

TESTIMONY OF
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INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

Oversight Hearing on
Tribal Colleges and Universities

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

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President, Institute for Higher Education Policy*

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee regarding the important topic of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).

The 110th Congress faces the ongoing challenge of promoting access to higher education for all Americans who have the interest and ability to attend college. Improving access to higher education continues to be one of the most important contributions that the Federal government can make to our national well-being. For many American Indians, the path of educational attainment is one of many journeys, reflecting the complex challenges that face people who have been underserved by America's educational system for more than two centuries. That path may take students on an array of journeys through the postsecondary educational system: Tribal Colleges and Universities; mainstream institutions of higher education; adult education programs; associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees; outreach and support programs; financial aid programs; and many others. Yet for many Native people, those journeys represent the best and most important opportunities available for cultural preservation and growth, social mobility, and economic prosperity.

Today I will discuss some of the evidence that has been amassed about why investment in Native people matters to us as a society, and why the specific investment in Tribal Colleges and Universities brings enormous benefits both individually and collectively to Native people and communities. I also will discuss some of the most important strategies that you can pursue at the Federal level to make this investment pay off in economic, social, and cultural terms.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy's acclaimed recent national report *The Path of Many Journeys: The Benefits of Higher Education for Native People and Communities* (made possible through the generous support of USA Funds, in collaboration with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and the American Indian College Fund) has been provided in advance to the Committee. The report points out that a combination of historical, economic, social, demographic, and educational forces have shaped the challenges and constraints that American Indians face.

Historical forces: For decades U.S. Federal policy toward Indian tribes was made without knowledge or consideration of the values of Native people themselves. In addition, educational

* The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to access and success in postsecondary education around the world. Established in 1993, IHEP uses unique research and innovative programs to inform key decision makers who shape public policy and support economic and social development. The Institute's work addresses an array of issues in higher education, ranging from higher education financing to technology-based learning to quality assurance to minority-serving institutions.

curricula and teaching came from a Eurocentric-White perspective and completely neglected any mention of tribal ways of life.

Economic and social forces: American Indians, especially those who live on reservations, are among the poorest groups in the country. Approximately 26 percent of the American Indian/Alaska Native population lives below the official poverty level, compared with 12 percent of the total population. Factors such as geographic isolation, limited opportunities for upward mobility in rural areas and on reservations, and low labor force participation rates contribute to a continuous poverty cycle among American Indians. This poverty is often accompanied by a range of social problems—injuries and violence, depression, substance abuse, inadequate health care and prenatal health care, unhealthy or insufficient diets, and high rates of diabetes—that can greatly affect the ability and desire to pursue education.

Demographic forces: The American Indian population has experienced tremendous growth, from 237,000 in 1900 to 4.3 million in 2000. An estimated 33 percent of this population is under the age of 18, compared with 26 percent of the total U.S. population. American Indians reside primarily in the Western part of the United States: 48 percent, compared with 22 percent of the total U.S. population. Currently, more than a third of American Indians live on reservations or in other American Indian Areas, with the remainder living in other communities. American Indians tend to be more rural, geographically isolated, and younger than the U.S. population as a whole.

Educational forces: American Indian college enrollment more than doubled, from 76,100 in 1976 to 165,900 in 2002. An important reason for that growth was the advent of the Tribal College and University movement, which began in the late 1960s and has grown at an impressive rate over a nearly 40 year period. However, American Indians continue to have much lower educational attainment rates than persons from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Almost 28 percent of American Indians age 25 and over in 2004 had not graduated from high school, compared with the national average of 15 percent. Further, only 42 percent of American Indians pursued any form of higher education and 13 percent attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 53 percent and 28 percent nationally.

In addition, more than a third of all American Indian students are 30 years or older, which puts them at risk for dropping out prior to earning a degree. Most (65 percent) are financially independent, compared to a national average of 50 percent. At TCUs, entering students have family incomes that average \$13,998, or 27 percent below the poverty threshold.

Despite the significant obstacles that confront American Indians, we know that investing in higher education results in widespread, dramatic benefits to both individuals and the nation as a whole, including higher rates of employment, less reliance on public assistance, increased levels of health, and a greater sense of civic responsibility. Figure 1 details some of the many benefits that result from such investments. For example, American Indians with a bachelor's degree or higher earn almost four times as much as those who did not graduate from high school, and more than twice as much as those who hold a high school diploma. Further, the more education that is attained, the less likely it is for individuals to rely on public assistance programs. Participation in Federal welfare programs is three times higher for those with a high school degree compared to individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher.

A number of social benefits also correlate with postsecondary education attainment. For example, 88 percent of American Indians with a bachelor’s degree or higher said they were in “excellent, very good, or good” health, compared with 73 percent of those without a high school diploma. Only about a third of American Indians who did not graduate from high school voted in the November 2004 presidential election, compared with over half of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Figure 1: Benefits resulting from higher education in general and from TCUs on reservations

	Private	Public	Particular to Reservations
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Salaries and Benefits • Employment • Higher Savings Levels • Improved Working Conditions • Personal/Professional Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased Tax Revenues • Greater Productivity • Increased Consumption • Increased Workforce Flexibility • Decreased Reliance on Government Financial Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce and Skills Development • Greater Opportunities for Leadership and Small Businesses • Economic Growth and Development • Employment for Graduates on Reservations • Agriculture and Land Development
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved Health/Life Expectancy • Improved Quality of Life for Offspring • Better Consumer Decision Making • Increased Personal Status • More Hobbies and Leisure Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced Crime Rates • Increased Charitable Giving/Community Service • Increased Quality of Civic Life • Social Cohesion/Appreciation of Diversity • Improved Ability to Adapt and Use Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigation of Social Problems • Centers for Preservation of Culture, Language and Traditions • Provision of Further Educational Opportunities • Technology Transfer • Community Programs

TCUs and other nearby colleges contribute to the economic development of reservations. Despite persistent unemployment in reservation communities, graduates from TCUs are employed at encouraging levels—for example, in one survey, 60 percent of alumni were employed outside the home, in the military, or self-employed. TCUs also play an important role in workforce and skills development, and they emphasize areas that are of particular importance to the development of reservation communities, such as health services, primary and secondary education, and rural farm and business development.

