

**Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee  
Field Hearing  
Denver, Colorado**

**“Securing Educational Opportunities for Native American  
College Students: The Native American Education Act of 2012”**

**Testimony of  
William Mendoza, Director  
White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education  
U.S. Department of Education  
August 22, 2012**

Good morning. My name is William Mendoza, and I am the Director of the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Education at the United States Department of Education. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the work the Administration is doing to expand educational opportunities and improve outcomes for AI/AN students.

I would also like to acknowledge Senator Bennet’s work on S.3504, The Native American Education Act of 2012, which is the subject of this hearing.

**Increasing Partnerships with States, Tribes and the Private Sector to Improve Student Achievement**

This Administration has taken great strides to support self-determination and to strengthen and honor the Federal Government’s government-to-government relationships with Tribal Nations. At the White House Tribal Nations Conference on December 2, 2011, President Obama, joined by Cabinet Secretaries and other senior Administration officials, met with tribal leaders from federally recognized Tribes for the third consecutive year to continue to enhance these relationships. In reaffirming the Federal Government’s commitment to ensure that Tribal Nations are full partners with the Federal family, the President announced the signing of Executive Order No. 13592 entitled, “Improving American Indian and Alaska Native Educational Opportunities and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities.” As President Obama said, “We have to prepare the next generation for the future.”

The mission and function of the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education is to expand educational opportunities and improve educational outcomes for AI/AN students. This includes helping to ensure that AI/AN students have opportunities to learn their Native languages, cultures and histories, and receive a complete and competitive education that prepares them for college, a career, and productive and satisfying lives.

Specifically, the Initiative works with Federal agencies, States, Tribes, and the private sector to advance these goals. With respect to postsecondary education, the Initiative works to implement

strategies to promote the expanded implementation of education reforms that have shown evidence of success in enabling AI/AN students to acquire a rigorous and well-rounded education; increase access to the support services that prepare them for college, careers, and civic involvement; reduce the student dropout rate and help more students who stay in high school prepare for college and careers; increase college access and completion by strengthening the capacity of postsecondary institutions, including Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs); and help ensure that the unique cultural, educational, and language needs of AI/AN students are met.

#### American Indians/Alaska Natives and Higher Education

We need to do better when it comes to meeting the academic and cultural needs of our American Indian and Alaska Native students across the nation. AI/AN young adults lag behind their white peers in employment and educational attainment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2010, white young adults ages 16-24 had the lowest rate of unemployment, while AI/AN young adults had the highest.

According to 2010 US Census data, about 30 percent of all youth and adults in the general population held baccalaureate degrees, compared with just 13 percent of the AI/AN youth and adults<sup>1</sup>. And, while across all degree granting institutions, AI/AN undergraduate enrollment increased from 70,000 to 189,000 students from 1976 to 2009, these students still accounted for only 1 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment during those years. AI/AN students entering postsecondary education also lag behind all students in timely completion of both baccalaureate degrees and certificates or associates degrees at 2-year degree granting institutions.<sup>2</sup> These statistics make clear that more must be done to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for AI/AN students.

In order to meet President Obama's goal for college attainment, there will need to be an additional 112,000 AI/AN students completing college by the year 2020. Working together to support TCUs is important in achieving this goal.

Our Nation's 37 tribally-controlled TCUs, which serve approximately 33,000 students, and whose student body is at least 50 percent AI/AN students, fulfill a unique role in AI/AN communities by acting as safeguards and champions of tribal languages and cultures. TCUs are also public institutions and they provide high-quality education and career-building opportunities to students of all ages, while also serving as a catalyst for economic development on reservations.

It's also important to note that more than 90 percent of AI/AN postsecondary students attend institutions of higher education that are not tribally-controlled. These include Native American Serving Non-Tribally Controlled Institutions (NASNTCIs), where the student body is at least 10 percent AI/AN students, but where there are few opportunities for collaboration between Tribes and States.

