



STATEMENT OF
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HEARING ON *INDIAN EDUCATION*
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
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Representative Herseth Sandlin, other distinguished members of the Committee, and honored guests, on behalf of my institution, Sitting Bull College and the 35 other tribally-chartered colleges and universities that collectively are the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), thank you for inviting me to testify on the challenges and successes of the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) in their efforts to ensure that all Americans, including the First Americans, have access to high quality higher education and career opportunities.

My name is Laurel Vermillion; I am a member of the Hunkpapa Lakota people of the Standing Rock Reservation. The Standing Rock Reservation is located in both North and South Dakota. In 1973, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe established our college with a goal of determining a lasting tradition of advanced training and higher education, for a good path into the future for our people. I am proud to say that I truly am a product of this tradition. As a student, I graduated from Sitting Bull College, although then it was known as Standing Rock Community College, then having earned advanced degrees, in the Spring of 2005 I became its president. I have extensive experience in the field of education having served 14 years as an elementary school teacher for the Standing Rock Elementary School in Fort Yates, North Dakota and then as principal of the Marty Indian School, in Marty South Dakota, before returning to Sitting Bull College.

Today, I will speak briefly on the Tribal College Movement; TCU challenges and successes; and how Congress and the federal agencies can help us to expand efforts in serving Indian people. I ask that my written statement be included in the Hearing Record.

BACKGROUND: THE TRIBAL COLLEGE MOVEMENT

Tribal Colleges and Universities struggle daily as the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country. Yet, we have achieved tremendous successes from our work to build self esteem and to change the life and future of our students. We have achieved this through a nurturing educational environment that is culturally-based and relevant to our students. Our goal is to continue to build stronger and more prosperous Tribal nations through the restoration of our languages, 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.

American Indian tribally chartered colleges and universities are young, geographically isolated, poor, and almost unknown to mainstream America. Our institutions are also extraordinarily effective catalysts for revitalization and change -- so much so that we have been called "higher education's best kept secret." We would like to share this secret with others and we are grateful for opportunities such as this to do so.

Located in some of the most rural and impoverished regions of this country, TCUs are planting resilient seeds of hope for the future; nurturing and sustaining languages, cultures, and traditions; and helping to build stronger tribal economies and governments. Yet, I suspect the oldest Tribal College is younger than many of the people in this room. Our oldest institution, Diné College on the Navajo Nation, just celebrated its fortieth anniversary last year.

The Tribal College philosophy is simple: to succeed, American Indian higher education must be locally and culturally-based, holistic, and supportive. The education system must address the whole person: mind, body, spirit, and family. Today, the main campuses of the nation's 36 tribal colleges are located in 14 states throughout the Southwest, the Great Plains and Great Lakes, and the upper Northwest, as well as Alaska and Oklahoma, and through distance education programs, our colleges are reaching all of Indian Country.

Sitting Bull College, like all TCUs, is first and foremost an academic institution, but because of the number of challenges facing Indian Country – high unemployment, poorly developed economies, significant health issues, and the lack of stable community infrastructures -- our institutions are called upon to do much more than provide higher education services. TCUs, such as Sitting Bull College, often run entrepreneurial and business development centers. Many TCUs are the primary GED and Adult Basic Education provider on their reservations, and all TCUs provide a variety of evening, weekend training and paraprofessional programs for tribal employees, BIA and IHS staff, K-12 schools, tribal courts and justice system staff, and many others. TCUs operate day care centers, health promotion and nutrition programs, community gardens, and often, the community library and tribal museum or archives. .

For example, at Sitting Bull College we work in partnership with the K-12 schools on the reservation. This partnership is called the Standing Rock Education Consortium. Through this partnership, a Professional Development Day has been planned for all K-12 schools as well as Head Start. As a consortium, the school administrators and well as Head Start and SBC, meet monthly to strategically do goal setting for our educational programs and departments. SBC also provides incubator spaces for start-up businesses on Standing Rock. These rental spaces are housed in our Entrepreneurial Center with immediate access to the Tribal Business Information Center (TBIC), which provides consultation and assistance for new businesses.