Students at TCUs, as well as the colleges themselves, contribute to the social health of reservation communities. The goals and activities of the colleges and their students translate into direct benefits to communities, such as the provision of social services, the preservation of language and tradition, and the encouragement of educational opportunities. TCUs offer a variety of social services for students and community members, such as family life and parenting courses and domestic and community violence prevention programs. In addition, the very presence of TCUs and college graduates on reservations encourages postsecondary educational attainment in these communities. About one-half of TCU graduates continue their education, and of those, over 86 percent pursue a bachelor’s degree.

Thus, investment in Native American higher education through TCUs and other postsecondary institutions is not just a nice thing to do for American Indians. It is a necessary step that is required to allow TCUs to serve the growing numbers of students who will contribute in significant ways to their communities and to our nation.

I therefore urge the Committee to focus on the following key Federal policy priorities that will greatly improve the postsecondary educational prospects of American Indians.

Recommendations

Increase funding for the operating expenses of Tribal Colleges and Universities and increase the level authorized under the Tribally Controlled College or University Assistance Act of 1978 (TCCUAA).

TCUs are in a unique funding situation. States have no obligation to provide funding for TCUs because of their location on Federal trust territory. At the same time, the Federal trust territory status prevents the levying of local property taxes, which are often used to support community colleges elsewhere in the United States. Thus, the main source of funding for the TCUs is the U.S. government. This puts TCUs in a unique category of institutions that includes only the U.S. military academies, Howard University, and Gallaudet University. According to treaty obligations and the trust responsibility between the sovereign Indian tribes and nations and the United States, the Federal government is bound to provide funding for American Indian tribes for a variety of programs, including higher education.

The TCCUAA currently allocates funding to 24 of the TCUs through a formula based on the number of Indian students enrolled (called the Indian Student Count or ISC). No funds are distributed for non-Indian students, who make up 20 percent of total enrollments at these schools. In 2006, the total funding per American Indian student provided under TCCUAA was \$5,001. Appropriations have never reached the authorized level of \$6,000 per student. Despite increases in total appropriations, funding per Indian student has increased only slightly since 1981 (by only \$1,616 over a 26 year period) and, in fact, has decreased by almost 30 percent when inflation is considered. Future funding increases should be tied to inflation to ensure that support for students at TCUs does not decline and therefore negatively impact the ability of the colleges to effectively serve American Indian students.

Improve the capacity of TCUs to serve students by increasing support for facilities and critical infrastructure needs.

In 1994, 29 TCUs were awarded land-grant status in Federal legislation. As land-grant institutions, these TCUs have the right to receive resources that can be invested in additional faculty or equipment to conduct agricultural research, either independently or in collaboration with four-year institutions. The 1996 White House Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities aims to more fully integrate the colleges into Federal programs and reaffirms their important role in reservation development by directing all Federal departments and agencies to increase their financial support to the colleges. However, only modest sums that have been invested in TCUs have been allocated for facilities construction and improvement. While many mainstream colleges and universities have benefited enormously from infrastructure support from the Federal government, most that have received such support were created prior to the

establishment of the first TCUs. Congress can correct this inequity by establishing a facilities and infrastructure equity plan for TCUs that provides a level of support that is comparable on a per-student basis to the sums available to the other land-grant institutions.

Enhance the development of TCUs to better serve students through increased support under Title III of the Higher Education Act.

Part A, Section 316 of the Higher Education Act provides vital services to the growing number of TCUs and the students they serve. These funds are used to support basic enhancements to curriculum, faculty development, and some infrastructure costs. Inexplicably, the President's 2008 Budget proposed slashing funds for TCUs under Title III by more than 20 percent—an unprecedented cut. Title III represents an important opportunity for TCUs to assist in their academic development. This funding is similar in scope to funds made available to other institutions with low average revenues, including many mainstream two- and four-year colleges as well as Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Only funding for TCUs was cut under Title III in the President's Budget (funding for other developing institutions was level funded and also disappointing). I urge the Committee to focus on two key issues to aid in institutional development at TCUs under Title III. First, make funding for TCUs under Section 316 formula-based so that institutions do not have to go through the complex and time-consuming task of developing detailed competitive proposals. All TCUs have major development needs and should be recognized with support based on their FTE enrollments. Second, increase the authorization level for Section 316 funds to at least \$40 million and use the Committee's leverage with appropriators to fund this section at its authorized level.

These and other strategies targeted at the unique circumstances of Tribal Colleges and Universities must be combined with broader Federal policies to assist low income, educationally disadvantaged students. Increasing support for Pell Grants, the Federal TRIO programs, and programs that are aimed at building the high-order workforce skills of our nation (such as the Minority Science and Engineering Improvement Program) is essential to combat the challenges of limited college access and success for our nation's growing emerging majority populations.

Low college access and degree achievement rates have been a persistent problem for American Indians, the result of decades of neglect, marginalization, and discrimination. As one of the main drivers of economic and social development for all American Indian communities, Tribal Colleges and Universities are critical to the future success of these communities. I urge you to continue the Committee's bipartisan history of support for TCUs and act without delay to make these investments that are so critical to the future prosperity and security of American Indian communities. In so doing, our nation will be strengthened and sustained for many generations to come.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before the Committee on this important issue.