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By E-Mail and US Mail

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
US Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Re: **Haskell University and the Need to *Put
American Indian Students First***

Dear Secretary Haaland.

I can be silent no more. Two seemingly unrelated circumstances and situations have just come together. First, letters from Haskell students to the Secretary of the Interior, BIE and Haskell detailing compounding scandals were just sent to me. Second, I just filed a whistle-blower complaint for retaliation for reporting fraud, waste and abuse that led to my termination.

I was just provided several letters recently written anonymously, under the cloak of fear, by Cross-Country student-athletes at Haskell addressed to you and to the Bureau of Indian Education Director. Declared the students, “*We reported intimidation, threats, fraudulent reports, assaults, sexual abuse, embezzlement, forged signatures, and countless crimes and unspeakable acts of evil all from one group at Haskell.*” In the face of outright fear and direct threats, the students stood up, spoke out and demanded justice. According to various reports, including those in the media, a comprehensive investigation followed, and an Investigatory Report, now finalized, was submitted to BIE. On March 10, according to BIE’s HR Director in an email to the students, “...you will never know what actions are being taking (sp) to address to address specific findings...” The Students now declare that the BIE Report is being “100% covered-up.” Words are inadequate. But, given my experience at Haskell, I am not surprised.

*Today, I am the unthinkable. I am a **whistle-blower** having just filed a complaint with the Office*

of Special Counsel in Washington, D.C. detailing and reporting, during my tenure, outright corruption, serial malfeasance, criminal misconduct and administrative wrong-doing at the Federal Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Haskell Indian Nation's University.

What do a group of Haskell's Cross-Country student-athletes and I, as a fired President of Haskell, have in common? Answer: one word. Retaliation. The student were forced to communicate anonymously because they feared Retaliation. I reported truths at BIE and Haskell resulting in Retaliation and paid the price for it.

When I accepted the position as Haskell President, my mantra was simple:

<p><i>PUT AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS FIRST</i></p>

Bureau of Indian Education leaders and select members of the Haskell Faculty, as demonstrated by their actions, did not share this goal, as demonstrated by their conduct.

* * * * *

I am an enrolled member, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma.

In 2019, the Department of the Interior and Bureau of Indian Education posted the position of President, Haskell Indian Nations University. I applied. In February 2020, at the conclusion of my second interview, I was invited to serve as Haskell President. I considered it a high honor.

Haskell – Home to a Runaway Faculty. At the interview and after I was selected to be President, BIE Director, Tony L. Dearman:

- Revealed a *Runaway Faculty* existed at Haskell;
- Advised that my *Greatest Challenge* would be to bring order and discipline to Haskell;
- Instructed me to institute *Fiscal and Financial Accountability* at Haskell;
- Directed the preparation of a *Five-Year Strategic Plan* for Haskell;
- Made *Student Retention* and *Student Growth* [dual enrollment] a major programmatic priority at Haskell; and,
- Insisted that a *Chain-of-Command* policy be put in place to eliminate faculty and staff

speed-dial calls to BIE headquarters as was occurring at the time as a matter of routine.

Hallowed Ground at Haskell. On May 11, 2020, I stepped on the sacred and hallowed ground of Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas.

First Eight Months, May-to-December 2020, A Whirl-Wind. When I arrived at Haskell, COVID was raging, campus was largely shut-down, and an obsolete IT system crippled distance learning for instructors and students alike. Emergency funds were secured, the IT system was upgraded and distance learning commenced. Director Dearman gave me a year to prepare a heretofore non-existent Strategic Plan, which, with faculty and staff involvement, was delivered in eight months. A dual enrollment program was designed, approved and instituted. Six Oklahoma schools launched the program and 25 throughout Nation were in the process of signing up. At the time I was terminated, we were projecting as many as 300 schools would sign up all across Indian Country in the next 24 months which could eventually equate to well over 3,000 new students. For the faculty, I discovered that required annual reviews had not been conducted for years which meant that annual pay adjustments were not processed. It was addressed and made current. Recognized university faculty committees were established. Training programs approved. Haskell community partners were identified and created. A Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy was instituted. Outstanding complaints – some more than two years old – were addressed and closed out. Weekly cabinet meetings were held. Operational funds were raised and initial steps toward building a 10-year \$100 Million Endowment for Haskell were initiated, and much more.

Haskell Approach to Pandemic – A Model for All Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Early on, with COVID still active, I wrote a letter to Director Deaman detailing how Haskell would operate during the pandemic. Student and faculty protection was paramount. Therefore, they could not return to campus at the time. Discussed my decision with Dearman and all TCUs in a teleconference. TCU's decided to follow Haskell's policy as a model to do the same.

BIE Conducts Annual Review – Graham Grade: “Exceeds Expectations.” In December, 2020, as required by Federal regulations, BIE conducted my Annual Performance Review. The BIE awarded my overall grade – **Exceeds Expectations** (measured in four separate categories). The first category, called Critical Element 1, Mandatory Supervisory/Managerial Element, for “Effective People Management – During Pandemic,” I received an *OUTSTANDING* Grade, which is awarded when an “*employee demonstrates exceptional performance...*” Inexplicably, BIE declared this specific work to be a justification for termination. Beyond high marks assigned

in four separate categories, that Review cited and identified “**51 Accomplishments.**”

BIE’s Termination Contradiction – Inexplicably, BIE fired me for BIE-Cited Performance

Accomplishments. A few months later, the May 7, 2021 BIE Termination stated that my “*termination is necessary because of issues relating to your failure to properly perform duties....or follow procedures.*” Three examples are provided – COVID management, dual enrollment and faculty relations. Inexplicably and without explanation, **each** of the three cited so-called “failures” were expressly identified as **Accomplishments** in BIE’s annual evaluation only a few months prior. I was fired for BIE cited **Accomplishments**. I should add that, at no time after my annual evaluation and prior to Termination did BIE Director Dearman or BIE HR Director Shamblin ever notify me or raise any – *even the slightest* – concern or issue about any of these three matters.

