



**Statement of Ahniwake Rose, President & CEO
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Public Witness Days on American Indian and Alaska Native Programs
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Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Ahniwake Rose, and I am President of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the Department of Interior's budget as it relates to our nation's 35 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).

Thank you for acknowledging the federal government's trust and treaty responsibility by proposing crucial funding increases for TCUs in the House Appropriations bills last summer. This responsibility establishes a clear and enduring relationship between Tribal Nations and the federal government, applying to all branches—including Congress's constitutional duty to appropriate funding.

Tribal Nations are sovereign, and Tribal citizens hold a unique political status that is not based on race. Despite the clear federal trust and treaty responsibility, I want to state for the record that I am deeply concerned by any misclassification of Tribal programs as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) or Environmental Justice (EJ) initiatives.

Further, proposed reductions or delays in funding, or any terminations of the dedicated federal employees at the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) who support TCUs, ultimately jeopardize the accreditation of TCUs, place additional strain on already overextended faculty and staff—many of whom fulfill multiple roles—and may force the elimination of positions at TCUs in regions with some of the highest unemployment rates. The recent termination of federal employees at Haskell Indian Nations University, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, and from the BIE offices supporting TCUs—in the middle of the school year no less—contravenes congressional intent for already appropriated funding and jeopardizes the ability of TCUs to continue to offer opportunities for students.

TREATIES AND TRUST

So today, I remind you of your sacred trust responsibility and to share concrete examples of how investments by this Subcommittee impact American Indian and Alaska Native students, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Indian Country.

Years before Columbus arrived, an estimated 10 million people lived on this land, speaking hundreds of languages and living in diverse, vibrant cultures shaped by millennia of history and tradition. Beginning in 1785, Tribal Nations relinquished their sacred lands—over one billion acres—in exchange for treaty promises. It is from these treaties that the federal trust responsibility grows. Authorized by the U.S. Constitution and repeatedly re-affirmed, the trust responsibility establishes a clear relationship between Tribes and all three branches of the federal government.



Many of the treaties included a trust responsibility to provide education.

For us, education meant equality, opportunity, and hope for our children and grandchildren as Tribal people within the context of our Tribal identity. But that is not what happened. Education was used as a weapon to eliminate our language, crush our culture, and assimilate our spirits.

TRIBAL COLLEGES EMERGE

Yet our spirit remained resilient. In the 1960s, Tribal leaders and educators pushed for self-determination and Tribal sovereignty and, with that, greater control over educational systems to ensure they reflected their unique cultural values, languages, and traditions.

In 1973, six Tribally controlled colleges established AIHEC to provide a support network as they worked to influence federal policies on American Indian higher education. We advocated for, and in 1978 successfully passed, the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act (TCCUAA) to provide federal support and assistance to Tribally controlled colleges and universities.

Today, AIHEC represents 34 accredited TCUs across the United States, operating more than 90 campuses and sites in 16 states. We recently welcomed one new associate member from California as they seek accreditation and have two developing Tribal Colleges in Arizona and California. These institutions serve students from over 250 Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and embody a vital component of Tribal higher education.

Over 80 percent of Indian Country is served by TCUs. Tribal Colleges not only serve students, but they also serve over 160,000 other American Indians, Alaska Natives, and other rural residents each year through a wide variety of academic and community-based programs. All TCUs offer certificates and associate degrees; 21 offer bachelor's degrees; 9 offer master's degrees; and one offers a doctoral degree. Our programs range from liberal arts to technical and career programs. And, as open enrollment, community-based institutions, Tribal Colleges welcome all students and proudly became a part of this nation's land-grant family in 1994.

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TCUs are resilient and play a critical role in workforce development, particularly in nursing, land management, and education for Tribal communities. For example, Salish Kootenai College graduates half of Montana's American Indian and Alaska Native special education teachers. Eight TCUs, including institutions in Montana and Minnesota, have early education partnerships that strengthen cultural continuity and support Native families. TCUs also train professionals in high-demand fields like agriculture, Information Technology (IT), and trades, equipping graduates with essential skills to drive Tribal economic growth and self-sufficiency.

BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal government has never fully funded TCU institutional operations as authorized under the TCCUAA.



This chronic underfunding undermines the mission and impact of TCUs. For example, at Northwest Indian College, 50 percent of faculty salaries come from grant applications, which require ongoing management and applications, diverting resources from the school's core mission.

Reductions in funding—either through a year-long continuing resolution or sequester cuts—would impact teaching and Tribal college student success.

We applaud the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee's efforts to increase funding for Tribal college programs in the fiscal year (FY) 2025 appropriations bills. We urge the Committee to complete these bills and increase funding levels for TCUs in FY 2025 and in FY 2026.

