

No One Way of Knowing: Agricultural Science Student's Perspective Changed by Ojibwe Field Experience

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In a combined course and field experience, Alexandra Dutt explored indigenous peoples' understanding of their environment -- and how it could inform her own.

Dutt, a senior agricultural science major from near Allentown, Pennsylvania, first became interested in Native American studies after taking a literature class. When she came across information about a course called Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing, which included an end-of-semester trip to the Ojibwe communities in northern Minnesota, it seemed like a good opportunity to learn more.

During the 2015 spring semester, Dutt participated in discussion-based class sessions about the cultures, histories, and knowledge of the Native American peoples of the Great Lakes area. Students were encouraged to ask questions and interact with one another in talking circles. "The instructors were awesome," Dutt remembered. "In addition to being great teachers, they were like friends by the end." The course helped to ready the students for what they would encounter during a three-week Maymester term with the Ojibwe tribe.



Dutt, third from right, at an Ojibwe event with the Penn State CED 401 group.

But nothing could have prepared them for the impact the trip would have. For Dutt, it was life-changing. “It’s almost hard to put into words because it was so awesome,” she said. A huge part of the experience was learning from members of the community. The students heard lectures on a variety of topics, like the boarding school era, during which Native American children were forcibly taken from their homes and placed into schools. There was a strong focus on sustainability and preservation -- for example, the students visited Native Harvest, a company started by the White Earth Land Recovery Project, which is focused on preserving original seeds and other land-use planning issues. “It was a chance to connect the concepts I had learned in my major and throughout the course and trip,” Dutt explained. “The people we met and talked to were amazing and had so much insight.”

In addition to the lecture series, the students participated in several immersive experiences among the Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth Ojibwe. Dutt recalled attending pow-wow and Sacred Drum ceremonies, hiking with an ethnobotanist, and canoeing down the Mississippi River. The students were also able to stay with a host family for a night. “Everyone on the trip got so close, I almost felt like we had a family,” she said.

Her experiences among the Ojibwe caused Dutt to reevaluate her plans for the future. “The trip taught me a lot about myself. It taught me what I want to do, about how to act in another culture and how to carry myself, and why culture is so important in communities,” she explained. “Before, I thought I wanted to pick a job that would help me earn money. Now I want a career where I can help communities, people, and the earth.”

After she graduates, Dutt plans to work for a program like AmeriCorps for a few years before attending graduate school. “I’m really passionate about teaching people the importance of agriculture and environmental issues.”

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Learn more about the [Agricultural Science](#) major.

Learn more about the [Ojibwe course and field experience](#).

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