A Thousand Challenges. From the day I stepped onto campus in May, 2020 until December, same year, there were a thousand challenges and I dealt with each as they came to my desk. In December, I received my excellent evaluation. Right afterwards, beginning in the last few days of December 2020 and extending to the very end of March, 2021, a series of financial, programmatic, administrative and management issues from a variety of sources – staff, instructors, outsiders and, in one case, anonymously – were brought to my attention. These issues included millions in unaccounted for donated funds, mismanaged contracts, ethics violations, falsified payroll issues involving more than 10 faculty members, and others matters. As required and directed, I reported each to BIE Director Dearman and HR Director Shamblin. Extensive reports and discussions regarding each followed. With each instance and as appropriate, I requested BIE institute reviews, audits and/or investigations. On one occasion, I also recommended that the FBI be invited to conduct appropriate investigations. Without exception, Dearman and Shamblin agreed.

After Termination, I Realized that the Requested Reviews, Audits or Investigations Were

Not Completed. While serving as President, I was led to believe that the requested reviews, audits and/or investigations were underway. Whatever happened while I was President – it changed the moment I was fired. To the best of my knowledge, none of these issues was fully addressed or finalized after termination.

Retaliation for Reporting Fraud, Waste and Abuse. As required, after I learned of any instance of misconduct, malfeasance and/or wrong-doing at Haskell then BIE Director Dearman and BIE HR Director Shamblin were notified, usually the same day. My termination quickly

followed almost immediately after fraud, waste and abuse was reported. Retaliation!

Dearman Ran A Taxpayer-Financed Protection Racket at Haskell. I now realize that BIE Director Dearman ran a *Taxpayer-Financed Protection Racket* during my presidency for a very select group of Haskell's instructors and staff.

When I reported to Dearman and Shamblin that all Regents must undergo and pass a background check as required by Federal law, I insisted that Regents not be allowed on campus until such checks were conducted and individuals passed. Dearman and Shamblin later reported that at least three of the then-Regents failed the checks and would not be allowed to serve. Dearman, after my termination, then reinstated at least one Regent BIE previously determined to be ineligible a result of a multiple criminal issues on his record.

When I reported to Dearman that more than \$1 million in donated funds were unaccounted for and requested an independent audit, he agreed but to the best of my knowledge no audit was conducted and no investigation completed.

When I reported to Dearman that more than 10 faculty members submitted falsified payroll claims (estimated to be more than 200 false claims) and requested an investigation, Dearman and Shamblin agreed (and even requested the Haskell computer-based printouts as evidence which were provided), but the investigation apparently did not happen.

When I reported to Dearman and Shamblin a faculty member's questionable employment conduct, Dearman and Shamblin informed me that a serious ethics violation occurred that possibly justified termination, but neither took action and that investigation apparently disappeared after my termination (and that particular Faculty Member, according to Haskell, was recently promoted).

When I reported serial wrong-doing, numerous irregularities and repeated violations of law, policy and procedure, I did not realize at the time that Dearman and Shamblin's dereliction would knowingly perpetuate a hostile work environment.

Honest, Committed, Dedicated and Hard Working. It is essential to state, and I am compelled to emphasize that the vast majority of Haskell University staff and faculty are honest, committed, dedicated, and hard working. They care. Every day, they invest in that next generation of American Indian students.

Graham's Job One – Put American Indian Students First. On May 17, 2022, a year after I was terminated, BIE readvertised the position of Haskell President and then readvertised it a second time on August 8. On September 7, 2022, I reapplied to be reinstated as President. BIE approved my application and determined that I was eligible. I was not allowed to interview. A supplemental letter accompanied the application. It concluded stating: ***Job One was to Put American Indian Students First.***

And I further concluded, ***“notwithstanding retaliation, serial violation of my rights, absence of due process, and a willful cover-up of financial misconduct by numerous faculty members, I remain committed to our American Indian Students – First, Foremost and Always. These students – these young Indian men and women deserve far better. My goal was to rebuild Haskell Indian Nations University making it a flagship of pride throughout America. I am prepared to resume that effort and, because of the students, submit my application to serve as President.”***

Something is Terribly Wrong. There is something terribly wrong at BIE. There is something terribly wrong at Haskell. Students at Haskell should embrace learning and prepare for life, not confront fear of Retaliation from Haskell officials or faculty members. Their fear of Retaliation is real. I know. I know first-hand. I experienced Retaliation for reporting payroll fraud, examples of waste and abusive situations and circumstances. I “committed truth” and was fired for it.

Striving to be “Flagship of Pride.” These matters scream – ***plead*** – for leadership exclusively committed to the well-being and education of students entrusted to Haskell’s care and respect for the public funds allocated for Haskell. The rule of law needs to be upheld and respected. And, all should work together to make Haskell that *“flagship of pride.”*

Sincerely,

Dr. Ronald J. Graham

