



Salish Kootenai College and the Economic Development Administration Pave New Career Pathways for Rural and Native Technologists



About SKC

SKC is a private, accredited Tribal land-grant community college in Pablo, Montana, established in 1977 to serve Native American students, though it is open to all. Located on the Flathead Reservation, it offers bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificates with a focus on STEM, Indigenous education, and culture.

A STUDENT'S DREAM OF RESEARCH COMES TO LIFE

Steven Statham grew up surrounded by the mountains and waterways of Snohomish County in the Pacific Northwest. Despite not being a Tribally affiliated, he was inspired to pursue a hydrology degree at Salish Kootenai College (SKC), given its unique history of combining world class environmental science research, with the Indigenous values of a Tribal college education, and the philosophy of cherishing one's individual place within the communities and ecosystems they live.

Through SKC's decades-long goal of providing cutting edge STEM education, Steven and his classmates have been able to access the best training and technology available, from advanced sensors to participation in the Balloon Outreach, Research, Exploration and Landscape Imaging System (BOREALIS) program - one of America's premier Space-Grant environmental research efforts. However, hydrology is far from the only STEM field in which SKC excels in providing culturally-aligned higher education for Tribal students.

SKC IS AWARDED \$7.2M TO EXPAND STEM OFFERINGS

Salish Kootenai College (SKC) is renowned throughout the region for serving students in a way that is truly rooted in the Indigenous communities of the Flathead Indian Reservation and beyond. With the vast Flathead Lake and the towering peaks of the Mission Mountains as its backyard, SKC provides a haven for young minds of all backgrounds to learn and grow in wonder.

SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE



"We find that encompassing the concept of 'place' is where the relationships and connections begin and how we keep students interested, connected, and empowered," says Dr. Antony Berthelote, SKC Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs.

Their mission is so critical that SKC was recently awarded \$7.2 million for its Supporting Tribal Education Pathways (STEP) project as a component of the broader Headwaters Tech Hub (HTH) funding from the Economic Development Administration (EDA). Certainly, SKC has a successful history offering Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) training opportunities for Native and rural students; but it is their rich tradition of providing those opportunities in an environment combining Tribal cultural values with real-world industry challenges that this funding will truly help elevate.

Since receiving their funding, SKC has been able to rapidly expand and diversify their STEM programs for students and faculty of all ages and backgrounds. One such program is their five-week Technology Internship awarded to seven high school and college students in programming, sensor technology, and data science. Beyond internships, SKC has also expanded applied learning coursework through their GIS and drone certification programs, a new remote sensing minor, and dedicated K-12 outreach efforts, all of which teach not only technical skills, but also ethics and responsible use within the lens of Tribal culture and history.

This is the exact type of applied experience that helps students connect learning to practice; while building early confidence with tools they will encounter in future careers.



SKC's work in training K-12 STEM educators is also helping foster STEM identities in the next generation by providing high levels of access to emerging technologies like autonomous driving and modern electrical engineering practices.

To ensure these lessons reach the classroom effectively, the college has also invested in its secondary and after-school educators, with approximately 15 teachers completing specialized photonics lesson planning and professional development trainings. Last summer, SKC hosted a UAS Symposium and Introductory Workshop (which brought together Tribal professionals, students, and private-sector representatives), resulting in 14 individuals completing the FAA TRUST exam – this project continues to build on these initial efforts to expand community and educator professional development programming.

SKC – THE NEW FRONTIER OF TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION



- ▶ Headwaters Tech Hub's Phase II award set aside **\$8.0 million** for the **HTH-STEP** project
- ▶ **209 students were enrolled** in STEM programming in 2024–2025
- ▶ **76 students** participated in BGC **drone STEM activities**
- ▶ **19 teachers were trained** in UDL STEM in Construction Education, **impacting 424 students**
- ▶ **14 individuals** completed the **FAA TRUST exam**
- ▶ **15 educators** completed professional development training for **photonics** lesson planning



EYES ON THE HORIZON – SKC HELPS STUDENTS BUILD LIFE SKILLS AND ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

This funding is so much more than a means to provide relevant education; it is a lifeline to the community. The average wage on the Flathead Indian Reservation is \$28,000, while the overall average in Montana is \$66,000.

“In a county with one of the highest costs of living in the state, the struggle is real,” says Dr. Berthelote.

As of 2026, the region represents one of the most significant housing-to-income imbalances in the United States, and upskilling a new workforce capable of thriving within this economy is a high-priority, all-hands effort. This investment is even pushing the college's internal infrastructure into the future by allowing for the modernization of the Student Information System, ensuring the college can better serve its students for years to come.

Steven Statham is only one of many young students who are building their destiny at SKC, and thanks to their dedication to expanding their programs and capacity, there is a bright future for many more to come. The transition from the classroom to the field is critical for these young students, and SKC is at the core of this effort by building a pathway where confidence leads to skills and skills lead to careers. And through its role as a leader in Tribal education, SKC is driving capacity building and curriculum development so that when people ask where to go to find the future of STEM, the answer is Salish Kootenai College.



For more information about Salish Kootenai College STEM Programs, please Contact:

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The Headwaters Tech Hub 501c3 is a Economic Development Administration-designated regional consortium led aimed at making Montana a global leader in smart, autonomous, photonic sensing technologies. For more information please contact:

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