

## Equal Opportunity Staff Diversity and Inclusion Success Stories

### University:

Bristol Bay 4-H Program, 4-H Afterschool Programming for Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, & Youth in State Custody Program at Alaska 4-H, University of Alaska Fairbanks: Principal Investigator, Mara Bacsujlaky, Assistant Professor of Extension (907) 987-0886; [mcbacsujlaky@alaska.edu](mailto:mcbacsujlaky@alaska.edu)

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Since 2009 4-H faculty at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service have been responding to requests to introduce or re-introduce 4-H in remote Alaska Native villages. As we began this journey, we inherently knew that diversity among villages and geographic regions of the state precludes a one-size-fits-all approach to youth programming. Through community-participatory research to better understand what 4-H might look like in rural Alaska and a series of grants for program implementation and evaluation, we engage youth and their families in life skills through hands-on learning for success now and as they navigate the future. We deliver culturally responsive 4-H in 14 remote rural tribal villages, in several Fairbanks schools, to teens in the Fairbanks Youth Facility and to youth aging out of foster care, where the majority of youth are Alaska Native. Thus, wherever we may reach tribal youth through our 4-H programming, our overarching goal is to connect tribal youth to their culture and heritage and to their community of origin, thereby fostering an enhanced sense of belonging and ability to visualize healthy, productive futures for themselves, their families, and their tribal communities.

Our approach to culturally responsive 4-H programming is easily replicated in any community:

- **Unbiased listening:** We talk to youth, families, knowledge bearers, elders and other community leaders; we learn about and from the community. We ask them what their vision for youth programming is, and how can we support that vision. We listen, and working with the community build responsive programming, rather than imposing an outside model on youth and their families.
- **Commitment:** We commit to building and honoring a long-term relationship for as long as we are of service to the community.
- **Adaptation:** We accept what the community offers in terms of lived-experiences, cultural values and practices, and local knowledge and history as the foundation to our 4-H program. 4-H components that resonate with tribal youth and families are adapted to our programs – those that present barriers or are culturally non-normative – are not incorporated, as long as the safety of all program participants is not compromised.

There is a common conception of the role of youth development programs to develop future leaders. However, the definition of what makes a leader is currently defined through a western lens. We support youth in choosing pathways that align best with their cultural framework and definitions of leadership. And while this may be one outcome from our programming, it is our contention that youth also need to be recognized and valued for who they are during childhood and adolescence and not just for the future adults they will become. Our combination of foundational research and program development is helping us, in concert with our tribal partners, to create educational and supportive environments which encourage and engage tribal youth to fully discover and utilize that power: for themselves, their families, tribes and communities.

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