



**STATEMENT OF DR. SANDRA BOHAM**  
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**PREPARED FOR THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**  
**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON S. 2304, S. 2468, S. 2580, AND S. 2711**  
**REGARDING AMERICAN INDIAN & ALASKA NATIVE EDUCATION**  
APRIL 6, 2016

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Dr. Sandra Boham. I am an enrolled Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribal member; 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, Salish Kootenai College, the six other Tribal Colleges in Montana and the 30 other TCUs throughout the country, which collectively are AIHEC, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing on four bills seeking to enhance American Indian and Alaska Native education.

While four legislative initiatives are included in today's hearing, my testimony will specifically address two: S. 2304, which provides for tribal demonstration projects to integrate certain early childhood programs, and S. 2468, the SAFETY Act, which would provide modest – yet vitally needed -- funding for Indian education facility construction.

It is an honor to speak with the members of this Committee about these two pieces of legislation and to share with you a little about the important work that Tribal Colleges are doing to transform Indian Country. First, however, I want to thank Senator Tester for his tremendous work on behalf of the seven tribes in Montana, our seven Tribal Colleges, and all Native people. We appreciate Senator Tester's commitment to working collaboratively with Tribal Colleges to addressing our collective mission of improving the lives of our students through higher education and moving American Indians toward self-sufficiency.

My statement will touch on two topics: first, Tribal College recommendations regarding S. 2304 and S. 2468; and second, the accomplishments and challenges of Tribal Colleges in bringing high quality, culturally appropriate education opportunities to our students and culturally centered programs to our communities.

**Recommendations Regarding S. 2304 and S. 2468**

The nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities, through our collective organization, AIHEC, support and encourage swift enactment of S. 2304 and S. 2468:

***S. 2304, Tribal Early Childhood, Education, and Related Services Integration Act***

There is no other group of young people more at risk in this country today than American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and youth. Native kids are more likely to be involved with gangs than any other racial population (*National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2009*); Native youth have the highest suicide rate in the country, 2.5 times the national average (*U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control, 2010*); Native

children suffer one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the nation: 11.4 per 1,000 AI/AN children (*Children's Bureau, 2012*); we have the highest poverty rate in the nation (*U.S. Department of Commerce, 2009*), which means many of our children go to bed hungry; and Native kids have the highest high school dropout rate in the country.

These statistics describe a situation that cannot be tolerated. As a nation, we can and must do better. Tribal Colleges are already leading the way: Oglala Lakota College and Aaniiih Nakoda College are running high achieving Native language immersion schools on their campuses without funding from the BIE or the state; Salish Kootenai College, along with most of the TCUs are managing our own day care centers at considerable cost to the college every year because students often cannot afford to pay; OLC and Cankdeska Cikana Community College each took over failing Head Start programs and revitalized dilapidated facilities and introduced culturally relevant programming; Sitting Bull College established an innovative intergenerational Lakota immersion program for its day care center and pre-school; nearly 20 TCUs are conducting Indigenous, community-based participatory research on behavior health needs in the community; all TCUs are running Saturday academies, summer and after-school enrichment programs; and 16 TCUs, including SKC, are partnering with BIE schools to raise high school completion rates and develop a college-bound culture; Sitting Bull College has a model summer Native Language Institute – professional development for all pre-K-12 teachers (and anyone else who is interested and committed) on the Standing Rock Reservation that has proven so successful that at least three other TCUs are now implementing the model on their own reservations. We are doing much more -- these are just a few examples of the strategies TCUs are implementing and integrating to transform the educational and life experience of our children through a holistic continuum of culturally-based education.

We are pleased that S. 2304 includes Tribal Colleges, and we would like to make two broader, yet relevant, recommendations to address the needs of our youngest learners:

- (1) Recognize the Inherent Role of TCUs in Training Educators of Native Learners:** Congress should specifically and clearly reinforce the lead role of Tribal Colleges in the U.S. Department of Education's Professional Development Program (American Indian Teacher Preparation) by requiring applicants to have as a key component of their program a partnership with one or more TCUs designed to increase the number of American Indian/Alaska Native teachers and administrators serving tribal communities and provide a minimum of \$10,000,000 to fund these critically needed competitively awarded grants.

