STATEMENT
OF THE
AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM
CARRIE BILLY, PRESIDENT & CEO
HEARING ON THE HISTORY & CONTINUED CONTRIBUTIONS OF
TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT
July 19, 2022

Chairwoman Wilson, Ranking Member Miller-Meeks, and distinguished members of the Committee: on behalf of the 35 accredited Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in the United States, which are the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the history, contributions, and promise of Tribally controlled higher education.

My name is Carrie Billy. I am an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation, and I am the President and CEO of AIHEC. This morning, I will cover three main points:
(1) Tribal Colleges and Universities: brief history of the Tribal College Movement and the impact of TCUs on our Tribal Nations and communities today;
(2) Federal investment in TCUs and our potential for the future; and
(3) Impact of the covid-19 pandemic on TCUs and our students, including examples of how TCUs are using covid-19 relief funding.

BACKGROUND: THE TRIBAL COLLEGE MOVEMENT

As American Indian and Alaska Native people, we all have creation stories that explain our emergence from a sacred place, from the land, the water, or the sky. Though our stories vary from tribe to tribe, we are people of this place – this land. In the pre-Columbus Days, an estimated 10 million people lived on this land, speaking hundreds of languages that are found nowhere else on earth. But that quickly changed. Ships sailing across the waters and arriving on our lands brought disease, death, near annihilation – and in some cases, complete annihilation. They brought centuries of oppression, forced marches, relocation, and fighting over land and resources that continues today: a manifest destiny that to most Native people meant loss of homeland and the only way of life they knew. These were replaced with poverty, dependence, loss of culture and identity, and broken promises captured in more than 400 treaties between Tribal leaders and the U.S. federal government. Beginning in 1785, American Indian tribes relinquished their sacred lands – more than one billion acres -- in exchange for treaty promises. It is from these treaties that the federal trust responsibility grows. Many of our treaties included education. Education to our ancestors meant equality, a new world of opportunity and hope for our children and our children's children as Tribal people, within the context of own identity.

That is not what it meant to the federal government and others. To them, education was an opportunity to crush our spirit and our songs and to vanquish our languages – our very identity. To great extent, it worked. But the resilient spirit of American Indian and Alaska Native people could not be vanquished. It took a while, but in the 1960s, something started to happen: Tribal Colleges

121 Oronoco Street ~ Alexandria VA 22314 ~ 703/838-0400 ~ Fax: 703/838-0388

began to emerge onto the U.S. higher education landscape – nurtured by and in turn, nurturing, the land, language, culture, and distinct people who created them.
The Tribal College Movement started when a group of Navajo visionaries asked the parents "*how do you want our schools to look?"* It was a simple question -- never asked before -- and it was empowering. *"That was the day that something happened,"* said Guy Gorman, one of the founders of Navajo Community College. The beginning of the greatest experiment and experience in American Indian self-determination: the Tribal College Movement. And it began with a group of people who had no money and no real template to follow, but who had an enormous vision of an education system like none other in the world. One rooted, nurtured, and growing from our own language, culture, and traditions. Where Navajo philosophy and ways of knowing are at the heart – not added to the curricula but creating the curricula. That is the heartbeat, the center, and the lifeblood of all Tribal Colleges. It gives our underfunded institutions the power to work miracles and create opportunity where others see none: opportunity for a better life; for economic stability; for hope for the future. It empowers Tribal Colleges to transform families, communities, and tribal nations.

Navajo Community College, like all the TCUs that followed -- was established in ceremony and prayer for two reasons:

1. the near complete failure of the U.S. higher education system to address the needs of – or even include – American Indians; and
2. the need to preserve our culture, our language, our lands, our sovereignty – our past and our future.

The goal: to build our own education system founded on our ways of knowing, traditional knowledge, and spirituality, and designed specifically to serve and strengthen our Tribes, communities, and lands. The vision: *Strong Sovereign Nations Through Excellence in Tribal Higher Education.*

THE GROWTH AND IMPACT OF TCUS

Tribal Colleges and Universities have made tremendous progress in the past five decades. From one college on the Navajo Nation, we now have 35 accredited TCUs operating more than 75 sites across 15 states, within whose geographic boundaries 80 percent of all American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) reservations and federal Indian trust land lie. TCUs serve students from well over 250 federally recognized tribes and 30 states. In Montana in 2017, for example, 50 percent of all American Indians enrolled in higher education attend one of seven TCUs in the state. In fact, according to all available statistics on AIANs enrolled in federally recognized Indian tribes and currently engaged in higher education nationally, more than 50 percent attend TCUs.[1] In total, TCUs serve about 130,000 AIANs and other rural community members each year in academic and community based programs. All TCUs offer certificates and associate degrees; 19 offer bachelor's degree programs; and six offer master's degree programs. Our programs range from liberal arts – including Tribal governance and business, to career and technical programing, including welding, carpentry, automotive, allied health, engineering, and computer science. Tribal

[1]This statistic excludes self-reporting, which despite having been shown in studies to be unreliable, is the measure used by the Department of Education's White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education.

Colleges are doing all of this and more, one student at a time, restoring hope, a sense of sovereignty, and most important, identity within our students.

Yet, TCUs often face tenuous financial situations – inconsistent and inadequate funding – which seriously threatens TCU efforts to attract and retain AIAN students and high quality faculty, to hire grant writers with the ability to compete against Research 1 institutions (as we are required to do), and to learn about and adopt the latest teaching, data collection, and management strategies required to maintain accreditation with regional accrediting bodies. These are issues TCUs grapple with daily, even as they work to rebuild self-esteem and instill hope, a strong work ethic, and purposeful engagement within our students, many of whom suffer from generational poverty and unemployment and historic trauma.