In terms of agriculture and land based programs, as the 1994 land grant institutions, TCUs are working diligently to sustain our lands and waters. With 75 percent or more of all tribal land being forested or agriculture based, sustaining our environment is of critical importance to our people. Several TCUs are involved in climate change research and education projects, funded by NSF and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. This semester, 15 TCUs launched a distributed, online Introduction to Climate Change course, developed collaboratively from a Native perspective through funding awarded to AIHEC by NSF.

Perhaps most important, Tribal Colleges are actively and aggressively working to preserve and sustain their own tribal languages and cultures. All TCUs offer Native language courses. In some cases, the tribal language would have been completely lost if not for the Tribal College. SBC is partnering with the K-12 schools on Standing Rock in providing a Lakota Language revitalization summer camp for Lakota language teachers. We have just finished our fourth summer for offering this event. Since this project began, the Standing Rock Higher Education department has been tracking pre and post test student scores at the participating schools and the scores are showing a huge increase in students' learning and speaking of the Lakota language.

Many TCUs offer unique associate and bachelor degree programs, as well as in-service training, in elementary education. At the TCUs, teacher education programs follow cultural protocols and stress the use of Native language in everyday instruction. Well over 90 percent of teachers who graduate from a TCU teacher education program begin teaching on the reservation shortly after graduation, providing positive role models to our Indian children.

Finally, Tribal Colleges are highly accountable institutions, always striving to be more accountable to our funders, our students, and our communities. Several years ago, AIHEC launched an ambitious and landmark effort called "AIHEC-AIMS," which is a comprehensive data collection system for TCUs, created by tribal college faculty and presidents, community members, funders, students, and accrediting agencies, aimed at improving our ability to measure and report our successes and challenges to our key stakeholders. Today, each Tribal College reports annually on a comprehensive set of 116 qualitative and quantitative indicators allowing us, for the first time, to share the true story of our success with funders, and most important, with our communities.

Tribal Colleges have advanced American Indian higher education significantly since we first began four decades ago, but many challenges remain. Tribal colleges are poor institutions with limited revenue sources to tap.

First, while Tribal Colleges are public institutions they are not state institutions, and consequently, we receive little or no state funding. In fact, very few states provide support for the non-Indian students attending TCUs, which account for about 21 percent of all TCU students. However, if these students attended a state institution, the state would be required to provide the institution with operational support for them.

Second, the tribal governments that have chartered Tribal Colleges are not among the handful of wealthy gaming tribes located near major urban areas. Rather, they are some of the poorest governments in the nation. In fact, three of the ten poorest counties in America are home to Tribal Colleges.

Finally, the federal government, despite its trust responsibility and treaty obligations, has never fully-funded our primary institutional operations source, the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act. Today, the Act is appropriated at about \$5,784 per full-time Indian student, which is a fraction of the level that most states fund their institutions.

To continue to thrive and expand as community based educational institutions, Tribal Colleges must stabilize, sustain, and increase our basic operational funding. Through tools such as AIHEC-AIMS, we hope to better educate the public, lawmakers, and other federal officials about the cost effective

success of our institutions. Through opportunities such as this, we hope to share with Congress and others how we are helping to meet the challenges facing our tribal nations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Stable and Adequate Institutional Operations Funding: Full funding of the TCUs' institutional operating grants administered by the Department of the Interior – Bureau of Indian Education - needs to be attained by FY 2012.

Sovereignty and Equal Access to Federal Funding: Tribal college and universities need to be widely recognized as accredited public Institutions of higher education. A separate set-aside needs to be established in all federal programs and initiatives that are distributed through the various states, which otherwise will exclude tribal colleges from participation.

Support for the “Tribal Health Promotion and Tribal Colleges and Universities Advancement Act – or The PATH”: The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs has reported S. 633, “Tribal Health Promotion and Tribal Colleges and Universities Advancement Act” , which includes a provision authorizing a TCU Language Vitalization program in the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. This program would provide for competitive grants to allow TCUs to carry out activities critical to the preservation and vitalization of Native American languages. In the near future, a House companion bill is expected to be introduced and we ask that the members of this committee become cosponsors and advocates for this legislation.

TEACHER PREPARATION

The Professional Development for Teachers and Educational Professionals Grant Program will be part of the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The program is administered through the US Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education – Office of Indian Education.