Bureau of Indian Education - Education Construction

To build a modern Tribal workforce, TCUs need safe, well-equipped facilities. This is impossible with leaking roofs, outdated wiring, inadequate computer labs, and a severe lack of student housing. AIHEC urges support for documenting and funding these important infrastructure needs.

Leech Lake Indian Reservation, the largest in Minnesota, requires students to drive over an hour to get to class if they have reliable transportation. Due to the size and lack of housing on the reservation, Leech Lake Tribal College has identified the need for on-campus dormitories to address many of the challenges faced by its students. Little Big Horn College in Montana is having to rent and borrow space for its critical career and technical programs in electrical, plumbing, HVAC, welding, and agricultural technology. Northwest Indian College, serving the communities of Bellingham, Washington and Lapwai, Idaho would like to build its cybersecurity program to address Tribal community and business needs. The college also has \$20 million in deferred maintenance costs and needs \$35 million to complete its campus master plans.

In the aggregate, AIHEC's 2021 survey calculated \$400 million (total) in deferred maintenance and rehabilitation costs and \$2.7 billion (total) to complete existing master plans.

AIHEC deeply appreciates this Subcommittee's recommended increases for TCUs' Facilities Improvement & Repair (FI&R) funding and for report language urging the BIE to undertake a study of TCUs' facilities funding needs. The House Interior Appropriations bill for FY 2025 proposes \$19 million for TCU construction and facilities—an increase of \$3 million from FY2024—translating to about \$500,000 per institution. However, TCUs have yet to even receive their FY 2024 FI&R allocations, partly due to funding being withheld amid an audit of potential "DEIA" programs.

Further, despite the TCCUAA mandating an infrastructure review since 1978, the required study remains incomplete 45 years later. Recommending a certain amount for this study in addition to continuing to provide sustained increases for TCUs' FI&R needs would ensure that such a study is completed without negatively impacting this critical funding stream for TCUs. To begin addressing TCU infrastructure needs, AIHEC requests the House recommended levels of \$19 million be allocated in FY 2025, and \$37 million be allocated in FY 2026.



Bureau of Indian Education - Post-Secondary Programs

AIHEC requests \$176 million under Post Secondary Programs, forward funded, to support the Nation's Tribal College and University System. This funding is essential to ensure the continued success and impact of TCUs in advancing educational equity, excellence, and economic opportunity for Native Americans.

For the colleges authorized by the TCCUAA, we request a total of \$110.9 million. These funds are for institutional operations under Title I (\$92 million) and Title II (\$18 million), along with TCU Endowments (\$115,600) and technical assistance (\$743,600). This funding would provide the Congressionally authorized amount of \$11,571*/Indian student for the first time since the enactment of the TCU Act more than 40 years ago (*\$8,000 per Indian student adjusted for inflation). AIHEC specifically requests an increase for needed technical assistance, which has been level-funded for 15 years despite growing numbers of developing TCUs and increased demands for accountability and student success.

For Tribal career and technical institutions authorized under Title V of the TCCUAA, we request \$15.9 million.

For BIE's two postsecondary institutions—Haskell Indian Nations University (Haskell) and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI)—we request \$34 million and a reversal of the recent terminations of federal employees at these schools.

AIHEC is also urgently seeking reforms to the 1983 TCCUAA endowment program. A recent legislative change increased endowment funds from \$109,000 to \$2 million, which AIHEC believes diverts necessary resources from operational expenses, while benefiting only about half of the TCUs because of the prescriptive and cumbersome requirements associated with using these funds. AIHEC urges Congress to realign these funds to better address long-standing funding gaps and to make changes to the underlying endowment requirements.

Additionally, AIHEC is frustrated that the Bureau has ignored Subcommittee guidance on including Contract Support Costs in TCU budgets and urges that the Subcommittee address this.

Congressionally Chartered TCU

For the Institute of American Indian Arts, which is congressionally chartered and funded from a separate section of the Department of Interior's budget, we request \$14.8 million and urge the Committee to maintain funding for the Institute.

CONCLUSION

AIHEC appreciates the Subcommittee's continued commitment and support to Tribal education. Through this process, you can ensure that the federal government honors its trust and treaty obligations. In closing, I urge this Subcommittee to not only fund, but to exercise oversight authority to save our two oldest, federally chartered TCUs—Haskell and SIPI. I also urge this Subcommittee to prioritize the funding needs of all TCUs in the FY 2026 budget, recognizing the critical role they play in fulfilling the federal government's responsibility to Tribal Nations and advancing the educational and economic well-being of Native communities. Thank you.