



**Statement of Ahniwake Rose, Incoming President & CEO**

**American Indian Higher Education Consortium**

**Prepared for the U.S. House Of Representatives Interior Appropriations Subcommittee**

**Public Witness Days on American Indian and Alaska Native Programs**

**May 8, 2024**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Committee. My name is Ahniwake Rose, and I'm the incoming President of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Department of Interior's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget.

As a citizen of the Cherokee and Muscogee Creek Nations and a resident of Oklahoma, I want to congratulate Chairman Cole on his election to be chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

The work you do is critically important to Indian Country and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). On behalf of AIHEC and the Tribal Colleges, I thank the subcommittee for preserving key funding for the Tribal colleges last year during the fiscal year 2024 Appropriations process. The initial funding levels discussed would have forced TCUs to scale back vital programs and services students rely on to complete their programs. Funding reductions threaten TCU accreditation status, further stretch overtaxed faculty and staff—already wearing multiple hats—or eliminate faculty and staff positions in areas of the country with some of the highest unemployment rates.

**TREATIES AND TRUST**

I'm here today to remind you of your sacred trust responsibility and to share concrete examples of how investments by this subcommittee impact American Indian and Alaska Native students, Tribal colleges, and Indian Country.

Years before Columbus arrived, an estimated 10 million people lived on this land, speaking hundreds of languages and living in diverse and vibrant cultures shaped by millennia of history and tradition. Beginning in 1785, Tribal Nations relinquished their sacred lands—over one billion acres—in exchange for treaty promises. It is from these treaties that the federal trust responsibility grows. Authorized by the U.S. Constitution and repeatedly re-affirmed, the trust responsibility establishes a clear relationship between Tribes and the federal government, which applies to all branches of the government.

Many of the treaties included a trust responsibility to provide education.

To us, education meant equality, opportunity, and hope for our children and grandchildren as Tribal people within the context of our Tribal identity. But that is not what happened. Education was used as a weapon to eliminate our language, crush our culture, and assimilate our spirits.

**TRIBAL COLLEGES EMERGE**



Yet our spirit remained resilient. In the 1960s, Tribal leaders and educators pushed for self-determination and Tribal sovereignty and, with that, greater control over educational systems to ensure that they reflected their unique cultural values, languages, and traditions.

In 1973, six Tribally controlled colleges established AIHEC to provide a support network as they worked to influence federal policies on American Indian higher education. We advocated for, and in 1978 successfully passed, the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act to provide federal support and assistance to 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. We recently welcomed one new member from California as an associate member as they seek accreditation. These institutions serve students from over 250 Federally Recognized Indian Tribes 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 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; 22 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.

### **BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS**

We appreciate the Department of Interior's effort to increase Tribal education programs by an estimated \$154.6 million (11 percent). We recognize that investing in our Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) K-12 schools is essential to reducing education and opportunity gaps for American Indian students, and we support the requests of our sister organization, the National Indian Education Association, for this important work.

We only wish that Tribal post-secondary education was included as part of those proposed increases by the Department of Interior.

Despite the invaluable contributions of TCUs and the federal trust responsibility, the Department of Interior's FY2025 budget proposes flat funding for most Tribal colleges. The federal government has never fully funded TCU institutional operations as authorized under the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act. This chronic underfunding undermines the mission and impact of TCUs. For example, at Northwest Indian College, 50 percent of faculty salaries come from grant applications, which require ongoing management and applications, diverting resources from the school's core mission. Significant cuts in funding would impact teaching and Tribal college student success.

Moreover, we are disappointed that the Department of Interior the guidance of this subcommittee on provisions relating to contract support costs for the Tribal colleges. In fiscal years 2020- 2022, AIHEC inserted report language directing the BIE to provide support costs for Tribal colleges in their annual budget request. Despite the directive, the Department of Interior has failed to do so.



We look to this subcommittee to address these needs and uphold the federal government's trust responsibility to provide education for tribal college students.

At the Department of Interior, we request **\$168.9 million for Post-Secondary Programs** within the Operation of Indian Education Programs and an **additional \$35 million to address Tribal College Facilities Improvement and Repair**.

### ***Post-Secondary Programs***

AIHEC requests \$168,982,000 under Post Secondary Programs, forward funded, to support the Nation's Tribal College and University System. This funding is essential to ensure the continued success and impact of TCUs in advancing educational equity, excellence, and economic opportunity for Native Americans.