The program is designed to prepare and train American Indians to serve as teachers and school administrators. Professional development grants are awarded to: provide training to qualified American Indians to become teachers, administrators, teacher aides, social workers, and ancillary education personnel; improve the skills of those qualified American Indians who already serve in these capacities; and to increase the number of qualified individuals in professions that serve American Indians. Individuals trained under this program must perform work related to their training and that benefits Indian people or repay the assistance received.

Tribal Colleges and Universities are ideally suited and located to prepare a corps of American Indian teachers for reasons such as:

- **Student focused:** It is the mission of every TCU to serve its people and to honor and protect its heritage. The student, family, and community come first. If a mainstream university with which a Tribal College has partnered requires the tribal student to travel away from home for courses or

student teaching, the TCU typically provides the student with a modest financial stipend or family support. Nearly all the tribal colleges operate day care centers for children of students and most have developed “pipeline partnerships” and linkages with local elementary and secondary schools to help encourage young people to pursue college and become teachers.

- **Culturally Centered:** The Tribal Colleges teach their students in compliance with national and state accreditation requirements and in accordance with traditional values and culture. The knowledge of tribal culture and heritage, which Native American faculty possess, together with use and teaching of the native language help students succeed in a challenging postsecondary environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- TCUs should be the primary training sites for all educators who work with Native learners. We are challenged to compete for grants that are historically being awarded to mainstream institutions while we are the most direct, best conduits to education in our tribal communities. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) should include a Tribal Teacher Preparation initiative for TCUs that focuses on educators who are working at Indian schools and educators who are, or are interested in, working at American Indian schools. This TCU program would replicate already successful strategies which education many reservation based teachers and administrators since the inception of Tribal College Movement over 40 years ago.
- As the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act unfolds the critical need for adult basic education funding for tribal communities must be addressed. At Sitting Bull College would like to offer adult basic education classes in all of our communities on Standing Rock. Due to the lack of funding for this, this fall we are only able to offer classes in four of the eight communities.

TRIBAL COLLEGE STEM PROGRAMS:

Although Tribal Colleges and Universities have made unprecedented strides in addressing the higher education needs of American Indians, much work and many challenges remain.

Of all groups in the U.S., American Indian students have the highest high school drop-out rates in the country: less than half of all American Indian high school students actually graduate. If these students eventually do pursue higher education, it is most often through the tribal colleges, which like other community colleges are open-admission institutions.

On average, more than 75 percent of all TCU students must take at least one developmental course, most often pre-college mathematics.

TCUs have developed strong partnerships with their K-12 feeder schools. We are working, often through STEM programs, particularly the NSF-TCU programs, to engage young students – early on and consistently – in community and culturally relevant science and math programs. Sitting Bull College offers a “Sunday Academy” opportunity to area high school students. This Academy provides a hands-on approach to learning science. The high school students are bused to SBC once a month to

work in the science labs on lesson plans which were developed by SBC science faculty and the area high school science teachers.

However, most of TCU STEM programs operate on “soft” – competitive – funding.

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2001, NSF-TCUP made available essential capacity building assistance and resources to TCUs. Before the NSF-TCU Program, most tribal colleges were unable to secure the resources needed to build high quality STEM programs. We simply were not able to compete successfully in STEM programs sponsored by NSF and other federal agencies.

In fact, in less than 10 years, NSF-TCUP has become the primary federal program for building STEM capacity at tribal colleges.

The program can be credited with many success stories:

- More American Indians are entering STEM education and more are entering STEM professions: At Sitting Bull College, Environmental Science is one of our most popular programs.
- STEM faculty is becoming more effective and engaged. At Sitting Bull College, we currently have four PhD faculty members in STEM.
- Students are becoming involved in cutting-edge and community-relevant research in significantly greater numbers.
- Partnerships between TCUs and major research institutions are emerging as our capacity grows, in areas of education and research, including pre-engineering.

