



## **Salish Kootenai College**

P.O. Box 70  
Pablo, MT 59855  
Ph. 406-275-4800  
Fax 406-275-4801



### **Statement of Dr. Sandra Boham President, Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, Montana)**

#### **Hearing on: The History and Continued Contributions of Tribal Colleges and Universities, House Committee on Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment July 19, 2022**

Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Committee, 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. I am honored to speak with you.

Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are place-based and mission-focused institutions. TCUs serve critical roles in preparing individual American Indian and Alaska Native students for success, as well as strengthening and sustaining our Tribes, Tribal communities, lands, languages and cultures. 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; and (2) the need to perpetuate our culture, language, lands and sovereignty.

#### **Overview of Salish Kootenai College**

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation chartered Salish Kootenai College in 1977. It is the mission of Salish Kootenai College to strengthen our communities and perpetuate our cultures. For us, that means grounding our programs in the values, principles, and world view of the Séliš, Ksanka, and Qiispé people.

The impact of Salish Kootenai College for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the reservation community and Indian country at the tribal, state and local level is significant. Salish Kootenai College has provided a highly skilled workforce that has assisted our Tribe to become

a successful self-governance tribe. The Tribes own and operate a hydroelectric dam, bison range, natural resources and Tribal Health system. To meet the needs of the Tribe and the reservation community, Salish Kootenai College developed Workforce Certifications, Certificate of Completions, Associate Degrees, Bachelor Degrees and two (2) Masters Degrees that are responsive to Tribal needs. All of the programs offered at SKC are grounded in our Tribe's distinctive and resilient world view. SKC offers bachelor's degrees in forestry management and hydrology (the only two such tribally-focused bachelor's programs in the nation), wildlife and fisheries, education, nursing, social work, Tribal governance and Tribal historic preservation.

Salish Kootenai College has always aggressively worked to sustain our Tribal languages because language, culture, and community are essential to Native student identity, resiliency, academic success and degree completion. We developed a Salish language teacher apprenticeship program that includes a year-long immersion experience with fluent Salish speakers. We also developed a culture and language program that includes an apprenticeship component to ensure that our ceremonies, songs, traditional plant knowledge as well as cultural skills training can be conducted in an apprenticeship model. The COVID-19 pandemic created an increased sense of urgency due to the loss of many Tribal elders. We are actively increasing efforts to protect each of these virtual components to ensure our Tribal Nation is protected.

### **Supporting Critical Workforce Pipelines: Teacher Education and Nursing Program**

Salish Kootenai College has an excellent reputation as a Tribal College, but it is best known for its education and nursing programs. The SKC Education Division offers teacher preparation at all levels of the P-12 system; pre-school, P-3, elementary education, secondary math and secondary science. These programs are critical in meeting the need for teachers in rural and reservation schools. Many of these students want to teach in these communities because they are from these communities. The teacher preparation program integrates Séliš, Ksanka, and Qíispé history. The students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. They are not invisible. Additionally, this past year SKC developed the Salish Language Teacher Education Program. This program prepares Native Language speakers to become certified teachers. Many language speakers struggled with the classroom and curriculum development part of teaching. This program provides the pedagogical skills to be a successful teacher. We know, and research has proven, that a strong sense of identity as well as a connection with language and culture are

protective factors for American Indian students. Anything we can do to impact public education to create a better space for American Indian students to learn and develop into the next generation of leaders is what we need to do.

SKC has successfully prepared nurses over the past 30 years. The nursing curriculum at SKC integrated culturally congruent, culturally competent, holistic approaches to health care. We know that there is a critical shortage of healthcare workers at all levels and rural, reservation communities are some of the hardest to serve communities.

The growing our own approach has proved to be incredibly successful. Many of the nurses that graduate stay in our community or return to their home communities because they want to serve their Tribes. However, SKC nursing graduates can be found in many states in a variety of healthcare settings from remote rural communities to large research hospitals in major metropolitan areas.