Inadequate Operating Support: Because of the federal Trust responsibility and treaty obligations resulting from the exchange of over one billion acres of land, the responsibility for providing operation funding for the TCUs lies with the federal government. Yet the Department of the Interior, which has jurisdiction over this support, has not considered funding of AIAN higher education a priority. In fact, on average, TCUs are the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the nation. TCU operating funding is grossly inadequate to meet our needs. Most TCUs received about $8,060 per Indian Student for an academic year, which is below the authorized level of more than 9,000 per Indian Student. TCUs receive little or no financial support from their Tribal government. This is because the tribal governments that have chartered TCUs are not among the handful of wealthy gaming tribes; rather, they are some of the poorest governments in the nation. For those that do receive funding, it is often inconsistent and dependent on annual tribal revenues. For example, 16 of the 37 TCUs received about $33 million in tribal support in academic year 2018-19; in AY2017-18, TCUs received $31 million in tribal support. Additionally, because they are not part of state education systems, most TCUs do not receive state funding. The handful of TCUs that do receive limited state funding receive support only for the non-Native (“non-beneficiary”) students at their college.

Although 28 TCUs have an endowment, most are extremely small. Only one TCU has a somewhat large endowment: Oglala Lakota College, which has worked hard to grow its endowment to $51 million. The other 27 TCU endowments ranging from $10,000 to $14.2 million. Nationally, the median college/university endowment is $65.1 million, while the median TCU endowment is $2.4 million.

As open door institutions, TCUs work hard to keep the cost of postsecondary education affordable. In fact, at about $3,060 per year, tuition for a 4-year or 2-year degree is among the most affordable in the nation. In addition, many TCUs provide books free of charge to students to keep student costs down; and although 19 TCUs operate dorms and cafeterias, these are not money-making enterprises, as they are at mainstream institutions. Still, many TCU students cannot afford to pay both tuition and room/board. For example, in 2019, the average TCU student unmet need was more than $10,000 per year, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics. In AY2018-19, TCUs wrote off more than $4 million in unpaid tuition and fees.

TCU Student Demographics: Most TCU students are between the ages of 16-24 years of age, and a little more than half are first-generation college students. One-third are single with children, and

the vast majority live in multi-generational homes with deep family and community ties and responsibilities.

Financial Challenges: More than 80 percent of TCU students receive Pell grants; and with an average annual income of less than $20,000 per year, our students live below the U.S. poverty line. Many TCU students come to us unprepared for post-secondary education. Our students fall into one of two categories: those who began post-secondary education at a mainstream institution but were unable to complete their program; and those who dropped out of high school and came to the TCUs to earn a GED. (On some reservations, more than 50 percent of all Native students drop out of high school, many in their senior year.) To both groups, the TCU represents hope: an opportunity to rebuild damaged self-esteem, find their identity, and eventually earn a credential or degree at an affordable price. About 60 percent of TCUs test into developmental math, and more than 45 percent require developmental reading. To address these challenges to academic success, most TCUs now offer dual credit or early college programs for local high school students, and some are developing high school programing right at the TCUs, such as Salish Kootenai College's STEM academy. At SKC STEM Academy, high school juniors and seniors spend mornings at their secondary school and afternoons at SKC, where they engage in experiential math and science classes and labs.

Food and Housing Insecurities: In addition to being low-income and first generation, our students – and faculty – face serious health and safety risks. A recent survey published by the American Indian College Fund and the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice (Temple University) revealed that of the students surveyed, TCU students suffered food and housing insecurity and homelessness at much higher rates than other college students. Nearly 30 percent of the TCU student respondents reported being homeless at some point in the prior 12 months (compared to the national student average of 17 percent); almost 62 percent were food insecure in the prior 30 days (compared to the national student average of 39 percent); and 69 percent of the TCU student respondents said they faced housing insecurity in the prior 12 months (compared to the national student average of 46 percent). Yet despite these challenges, TCU students reported greater academic success compared to similarly students at other colleges/universities.

Tribal Nation Building

TCUs are true to their mission and work tirelessly on all facets of Tribal Nation Building. TCUs are changing the lives and futures of students and their families for generations to come through a holistic and supportive educational environment that is culturally-based and relevant to our students and their families. They are building stronger and more prosperous Tribal nations through the restoration of our languages, community outreach programs and applied research on issues relevant to our land and our people, workforce training in fields critical to our reservation communities, and community-centered economic development and entrepreneurial programs.

TCUs are transforming our education systems – training early childhood educators, successfully managing once failing Head Start programs, rebuilding schoolhouses and children's lives; reforming K-12 science and math programs and providing summer and Saturday enrichment alternatives; preparing an American Indian K-12 teacher workforce; and transforming Native language instruction at all levels. TCUs are growing a Native health care workforce – from behavioral health to emergency room nursing, to serve our people and provide care in our

language and according to our customs. In fact, two Tribal Colleges lead the nation in preparing and graduating American India nurses. Before Oglala Lakota College in South Dakota launched its nursing program, none of the nurses employed by the Indian Health Service to work on the Oglala reservation were American Indian. Today, more than 50 percent of the nurses on our reservation are American Indian and 85 percent of them are graduates of Oglala Lakota College.

