



**Written Testimony of**

**Fort Lewis College**

**President**

**Dr. Dene Thomas**

**August 22, 2012**

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee**

**On Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions'**

**Field Hearing to**

**Help Fulfill the Federal Mandate to Provide Higher**

**Education Opportunities for Native Americans**



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Testimony of Fort Lewis College by Dr. Dene Thomas  
IN SUPPORT OF S.3504 and S.484, Native American Indian Education Act of 2012  
Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pension, Field Hearing  
August 22, 2012

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Dr. Dene Thomas, President of Fort Lewis College. On Jan 25, 1911, Governor John Shafroth signed a contract with the federal government which transferred 6,279 acres in southwest Colorado to the State of Colorado “to be maintained as an institution of learning to which Indian students will be admitted free of tuition and on an equality with white students” in perpetuity (Act of 61<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1911). That free tuition has benefitted numerous Native American students from 46 states and 269 federally recognized Indian tribes, and has in turn, benefitted the State of Colorado and the nation through an investment in human capital.

No one could have foreseen the national impact such an agreement would have on all concerned. New Mexico and Arizona were territories that had not entered statehood. Modern transportation made this once isolated military fort easily accessible and centrally located in the heart of Indian Country. We now have a situation where what is of benefit to many is of a cost to only one. Colorado benefits, but even more, the country benefits, as societal benefits accrue from becoming more educated productive taxpaying citizens. Given the national benefits and the hundred years of support from only Colorado, it is time for the nation to support what has become an unintended unfunded federal mandate. We now have an issue of fairness. It is only fair for the federal government to support Senate Bill 3504 and S.484.



FLC owns its dual mission of Colorado's only public liberal arts college and historic Native American education mission with pride. We are now a college of 23% Native American students from 138 tribes and 45 states. Our 860 Native American students benefit and the rich cultural diversity also benefit everyone at FLC and the Durango community. FLC ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation in the percent of full-time Native American undergraduates enrolled in a baccalaureate institution (American Indian Science & Engineering Society, 2012). Almost half of FLC Native students are from the Navajo Nation (second largest tribe in the U.S.), located 84 miles from campus, and 11% are from Native Alaskan tribes. FLC awards more degrees to Native American/Alaskan Native students than any other baccalaureate institution in the nation. From 2006-2010, Fort Lewis College awarded over 10% (556) of the total number of baccalaureate degrees earned by Native American students in the United States. In 2010, FLC was 1<sup>st</sup> in the nation in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) degrees earned by Native Americans.

The College's tuition waiver provides access and opportunity to the most underserved minority population, as less than 1% (0.7%) of American Indians attain a Baccalaureate Degree annually, as compared to all other minorities (African American (8.9%), Hispanic (7.5%), and Asian American (6.6%) in the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> The educational attainment rate for Native American students is widening as bachelor's degrees conferred by ethnicities has increased for every minority group, with Hispanics accelerating the highest from 5.6% in 1998 to 7.5% in 2008. Other ethnicities have also had positive percent changes, such as African Americans

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<sup>1</sup> Kim, Young, "Minorities in Higher Education, Twenty-Fourth Status Report", 2011 Supplement, American Council on Education, October 2011.



(2.8%) and Asian Americans (3.1%), while Native Americans remained flat over the ten year period at 0.7%.<sup>2</sup>

The federal government has provided much more assistance and for far greater a time period to Hispanic Serving Institutions and Historically Black Institutions. Aside from Tribal College funds, there is only a \$5.0 million federal allocation annually that was created in fiscal year 2008-9 to support Native American students outside of Tribal Colleges, through the Native American Serving, Non-Tribal College discretionary funds at the U.S. Department of Education. We are one of a small number (18) of Native American Serving, Non-Tribal Colleges who focus on bachelors' degree attainment for Native American students. We are only one of two with historic mandates that date back to the days after the Indian Wars; Fort Lewis College's origins as a military fort and an Indian Boarding School. Together, by supporting S.3504 we have an opportunity to extend beyond the two-year Tribal Colleges and provide a quality educational experience for Native American students, so that they too can compete in the global market place and carry the hopes and dreams of their nation, and ours, into prosperity.

We believe in our mission to educate Native American students and we do it well. One great example is our partnership with the Navajo Nation to bring the FLC Teacher Education program to the reservation. The positive impact of that partnership has been remarkable. In 1990, only 8% of certified teachers on the Navajo reservation were actually Navajo. As a result, instruction struggled as non-Navajo teachers lacked the cultural understanding to be effective with Navajo students. These struggles led to teacher retention problems for reservation schools and a further decrease in educational quality due to the high turnover rate for teachers. Today,

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<sup>2</sup> IBID



due in large part to the Teacher Education partnership between FLC and the Navajo Nation, over 60% of teachers on the Navajo reservation are Navajo. Test scores are up at reservation schools and the schools are showing improved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In addition, many other of our Native American alumni are doing great things, alumni like Quannah Spencer, a Seattle-area attorney; Marsha Greyeyes-Appel, owner of her own business in Maryland; Melissa Henry, filmmaker and business owner in New Mexico; and, of course, Bill Mendoza, a leader of Native American education in Washington, D.C. It would be a travesty to be unable to provide a broader base of support for a successful national program. The scope of the program has far exceeded the expectations set forth in the 1911 agreement between the State of Colorado and the federal government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the opportunity to appear before you today in support of S.3504 and S.484: I stand ready to answer any questions you might have for me.