



STATEMENT OF DR. SANDRA BOHAM
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BOARD MEMBER, AMERICAN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM (AIHEC)

HEARING ON:

*ENGINES OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, HBCUS, AND MSIS IN
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS*

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENT
MAY 22, 2019

Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am Dr. Sandra Boham. I am an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, President of Salish Kootenai College in Pablo, Montana, and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). On behalf of my institution and the nation's 36 other Tribal Colleges and Universities, which collectively are AIHEC, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing.

I am honored to speak with you about the essential role of Tribal Colleges and Universities as engines of economic mobility in Indian Country. To our place-based and mission focused institutions, economic mobility not only means preparing individual American Indian and Alaska Native students for success, but also rebuilding, strengthening and sustaining our tribes, tribal communities, lands, languages and cultures for generations to come.

In my statement, I will touch on four areas: (1) brief overview of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs); (2) TCUs and holistic student success – strategies, successes, and challenges to Native student success; (3) TCUs as Nation builders – the importance of job creation in Indian Country and rural America; and (4) Recommendations for consideration during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

BACKGROUND: THE TRIBAL COLLEGE MOVEMENT

Over the past 50 years, Tribal Colleges have emerged onto the U.S. higher education landscape – nurtured by and, in turn, nurturing the land, language, culture, and distinct people who created them. My college, Salish Kootenai College, like all TCUs, was established 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 Alaska Natives (AI/ANs); and (2) the need to preserve our culture, language, lands and sovereignty. The goal: to build our own education system founded on our ways of knowing, traditional knowledge, and spirituality. The vision: *Strong Sovereign Nations Through Excellence in TRIBAL Higher Education.*

Located in some of the most impoverished and remote regions of this country, Tribal Colleges have grown from one institution in 1968 to 37 TCUs today, operating more than 75 campuses in 16 states, within whose geographic boundaries about 80 percent of all American Indian reservations and federal Indian trust land lie. We serve students from more than 230 federally recognized tribes. In my state of Montana, where we have seven Tribal Colleges, 50 percent of all American Indians enrolled in higher

education attend a TCU. In total, Tribal Colleges serve about 130,000 AI/ANs each year in academic and community based programs.

TCUs are accredited, place-based public institutions of higher education, chartered by federally recognized American Indian tribes or the federal government. We are committed to improving the lives of our students through tribal higher education and to working with our tribes to ensure self-sufficiency for our people. All TCUs offer certificates and associate degrees; 16 TCUs offer bachelor's degrees, and five TCUs offer master's degrees – all taught from a foundation grounded in our tribe's distinctive and resilient world view. We are the best experiment and experience in American Indian self-determination, and we know that we have much to share.

All too often, however, mainstream America hears only of the challenges facing Indian Country: high unemployment, high school drop-out rates¹, poverty, alcoholism, suicide, abuse, and more. These challenges are real and serious. But they are not insurmountable, and they do not define us. At Tribal Colleges, hope defines us: it is our ability to reach back and draw from our history, our respective cultures, and our languages, to shape a foundation for a better world on our own land. Tribal Colleges are catalysts, transforming our vision into reality.

Tribal Colleges take our hope and a pitifully few dollars – we are among the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country -- and shape them into opportunity. Opportunity to complete high school and succeed in higher education, opportunities for a healthier life, a more stable and prosperous community, a revitalized language and culture, an engaged citizenry, a safer and more secure environment, and more.

TCUs are transforming our education systems – training early childhood educators, successfully managing once failing Head Start programs, rebuilding schools; reforming K-12 science and math programs and providing summer and Saturday enrichment alternatives; and preparing an AI/AN K-12 teacher workforce. 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 Indian nurses, Salish Kootenai College and Oglala Lakota College, with more than 90 percent of our graduates certified as Registered Nurses and working in local community settings. Before Oglala Lakota College (OLC) launched its nursing program, none of the nurses employed by the Indian Health Service to work on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, were AI/AN. Of the 70 nurses working on the reservation in 2013, 80 percent were OLC graduates.

NATIVE AMERICAN ECONOMIC MOBILITY: IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND VALUES

Perhaps most important, TCUs are actively and aggressively working to preserve and sustain our tribal languages and cultures in innovative ways because we know that language, culture, and community are essential to Native student success. The Fort Belknap Reservation in eastern Montana is home to Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC). Fort Belknap is the only place in the world where the Gros Ventre, or White Clay, language is spoken, and until a few years ago, you could count the number of fluent

¹ American Indians have the highest high school drop-out rate in the country: a 2010 study of 12 states with high Indian student enrollment showed that 83 percent of Anglo high school students complete high school, but less than 60 percent of all Native students graduate. On some reservations, the high school drop-out rate can be as high as 80 percent.

speakers on one hand – none of these lived on the Fort Belknap reservation. So Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) established the White Clay Immersion School – a K-8 school right on the ANC campus, funded by competitively-sought grants from foundations. Today, the largest group of White Clay speakers in the world are the graduates of ANC's White Clay Immersion School.