TCUs need to be recognized and adequately supported so that they can continue to play a fundamental role in developing a critical mass of educators for Native learners. As Tribal institutions, TCUs should be the primary training sites for pre-service and in-service educators who work with Native learners. Since the primary goal of Professional Development for American Indian Teachers/Administrators program is to increase the number of effective Indian teachers and administrators for schools with large Indian populations, the TCUs need to be lead institutions in the efforts funded under this program.

- (2) Expand the TCU-Head Start Partnership Program:** Congress should allocate up to \$8 million of the \$10 billion Head Start Program to reestablish the highly successful Head Start-TCU Partnership Program, which would provide scholarships and stipends for Indian Head Start workers to get vitally needed training and certification.

With the reauthorization of the Head Start program in the mid-1990s, Congress imposed new performance and professional competency requirements. Specifically, at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationwide were to have a baccalaureate or advanced degree in Early Childhood Education or a baccalaureate or advanced degree in any subject and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education with experience teaching preschool-age children, and 50 percent of all teacher assistants were to have an associate degree or enrolled in an associate degree program. While we may be prepared to declare that this nationwide goal has been achieved, far less than half of Head Start teachers in the American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start Program area hold an associate or bachelor's degree.

AI/AN children deserve the best, and the TCUs are ideal catalysts for preparing Indian Head Start teachers so that they might offer these children the Head Start programs they deserve. We know this is true because from 2000 to 2007, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided modest funding for the TCU-Head Start Program, which helped TCUs build capacity in early childhood education by provided scholarships and stipends for Indian Head Start teachers and teacher's aides to enroll in TCU early childhood programs. Before the program ended in 2007 (ironically, the same year that Congress specifically authorized the program in the Head Start Act), TCUs had trained more than 400 Head Start workers, many of whom have since left to higher paying jobs in elementary schools.

***S. 2468, Safe Academic Facilities and Environments for Tribal Youth Act (SAFETY Act)***

All children, no matter where they go to school, deserve to have safe, high quality learning environments. Feeling safe, being warm, and having clean drinking water are fundamental to a quality learning environment. Yet, many American Indian and Alaska Native students attend schools that lack even these basic requirements, and when tribes, states, or even Tribal Colleges step in with repairs or rehabilitation, the school risks being removed from the BIE repair list. Meanwhile, Tribal Colleges operating Head Start programs for their tribes are taking out loans for which the college itself is responsible and forgoing higher education construction to rehabilitate classrooms for our youngest children. If the TCU did not do this, another generation of young American Indian children would be forced to begin their educational path in rundown, unsafe, sometimes rodent infested educational facilities.

We need an accurate accounting of the facilities needs of schools serving AI/AN youth, early childhood through postsecondary, and more important, we need reliable and equitable resources to begin addressing these needs.

The SAFETY Act will help address one of the most basic needs of any education institution and in so doing, will enable TCUs to provide more students with the opportunity to complete a degree program and help our tribes grow their Native workforce and advance the economies of Indian Country. In 2009, TCUs had at least \$100 million in shovel-ready construction and rehabilitation projects, including Science, Career/Technical, and other academic facilities; student and faculty housing; and libraries, day care centers, and wellness centers. Recent surveys show that the need persists in all of these areas. To continue to provide high quality, culturally relevant postsecondary education opportunities, all TCUs must continue to build and expand their facilities and infrastructure.

We look forward to working with Senator Tester and the Members of this Committee toward enactment of S. 2304 and S. 2468 and other important measures related to excellence, safety, and success for all American Indian and Alaska Native students.

**BACKGROUND: THE TRIBAL COLLEGE MOVEMENT**

Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned earlier, I am an enrolled Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribal member. I am also a lifelong educator. I was raised in St. Ignatius, Montana – I am a graduate of St. Ignatius High School. 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 college. Another 25 years passed before I completed my Ph.D. 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. (So I have experienced, first hand, the need for legislation like the SAFETY Act.) I came back to work at SKC years later for the college's 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.