In 2002, OLC established a master's degree in Lakota Leadership and Management with an emphasis in Education Administration, to prepare state-endorsed school principals. By 2013, OLC had graduated 49 principals, 90 percent of whom are employed in schools with a majority of Indian students on North and South Dakota reservations. There were also 136 Native teachers of a total of 322 teachers teaching in elementary schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Of those Native teachers, 123 - or 90 percent - were OLC graduates. The same is true on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation. In the early 1970s, only five tribal members of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians had college degrees. The tribe established Turtle Mountain Community College. Now, thousands of tribal members have college degree and of the 350 teachers on/near the reservation, about 300 are AIAN.

TCUs excel in other areas as well. A 2017 report by Diverse Issues in Higher Education revealed that TCUs led national rankings in the Native workforce development. TCUs graduated more AIANs in accounting, business administration, computer and information sciences, health professions, culinary arts, public administration and social services, visual and performing arts; construction trades, and natural resources and conservation.

Despite these successes, TCUs know that workforce development alone will not end generational poverty on our reservations, so TCUs and AIHEC are now focused on job creation and Indigenous innovation. Salish Kootenai College and Navajo Technical University (NTU) lead the TCUs in job creation initiatives, which is the only way to end generational poverty in a sustainable manner. SKC and its partners, including the tribe and Northrop Grumman, are training students to build advanced materials for the Air Force and NASA. When the college realized that incoming students were not prepared for STEM courses, SKC created a high school STEM Academy. Now, young students attend their own high school for a half day and spend the other half learning math and science at SKC, as I mentioned earlier.

Led by NTU – which currently has the only ABET accredited bachelors of engineering degree programs among the TCUs – AIHEC launched an advanced manufacturing initiative with five TCUs to create new jobs on our reservations. The idea was that TCUs would developed partnerships with their Tribes and industry for products, and the TCUs would then train the workforce to produce the products. For example, NTU has partnerships with Boeing and other large contractors to create 3-D printed parts for aircrafts and machines. In fact, NTU had the first 3-D mental printer in New Mexico. The Department of Energy has expanded our advanced manufacturing initiative and hosted a grant competition for TCU consortia to become involved in high skill/high pay job creation fields including cyber security, manufacturing, and engineering.

For many fields, the key to "getting your foot in the door for employment" is through internships and apprenticeships. But apprenticeships are challenging for TCUs and our students because so few traditional industries are located in Indian Country. We believe we need to create a new type

of apprenticeship program, based on the “industries” we have near our communities. A few years ago, AIHEC began that work with the USDA’s Farm Service Agency – which we are told has an office in every country in the country. Three TCUs came together to develop a curriculum designed to help Native students meet the qualifications for agribusiness and financial management careers in USDA and the agriculture industry. FSA experts helped inform the curriculum, to ensure that graduates would have the skills needed for immediate employment. We are still trying to figure out how to add a sustainable apprenticeship component, which would be a win-win for tribes and the FSA: jobs for tribal members and help in addressing a national workforce shortage for FSA. We hope to build more partnerships like this with other federal and tribal industries.

Some TCUs are building innovation centers or hubs where community members can learn and create. Navajo Tech’s center blends Navajo ways of knowing with Western science. The center has computer and designer labs, conference rooms, and super-high-speed internet. Users have access to NTU’s business incubation program, as well as experts in entrepreneurship, venture capital, marketing, and product development through an existing partnership.

Overall, TCUs address entrepreneurship and career building through a wide range of programs focusing on:

- Preparing students EARLY to think about careers and pathways, like the Experiential Learning program and “start-up weekend” at Salish Kootenai College;
- Industry internship programs, like the Institute of American Indian Arts’ “Imagineering” partnership with Disney and journalism partnership with NBC-Universal; and
- Adapting and developing programs to meet emerging regional and national demand, like Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College’s FAA certification program in drone operation and Leech Lake Tribal College’s sustainable solar energy workforce development program.

The real key to the success of TCU programs — whether they are designed to train students to operate drones or open a bake shop — is the world view from which TCUs prepare our students: our own *Tribal* world view. Culture, place, community, and spirituality are the foundation of all TCU programs. They are our reason for being -- the web that binds us together and ultimately, the reason we will achieve our vision of strong sovereign Tribal Nations through excellence in *tribal* higher education.

Native Languages & Culture

Tribal Colleges are implementing a number of programs designed to address the challenges facing our children, youth, and communities. At TCUs, students find the nurturing, understanding, and holistically supportive environment they need to rebuild a strong belief in their ability to accomplish their goals and to rekindle a love of learning. We are the people of Crazy Horse, Manuelito, Sitting Bull, Dull Knife, Seattle, and Mankiller. We are people of a place – of land, rivers, sacred mountains and oceans. We are people with our own languages, our own songs, stories and histories. This is what keeps our students strong. Our language and culture, and our sacred places are the core of our support systems and academic programs. They are the foundation of every service a TCUs provide.

Language vitalization is the core mission of all TCUs, and to date, no group has done more to protect and restore Native language use than the nation's TCUs. They operate complex and innovative language restoration and vitalization programs on shoestring budgets, including research efforts, K-8 language immersion schools on campus, distance education programming, and elder/child after school programs. All TCUs offer Native language courses, with 29 different Native languages being taught at TCUs. In some cases, the tribal language would have been completely lost if not for the local Tribal College. Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, North Dakota, was established primarily for this purpose, and over the years, its success in writing and revitalizing the Turtle Mountain Chippewa language has been remarkable. Aaniiih Nakoda College in Montana runs a K-6 language immersion school on campus. At the White Clay Immersion School, children learn the White Clay language and culture in addition to subjects they would routinely study at any other school. Today, the largest group of Aaniiih language speakers are graduates of White Clay Immersion School.