Salish Kootenai College prepares students to choose whatever path they wish to take.

### **TCU Leadership: Lifelong Commitment**

I began working at SKC in 1979 as an Adult Basic Education Instructor. I have held many different positions over the years and have worked in Institutions of Higher Education in California and in K-12 education as an Indian Education Director in a large off-reservation community in Montana. I began serving as the President of Salish Kootenai College in 2016.

Leading SKC has been one of the greatest privileges in my career, it has also been one of my greatest challenges. Tribal Colleges and Universities are transformational institutions that actively work to improve the lives of individuals as well as build the capacity of Tribal organizations to improve the economic and social conditions of the people who live and work on the reservation. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Government and all of its affiliates as well as the non-Indian business on the reservation look to SKC to assist with educating the workforce and developing the leaders of the future.

## **Tribal Governance and Sovereignty**

Salish Kootenai College is a young institution. The college is only 45 years old. The impact that the college has made during this time has been widespread. In 1977, most of the operations of the Tribe were managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the Tribes. Many of the people managing the Tribe's natural resources were not Tribal people and not from the community or even Montana. In order to fill this critical need, SKC created professionals in natural resource management who could manage the resource not only for its economic value, but also for its cultural value. Today, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes is a self-governance Tribe that operates all of its own natural resources and healthcare systems. This became possible, in part, because of the role the college played in developing the professionals needed to assume management of these essential services for the perpetuation of our culture and well being of the people.

## **Challenges: Operational Funding**

Tribal College and University funding is very complex which makes budgeting and long-term planning even more challenging. Montana is one of only two states that provides funding for non-Indian students (which includes Indian students who are not enrolled members of Federally Recognized Tribes and are referred to as non-beneficiary students). Salish Kootenai College is an open admissions campus. Our current enrollment is approximately 70% American Indian and 30% non-Indian. The State of Montana provides less than half of the funding per non-beneficiary student to tribal colleges than it does to the state institutions.

Salish Kootenai College has not raised tuition in the past 10 years. The reason for this is that if the cost of tuition exceeds Federal Pell grant funds, students will not be able to afford to attend college. SKC provides a number of institutional scholarships and tuition waivers to assist students with access. The fact is, most of our students are non-traditional college students. Even with jobs, the cost of books, housing, childcare, food and other necessities make it challenging for even the best prepared student.

SKC has experienced urban flight into our community in a way that could not be anticipated. The influx of people fleeing more populated areas to Montana has had far reaching impact in the

housing market. Inventory of available rentals is non-existent and what is available is priced beyond what the local wages can support. This has created a problem for students looking for housing to attend college, but has also affected the ability of employers to fill much need job vacancies.

### **Student Support during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

If we learned anything from COVID, we learned that well-funded students can focus on their education. Pre-COVID, 90% of our students indicated food and housing insecurity. We had a high incidence of suicide ideation and other mental health issues as well. With COVID funds we were able to provide food boxes weekly, child care funding, emergency housing assistance, tuition reduction, book vouchers, internet access and a computer check out system. We were also able to normalize discussions around mental health and asking for help. We funded and implemented a tele-mental health system that has been widely accepted. For the past two years we have had not suicide attempts and almost no suicide ideation.

COVID funding has provided much needed resources to address funding issues for our students as well as critical infrastructure needs for our campuses and communities.

Internet access continues to be an issue that needs to be addressed in rural reservation communities. Internet access is expensive and unstable. Campus facilities need to be remodeled and some new facilities constructed to address social distancing, adequate air exchanges and increased technology demands.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Salish Kootenai College and Tribal Colleges and Universities. I look forward to working with you to advance the Tribal College Movement through increased federal investments.

Lemlemts  
Dr Sandra L Boham  
President, Salish Kootenai College

**PERSONAL STATEMENT:  
PRESIDENT SANDRA L. BOHAM  
SALISH KOOTENAI COLLEGE  
PABLO, MT**

*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 is 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.*