Where do we begin?

American Indian educators and researchers forward essential understandings for teachers and students to know regarding American Indian people and nations. The following essential understandings, derived from the Montana Office of Public Instruction’s *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*, offer starting points to fulfill Act 31:

**Essential Understanding #1: Nations**
There is great diversity among the 11 federally recognized American Indian Nations in Wisconsin—diversity in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each of the 11 American Indian Nations in Wisconsin has a distinct and unique cultural heritage contributing to Wisconsin’s past and present.

**Essential Understanding #2: People**
There is great diversity among individual American Indians as identity is developed, defined and redefined by entities, organizations and people. A continuum of Indian identity, unique to each individual, ranges from assimilated to traditional, and as many American Indian families are multicultural, there is no generic American Indian.

**Essential Understanding #3: Culture**
American Indian cultures, while grounded in tradition, are always growing, evolving, and changing. Culture, beliefs, spirituality, and language are a part of people’s everyday lives and guide how tribal nations govern and manage their affairs.

**Essential Understanding #4: History**
United States history begins with American Indian history, and American Indian history begins with stories representing oral histories. Contact with non-Native American societies is a recent chapter in Native American histories. American Indian history is often broadly defined by the following historical periods:

- Pre-contact
- Early Colonization
- Conflict & Indian Wars
- Treaty
- Removal and Reservation
- Coercive Assimilation
- Termination
- Self-Determination

*Pre-contact* Origin Stories – 1492
*Early Colonization* 1500 – 1700
*Conflict & Indian Wars* 1622 – 1924
*Treaty* 1789 – 1871
*Removal and Reservation* 1815 – 1960
*Coercive Assimilation* 1878 – 1975
*Termination* 1953 – 1975
*Self-Determination* 1975 – Present

The writing of history is a subjective experience, and history told from an American Indian historical perspective frequently conflicts with Western histories.

**Essential Understanding #5: Sovereignty**
American Indian Nations maintain sovereign powers separate and independent from federal and state governments. These are inherent rights and were not granted or given.
What is Act 31?

For 12,000 years the western Great Lakes have been home to a diverse and ever changing population whose shared histories and cultures define Wisconsin’s communities today.

In the 1980s, a conflict arose in Wisconsin, the spearfishing conflict, due to a general misunderstanding of tribal sovereignty.

To lessen conflict and improve the social climate for all of Wisconsin’s citizens, the 1989 Wisconsin state statutes 115, 118, and 121, collectively known as Act 31, seek to achieve these goals by incorporating American Indian Studies into public education.

Chapter 118.19 directly impacts Wisconsin’s teacher education programs by requiring . . .

“Beginning July 1, 1991, the state superintendent may not grant to any person a license to teach unless the person has received instruction in the study of minority group relations, including instruction in the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized American Indian tribes and bands located in the state.”

Chapter 121.02 requires K-12 school teachers to provide instruction on Wisconsin’s First Nations and requires libraries to carry materials reflecting the cultural plurality of our state.

Four Approaches: Infusing Act 31 into Teacher Education courses and programs:

1. Investment
The opportunity to learn more about the 12,000 year span of human history of the Great Lakes, including the 11 contemporary American Indian Nations in Wisconsin, and the opportunity to explore personal schemas and enduring stereotypes of American Indians.

2. Authentic Content
The opportunity to receive instruction in the scope and language of Act 31 along with the history, culture and sovereignty of Wisconsin’s Indian Nations.

3. Analysis
The opportunity to analyze and critique the approaches of curriculum and materials that include Wisconsin Indian Nations.

4. Assessment
The opportunity to modify or create curriculum to address Act 31 and reflect on the experience through electronic or other portfolios.