Several years ago, faculty and staff at Oglala Lakota College noticed that every year, fewer of their entering students were fluent in -- or could even speak – the Lakota language. Most of these students had attended schools in the local area, some of them taking Lakota language courses for eight, 10, or even 12 years. Yet, their mastery of the Lakota language was missing. They could recite a few words, *ina – ahte (mother – father)* and some simple phrases, sing a few Lakota songs, and count *wáŋči – wikčémna (1-10)*; but tragically, on Pine Ridge, language instruction in the K-12 schools has not produced any language speakers over the last 40 years. Even more troubling, an OLC survey found that within its local communities, while 70-80 percent of elders could speak Lakota, only about 5 percent of the tribe's 4- to 6-year-olds could speak the language. OLC knew that if its people had any hope for reversing this trend, it was up to the college to act: it was time for OLC to open its own elementary school. Because of the depth and complexity of the language issues facing its people, OLC spent most of the first three years of the initiative researching different methods for achieving greater Lakota language proficiency. The college opened the Lakota School teaching about one-half of the curricula in Lakota and the other half in English, later transitioning to an immersion program.

Not all TCU language programs are conducted as part of a formal classroom activity. Sitting Bull College began an immersion program in 2012 with 11 three-year-olds. The program is an interesting and promising hybrid of specialized day care and language immersion.

In addition to the language programs, including immersion programs, and critically needed but tragically underfunded Native language research, many TCUs offer unique associate and bachelor's degree programs that include Native language instruction, as well as in-service teacher training in language and culture. At the TCUs, teacher education programs follow cultural protocols and stress the use of Native language in everyday instruction.

To help address critical Native languages needs, AIHEC is developing the TCU National Center of Excellence in Native Languages, funded by the Mellon Foundation, to assist TCUs in ensure that the basic building blocks needed for language teaching in learning are in place at all TCUs.

Dual Credit

Nearly all the TCUs currently engage in dual credit programs, designed to keep AIAN high school students engaged in school, graduate, and pursue higher education goals. Some of the programs are quite extensive. All of them are free for the students and high schools. The TCUs – many of which receive no compensation - offer this service at their expense because they know it is a crucial tool for engaging our AIAN youth. It keeps them on a path to a better future and a world of opportunity.

TCUs will continue to offer these life-changing and life-saving programs, but we encourage the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and states to work with us to expand these programs and level the playing field. Currently, states reimburse tuition costs for dual credit high school students attending state public institutions of higher education. Although TCUs are public institutions and the state colleges/universities accept the TCU credit on transcripts, many states do not reimburse TCUs for the tuition costs of public high school students attending TCUs. This is the case even where there is no other public institution of higher education within a hundred miles or more for the high school student to attend. The same holds true for the BIE: some BIE high school students earn dual credit at TCUs, but the colleges are not reimbursed the tuition costs and of course, the students do not factor in the TCUs' "Indian Student Count" for formula funding.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In early March 2020, the TCUs were doing their postsecondary and community based work in an environment that already was far more challenging than that of any other institution of higher education in the U.S.

Internet Connectivity and Cyberinfrastructure: Through a 2017 grant from the National Science Foundation, AIHEC and the TCUs have been conducting an in-depth study of the cyberinfrastructure capacity and needs of TCUs. The goal is to connect our institutions to the regional education and research Internet networks that crisscross this country and enable faculty and students at U.S.-based IHEs to learn, work, and conduct research with one another. Going into the pandemic, only 10 TCUs were connected to these vital networks. The NSF-funded study revealed startling information about Indian Country and TCUs: TCUs have the slowest Internet speeds of all IHEs in the country and, on average, pay more than any other group for Internet connectivity. For example, Tohono O'odham Community College (TOCC, Sells, AZ) was paying $70/Mbps per month, a monthly cost of $3,500 for 50 Mbps service, *which is 70 times the national average cost.* Iḷisaġvik College (Barrow, Alaska) pays more than any other college in the U.S. for the slowest Internet service: $250,000 annually for 6 Mbps. In 2015 - the most recent comparable year, the national average Internet speeds at colleges and universities were 513 Mbps for 2-year institutions and 3.5 Gbps for 4-year institutions. Yet, more than one-third of all TCUs (16) had Internet speeds at 100 Mbps *or less* – four were at or below 50 Mbps. Average TCU Internet speed was 375 Mbps. Making the problem even more challenging, TCU IT equipment refresh rate is 8.3 years, while 3-5 years is standard practice.

When the pandemic started, TCUs knew that to deliver high quality online/distance learning to AIANs in times of emergency, these gaps had to be addressed as rapidly as possible. However, other challenges also needed to be addressed: even those TCUs with adequate Internet access on campus faced problems delivering classes remotely to students across their reservations. At some TCUs, more than half of the students lacked consistent, reliable – and affordable -- Internet access

at home and many students lacked the equipment necessary to engage in coursework and homework (tablets, computers, laptops). President Richard Littlebear, Chief Dull Knife College, describes the problem: "*I can use my cell phone to make a call from Hawaii to Lame Deer, but I can't use my cell phone to call from Lame Deer to Busby – there is no cellular service and without cellular, there is no Internet.*" (Oahu, Hawaii is 3,300 miles from the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana. The distance between the reservation towns of Lame Deer and Busby is 16 miles.) These issues require a permanent and equitable solution strategy.

