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UW becomes member of University of Arctic

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Growing international interest in the Arctic led the UW in June to become a member of the University of the Arctic. UW is one of only two member institutions below the 49th parallel.

The University of the Arctic is different from most other universities in that it has no single, fixed campus. Rather, it's a cooperative network of 116 universities, colleges and other organizations committed to higher education and research in the North.

Global warming, Inuit self-government and sovereignty issues related to melting of the Northwest Passage have led to increased international focus on the Arctic, said Nadine Fabbi, associate director of the UW Canadian Studies Center. The sovereignty issue has surfaced, by the way, because the Northwest Passage has become more navigable, thus more attractive to shipping companies.

The UW joined the network for multiple reasons, including opportunities to increase faculty and student mobility and research in the Arctic, Fabbi said. Additionally, membership could make a UW undergraduate program in circumpolar studies possible.

For Native American students, it could mean more opportunities for exchanges or collaborations with Inuit young people. Canadian Studies, at the Jackson School of International Studies where the Arctic membership will be housed, works closely with Native Voices, an aboriginal filmmaking program headed by Daniel Hart, chair of the center and a specialist in American Indian studies. Students in Canadian Studies include Tim Pasch, who holds a fellowship to study Inuktitut, the Inuit language.

University of the Arctic membership will enable centers in the Jackson School whose study regions include the Arctic to collaborate in new ways, said Fabbi. In addition, students in international studies could study the Arctic in terms of global issues.

The UW has an extensive assortment of Arctic researchers. An abbreviated list:

- Benjamin Fitzhugh, an anthropologist, is on an expedition to the Kiril Islands, which are part of sub-Arctic Russia, this summer. He's studying human adaptations to Arctic environments.
- Vincent Gallucci, a professor in Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, researches shark species in the waters of Washington and British Columbia as well as in the Bering and Arctic seas.
- Harry Stern, a mathematician at the Polar Science Center, researches sea ice motion and thickness in the Arctic sea.
- Kristin Laidre, also with the Polar Science Center, studies habitat relationships between Arctic whales and climate, mostly in Greenland.
- Jody Deming, an oceanographer, studies microbial life in extreme environments such as Arctic winter sea ice.
- Jonathan Karpoff, a professor in the Michael G. Foster School of Business, researches Alaskan economics, including salmon fisheries and performance of Alaska Native Settlement Act corporations. He recently traveled with a group of students and two other professors to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to study potential economic and environmental impacts of oil drilling.

"I was immediately sold on the idea of joining the University of the Arctic," said Karpoff. "The UW is one of strongest research universities physically close to the North American Arctic." He added that membership in the university may also offer ways for the UW to connect with both Seattle communities and those in the Arctic regarding economic, environmental and indigenous issues.