was 87 percent and the third cohort’s retention rate was 100 percent (LaFrance 2003, iv).

Website: http://www.nwic.edu/tenrm
Contact: Northwest Indian College Telephone: 360-392-4309

References