Finally, when examining TCU IT infrastructure, it is important to keep in mind that 32 TCUs are in very remote areas. For these TCUs, there is a lack of choice (competition) of Internet service providers, which drives up costs significant. This is the primary reason TCUs pay high than average rates for their Internet service, particularly given the low speed.

TCU Response to the covid-19 Pandemic and HEERF Funding

Despite facing serious financial, Internet connectivity and equipment, and faculty professional development challenges that are far worse than other schools and colleges in the U.S. and having student (and faculty) populations at greater health risk than other groups in the U.S., the 35 accredited TCUs and two developing institutions have worked diligently to respond to the covid-19 pandemic in a comprehensive manner, addressing both the needs of students and community, largely through funding from the U.S. Departments of Education and Interior. As place-based, community-anchoring institutions, TCUs had no choice but to continue to serve Tribal nations to the best of their ability. TCUs have continued to offer high quality, culturally relevant, and job-focused educational opportunities to our students and communities – always mindful of the need to put first the health and safety of TCU students, their families, and community members. This is important for some critical reasons: many TCU students live in multi-generational homes; and as discussed above, AIANs suffer the lowest health status of any group of U.S. citizens, including the highest rates of diabetes – a critical adverse factor associated with high covid-19 mortality rates. In addition, for many of our Tribes, our Tribal language keepers are well over 70 years old, another adverse covid-19 factor. If Native language keepers are lost to this pandemic, whole tribal cultures would be devastated.

Although a significant need remains in each of these areas, all TCUs used covid-19 relief funding for:

- Direct aid to students in the form of checks, gift cards, food reimbursements, free meals, Internet access assistance and reimbursements, childcare support, reduced or free tuition.
- Technology equipment (laptop, tablets, etc.) to students, faculty, and staff at home through donations or a lending program.
- Infrastructure rehabilitation, including repairs to existing classrooms and buildings inadequately ventilated or too small for physical distancing.
- Internet access and broadband infrastructure to the college, students, and faculty. Several TCUs used their funding to support overworked IT staff and, if possible, hire additional IT staff to support technology needs and learning management systems.
- Student support, including mental health relief for students, although this remains a serious challenge for TCUs. Adding to the challenges faced by small, very rural, and under-resourced institutions is the fact that many tribes lost significant numbers of elders to covid-19, and the impacts of the pandemic will affect student learning potentially for years to come.

More specific examples of how TCUs used covid-19 relief funding to address the impacts of pandemic are:

Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, MT) – Helping Community: President Sandra Boham, Salish Kootenai College, described the situation at her college: *"As a TCU, Salish Kootenai College is working together with our K-12 schools to educate all Indian students in our region – to meet their educational, technology, and mental health needs. SKC adopted a shelter-in-place policy on March 16, 2020. We kept family and student housing open to the extent possible, because we could not disrupt families during a pandemic. Many of our students are parents, and we quickly realized that they were forced to become full-time teachers at the same time as college students (because SKC's required course work did not go away). We did our best to help meet their needs.*

We established a computer loan program for students, faculty and staff who did not have one. Some students had a home computer, but it was being shared by multiple family members as children needed to use the home computer for their schoolwork. Access to an additional computer in the household was significant in reducing the stress of competing technology needs between K-12 and college student family members. Assistance was provided for food so that students could continue to feed their families without having to drop out of school to find work. Activity kits were provided to families to assist in keeping preschool age children busy so that parents could attend to classwork. Faculty and students in our Teacher Education Program offered parents assistance with tips for teaching. Faculty flexed their course schedules to find times that worked for students to meet virtually outside of normal college operating hours. IT technicians provided technical assistance for students' personal laptops and phones to help them with technology problems and improved access to Internet services on campus.

Every year, SKC provides dual credit programs to nine high schools; we have a 40-year partnership with our tribal BIE contract school (grades 8-12); we educate teachers for our local systems; we prepare Head Start teachers and program directors; we train health providers - medical people who work throughout the Flathead Valley. We provide childcare to students and local families, which we were unable to keep open for those in need due to the pandemic. All these programs and services were adversely impacted – they changed overnight. SKC went from zero to 100 percent online classes overnight. We quickly provided professional development to our faculty, and at the same time we were learning, we reached out to the local K-12 teachers to help them get up to speed.

At SKC, 67 percent of our students are in high risk categories, so we are taking additional steps to help keep our students mentally and physically well – we extended our spring and summer terms to allow for physically distant hands-on learning, and we are providing holistic support for students and instructors. Even in the face of these monumental challenges, we must keep going – we are teaching the people who do everything on our reservation: education providers, government workers, service providers, health care professionals, and more. We must do this well, and we cannot do it well if we are not well funded. There are faces behind every dollar we spend, and for them, we need to stay whole."

Diné College (Tsaile, Navajo Nation/AZ) –Connectivity Challenge: Early in the pandemic, President Charles M. Roessel of Diné College noted that his TCU is "*serving a Nation that has been knocked down*." Diné College, like all TCUs, quickly transitioned many courses online, began providing students with emergency financial aid from funding received under the CARES Act, but it also realized early on that its students would not succeed without new strategies to bring classes to them. When the pandemic first hit, Diné College surveyed its students about Internet access at home: *One student said he drives 15 miles to go on a mesa and then climbs a hill that's a little higher to get cell service. And he answered "yes" – he has access. Who else would answer yes?"* asks an incredulous President Roessel.

