



**Statement of Ahniwake Rose, President & CEO
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Prepared for the U.S. House of Representatives
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee
Public Witness Days on American Indian and Alaska Native Programs
March 17, 2026**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium’s (AIHEC) priorities for the Department of the Interior’s (DOI) budget as it relates to our nation’s Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). For Fiscal Year (FY) 2027, AIHEC respectfully requests the following:

Bureau of Indian Education – Operation of Indian Education Programs

<u>Post Secondary Programs (Forward Funded)</u>	\$173,460,000
• Haskell & SIPI:	\$ 44,000,000
• Tribal Colleges and Universities:	\$113,200,000
• Tribal Technical Colleges:	\$ 16,260,000

Bureau of Indian Education – Education Construction

- Tribal Colleges Facilities Improvement and Repair (FIR): \$ 38,000,000

Institute of American Indian and Alaska Native Culture and Arts Development

- Institute of American Indian and Alaska Native Culture and Arts Development \$15,160,000

TREATIES AND TRUST

The work you do is critically important to Indian Country and TCUs. On behalf of AIHEC and the TCUs, I thank the Subcommittee for acknowledging the federal government's trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens by preserving key funding for the TCUs during the Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations process. In FY 2026, you received a budget request from the President that would have nearly eliminated Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funding for Tribal Colleges. If enacted, such a cut would have forced TCUs to close their doors. Instead, in a bipartisan fashion, you came together to recommend increased funding for FY 2026. We applaud not only this Subcommittee for proposing increases, but the entire House of Representatives for taking a stand to uphold the federal government’s trust and treaty obligations – solemn promises made between nations which exist beyond the bounds of political parties.

HISTORY OF THE TRIBAL COLLEGE MOVEMENT

In the 1960s, Tribal leaders and educators advanced a powerful movement for self-determination and Tribal sovereignty, asserting greater control over educational systems so they would reflect Tribal Nations’ unique cultural values, languages, and traditions. Building on that foundation, in



1973, six Tribally controlled colleges came together to establish AIHEC as a unified support network to provide technical assistance to TCUs. That collective leadership culminated in the successful passage of the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act (TCCUAA) in 1978, securing dedicated federal support and technical assistance for Tribally controlled colleges and universities.

Today, AIHEC represents 35 accredited TCUs across the United States, operating more than 90 campuses and sites in 16 states. This number reflects the fact that we recently welcomed one newly accredited member in California. We are also pleased to report that on the horizon, we have two more developing Tribal Colleges in Arizona and California. In total, these institutions serve students from over 250 Federally Recognized Tribal Nations 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.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

TCUs are resilient and play a critical role in some of the most remote regions of the country, not only providing technical job training and access to affordable post-secondary education but also serving as economic hubs and drivers for rural America to sustain and support local economies. AIHEC recently undertook a study of the economic impacts of TCUs. Titled: *Building Local Economies of Scale: The Impact of Tribal Colleges and Universities in Rural America*, this study found that for 2023, alumni from TCUs contributed \$3.8 billion to the national economy, supporting the equivalent of 40,732 jobs.¹ Additionally, for every \$1.00 invested in TCUs, (1) students of those colleges and universities gain \$7.50 in lifetime earnings, (2) taxpayers gain \$1.60 in added tax revenue and public savings, and (3) society gains \$4.80 in added income and social savings.¹ Ultimately, supporting TCUs is not only a good deal for the federal government but also one of the most cost-efficient ways the federal government can endeavor to uphold its treaty and trust obligations to Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens, while simultaneously benefiting the nation as a whole.

BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS

Tribal Colleges urgently need improved infrastructure to support a modern Tribal workforce. Unfortunately, many campuses are struggling with leaking roofs, outdated wiring, inadequate labs, and a lack of student housing. Insufficient facilities funding significantly constrains TCUs'

¹ American Indian Higher Education Consortium. (2025). *Building local economies of scale: The impact of Tribal Colleges & Universities in rural America*.

https://webassets.aihec.org/FrontPageDocs/National_Study_AIHEC_TCU_Economic_Impact_Study_09102025_F...



ability to expand workforce development programs, which often require specialized facilities and equipment that TCUs simply cannot afford to build or acquire. A 2021 AIHEC survey found \$400 million in deferred maintenance across TCUs and \$2.7 billion needed to complete campus master plans. To begin closing these gaps, AIHEC requests **\$38 million for TCU infrastructure in FY 2027** and urges completion of the long-overdue TCCUAA-mandated infrastructure study.

AIHEC also requests **\$173.46 million for Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Post Secondary Programs (Forward Funded)** to sustain Tribal higher education. This includes funding for TCCUAA Title I and II institutions, covering operating funds, endowments, and vital technical assistance and support provided by AIHEC. This requested funding level would bring funding to the Congressionally authorized **\$12,327 per Indian student** for the first time. Additional requests include **\$16.26 million for Tribal career and technical institutions** under Title V and **\$44 million for BIE-operated institutions Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI)**. AIHEC further urges continued support for the congressionally-chartered **Institute of American Indian Arts at \$15.16 million**.

