THE CENTER FOR WESTERN LANDS & PEOPLES
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
LIVING IN THE WEST

Demographic studies indicate that the population of the United States is increasingly concentrated in the West, a trend that is likely to continue over the next decades. MSU’s new Center for Western Lands and Peoples, which received Board of Regents approval in spring 2017, enables public stakeholders and members of the academic community to gain a deeper understanding of the many social, cultural, political, and economic changes driven by this region. The Center offers a dynamic setting for discussions between the university and the public about issues facing the state and region, while also foregrounding the importance of imagining the North American West from a variety of viewpoints.

As part of a land-grant institution, the scholarly community at MSU has a special responsibility to foster understanding of the local spaces and the larger region in which we live, work, and study. As such, the Center for Western Lands and Peoples helps integrate learning, discovery, and engagement by bringing together students, faculty, and community members who share an interest in the interdisciplinary study and ongoing centrality of the North American West across national and international contexts.

AN INTERNATIONAL HUB FOR WESTERN STUDIES

The Center for Western Lands and Peoples builds on an impressive base of scholarship about the West in the College of Letters and Science and at Montana State University more generally. Through activities and programs sponsored by the Center, MSU is set to become an international hub for the study of critical issues involving the western US and Canada. MSU is the ideal home for such a Center due to our already-existing expertise, our strong community networks, our geographic location at the meeting place between the Great Plains and the Mountain West, and our proximity to Yellowstone National Park. By supporting and advancing student and faculty interdisciplinary research, publication, and scholarship, the Center seeks to establish a research-based resource for the regional, national, and global community.

The Center focuses on the natures and cultures of the western United States and Canada. Highlighting interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, the reach of the Center is often public. Faculty and students in a variety of fields, including American Studies, Archaeology, Ecology, English, Film and Photography, Geography, History, Political Science, and Native American Studies explore the meaning of place as expressed in a variety of texts and material objects.

These scholars examine the West as the site of powerful legends and stories in their studies of literature and the visual arts. Students and faculty also trace the role the region and its borders have played in the creation and development of national identity. In the process, they study the history of encounters between diverse populations in the West and the ways the region has served as a laboratory for working out relations between native and newcomer groups. The West is understood as a complicated space where different populations have struggled over the land and resources. These complexities have led to the creation of a rich and vibrant world that the Center for Western Lands and Peoples looks forward to exploring.
UNIVERSITY OF THE YELLOWSTONE

Our proximity to America’s first national park has enabled MSU students and faculty to develop innovative scholarly projects. In partnership with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the Wallace Stegner Chair in Western American Studies, for instance, the Center for Western Lands and Peoples is helping to organize an upcoming conference on the environmental and economic impacts of recreational activities in southwest Montana. This two-day event to be held in spring 2018 will enable experts from the university, state and federal agencies, and the outdoor industry to discuss how Montana’s growing population can best meet the challenges of the 21st century by developing new sustainability initiatives and stewardship practices for our public lands.

INTERDISCIPLINARY OPPORTUNITIES

Our initiatives and publications are interdisciplinary in scope, as are the undergraduate and graduate student activities and projects the Center sponsors. Our Center enables faculty and students to better coordinate and publicize the many scholarly projects that are ongoing at MSU. With the goal of having an independent budget focused on regional studies and a mission that broadly encompasses the humanities, the social sciences, and the environmental sciences from the outset, the Center for Western Lands and Peoples will offer a major advance in promoting cross-disciplinary research, outreach, and teaching endeavors at MSU.

The 2017 spring Festival of the West, for instance, served as an opportunity to foreground such research at MSU. The Festival featured talks by ten MSU faculty members and posters from over a dozen graduate students on their recent research about the American West. The participants represented a number of fields including Ecology, English, Film, Geography, History, Library Science, and Native American Studies.

The September 2017 symposium on Montana writer Ivan Doig offers another opportunity for interdisciplinary inquiry. Entitled “Doig Country: Imagining Montana and the West,” this event will feature presentations by geographers, historians, librarians, poets, and literary scholars from Montana, the West, and Canada. The MSU Library recently acquired the papers of Ivan Doig, which are housed in the Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections and are open to the public. Faculty, students, and community members will spend two days discussing the historical, cultural, and literary contexts of Ivan Doig’s writings and his contributions to our understandings of Montana and the West. The symposium will conclude with an afternoon of events in White Sulphur Springs, where Doig spent much of his childhood.
FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The goal for the Center for Western Lands and Peoples is to raise $5 million in the form of an endowment that will:

- Create paid internships for undergraduate and graduate students who wish to gain hands-on experiences in field science, public history, museum studies, professional film and photography projects, etc.

- Fund the “Perspectives on the American West” Speaker Series, which is held during fall semester at the Museum of the Rockies. Now in its third year, the series features public presentations, often with standing room-only attendance, by leading western scholars and writers. Previous and upcoming speakers include historian Patricia Limerick, ethnobotanist Rosalyn LaPier, writer Michael Punke, and conservation scientist David Theobald.

- Offer funded research opportunities for faculty and graduate students working on the West. Previously funded projects include a comparative study of mining engineers in the US West and South Africa; indigenous approaches to creating ecologically and culturally sustainable museums; a social history of Montana food; a high school literacy project involving partnerships between faculty from MSU and tribal colleges; and a study of Shakespeare in Montana classrooms in conjunction with MSU’s Shakespeare in the Parks.

- Provide opportunities to host scholarly talks and programs about the West. Previous programs included a “double feature” that showcased two talks on classic Western films by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Glenn Frankel and Emmy Award-winning writer Kirk Ellis.

- Establish a fully funded post-doctoral research position to be housed at the Center, which will enable a visiting scholar to spend one year working on a major research project centered on the North American West. While in residence, the postdoctoral scholar will offer focused research seminars on topics related to the region, mentor graduate students, and present a public lecture on the scholarship completed during the year.

- Provide publication subventions for scholarly books on the West.

- Organize conferences and symposia that bring together experts from the university and the public sphere to address the concerns and issues facing the region and the state.

- Host readings and book signings by western writers. Previous and upcoming authors include Willy Vlautin, Claire Vaye Watkins, Rick Bass, and Maile Meloy.

- Sponsor master classes with visiting writers and scholars as a way of mentoring undergraduate and graduate students in English, Film, Geography, History, Native American Studies, and Political Science on topics related to the North American West.

- Offer a Western film series in partnership with the Museum of the Rockies, with a presentation and discussion after the screening to be facilitated by MSU faculty.

Your support will lead the effort to establish MSU’s Center for Western Lands and Peoples as a world-class hub for the study of the region’s culture, history, environment, politics, and economy.

Thank you for your support of Montana State University.

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