At Salish Kootenai College, we have taken a different approach: we built an innovative teacher apprenticeship program to develop fluent Salish teachers that includes a 1-year immersion experience with elders and cultural experts who are Salish speakers. We chose to focus on adults, rather than children, because adults are essential to *teaching* our language, and for us, the situation is critical. When we started the program, there were only 18 fluent Salish speakers in the world. Our goal is to produce 40 Salish language teachers who will work in K-12 schools throughout our reservation, giving our children a clear vision of the world, restoring their identity as a Salish person, and setting them on a good path. This type of program, with its focus on our common identity, past, and future, is essential for long-term success for families, communities, and our tribe as a whole. It is also a direct path to a student's economic mobility today: in the first few years of our program, every student who has completed the 1-year immersion program has been hired by our local school system. The need is so great, every student who completes this apprenticeship program is assured a job and a path for a sustainable future. As the number of Salish teachers grows within our schools, we have the potential to expand our apprenticeship program in some exciting and perhaps specialized ways.

My focus on SKC's intensive language apprenticeship program and the Aaniiih Nakoda College's White Clay immersion school is purposeful. These two programs demonstrate the synergistic dual nature of "economic mobility" to us, as Native people. As a president of a Tribal College, I have a responsibility to do everything I can ensure the academic success of each one of my students. At Salish Kootenai College, we are doing some wonderful things in student success, some of which I will discuss later in my testimony. However, equally important is our duty to strengthen our communities and perpetuate the cultures of the Confederated Tribes of the Flathead Nation, including grounding our programs in the values, principles, and world view of the Séliš, Ksanka, and Qiispé people. It turns out, these twin missions – individual and community – are inextricably bound together. They cannot be separated – and we cannot fail at either -- without putting the other at risk.

We know (through data informed research), that traditional beliefs inspire well-being; and we know that for centuries, the federal policy toward AI/ANs was one of repression, removal, and assimilation – a concerted attempt to eliminate AI/AN cultures, religious practices, and languages, including through forced family separation – the very heart and soul of our well-being. Our students, families, and whole communities still suffer from this experience (historical trauma) even today². For Native people, issues including extreme poverty and lack of housing within reservation communities compound the hardships endured. The result is a pervasive and generational impact that is still felt today, as evidenced by continued high poverty rates, high unemployment, high suicide rates, substance abuse, and a myriad of other challenges in tribal communities.

² Historical trauma describes the intergenerational collective experience of complex trauma that was inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation such as a nationality, religious affiliation or ethnicity (Evans-Campbell, 2008). It encompasses the set of emotions and behaviors that characterize individuals directly or indirectly affected by the experience of adverse events. Historical trauma is intergenerational, meaning that emotional and behavioral patterns shaped by an original trauma (e.g. genocide, cultural fragmentation) are transmitted to children through trauma-affected parenting and reinforced by structural racism experienced through the dominant culture.

To ensure Native student success, Salish Kootenai College and all TCUs must help each student develop a success-oriented personal narrative that is culturally informed, focusing on the importance of traditional cultural and spiritual values³. At the heart of our culture and values is our language – it shapes our vision of the living world and our understanding of who we are as people. We can still be Salish without our language, but if it is lost, part of us will be lost forever. We are committed to working to ensure that our students are whole.

TRIBAL COLLEGES AS INNOVATORS

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TO JOB CREATION

An obvious contributor to student success and economic mobility is the ability to find a job. In the Tribal communities served by TCUs, this means the need to break cycles of generational poverty. The majority of our people want to stay home, in our communities with their families, to contribute their talent and vision to Tribal Nation building. We are, after all, people of a place. Place, another core value common to AI/ANs, is important to our identity – our songs, stories, and prayers come from our place.

Economic mobility for TCU students, therefore, cannot be separated from the economic health of the tribal communities in which our students live. TCUs are addressing this by developing and offering high quality academic and career/technical programs to prepare our students for key careers (with wrap-around student support) and by catalyzing local economic opportunity, particularly involving new technologies and emerging industries.

