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**Forestry in Indian Country:**  
**Solving Federal Forestry's Rubik's Cube**



# Tribal Colleges and Universities: A Critical Link in Indian Education and Workforce Development

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**T**ribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) can act as mechanisms of cultural preservation by promoting higher education among Indian people and improving economic conditions of tribal communities. By integrating tribal culture and traditions with western science education, 37 TCUs<sup>1</sup> provide a variety of bachelors, associates degrees and certificates in the natural resource fields uniquely customized to reflect Native perspective. On average, 400 students (Native and non-Native) each year are enrolled in natural resources degrees at 23 TCUs.<sup>2</sup> Many TCUs, located in rural areas, serve communities that suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment<sup>3</sup> by providing a conduit for advanced education and jobs. Many native students enrolled at TCUs

have pursued non-traditional educational pathways. For example, the median age of a TCU student is approximately 30, predominately female, first generation, low income, with dependents.<sup>4</sup>

TCU natural resource programs are helping to provide tribes with a skilled workforce, knowledgeable in the unique obstacles, opportunities and successes of natural resource management on tribal lands. However, the ability of TCUs to create programs to educate the future workforce of foresters is being compromised by funding shortfalls. For example, Title III-A program funding for TCUs was cut by 11% in 2011 and 16% in 2012<sup>5</sup>. Many TCUs accommodate the special needs of their student populations by providing childcare services, flexible tutoring schedules, small and flexible classes, peer and faculty mentoring and scholarship opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, the critical link that TCUs provide in developing a strong tribal workforce may be gaining recognition and political support. In December of 2011 President Obama signed Executive Order 13592, which stated, "Federal agencies must help improve educational opportunities provided to all AI/AN students...attending postsecondary institutions including TCUs." In 2011 the Bureau of Indian Education and DOI, the agencies charged with oversight of operations at Haskell Indian Nation University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, entered into a Memorandum Of Understanding to (1) advance the capability of TCUs to attain educational excellence, so that TCU students can fully participate in the U.S. workforce, including in natural resource field and (2) promote enriching outdoor experiences, natural resources and technology career pathways among students attending TCUs. However, neither of the above schools currently have accredited forestry programs. Salish Kootenai College (SKC) operates the only baccalaureate program in forestry at an Indian college. SKC has developed culturally in-



Leech Lake Tribal College at Cass Lake, Minnesota offers several associates degrees including forestry, natural science, law enforcement and business management. College photo





Sitting Bull College at Fort Yates, North Dakota offers a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate degree programs. College photo

formed curriculum including a class that focuses entirely on tribal forest management. Currently there are approximately 100 Native students from over 20 tribes enrolled in natural resource degrees at the college. SKC has formed partnerships with the BIA Division of Forestry and Wildland Fire Management, the USFS Office of Tribal Relations, University of Washington and Montana State University, among others, to give the students a variety of experiences in research and land management.

TCUs that offer Associate degrees in natural resources are also working with agencies and universities to broaden the student experience. Stone Child College partnered with the Globe Program to give students field and lab research experience in climate change and soil science fields.<sup>7</sup> The National Center for Earth-surface Dynamics, Fond du Lac Resource tribal community college, Fond du Lac Resource Management and University of Minnesota Natural Resources Research Institute collaborated to identify best management practices to restore wild rice on regional lakes.<sup>8</sup> Little Big Horn College, with help from a USDA Tribal Colleges Education Equity Grant, the Oglala Lakota College and the National Science Foundation, has been able to provide students with ecological field and research experience related to cottonwood woodlands management.<sup>9</sup> More

*TCUs focus on advancing self confidence, self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and intellectual development, essential to the success of many non-conventional students.<sup>6</sup>*



Cheyenne Arapaho Tribal College is housed at Southwest Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, Oklahoma. College photo

recently in 2013, North Dakota State Legislature authorized workforce development grants to the state's five TCUs.<sup>10</sup> With these partnerships and others, TCUs have created an educational environment where intertribal forestry and other natural resource issues can be examined with numerous benefits to students, tribes and surrounding communities.

- 1 AIEHC, American Indian Higher Education Consortium. 2013 <http://www.aihec.org/> Accessed July 2013
- 2 IFMAT-III, An Assessment of Indian Forest and Forest Management in the United States, Vol. 2 Pg 134-136 2013
- 3 WHAIANE, Executive Order 13952. White House Initiative On American Indian and Alaska Native Education January 2011
- 4 His Horse is Thunder, D. 2012 Breaking through Tribal Colleges and Universities.
- 5 AIEHC American Indiana Higher Education Consortium. Statement of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Submitted to the US House of Representatives- Committee on Appropriations. 2013.
- 6 Guardia, J. and Evans, N. 2008 Student Development in Tribal Colleges and Universities NASPA Journal Vol 45, No.2
- 7 The Globe Program, 2011 <http://globe.gov/news/globe-stars/starsdetail/10157/2010-stone-child-triba> Accessed July 2013
- 8 National Center for Earth-Surface Dynamics 2013 <http://www.nced.umn.edu/content/research-experience-undergraduates> , Accessed July 2013
- 9 Kim, J and Crasco, L. Weaving Native Knowledge into STEM Teaching and Learning at Tribal Colleges and Universities 2008
- 10 Senate Bill 2218. AN ACT to provide workforce development grants to tribally controlled community colleges through the North Dakota department of commerce; and to provide an appropriation. 2013