In addition to providing a high-quality education and career-building opportunities for AI/AN students, NASNTCIs are working to improve and expand their capacity to serve AI/AN and low-

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acsbr10-19.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_pgr.asp#info](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_pgr.asp#info)

income individuals by engaging in such activities as: expanding dual enrollment opportunities for AI/AN students; assisting institutions in the development of adult education that increases the number of AI/AN students who obtain high school diplomas; improving academic and student services to support student success and retention of AI/AN students; improving the effective use of technology in academic environments; and increasing the number of AI/AN students who pursue advanced degrees.

Together, TCUs and NASNTCIs have a far-reaching impact in the communities they serve. For example, these institutions provide effective paths to academic achievement and degree completion for AI/AN students that can mitigate the risks of high poverty and unemployment that follow low educational attainment. Also, these institutions often serve as powerful engines of economic development in their communities, contributing employment, raising incomes, and directly and indirectly supporting other forms of economic development within Tribal communities. Because many of these communities tend to be located in rural and underserved communities compared to colleges and universities in the U.S. overall, this contribution is especially vital.

#### The Role of the Federal Government

The Federal Government plays an important role in improving the postsecondary education attainment of AI/AN students, not only because these students face barriers to achievement and persistence in postsecondary education, but also because the Federal Government has a trust responsibility to help these students succeed.

Through the Race to the Top: College Affordability and Completion (RTTCAC) and First in the World (FITW) proposals, the Administration has offered a comprehensive approach to tackle the rising costs of college for all students, including AI/AN students. The Federal Government, States, and Institutions of Higher Education have a shared responsibility in this endeavor and must work together to address the college affordability and completion challenge.

In addition, the Administration has worked with Congress to take a number of steps over the last three years to address the challenge of helping to keep college affordable and accessible for all students, including AI/AN students:

- We have invested more than \$40 billion in Pell Grants, extending aid to 3 million more college students for a total of over 9 million recipients and raised the maximum award to an estimated \$5,635 for the 2013 – 2014 academic year. This represents a \$905 increase in the maximum award since 2008.
- We are working to make college loans more affordable through the “Pay as You Earn” proposal, which will enable an additional 1.6 million students to take advantage of a new option to cap student loan payments at 10 percent of a borrower’s monthly income starting as early as this year.
- We have created the American Opportunity Tax Credit, which provides up to \$10,000 for up to four years of education and includes benefits for low-income

individuals with no tax liability. Eleven million middle class and low-income families claimed the credit in tax year 2010..

This historic investment in student aid has kept the price that families actually pay for college — the net price—essentially flat over the last few years. Thanks to our Federal investments, the College Board reports that the net price of tuition and fees at four-year public institutions has increased by just \$170 since the 2006-07 academic year, while the net price of tuition and fees at community colleges has actually decreased over the same period.

Yet this Federal Government commitment to postsecondary education of AI/AN students cannot be limited only to the work of the Administration. We need a strong partnership with Congress if we are going to improve college participation and outcomes. So thank you Senator Bennet and the other members of the HELP Committee for holding this hearing.

Of course, the Federal Government cannot singlehandedly ensure college affordability. The Administration, Congress, postsecondary institutions, and, States must all work together to keep building on our momentum in recent years to make an affordable college education accessible and available to all students who want one, and where appropriate, to continue support of historical obligations to fund that education for certain populations like AI/AN students.

Thousands of AI/AN individuals and students around the country benefit from this continued demonstration of commitment and are appreciative of States that continue to uphold their obligations. These individuals are contributing not only to their Tribes, but also directly to the strength and well-being of the States in which they reside and to the Nation as a whole. At a time when higher education is more important than ever for our shared future, States should not turn to higher education budgets as a source for cuts. Such cuts often lead to tuition spikes and higher drop-out rates, particularly for vulnerable populations like AI/AN students. This Administration has made a strong commitment to upholding the United States' trust responsibility towards Tribes and is committed to doing our part.

### **Conclusion**

I look forward to working with you and this Committee on this and other vitally important issues facing the AI/AN community. Thank you for your time and I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.