Diné College, like other TCUs, kept some dormitories open for students who could not safely live at home, or who had no home to go to. The college also has or is planning a few other endeavors to address student and campus connectivity with its HEERF funding:

(1) *Established Micro-campuses:* Diné College entered an innovative partnership with the Bureau of Indian Education to establish "micro-sites" in several communities throughout the reservation (which spans Arizona, New Mexico, and corners of Colorado and Utah). The micro-sites are small learning centers with physically distant onsite instruction capacity at existing BIE facilities, close to students' homes. At the micro-sites, students have a safe and quiet place to access their online courses and do homework.

(1) *Enhanced Broadband – at a tremendous cost:* Using CARES Act funding, Diné College upgraded its "patchwork" broadband infrastructure at its main campus to 3 Gbps. (Prior to the upgrade, the college had cobbled together access of 280 Mbps from three different providers at a cost of more than $350,000 year.) However, the cost for the expanded access is not cheap, and not sustainable: Diné College now pays $803,000 per year for 3 Gbps of access for its six campuses and two micro-sites, a figure that is 95.5 percent more – or 21.33 times – the national average.[2]

(2) *Fiber:* Diné College is using a portion of its HEERF funding to lay fiber – on its own – between its main campus in Tsaile and its Chinle site, 27 miles. The estimated cost so far is about $1.5 million, but it could be significantly more, particularly if the college is required to use an existing Internet provider. Overall, Diné College hopes to implement a comprehensive technology upgrade plan on its main campus, which is estimated at $6.4 million (pre-pandemic).

(3) *Student Programs:* To assist students, Diné College had distributed more than $600,000 in emergency funding to students by July 2020. It implemented a 50 percent tuition cut for current academic year classes, with several online classes being free. The college also implemented a laptop loaner and Wi-Fi device program, including paid Cellular One service for students who do not have readily available Internet access.

Nebraska Indian Community College (Macy, NE) – Innovative IT Partnerships: Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC) is using a portion of its federal covid-19 relief funding to upgrade its IT infrastructure. NICC applied for a Federal Communications Commission license designed to expand broadband access in rural tribal areas, and the college partnered with K-12 schools to install base stations serving the Omaha and Santee reservations. Five K-12 schools host the base stations, which shoot out signals in four directions. "*We're offering free K-*

---

[2] The national average for 1 (one) Gbps is $1,000 per month, based on the rate of $1/Mbps per month.

14 access to the internet, if you are within so many miles of our transmission network" said Michael Oltrogge, president of Nebraska Indian Community College. *"It's not perfect by any means, but we're still building towers."*

United Tribes Technical College (Bismarck, ND) – Fiber, a Godsend: United Tribes Technical College used $1.6 million of its covid-19 relief funding to increase its Internet speed tenfold by installing a fiber-optic cable on campus. (The college kicked in an additional $200,000 to cover the entire $1.8 million cost). "*We would have never had the funds to do this,"* said President McDonald. "*The HEERF funding really was a godsend for us in that sense. It brought us to the level that we need to be regarding the infrastructure to help us now be innovative in terms of how we offer classes."*

Blackfeet Community College (Browning, MT) – Students First: Students have been front and center at Blackfeet Community College in terms of covid-19 relief spending:
"*We knew there was a chance our enrollment could go down, so we were very creative in using our HEERF funds to be very student-oriented,"* said Karla Bird, Blackfeet Community College President. The college:

- Forgave any existing tuition debt, so anyone could come back to college debt-free (non-federal funds);
- Reduced tuition by 50 percent;
- Purchased 500 laptops so any student who did not have a laptop was able to check one out and offered a down payment on their Internet access bill; and
- Purchased gift cards for students to buy food and other necessities.

"*We really put our HEERF money towards the students, so we ended up with an enrollment of 409 students, and the previous fall we had 356,"* according to President Bird.

Northwest Indian College (Bellingham, WA) provided a tuition scholarship in fall quarter 2020 and a 50 percent tuition waiver for winter and spring quarter 2021, which supports student enrollment and retention. Based on a recent NWIC student survey and feedback, students indicated that the waiver provided them financial security, a means to regain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and were grateful for returning to College after job loss during the pandemic. Additionally, 91 percent of students surveyed felt they benefited from the waiver, and new applications increased 41 percent.

Cankdeska Cikana Community College (Fort Totten, ND) – Meeting Students: Cankdeska Cikana Community College, located on the Spirit Lake reservation in North Dakota, is using a portion of its funding to ensure that tuition, books, and fees are free for students with a C average or better. The college provides students with laptops and gift cards to pay for basic needs. It also has emergency funds to help students pay utility bills or rent, or even repair their cars. Faculty and staff "*are meeting students in parking lots, at the grocery store, at the gas station, to give them a laptop or a card to get phone minutes because they're trying to do the college homework on a TracFone,"* says President Cynthia Lindquist. All TCUs have used a significant amount of HEERF funding to loan or provide students with laptops, as most students do not have laptops of their own.

Like most other TCUs, Cankdeska Cikana Community College also continues to serve the broader tribal community. Cankdeska administrators worked with their tribe to provide covid-19 testing in the college parking lot, while even the president herself delivers meals, food, and supplies tribal members in need.

Bay Mills Community College (Brimley, MI), **Cankdeska, and Navajo Technical University** (Crownpoint, NM) served their tribes and region in other ways as well: early in the pandemic, these colleges used their 3-D printers – normally reserved for advanced manufacturing instruction – to produce hundreds of face shields for tribal and regional health care providers and first responders. Later, as local governments began easing stay-at-home restrictions, the colleges provided face shields to local business to help keep their workers safe. BMCC also made valves for ventilators used in local hospitals.