TCUs, as place-based, community focused institutions, welcome students with open doors, regardless of where those students are from, and wherever they are on the continuum of learning. At TCUs, we do not worry about the value of SAT and ACT scores because we do not believe those scores are important to determining whether an individual will be successful or not. We have always believed that with the proper nurturing, *all* of our people can succeed. The reality is that about two-thirds of all TCU students – the majority of whom have high school degrees -- test into at least one remedial education course, while many of these students face significant deficiencies in *both* math and reading. Yet, within one or two years, many students who come to a TCU at a sixth or even fourth grade academic level are ready to take on college-level courses. They are intelligent and capable and the TCUs understand how to capitalize on their strengths, while also helping to address the social and economic challenges the students face.

Over the past 45 years or so, we have developed a strong model of workforce development in which we offer education and training programs that are responsive to local and regional employer needs. For example, SKC offers bachelor's degrees in forestry management and hydrology (the only two tribally-focused bachelor's programs in the nation), wildlife and fisheries, education (we prepare half of all Native-serving special education teachers in the state), nursing, and tribal governance. We offer a certificate in dental assisting technology, which could evolve into a stackable dental therapy program, beginning with a dental health aide therapy certificate. However, we are doing significantly more to facilitate transformational change. SKC, along with several other TCUs and AIHEC are developing models for moving TCUs from workforce development to job creation through several initiatives involving partnerships with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Department of Energy

³ A core cultural value common across AI/AN tribes and peoples is a sense of community, Nation building. AIHEC, *Indigenous Evaluation Framework*, 2009. <https://portalcentral.aihec.org/Indigeval/Book%20Chapters/4-CoreCulturalValues.pdf>

(DoE), the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), tribal governments, regional companies and local businesses.

Although we have – and still do – focus on the place-based needs of our tribe -- nurses, teachers, environmental professions. Increasingly, we are working to focus our tribes on global needs and strategies. We are beginning some exciting social entrepreneurial programs, which is something new for most tribal communities. We are doing some innovative and very promising work in problem based learning, which has the potential for transforming the education experience. And we are working to expand our national and international partnerships and research capacity.

THE VALUE OF INTERNSHIPS AND APPRENTICESHIPS

With support from the Northwest Area Foundation, AIHEC and the Montana TCUs are exploring the value of apprenticeships in Indian Country. Through previous work, we know that place-based internships are extremely helpful in improving student retention and completion, and that carefully focused internship programs are an excellent career readiness strategy for our students. They build self-confidence, non-cognitive skills, research capacity, and give students a “foot in the door” with potential employers. Now, we are exploring the development of a model that would provide TCU students opportunities to build their professional competencies through placements with local public and private sector employers. Including the public sector when contemplating apprenticeships in Indian Country is important because often, the top employers are tribes and the federal governments, including the Indian Health Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management.

A partnership between three TCUs and the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA), for example, has led to the development of a Tribal Agribusiness curriculum and certificate that includes the competencies needed for employment with FSA county- and regional offices and loan programs. A key part of this partnership will be the development of a TCU-FSA apprenticeship program. This program, which will be shared with all TCUs, is important because 75 percent of Indian Country is either forested or agriculture land. Across the nation, the number of farmers and ranchers – including Native farmers and ranchers – is declining rapidly. Through a similar partnership with the Department of the Interior, two TCUs are working to develop an online records management program that will provide training and technical support to any Tribal government in developing and operating a records management system and data repository.

JOB CREATION: INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Through a multi-year DoE initiative, five TCUs are establishing advanced manufacturing programs that will provide students the technical and engineering skills to operate digital manufacturing equipment and prototype new product ideas. A “TCU Innovation Corps” initiative will provide the support for aspiring entrepreneurs to move their ideas to commercialization. All of these initiatives are furthering the capacity of TCUs and their students to take a proactive role in local economic development, translating what they learn in the classroom to real-world jobs and business opportunities.

At SKC, we are helping to generate economic vitality through participation in the Air Force’s Mentor Protégé Program, with industry partners that include our tribe’s S&K Electronics, as well as the Northrop Grumman Corporation. The Air Force Mentor Protégé Program (MPP) assists eligible small businesses (protégés) to develop the ability to compete for prime contract and subcontract awards by partnering with large corporations (mentors) who provide developmental assistance under individual,

project-based agreements. A broad range of industries is represented in the Air Force Mentor Protégé Program including manufacturing, information technology systems, engineering/consulting services, environmental services and cyber security. As a protégé, SKC will provide specialized certification and recertification training for employees at S&K Electronics. As we move forward, the program will provide additional opportunities for SKC to serve as a corporate trainer and business partner with additional companies on the reservation and across Montana.

THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM: HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

DUAL CREDIT PROGRAMS

Nearly all of the TCUs engage in dual credit programs, designed to keep AI/AN high school students engaged in school, graduate, and continue on to pursue higher education goals. Some of the programs are quite extensive. Nearly all of them are free for the students and high schools. The TCUs – without any compensation whatsoever – offer this service at their expense because they know it is one very effective way to help save our American Indian children. 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 are working to 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, only a few states 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 the students are not included in the TCUs' "Indian Student Count" for formula funding under the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act, which authorizes operating for most TCUs.

SKC'S STEM ACADEMY

For our job creation partnerships with our tribe and industry to succeed, we need a pipeline of highly skilled workers, yet we know that our high school drop-out rates are unacceptably high and that too many students are enrolling at SKC unprepared for college STEM courses. With support from the National Institutes of Health, among others, our college launched the SKC STEM Academy (Academy), open to high school students on the Flathead Reservation. Our goal is to increase the number of Native high school students who are prepared for college academic majors in STEM fields by promoting a culturally relevant, supportive learning environment; enhanced college readiness skills; and exposure to college and university experiences. The Academy curriculum spans two years – students' junior and senior years, with students earning between 15-25 quarter credits per year or up to 50 college quarter credits over the two years. In year two, students choose a field for specialized study, such as cellular biology, math, or psychology and conduct independent research in that area. Throughout the two years, students attend their own high school in the morning, and come to the SKC campus for afternoon classes and labs. The Academy, which has been a goal for several years, is now an exciting and transformative reality for our tribe.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HIGHER EDUCATION ACT REAUTHORIZATION

Based on our experience with these initiatives, we have some specific recommendations for the Committee as you continue your important work to reauthorize the Higher Education Act:

1. **Strengthening Professional & Graduate Opportunities at TCUs:** We propose an amendment to the Higher Education Act, Title III Part A program to establish a modest program to assist TCUs in strengthening graduate degree programs and professional certificate programs in high demand fields vital to tribal nation building, economic development in rural America, and in fields critical to addressing health and other challenges facing AI/ANs.

In the 1970s through 1990s, as TCUs were being established and growing in number, the academic focus of most of these place-based, under-resourced, and rural institutions was to help their chartering tribes meet local workforce needs through vocational and technical programs and to serve as bridge institutions to regional state public universities. In recent years, the capacity of TCUs to provide necessary culturally- and place-based research has grown, as has the capacity and needs of the tribes that TCUs serve. More and more TCUs are beginning to develop master's degree programs in limited, but vitally needed fields including elementary/secondary education administration; environmental science; tribal governmental policy and management; industrial and electrical engineering; and fine arts.

At the time that important graduate and professional program support programs were established for Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions, we believe that Tribal Colleges were overlooked. It is time, we believe, that TCUs are recognized for the irreplaceable role we play in strengthening our tribal nations, protecting tribal lands, and preparing a 21st century Native workforce.

2. **TCU Role in Job Creation:** Any requirement to show results on job placement must be carefully crafted so as not to have an adverse impact on rural America and Tribal communities. Particularly troublesome for TCUs and rural colleges is a requirement related to placement in field of study. Often, we do not have access to unemployment and wage data that is "in-field" specific, and in our rural communities, having employment is of paramount concern.
3. **"Access Without Support is Not Opportunity":** Programs such as TRIO and Gear-up are essential and should be expanded. Likewise, the Department of Education's Strengthening Institutions programs (HEA, Titles III and V) are critical to our ability to serve our students. These programs have enabled our colleges to develop programs essential to student mobility. At SKC, we examined our data and then used Title III-Part F to strengthen a variety of student services. In response to our changing student demographics, we have established a robust residence life program, expanded hours in our student services building, and created opportunities for our students and their families to be part of the community by creating gathering places and learning activities. We also established a tribal governance and tribal business degree program.

In addition to the Title III, TRIO, and Gear-up programs, other student support strategies, such as small emergency aid grants to students, are proving important tools for successful completion and economic mobility. Sustainable funding for these initiatives is a challenge, however. Currently, 33 TCUs are able to offer our students small emergency aid grants, internships, and a range of other services, through an initiative supported by Federal Student Aid, U.S. Department of Education,

and Ascendium. Since 2018, TCUs have awarded nearly 2,000 emergency grants (less than \$500 per award), totally nearly \$1 million. The retention rate for students benefiting from emergency aid awards (Fall 2017 to Spring 2018) is an impressive 85 percent.

