

TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AGENDA FOR 2020 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

OCTOBER 2020

ABOUT TRIBAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: In a bold expression of sovereignty, American Indian tribal governments began chartering their own institutions of higher education – Tribal Colleges – in the late 1960s. Today, 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) operate more than 75 campus sites across 16 states. TCU geographic boundaries encompass 80 percent of American Indian reservations and federal Indian trust lands. American Indian and Alaska Native TCU students represent well over half of the 574 federally recognized tribes, hailing from more than 30 states, and 84 percent receive federal financial aid. TCUs serve over 160,000 American Indians, Alaska Natives, and other rural residents each year through a wide variety of academic and community-based programs. Nurtured by and in turn nurturing the land, languages, cultures, and the distinct peoples who created them, TCUs are among the most dynamic components of the American higher education system.

The first Tribal College, like all that followed, was established for two reasons: the near complete failure of the U.S. higher education system to address the needs of – or even include – American Indians; and the need to preserve our culture, our language, our lands, our sovereignty – our past and our future. The guiding vision of the Tribal College Movement is an education system founded on our ways of knowing, traditional knowledge, and spirituality.

TCU IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- 1. Re-establish a Separate Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities:** The first White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities was established in 1996, opening the door to new and expanded federal opportunities for TCUs. However, in recent years the initiative has faltered. To restore effectiveness, we look to the incoming Administration to restore the *separate* Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities on par with the 1996 order and the existing executive order on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Like HBCUs, TCUs face significant inequities in participation in federal programs, particularly grants, contracts, and research efforts. There has been no administration-wide report on federal support for TCUs in more than 10 years.
- 2. Full Operations funding for *all* Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs):** An aggressive plan is needed for achieving and sustaining FULL and equitable funding of TCU operations according to the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act of 1978 (TCCUAA). Most TCUs received \$7,356 per Indian student for academic year 2019-2020, still below the authorized level of \$8,000 per student. The only other minority serving institution to receive its operating support from the federal government, Howard University (which receives federal operating support because it is on land that is formerly federal trust land) receives \$30,000 per student from the Department of Education each year. The standard of respect for education and recognition of obligation should be the same across the administration, whether the funding agency is the Department of Education or the Department of the Interior.
- 3. Address TCU Facilities Needs—Commit Resources to the TCCUAA Facilities Fund:** Currently, strained TCU budgets must be stretched to address ongoing safety and health hazards such as leaking roofs, asbestos insulation, exposed and substandard wiring, crumbling foundations, and outdated

computer labs. One TCU needs-assessment revealed a need of \$332.5 million in Deferred Maintenance and Rehabilitation costs and \$558 million to complete existing Tribal College Master Plans. Originally authorized over 40 years ago by the TCCUAA, the federal government has yet to provide separate funding for TCU construction, maintenance, and renovation.

4. **Establish a TCU Broadband/Technology Fund within USDA-Rural Utilities Service Program:** To address a key part of the digital divide/homework gap and support long-term IT capacity building in Indian Country, a permanent TCU Fund should be established under the USDA-Rural Utilities Service. A \$24 million set-aside for TCUs, which are the 1994 Land-grant institutions, could be established using existing funds and therefore would be at no additional cost. (Note: Matching requirements should be waived for TCUs.)

If TCUs had adequate funding currently for IT infrastructure support, they would have already put in place many of the community-based mobile hot spots needed to address the “homework gap” in Indian Country. For TCUs that do have broadband access, Internet capacity is inadequate. **Nearly one-third of all TCUs (ten) have Internet speeds at 100 Mbps or less – five are below 50 Mbps.** This compares to national averages of 513 Mbps for 2-year institutions and 3.5 Gbps for 4-year institutions. It is important to recognize that any program to provide tax credits to existing Internet Service Providers for providing free internet access to students provides little or no help in Indian Country, because the IT infrastructure does not exist. According to the 2016 FCC Broadband Progress Report, 68 percent of people living on rural Tribal lands lack access to fixed broadband.