GRATITUDE OF TCU STUDENTS

AANIIIH NAKODA COLLEGE (Harlem, MT)

- ***Esther Talks Different: 2nd year Business Administration***

I am thankful for the support of the CARES Act. It helped immensely with bills and food, but most importantly, it helped with school and books, and [Aaniiih Nakoda College] was able to provide us with laptops. I was very appreciative of the school providing the help and support needed to get through the pandemic, especially after losing two loved ones from covid-19 and contracting it myself.

- **Weslyn Schilling: Associate Degree in Environmental Science (completed) Bachelor in Ecology (current)**

The first thing Aaniiih Nakoda College did when they received covid funding was put money onto all the student emergency aid funds in case the students needed help with any bills or [education equipment] needs at home so we can attend classes. If you maintained a 2.5 GPA and a 60% attendance rate, a laptop was provided by the school throughout the entire semester. Also, reimbursements were given for the laptops, tuition, books, and supplies when the semester was over. I have three sons at home with me all day, and when covid first hit us, it was hard because they could not go to school. I was able to use some money to pay for babysitters so I could study.

NORTHWEST INDIAN COLLEGE (Bellingham, WA)

- **Stephanie Cultee:**

I am grateful that the college has been able to help me pay for majority of my tuition. Every quarter I am left with a balance to pay, and I was furloughed from my job for four months when the pandemic first began. I wasn't sure if I could finish school, but NWIC was awarded [HEERF] funding, and thanks to the leadership and staff, disbursements were being made to the students immediately.

- **Jasmine Higheagle: 2nd year Associates of General Direct Transfer**

I am a mother of four and returning student after 10 years. The recent pandemic has helped NWIC provide help and resources to students during this time. It has eased my panic and made me happy to be a part of NWIC. Financial support and tuition reduction has tremendously helped as a mom.

BLACKFEET COMMUNITY COLLEGE (Browning, MT)

- **Christie Farmer: Addiction Studies (2+2 Program), Bachelor Degree in Social Work**

When the pandemic first began, our entire reservation was shut down, except for essential services. Within two weeks, the Blackfeet Community College staff worked tirelessly to transition the learning to virtual. CARES Act funds were awarded to the school, and the college issued stipends to the students for help with food, rent, utilities, and necessities. They also provided laptops, reduced tuition costs and for those who did not have Internet, they gave hotspots. They offset the cost for Internet services and tutors for students to keep their spirits up in the online environment.

- **Shawn Old Chief: Pre-Engineering Degree (transfer to University for Civil Engineering)**

As a single father, I want to be more for my son and better role model, as well as the community. When the covid pandemic hit the reservation, it presented a lot of obstacles and challenges. One of the biggest was long distance learning. Blackfeet Community College was able to provide computers and funding to help us offset costs.

CANKDESKA CIKANA COMMUNITY COLLEGE (Fort Totten, ND)

- **Areonna GreyBear: Business Administration Major**

Cankdeska Cikana Community College helped me in this pandemic by going completely online and allow me to fit in classes with my work schedule and my kids. The financial help and reimbursements are awesome and have really helped.

RED LAKE NATION COLLEGE (Red Lake, MN)

- **Selina: Associate of Arts in Business Administration**

During the pandemic, [Red Lake Community College] offered students emergency aid funding and a food pantry. Onsite mental health and career counsel also helped us get through the pandemic successfully. The federal funding helped [my college] purchase technology suitcases for students, which included a hotspot-enabled cell phone with unlimited data, a Chromebook laptop, and an Oculus Quest in-ear headset. We were able to transition through CANVAS to do classes online.

SOUTHWESTERN INDIAN POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE (Albuquerque, NM)

- **Derrick Shirley: Peer Tutor studying Network Management and Accounting**

My job is being a full-time student, so the covid relief funding was able to help pay my utilities and provide the technology I needed to continue my education. I was living at my grandmother's house, and my grandma had passed away four years ago. The water system had broken, and the house had no water. I also did not have transportation and I live in a rural area. My Internet plan would max out, and I would get a motel room for three or four days a week to catch up on my courses. I was able to take the funding and afford to provide a stable Internet connection. Everything was used with the purpose of completing my education.

- **Kamryn Apache: First Generation Student; Accounting and Business Administration**

I used the funds my college gave me to purchase technology equipment, personal protective equipment, water, food, and to pay utilities. At my current residence [on the Navajo Nation], we have no running water. Since covid, a lot of the places we use to get water closed, which made it even more difficult to maintain everyday duties. [My home], Alamo, NM, is in a rural area, where

there is limited access to broadband services. When the pandemic first began, I had to drive an hour and 30 minutes away just to get Internet connection. But with what SIPI was able to provide through CARES funding, it made it easier.

SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE (Pablo, MT)

- **Monty: Salish Language Educators' Program**

This year was the hardest year I've had. The pandemic made me feel like I couldn't make it anymore and graduate. The college gave covid funding; and it helped me and my family so much, and it was a blessing. We had a lot of hardships, and the help they gave was amazing.

TOHONO O'ODHAM COMMUNITY COLLEGE (Sells, AZ)

Jamie Siqueiros: Nursing

Since the college expanded its online presence in 2020 due to the pandemic, we have students from all over the world attending now.