For the colleges authorized by the Tribal College Act, we request a total of \$110 million. These funds are for institutional operations under Title I (\$92.2 million) and Title II (\$17 million), along with TCU Endowments (\$109,000) and technical assistance (\$701,000) of the TCU Act. This funding would provide the Congressionally authorized amount of \$10,907\*/Indian student for the first time since the enactment of the TCU Act more than 40 years ago (\*\$8,000 per Indian student adjusted for inflation). This request also provides an additional \$100,000 for needed technical assistance, which has been level-funded for 15 years despite growing numbers of developing TCUs and increased demands for accountability and student success.

For Tribal career and technical institutions authorized under Title V of the TCU Act, we request \$15 million. For the Institute of American Indian Arts, we request \$13.9 million and for BIE's two postsecondary institutions (Haskell Indian Nations University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute), we request \$30 million.

TCUs are resilient, resourceful, and proud to lead the nation in many areas, including preparing an American Indian and Alaska Native workforce of nurses, land managers, and teachers for Tribal-serving schools. For example, half of all American Indian or Alaska Native special education teachers in Montana are graduates of Salish Kootenai College. There are eight Tribal colleges—two in Montana and two in Minnesota—that have early education partnerships to enhance early childhood development initiatives, build the American Indian/Alaska Native educator pipeline, promote cultural continuity, and provide vital resources and support to families within Indigenous communities, fostering a strong foundation for future generations.

TCUs prepare professionals in high-demand fields, including agriculture and natural resources management, information technology, and building trades. By teaching the job skills most in demand on our reservations, TCUs are laying a foundation for Tribal economic growth, which is the *only* way to move Tribes and Tribal citizens to self-sufficiency.

Tribal Colleges and Universities continually seek to instill a sense of hope and identity within American Indian and Alaska Native youth, who will one day lead Tribal Nations. Unacceptably, the high school dropout rate for Native students remains around 50 percent. TCUs work with local schools to create a bridge for Tribal students as early as elementary school, encouraging them to stay focused on achievable goals, finish high school, and go on to the local TCU. TCUs



offer dual credit courses for high school students, provide math teachers for local high schools to improve course delivery, and host weekend academies, after-school programs, and summer camps for middle and high school students.

At the other end of the spectrum, TCUs offer GED/HiSET training and testing and have 2+2 partnerships to bridge programs with regional universities. All are solid steps to bolster future prospects for American Indian and Alaska Native youth and break the cycle of generational poverty. For these critical national and tribal objectives, AIHEC is requesting \$168,982,000 under Post Secondary Programs, forward funded, to support the Nation's Tribal College and University System.

### ***Education Construction***

For TCUs to realize their goals of strengthening Tribal nations with a modern workforce, TCUs must have the facilities and infrastructure capable of educating and training students in a safe environment. It simply cannot be done on the scale needed in classrooms with leaking roofs and substandard electrical wiring; outdated computer labs; students sleeping in cars and trucks because there are no dorms; and the slowest – yet most expensive – Internet access of any institution of higher education in the country.

The Senate Interior Appropriations report has requested that the BIE develop a consistent methodology for determining TCU operating and maintenance needs. The report's results will likely expand on the needs identified in a July 2021 AIHEC survey, which revealed many chronic unmet facilities and infrastructure needs, including a lack of student and faculty housing, inadequate classroom space, insufficient libraries, and outdated laboratories.

Leech Lake reservation, the largest in Minnesota, requires students to drive over an hour to get to class if they have reliable transportation. Due to the size and lack of housing on the reservation, Leech Lake Tribal College has identified the need for dormitories to address many of the challenges faced by its students. Little Big Horn College in Montana is renting or borrowing space for its career and technical programs in electrical, plumbing, HVAC, Welding, and Agriculture technology. Northwest Indian College, serving the communities of Bellingham, Washington and Lapwai, Idaho would like to build its cybersecurity program to address Tribal community and business needs. The college also has \$20 million in deferred maintenance costs and needs \$35 million to complete its campus master plans.

In the aggregate, AIHEC's survey calculated \$400 million (total) in deferred maintenance and rehabilitation costs and \$2.7 billion (total) to complete existing master plans. To begin to address TCU infrastructure needs, AIHEC requests \$35 million be allocated in FY25.

### **CONCLUSION**

AIHEC appreciates the committee's continued commitment and support to Tribal education. Through this process, you have the opportunity to ensure that post-secondary education is equitably funded. I urge this committee to prioritize the funding needs of TCUs in the FY25 budget, recognizing the critical role they play in fulfilling the federal government's trust responsibility to Tribal Nations and advancing the educational and economic well-being of Native communities. Thank you.