

**Opening Statement of Representative Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)**

Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, and the  
Committee on Education and the Workforce, Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development  
Joint Subcommittee Hearing

*“Investigating How the Biden Administration Ignored Cries for Help from Students at Haskell Indian Nations  
University”*

1334 Longworth House Office Building

Tuesday, July 23, 2024 | 3:15 p.m.

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Thank you very much Mr. Chairman, thank you also Chairman Owens and Ranking Member Stansbury, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today. I appreciate for many of you that this might be difficult, especially when we are asking you to publicly reshare what may be personal and sometimes traumatic stories.

I want to start by acknowledging our country’s shameful history of mistreating and forcibly assimilating Native people. In the past years, we’ve gone to great lengths to attempt to rectify a fraction of these injustices.

I’m grateful to the Department of the Interior for its work to address the wrongs many Native students experienced in boarding schools after many were forcibly removed from their families, communities, languages, religions, and cultural beliefs. In 2021, Secretary Haaland announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, an effort to recognize the concerning legacy of federal Indian boarding school policies and to address the intergenerational impact. I’m also pleased to see that the Department invested funding in the National Fund for Excellence in American Indian Education, which they indicated had been inactive for decades.

Haskell Indian Nations University was established from what once was an Indian boarding school, where Native children were forcibly assimilated for decades – an issue I’m familiar with because I represent Oregon, where we have Chemawa Indian School. Haskell University can—and should—be a safe space for Native students to learn while embracing and uplifting their culture. This is a noble goal – and with support, it is *attainable*.

Unfortunately, the reality of Haskell University is a sharp contrast to this goal. All academic institutions are responsible for creating safe and supportive learning environments. In the unique case of Haskell University, the burden falls on the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Education to provide resources and guidance to facilitate a safe school environment. We have heard of instances on campus that have indicated failure after failure of the University – and the Bureau – to provide leadership, transparency, accountability, and management despite reports of a hostile campus environment rife with academic fraud, nepotism, neglect, and – tragically – in some cases, sexual misconduct and abuse.

I want to emphasize this is not a new issue; there have been reports of misconduct for years. Student survivors report sexual assault and say they were met with indifference and a lack of consideration for their privacy and their mental health. The Inspector General has confirmed accusations of nepotism and bullying, as well as cases of academic fraud. The sitting university president directed the editor of the Indian Leader, a student newspaper, not to contact any outside government agency or the police regarding university matters without first getting permission.

The students deserve better. The faculty deserve better. And the community deserves better. Haskell University provides education to a population that has historically been underserved in higher education, and it *must* improve. The Bureau of Indian Education must hold Haskell University accountable for strict academic, accountability, and transparency standards. The Bureau must also be forthcoming with Congress about whether those standards are met for the health and well-being of Haskell students.

Finally, I will point out that accusations of misconduct have gone on for years. It may be tempting to point fingers at a single administration to pick “where it all went wrong,” but the reality is that the systemic issues plaguing Haskell University have happened for years under multiple administrations, both Democratic and Republican. Our task today should not be to engage in a partisan blame game but instead to commit ourselves to bettering the lives of students and faculty and the Haskell Indian Nations University community.

Thank you, and I yield back.