Examples of successful NSF-TCU funded STEM programs at some of the TCUs that serve SD include:

Sitting Bull College, Fort Yates, North Dakota

- Established BS programs in Environmental Science and Secondary Science Education
- Enhanced student recruitment and retention efforts created numerous student research opportunities
- Integrated traditional knowledge in STEM instruction

Outcomes

- 20 student research projects presented at scientific conferences; prior to NSF-TCUP funding, no presentations had been given by students
- Dramatic increase in average STEM enrollment: *tenfold* increase since 2004 (from 3 students to an average of 30 students)

Sisseton Wahpeton College, Agency Village (Sisseton), South Dakota

- Established a Computer Science and Technology degree program
- A BS degree program in Information Technology is being submitted for accreditation
- Partnering with area K-12s on a mathematics literacy program
- Providing professional development opportunities for STEM faculty and staff

Outcomes

- Establishing a local resource pool of trained computing professionals where there had been none before
- Reducing number of high school graduates requiring remedial math courses
- Providing a strong general science curriculum that is preparing students to pursue STEM fields of study

Oglala Lakota College, Kyle, South Dakota

- Established high quality online STEM courses
- Acquired state of the art science labs
- Providing K-12 STEM teacher professional development
- Established research collaborations with South Dakota universities

Outcomes

- Established a tribal STEM workforce in environmental science with graduates working in tribal agencies responsible for land and resource management, water quality, among others
- Improved quality of STEM instruction in area K-12 schools
- Conducted locally relevant environmental research

Despite the success of the NSF-TCU program and its demonstrated impact on American Indian STEM participation, we believe that the program must have increased support from Congress and the Administration.

Over the past several years, as NSF and other science agencies' broadening participation requirements have grown in importance, the number of proposals from mainstream institutions seeking to include TCUs -- without our knowledge or only after the proposal is completely developed -- has increased dramatically. In fact, the situation became so frustrating that in early 2008, the AIHEC Board of Directors, on which the presidents of all accredited TCUs sit, approved a motion urging federal agencies to adopt a policy that any proposal for federal funds, which directly or indirectly names Tribal College(s) or AIHEC in the proposal, but is not submitted by a Tribal College or University or AIHEC, must include documentation confirming that Tribal College administration or AIHEC, as relevant, is fully informed of and supports the college's role in the proposed project. The goal of this motion is to ensure that fewer proposals are funded that include TCUs without our knowledge or agreement and therefore fail to address the TCU priorities in a manner that is likely to prove successful, or whose project budget fails to include the resources necessary for the TCUs to accomplish stated goals.

Another problem facing TCUs is the size and remoteness of our rural institutions. These factors are often viewed negatively when panelists review TCU grant proposals and when we begin potential partnership negotiations with faculty members from larger universities. "How many students are they going to be able to affect?" is a common question, one TCU faculty reports. His response to this question is, "How many Native American students are in your science programs?" The answer is typically 1-3 students, based on self-reporting. The faculty member's institution, Sitting Bull College in Fort Yates, North Dakota, enrolls nearly 30 American Indian students in the Environmental Science program alone. Without NSF-TCUP, these students would not have been reached.

We are often told that TCU proposals are eliminated from competition by panelists and program officers who do not understand the unique situations of TCUs and our students. We are trying to build

a community, not just a single program. Many of our efforts focus on developing basic math, science, and writing skills, along with showing students that opportunities they never dreamed of are possible, but only to the extent that we can be successful in securing funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain Separate Tribal College Programs from other MSI programs:

First, we urge you to sustain and strengthen the existing Tribal College STEM and Construction programs, including NSF-TCUP; HUD TCUP (construction); TCU Rural Development Community (construction) as separate programs designed to meet the unique needs of our students.

Length and Focus of Tribal College Science Awards: Given the limited pool of TCU applicants -- 33 accredited TCUs -- and the need to build STEM programs "from the ground up" we recommend that:

- Awards made under NSF and possibly other federal science agencies should be for a period of 10 years, or alternatively, five years, with ongoing support for an additional five years, provided the programs meet appropriate agency criteria for satisfactory progress. This is consistent with other successful NSF capacity building programs.
- Federal agency program staff should not have the authority to "cut the pie into even smaller and smaller pieces" by expanding or prioritizing purposes within the established TCU program into new areas. Tribal colleges should be allowed to design projects that meet our communities' needs, so long as they are consistent with the overall goals of the agency's program.
- **Tribal College Consultation on Proposed Grant Proposals:** We request assistance in enforcing and measuring compliance with a requirement that any collaborative proposal involving Tribal Colleges must include letters of support and commitment from the TCUs or AIHEC. This will help stop ongoing abuses by mainstream institutions to "game the broadening participation" requirement.

Once again, thank you for this opportunity to share our history, our successes, and our needs with you today. We look forward to working with you to help bring equality in higher education and economic opportunity to Indian Country through the nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities.