



Rural Development • Business Programs • Rural Business Enterprise Grants Program

Business Development Training Expands Opportunities for Tribal Entrepreneurs

Over a decade ago, the Small Business Program for the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde was dissolved due to financial constraints, leaving few local resources to help tribal members start new businesses. For this rural community in Polk County, Oregon, the distance to the nearest business development services was a significant barrier to education, leaving many entrepreneurs without access to the training and support they needed to be successful.

Chemeketa Community College operates a microbusiness program, MERIT, that assists underserved entrepreneurs. With the help of a \$50,120 Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) from USDA Rural Development in 2011, Chemeketa was able to partner with the Grand Ronde Tribe to develop the MERIT Indianpreneurship Program. The program utilizes culturally appropriate resources developed by the Oregon Native American Business and Entrepreneurial Network (ONABEN) to help tribal entrepreneurs assess the feasibility of their business concepts, learn the basics of running a business, and develop a business plan. Provided onsite at the Grand Ronde Tribal Education Center, the program brings training and technical assistance to tribal members. It also provides resources to the surrounding non-native community in Polk and Yamhill counties, fostering new connections for the Tribe.

Three Chemeketa MERIT Program staff members are now trained as Indianpreneurship instructors and are available to the Tribe. The first Indianpreneurship class graduated in March 2012, and the program is still in operation today with 11 students graduating in 2014 to date. Seven businesses have been opened by graduates from the program with continued support from MERIT as of July 2014. Six of those businesses are native-owned.

“They already had good ideas and abilities, they just needed an opportunity to develop their business skills in a supportive environment,” said MERIT Instructor Kinji Neskahi.

The Indianpreneurship Program has provided the Grand Ronde Tribe with the educational resources it needed, laying the groundwork for new businesses and jobs. At the same time, the Chemeketa MERIT Program and ONABEN have helped to form a partnership that is dedicated to improving the economic prosperity of the Tribe into the future.



From left to right: Kinji Neskahi, MERIT Instructor; April Campbell, Grand Ronde Education Manager; Luhui Whitebear, Indianpreneurship graduate; Marion Mercier, Indianpreneurship graduate; Mona Edwards, MERIT Coordinator; Joshua Clift, Grand Ronde Education Coordinator.

Obligation Amount: \$50,120 grant

Date of Obligation: September 19, 2011

Congressional District: Representatives Bonamici, OR-1, and Schrader, OR-5; Senators Wyden and Merkley

Partners: Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, Chemeketa Community College, MERIT, ONABEN

Demographics: Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, Polk and Yamhill County residents

Impact: 3 Chemeketa staff members trained as Indianpreneurship instructors; 7 new businesses created