The Big Picture

Newsrooms are increasingly creating Indigenous beats and affairs desks as a response to the public’s appetite for such news and as an overdue acknowledgment that Native American communities have long been undercovered. Moreover, news outlets are recognizing the importance of building diverse staffs that include Indigenous reporters, regardless of beats. But these efforts are hamstrung by the historical and pervasive underrepresentation of Native Americans in newsrooms. There simply aren’t enough Indigenous journalists.

A 2016 Nieman Reports article said there were only 118 self-identified Indigenous journalists working at U.S. daily newspapers in 2015, or .36 percent of all newsroom employees, according to the American Society of News Editors. That figure has continued to hover below .5 percent since.

Underscore News, a nonprofit news organization in Portland that focuses on Indigenous reporting in the Pacific Northwest, is launching a program called the Underscore Indigenous Journalism Fellowship, in partnership with the University of Montana’s nationally reputed journalism school, that will help address these concerns by hosting and training an Indigenous journalism student each summer, giving the intern professional experience with a living wage and offering a scholarship upon completion.

Underscore has experienced the Indigenous journalist shortage firsthand as we’ve sought to build a staff of Native American reporters. Through our internship program, we want to reach aspiring journalists when they are undergraduates to help show them a viable pathway into the profession. In doing so, we hope to help facilitate an Indigenous journalist pipeline that will serve our newsroom and other newsrooms in the next five to 10 years, and beyond.

The Details

Our program, launched as a pilot project in 2022, has been organized in partnership with the University of Montana and The Oregonian to give interns an immersive and supportive journalism experience each summer. The fellowship includes the following:

→ An annual 10-week internship for qualified Indigenous journalism students at the University of Montana, with the candidate-selection process overseen by Jason Begay, a UM journalism professor who oversees the J-school’s respected Native News Honors Project and a member of Underscore’s Indian Country Advisory Team

→ A living wage along with a desk and computer at Underscore’s office in Portland, Oregon, where the interns will work under the supervision of senior staff and alongside experienced reporters; learn the ins and outs of professional print journalism; report and write stories; and see their work published by Underscore and its publishing partners, including Oregon’s largest daily newspapers, rural outlets and tribal publications
→ Access to weekly intern trainings offered by The Oregonian, whose editor and internship coordinator have agreed to this arrangement, which will offer the additional benefit of networking and camaraderie opportunities with The Oregonian’s roster of interns

→ Participation in an Indigenous reporting training workshop organized by Underscore for reporters in the Pacific Northwest, including The Oregonian

→ Housing at Portland State University through its summer intern housing program, to be paid in full by Underscore

→ A $2,000 scholarship upon completion of the program

The Supporters

Based on our research and own values, the best way to build this program, in order to attract candidates and make the experience as equitable and supportive as possible, is to include housing, a living wage and scholarship support to reinforce the value of education.

We are grateful to have received funding from the Scripps Howard Foundation, the Flathead Beacon Foundation and The Leadings Fund of the Oregon Community Foundation to make those ambitions a reality. Special thanks also goes to the University of Montana School of Journalism and Jason Begay, whose support and partnership were invaluable.

We anticipate that this internship will be executed as a pilot in 2022 and subsequently revised, as and if needed, as a result of the initial program. Our goal is to continue to grow and expand the annual program as funding and partnerships evolve.