OVERSIGHT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERAGENCY AGREEMENTS

On September 30, 2025, the Department of Education (ED) entered into a number of interagency agreements (IAAs) with other federal agencies “for the provision of services supporting the administration of [certain federal education programs].” Of the IAAs, the ED IAA with the Department of the Interior (DOI) is the most consequential for TCUs. This IAA provides for the BIE’s day-to-day administration of significant funding line items for TCUs from ED. To put this in perspective, TCUs receive core, formula-driven funding from three federal agencies: DOI, ED, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. TCUs need all three sources of funding just to stay open. Under the ED-DOI IAA, two of those three key sources of funding will now be administered by BIE. Throughout this process, TCUs are looking to AIHEC to continue to provide a steady source of technical assistance and support. AIHEC has submitted written comments in response to the Tribal consultation and to this Subcommittee. Pursuant to these comments, AIHEC respectfully urges the Subcommittee to conduct oversight of this process to ensure that funding and technical assistance for TCUs is not delayed or diminished.

OVERSIGHT OF REPORTS REQUESTED BY THE COMMITTEE

AIHEC has reviewed all Appropriations Committee-directed BIE reports since FY 2010, which shows that most TCU-related requirements remain incomplete, despite their importance in guiding accurate budget and policy decisions. Notably, the Appropriations Committee has requested—seven (7) times since FY 2017—that BIE work with Tribal leaders and stakeholders to develop a consistent methodology for determining TCU operations and maintenance (O&M) needs. This methodology will be critical for supporting justified funding levels. As of this writing, federally operated Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) are the only TCUs to receive O&M funding and the only TCUs to be eligible for Great American Outdoors Act – Legacy Restoration Fund resources to address their deferred maintenance backlog. Further, the TCCUAA specifically directs the Secretary of the Interior to undertake a study of TCUs’ infrastructure needs and then directs that this information



be used to inform the creation of a TCU Construction program. These requirements date to 1978 and have yet to be completed or funded.

LEVERAGING TCUs TO FILL THE WORKFORCE GAPS WITHIN IHS AND BIE

TCUs represent the most cost-effective pathway for reducing health professional vacancy rates across the Indian Health Service (IHS). Specifically, TCUs are particularly well-positioned to address nursing shortages. Fourteen (14) TCUs currently offer nursing degrees—ranging from Associate of Science to Bachelor of Science in Nursing—within regions identified as high-need areas for nursing professionals, of those, two (2) programs hold national accreditation. Despite this capacity, graduates of TCU nursing programs often face structural and institutional barriers within the IHS hiring system. Encouragingly, IHS has expressed interest in strengthening partnerships with TCUs to remove these barriers and build workforce pipelines.

AIHEC proposes a collaborative approach to turn this problem into an opportunity. This Subcommittee could fund a designated set-aside or a demonstration initiative within an already established program. There are already several proven models in place to look to. For example, the *TCU-Head Start Partnership* program at the Department of Health and Human Services is designed to help TCUs build and sustain early childhood education career pathway programs. Best practices from this successful program could inform the creation of a *TCU-IHS Nursing Partnership* program or strengthen the IHS's *American Indians into Nursing* program. Already, the *American Indians into Nursing* program—authorized under Section 112 of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act—acknowledges TCUs as priority applicants. However, the current limitation of one award per region restricts TCU participation. In FY 2026, \$84,568,000 was appropriated for the Indian Health Professions programs, which includes this initiative. For this reason, AIHEC urges the Subcommittee to increase funding for this line and the creation of either a dedicated demonstration grant for a TCU-specific nursing pipeline or a set-aside within the existing *American Indians into Nursing* program.

Similarly, teacher shortages exist across the BIE-funded K-12 school system. So much so that BIE-funded schools are even turning to the J-1 visa process to bring in foreign teachers. For these teachers, English is often a second language, and they have no experience with Native languages. This is happening despite the fact that TCUs are already successfully preparing talented teachers right in these very same communities. Indeed, 26 out of 35 TCUs offer teacher education programs ranging from certificates to masters degrees in early childhood education to elementary and secondary education. Again, the *TCU-Head Start Partnership* program and the Indian Health Professions programs provide models this Subcommittee could consider for creating TCU-specific teacher pipeline for the BIE-funded K-12 school system.

CONCLUSION

AIHEC appreciates the Subcommittee's continued commitment and support to Tribal education. Through the appropriations and oversight process, Congress can ensure that the federal government's trust and treaty obligations are carried out fully and consistently. Please continue to consider AIHEC a partner in this endeavor. *Wado*, Thank you.