Ashlynn Siqueiros: Certificate in Digital Media and Associate in Fine Arts

When everyone went into lockdown, TOCC automatically switched to online courses. They also helped me with a laptop this semester; and that relived a lot of stress relief, because I didn't know how would continue school. They've been helping with emergency relief funds which helped with my photography/videography. I could stay on top of my bills and find a home.

TURTLE MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE (Belcourt, ND)

- **Ivie Frederick: Student Body President, Nursing**

The college supported me during the pandemic by providing me academic and financial resources. These resources include a laptop to participate in distance learning, a printer for worksheets, and more. There are also tutors to help when needed.

WHITE EARTH TRIBAL & COMMUNITY COLLEGE (Mahnomen, MN)

- **Chayann Fairbanks: Liberal Arts & Early Childhood Education**

WETCC has helped support me educationally and financially during the pandemic with mobile hotspots, emergency aid, and food boxes. Without the help, I would not have been able to finish my classes and graduate this spring.

ONGOING COVID-19 NEEDS: *SOLUTIONS MUST BE DESIGNED FROM THE PROPER WORLD VIEW*

Despite some significant improvements on TCU campus and for TCU students due to the HEERF funding, the end to the challenges TCUs and their students face due to the pandemic is not in view.

President Twyla Baker, Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (New Town, ND) said recently that the CARES and CRRSAA funding helped Tribal Colleges get to the starting line: "*The TCUs themselves have been struggling to reach equity with a lot of our mainstream partners,*" she stated. "*If it is a marathon, everyone's taken off [running]. The covid funding has gotten them halfway, but TCUs are basically still tying our shoes to get running.*"

According to a recent survey of the TCUs conducted by AIHEC, the following are areas in which most TCUs are spending their remaining federal covid-19 relief funding – some of which will require significant additional support and waivers:

(a) **Student Mental Health**: New ways of providing critically needed social, academic, and mental health support to students and communities are needed. Only three TCUs currently have health centers, so in terms of addressing mental health needs of students, TCUs lag far behind other colleges. Also, TCUs must include a mix of Western and traditional practices in their mental and behavioral health services. (AIHEC conducted two studies in late 2020 and again in spring 2022, on TCU students and the pandemic. The study revealed that 25 percent of TCU students who reported no mental health needs prior to the pandemic now face unmet mental health needs. An additional 10 or so percent reported unmet mental health needs before the pandemic and currently, for a total of 1 in 3 TCU students reporting unmet mental health needs by spring 2022.)

(b) **Reliable, but Economical High-speed Internet Access:** Campus technology, Internet speed upgrades, and accessible and affordable community- and home-based connectivity are critical. (AIHEC has extensive data documenting this need through an NSF-funded study.)

(c) **Construction:** Despite specific language in the FY2022 omnibus appropriations bill directing ED to allow HEERF funding to be used for construction – and other provisions directing the Secretary to waive cumbersome requirements and speed the distribution of this important funding, the Department continues to erect roadblocks. To date, no TCU request has been approved. Instead, ED staff are requested additional and extremely detailed information, such as detailed approved budgets, architectural drawings and reports, supply lists, and more – the type of documentation that does not exist until a project is completed, or at the very least, approved and underway. Each day the Department delays, the situation grows more dire for small under resourced TCUs, whose construction costs have increased 30-50 percent since the pandemic began.

(d) **Rehabilitation of Existing Facilities:** For example, in at least one TCU, the buildings are so old that none of the windows will open in classrooms and dormitories. Other TCUs have extensive rehabilitation and upgrade needs, particularly with respect to career and technical programs, laboratories, and faculty and student housing.

(e) **Developmental Education:** There is need for long-term remediation of current students and incoming students from high schools – multi-year funding will be needed to assist in the effort to overcome the achievement gaps created by the pandemic. The TCUs cannot develop plans or programs for this with one- or two-year funding performance periods.

(f) Online Course Delivery:

a. Unified instructional delivery and access systems/devices (course/communication tools)
b. Faculty professional development to create and maintain quality, engaging online programming and student computer/online literacy training for adoption of successful online learning strategies

(g) **Faculty/Staff Support:** One president notes that "much of our staff and faculty have been working now for over a year under pandemic conditions, and the ability to provide some level of support would go far to maintaining a productive work environment."

(h) **Ongoing Student Support:** Some TCUs have experienced increased student enrollment, and for all TCUs, student emergency aid is critical to helping students stay in school. TOCC students, like many TCU students, face double challenges: finding Internet access and being able to pay for it if they can find it. Often, the cost is prohibitively high. TOCC President Robertson notes that *"some TOCC students were thwarted by lack of access to the broadband they needed to complete their coursework. Others could not afford the cost of an Internet subscription from the sole supplier on the Tohono O'odham Nation, nor could they access Internet from parking lots in front of fast-food establishments and Starbucks, something some urban students have been reduced to. The Shell gas station in Sells has a few "Wi-Fi parking" spots and some students have driven long distances to take advantage of that. That is not a solution. It should not be happening."* But if the choice is paying a monthly Internet connection fee or feeding your family, what are TOCC students to do? Ongoing emergency aid can help, and all TCUs plan to provide emergency aid, tuition discounts, and IT support to students if the covid-19 relief funding is available.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony on issues of concern to the Committee. We appreciate your support for our students, our communities, and our Tribal institutions of higher education, Tribal Colleges and Universities. We look forward to working with you and other Members of the Committee to achieve our vision of strong sovereign Tribal Nations through excellence in *Tribal* higher education.