Tribal Colleges make this connection every day, one student at a time. We build confidence, self-esteem, and identity: at SKC and all TCUs, our students learn our stories and songs, our history and our language, and from these, they gain the courage, the tools and the confidence to shape a better world on our own land. Being around other tribal students and experiencing education from a Native perspective brings a connection to family and culture that is critical to the success of our students. As some of the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country, our struggle is a daily one, but our successes are generational. We are changing the lives and future of our students and their families through nurturing educational environments that are culturally-based and uniquely relevant to our students, we are building stronger and more prosperous Tribal nations through the restoration of our languages, community outreach programs and applied research on issues relevant to our land and our people, workforce training in fields critical to our reservation communities, and community-centered economic development and entrepreneurial programs. TCUs are a vital and essential component of the AI/AN education continuum.

Currently, 37 TCUs operate more than 75 campuses and sites in 16 states, within whose geographic boundaries 80 percent of all American Indian reservations and federal Indian trust land lie. We serve students from well over 250 federally recognized tribes, 85 percent of whom receive federal financial aid. In total, TCUs annually serve more than 160,000 AIs/ANs through a wide variety of academic and community-based programs. In Montana, 50 percent of all American Indians enrolled in higher education attend one of seven TCUs in our state. In fact, according to all available statistics on American Indians enrolled in federally recognized Indian tribes and currently engaged in higher education nationally, more than 50 percent attend TCUs.<sup>1</sup>

TCUs are public institutions accredited by independent, regional accreditation agencies and like all U.S. institutions of higher education must periodically undergo stringent performance reviews to retain their accreditation status. Currently, all TCUs offer associate degrees; 13 TCUs offer multiple bachelor's degrees, and five TCUs offer master's degrees. Each TCU is committed to improving the lives of its students through higher education and to moving American Indians toward self-sufficiency.

Tribal Colleges are first and foremost academic institutions, but because of the number of challenges facing Indian Country – high unemployment, poorly developed economies, poor health status, and lack of stable community infrastructures, our colleges are called upon to do much more than provide higher education services. TCUs often run entrepreneurial and business development centers; many TCUs are the primary GED and Adult Basic Education provider on our reservations, and most if not all TCUs provide a variety of evening, weekend training and para-professional programs for tribal employees, BIA and IHS staff, K-12 schools, tribal courts and justice system staff, and many others. TCUs run day care centers and Head Start programs, health nutrition education programs, community gardens, and often, the community library and tribal museum or archives.

Perhaps most important, Salish Kootenai College and all of the TCUs are actively and aggressively working to preserve and sustain their own tribal language and culture. All TCUs offer Native language courses. In some cases, the tribal language would have been completely lost if not for the local Tribal College. Turtle Mountain Community College in Belcourt, North Dakota, was established primarily for this purpose, and over the years, its success in writing and revitalizing the Turtle Mountain Chippewa language has been remarkable. As I mentioned earlier, Aaniiih Nakoda College in Harlem, Montana runs a K-8 language immersion school, right on campus. At the White Clay Immersion School, children learn the White Clay language and culture in addition to subjects they would routinely study at any other school. One of our goals at Salish Kootenai College is to launch a high school on our campus to improve high school and college completion rates among our youth.

AIHEC recently commissioned an internationally known economic impact firm to investigate the TCU return on investment: for every \$1 the federal government invests, taxpayers get at least \$2.40 back – with an average annual rate of return of 6.2 percent. Students get \$4.20 back for every dollar they invest; and tribes, states/regions receive a \$5.20 return for every dollar. Further, TCUs save the federal government nearly \$200 million every year in social program savings, and our alumni generate at least

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<sup>1</sup>This statistic excludes self-reporting, which despite having been shown in studies to be unreliable, is the measure used by the Department of Education's White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education.

\$2.3 billion in added income every year. This number is actually much higher, but it is the best data we have currently.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, we recognize and greatly appreciate the ongoing support of this Committee. Now, more than ever, we need to strengthen our commitment to action. TCUs are sound and stable tribal institutions; TCUs have a proven high return on investment; TCUs are transforming Indian Country. We ask for your support as we continue to bring educational excellence to the students and communities we serve. Thank you.