4. **TCU AI/AN Language Vitalization and Training Program:** We propose a new section under Title III-A to provide grants to TCUs to promote the preservation, revitalization, relevancy, and use of endangered AI/AN languages⁴. TCUs are ideal forums for advancing the time-sensitive efforts to rescue Native languages from extinction. Of the 155 Indigenous languages still being spoken in the United States, 135 are spoken only by elders. Native languages have rich oral cultures with stories, songs, and histories passed on to younger generations, but many have no written forms. When a language is lost, it is lost forever, and with it, key aspects of an entire culture are lost. Language and culture are at the heart of the mission of each TCU, as explained above, and we already play a strong, but under-resourced leadership role in Native language immersion. Despite the proven success of TCU Native language preservation and vitalization efforts, only minimal federal and private sector resources are directed toward these critical activities. Because many Native languages are on the verge of extinction, we do not have the luxury of time. We must address this critical issue now, before it is too late.
5. **Maintain voluntary participation in Federal student loan program:** With average annual tuition at about \$3000, TCUs are the most affordable institutions in higher education in the country. Currently, only two TCUs – including Salish Kootenai College -- participate in federal student loan programs. (At SKC, we are proud of our low default rate (6 percent) and our ability to work one-on-one with our students.) Some TCUs are beginning to explore the federal loan programs, as more are offering an increasing number of bachelor's and master's degrees. However, TCUs work hard to keep tuition low to allow their students, especially those planning to seek advanced degrees, to graduate without debt. That goal, along with limited institutional resources to administer loan programs, has led the vast majority of TCUs to avoid participating in federal student loans. Mandating federal loan program participation and tying institutional Title IV eligibility to loan performance metrics will unnecessarily impede Native and other low-income students from pursuing, let alone achieving, higher education goals that may be necessary for securing and advancing their career objectives. TCUs need flexibility to create aid programs that meet the unique needs of their students and communities.
6. **Restore eligibility for Federal financial aid to disenfranchised populations:** The elimination of aid for incarcerated individuals and individuals with non-violent, drug-related convictions represents an excessive and imprudent penalty for individuals who are already paying their debt to society. To help ensure that these individuals will become productive, taxpaying citizens, efforts must be made to promote their rehabilitation and positive contribution to the Nation. Restoring eligibility for Federal financial aid would be a step toward breaking recurring negative patterns and promoting rehabilitation among this population.

⁴ AIHEC proposes a specific Native language program for TCUs, however, given the rapidity with which Native languages are disappearing, we also recommend a separate program for both Native Hawaiian Serving Institutions and Alaska Native Serving Institutions. To avoid confusion and unintended advantages due the size of the different types of institutions, we recommend that two separate programs be established: one for TCUs and one for Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian serving institutions.

PERSONAL STATEMENT:
PRESIDENT SANDRA L. BOHAM
SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE
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I am an enrolled Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribal member. I am also a lifelong educator. I was raised in St. Ignatius, Montana. I earned undergraduate and doctorate degrees from the University of Montana and in between, a graduate degree from Montana State University. Sounds tidy and smooth when I say it like that. But it was not: it took me about eight years, taking summer classes, to earn my master's degree after earning my undergraduate degree. Another 25 years passed before I completed my doctorate degree. In between, I worked across the educational spectrum: I taught in a women's prison, a Job Corps site, and mainstream colleges. I also worked at Salish Kootenai College, first in its early days when there were no buildings and classes were taught anywhere we could find a spot -- including a church basement, empty buildings, and shared facilities. I came back to SKC several years later and worked with the SKC Gear Up and TRIO programs, reaching out to high school and middle school students. I also worked in an urban state public school system in Montana, and finally, I came home to Salish Kootenai College as an administrator. My professional life spans the continuum of learning.

Throughout my life and career, one thing has remained constant: my identity as a Salish and Kootenai tribal member. No matter where I was, it was important to remain connected to my tribe and community and to nurture that connection with my children. My children danced in pow wows, and we even formed our own family drum group to keep our songs and stories alive. As parents, my husband and I took these steps to ensure that our children never questioned their identity; but many parents cannot do this. They do not have the resources, or maybe they have lost touch with their own tribal identity. It's important for our schools to fill this gap, because without the strength of identity, it is difficult for our children to succeed in education.

A strong connection to tribal culture and language is critical. I noticed that many young Native students were missing this connection when I went to work for the Great Falls Public School System. The Indian community was isolated, even from one another. We were losing many students. So we started drumming and singing. We reconnected. When I left Great Falls to come back to SKC, 125 students were singing and five drum groups had been formed. Our youth are finding their identity.