Establishing specific funds for Land-grant institutions is not unusual. In the last reauthorization of the Farm Bill, Congress established a permanent \$40 million scholarship fund for 1890 Land-grant institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Additionally, Congress has established and annually funds a modest TCU communities facilities construction program within the USDA-Rural Development Community Facilities program.

5. **Establish parity of funding for 1994 Land-Grant Institutions (TCUs) as members of the federal land-grant system.** The first Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and their respective TCUs were not granted land-grant status until 1994, roughly 26 years after the first tribal college was established. Today, 26 years later, funding for the five 1994 land-grant programs remains alarmingly inadequate to address the growing agricultural needs and opportunities in Indian Country. Equity in land-grant funding is essential to increasing the capacity of 1994 land-grant institutions to conduct critical culturally responsive research that could be the key to addressing some of the most critical issues facing Indian Country.
6. **Create TCU-specific Programs within the U.S. Department of Education:**
 - **Student Support Services Program** to strengthen the capacity of TCUs to provide high-quality, culturally integrated programs, address changing student demographics, and ensure the ongoing engagement of students;
 - **Native Language Vitalization and Training Program** to promote and expand the preservation, revitalization, relevancy, and use of endangered American Indian and Alaska Native languages;
 - **Strengthen Professional and Graduate Opportunities Program** to increase graduate degree attainment in high-demand fields vital to tribal nation building, economic development in rural American, and in fields critical to addressing health and other challenges facing Indian Country.

7. Double the Maximum Pell Grant Award

The federal Pell Grant program is the primary form of financial assistance for many American Indian and Alaska Native students. In fact, 84 percent of TCU students rely on need-based Pell Grants to assist in covering the cost of obtaining a postsecondary degree. However today, for American Indian and Alaska Native students and low-income families, the Pell Grant covers only around 30 percent of the average costs of tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year colleges, which is far below the 79 percent it covered over 40 years ago. Doubling the maximum Pell Grant award would boost college enrollment, reduce drop-out rates, and improve student outcomes for students who rely on the program to attain a postsecondary degree.

- 8. Recognize the uniqueness of TCUs and ensure voluntary participation in the Federal student loan program at institutional level.** TCUs are the most affordable institutions in higher education, and only two TCUs currently participate in federal student loan programs. Some TCUs are beginning to explore the federal student loan programs, as more are offering an increasing number of bachelor's and master's degrees. However, TCUs work hard to keep tuition low to allow their students, especially those planning to seek advanced degrees, to graduate without debt. That goal, along with limited institutional resources to administer loan programs, has led the vast majority of TCUs to avoid administering federal student loans. Mandating loan program participation and tying institutional Title IV eligibility to loan performance metrics will unnecessarily impede American Indian, Alaska Native, and other low-income students from pursuing a higher education. TCUs need flexibility to create financial aid programs that meet the needs of their students and communities.

TCU FACTS & FIGURES

- **Breaking the cycle of generational poverty:** Tribal Colleges and Universities provide access to higher education for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and others living in some of the nation's most isolated and economically depressed areas. The median household income of a TCU student is \$23,203, 8 percent below the national poverty line (\$25,100), and 63 percent below the median household income nationwide (\$63,179).
- **Growing number of TCUs:** Since 1981, when TCUs first received federal operating funding, the number of tribal colleges has more than quadrupled and continues to grow; and the number of Indian students enrolled has risen over 300 percent. In the past 10 years, two more TCUs became eligible for funding under Title I of the TCCUAA, and up to four more colleges are expected to be added in the upcoming years.

Today, several tribes in California, Alaska, New York, New Mexico, Arizona, and Oklahoma are expressing interest in establishing their own tribal colleges. The next Administration must work with Congress to increase TCU funding, otherwise this growth will translate into decreased funding for all TCUs.