



## Blackfeet Community College Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Program—Overview and Preliminary Outcomes

*This practice brief is one in a series being developed by the Tribal HPOG evaluation team, comprised of NORC at the University of Chicago, Red Star Innovations and the National Indian Health Board (NIHB). The briefs will be used to disseminate important lessons learned and findings from the Evaluation of the Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program, which is funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The HPOG program is funded by the Affordable Care Act to support 32 demonstration projects, including five Tribal Organizations and Colleges, to train Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients and other low-income individuals as healthcare professionals. The Tribal HPOG program aims to meet local healthcare demands by increasing the number of well-trained health professionals in tribal communities. The program is designed using a career pathways approach where students advance through related trainings that build on each other to deepen students' healthcare knowledge and skills. This practice brief provides an overview of the Blackfeet Community College (BCC) Tribal HPOG program and key findings to date.*

### OVERVIEW OF THE BCC TRIBAL HPOG PROGRAM

Blackfeet Community College (BCC), chartered in 1974, is a Tribal Health Profession Opportunity Grant (HPOG) recipient serving the people of the Blackfeet Reservation and other Tribal communities in Montana. BCC offers an array of educational programs that integrate the Blackfeet culture and language into curricula and that prepare students for achievement in higher education and meaningful employment. The BCC HPOG program, known as the *Issksiniip* Project,<sup>1</sup> provides scholarships and training opportunities in healthcare fields to students at BCC, the grant's lead entity, as well as to students at its partner institutions that include Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, MT), University of Montana Missoula (Missoula, MT), Montana State Bozeman (Bozeman, MT), Montana State Billings (Billings, MT), and Great Falls College - Montana State University (Great Falls, MT). The *Issksiniip* Project provides financial assistance and academic and social supportive services that enable students to pursue training and promote their successful completion of training programs. Financial assistance consists of scholarships to assist with tuition and fees, and assistance with childcare, transportation, and other living expenses while attending college. The supportive services include mentoring, tutoring, academic advising, referrals to public assistance and behavioral health programs, and career development, such as job shadowing and career fairs. The training opportunities available through the *Issksiniip* Project include programs in nursing, pharmacy, dental, medical coding and billing, and other allied health professions.

<sup>1</sup> In the Blackfeet language, "Issksiniip" means "a way of knowing" or "the concept of gaining knowledge."

<sup>2</sup> The findings to date on program structures, program processes, and program outcomes are derived from three site visits to BCC which included key informant

### KEY FINDINGS TO DATE<sup>2</sup>

#### Program Structures

- **Statewide implementation to maximize the reach of the *Issksiniip* Project.** BCC developed its statewide approach to implementing the *Issksiniip* Project in order to train healthcare professionals across Montana and respond to local and regional labor market needs. Establishing the *Issksiniip* Project network across Montana is also intended to benefit students by facilitating a seamless transition from a tribal college to a four-year university. Prior to the HPOG grant, BCC had not established relationships with the state university or colleges. BCC has now built a strong foundation for healthcare workforce training with its tribal and state partners across Montana and continues to identify new opportunities to build its capacity, such as faculty exchanges and new degree offerings.
- **Forging partnerships to increase program capacity and promote employment opportunities.** BCC has brought together nearly 20 organizations both on and off the Blackfeet reservation to build capacity for healthcare training programs and promote employment for *Issksiniip* graduates. In addition to the partnerships with academic institutions, BCC is collaborating with health organizations to provide students with additional education, training, and employment opportunities. BCC has established partnerships with Benefis Health Systems (Great Falls, MT), Indian Health Service, and Glacier County EMS to foster student employability and employment.
- **Offering a variety of academic programs responsive to community needs.** The training programs available through the

interviews with administrative and program implementation staff, focus groups with the BCC students, and completer and non-completer phone interviews with BCC students. Information was pulled directly from the interviews and focus groups.

*Issksiniip* Project span a range of health professions, from administrative positions to positions in the nursing, pharmacy, dental, and mental and behavioral health fields. During the 2013-2014 academic year, BCC added new programs based on a community assessment that identified specific employment needs. As a result, Medical Billing and Coding and Phlebotomy programs were both added. As of the 2014-2015 academic year a Licensed Registered Nursing program is underway that will allow current Licensed Practical Nursing students to further their education.

**Program Processes**

- **High student enrollment across partner institutions.** Since program inception, nearly 400 students have enrolled in the *Issksiniip* Project across the six academic institutions. Project Liaisons at the partner institutions have been beneficial in supporting student recruitment and retention and promoting communication across the partners.
- **Comprehensive supportive services to address student needs.** The *Issksiniip* Project staff have created a supportive environment with multiple services in place to meet academic, financial, personal, and employment needs. Although these supports vary across the colleges and universities, supportive services include scholarships, mentoring, academic services, referrals to public assistance, and career preparation. Staff and students describe the *Issksiniip* Project as more than just a scholarship program, reporting that the range of supportive services available sets the *Issksiniip* Project apart from other programs that only provide tuition.
- **New emphasis on support for employment outcomes.** As more students advance through their programs, the *Issksiniip* Project is focusing on services that will promote job readiness and employment. This past year, BCC and its partners held a series of career fairs specifically for *Issksiniip* students at various locations across the state. The career fairs provided students an opportunity to network with local and regional employers and learn about job opportunities in healthcare. Another key opportunity that BCC offers to students is a one week job shadowing placement at Benefis Health System. Along with giving students exposure to their chosen field of study, job shadowing emphasizes the importance of workplace skills such as punctuality, appropriate attire, and professional conduct.

**Program Outcomes<sup>3</sup>**

- **Strong progress towards program completion and employment goals.** In May 2014, BCC graduated one of its largest classes ever, 77 students, at Commencement exercises. *Issksiniip* students accounted for nearly half of the graduating class (34 students) and included BCC’s first Licensed Practical Nursing graduating class. Students at BCC and at the partner institutions have expressed their appreciation for the *Issksiniip* Project in affording them the opportunity to pursue their education further than they would have without the program’s assistance. In addition, 255 *Issksiniip* students gained employment as of January 2015; 153 of those students have become employed in the healthcare sector.
- **Greater awareness of the importance of higher education.** At BCC, staff feel that a major success of the program is the renewed

*“I resigned from my job so I can go to school full time. The Issksiniip Project helped me transition into the [healthcare] program. They helped with fixing my vehicle so I could get to school. They give you all the resources to help get rid of the barriers to going to school and make it so you can do well. They are very supportive, encouraging.”*  
 –BCC Program Participant

emphasis on the importance of education in the community and within families. The *Issksiniip* Project has enabled students and families to become more aware of opportunities for higher education, which in turn has created more support for families for students to complete their programs. This familial support, whether emotionally or through helping with students’ other responsibilities (e.g. childcare), has helped first generation students successfully obtain certifications and degrees.

- **High satisfaction among program stakeholders.** Staff, students, and local employers report a high level of satisfaction with the *Issksiniip* Project. BCC students appreciate that the program provides monetary and social supports as well as the ability to explore employment prospects beyond the reservation, if desired. Staff at the partner institutions noted their satisfaction with the progress of students and reported seeing increased confidence, successful employment, and pride among those that have completed the program and entered a health profession.

*“[Completing my degree] makes me feel good that I have succeeded and got the tools to pursue a career in the healthcare field. It gives me a sense of self-worth... The Issksiniip Project gives you every avenue to succeed.”*  
 –BCC Program Participant

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<sup>3</sup> Although the evaluation describes preliminary outcomes for program participants, we do not know what the outcomes for participants would have been in the absence of the program.