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The history of tribal colleges could be told in two parts. The first part would describe the colleges' founding. It would tell about the struggle to create these institutions without money or outside support and the challenge to discover entirely new approaches to teaching and community service. This is the story of visionary leaders who saw the value of higher education in impoverished communities. But the second part is just as important. It tells how leaders of the first colleges came together and created something called the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, an organization that now represents 31 tribal and Indian-controlled colleges across North America and is, this year, celebrating its 25th anniversary.

The consortium (known simply as AIHEC) is central to the story of tribal colleges for at least three reasons. First, it was created by the colleges themselves. Unlike most associations, tribal colleges are not merely dues-paying members but also founders and directors. Second, it is through the consortium that most colleges receive essential federal support. As a practical matter, only colleges that are members of AIHEC and satisfy the legal definition of a tribal college get funded through the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978. If nothing else, colleges are bound together by this legislation and the need to sustain the flow of money.

But the American Indian Higher Education Consortium serves another important function. Through this body, tribal colleges nurtured a common vision and learned to see themselves as a national movement, not just a collection of struggling community colleges. By working together, they ensured not only their own survival but helped shape federal Indian policy and even our nation's perceptions of American Indians. Because of this consortium, tribal colleges became far more than the sum of their parts.

This part of the tribal colleges' history is less often told. The creation of AIHEC is frequently noted as an important early milestone in the history of tribal colleges. Yet little attention is given to the events that led to its founding or the unique role it plays in shaping the work of the colleges. It is true enough to say that several key tribal leaders, struggling to keep their impoverished colleges alive, convened a meeting in 1972 and officially incorporated the consortium in 1973. But it doesn't explain why AIHEC emerged so quickly as such a significant and even transforming force for the tribal colleges.

Little Big Horn President Janine Pease-Pretty on Top (Crow) notes that while AIHEC is classified as a professional association, this does not begin to explain the importance of the consortium to member colleges and the individuals who run them. "Most professional organizations are sort of optional. They're something you do because you think you ought to, because you might meet some nice people and so on," she says. "But AIHEC is a lifeline."

1971-1972: Finding Common Ground

The founding of AIHEC now seems logical and even inevitable. But at the time, tribal college leaders had to work deliberately to find common bonds and overcome both suspicion and

jealousy. Although there were six tribal colleges by the early 1970s, what the nation really had was a Navajo college, an Oglala Sioux college, a Turtle Mountain Chippewa college, and so on. Their leaders shared a larger vision for social change, but the institutions were unapologetically parochial.

Their goal, jokes Jack Barden, a long-time consultant and writer for the North Dakota tribal colleges, was to be "uniquer than thou." Eager to shape something new out of their own particular lumps of clay, many of the early presidents and faculty say they were only vaguely aware of the work of other fledgling tribal colleges when they developed their proposals and first opened their doors.

United Tribes Technical College President David Gipp (Hunkpapa Lakota) also notes that AIHEC required members to overcome long-standing tribal rivalries. There was much good will but not easy agreement. In a recent conversation he described the tenor of early AIHEC meetings:

There was debate and disagreement. In many respects [the member presidents] had to give of themselves a great deal before they could make this whole concept a reality. There was a degree of mistrust. They had no history of working together. I mean, this was the first time they came together, at least with this particular set of issues.... And keep in mind that some of these tribes are very competitive, historically speaking. The fact that they did come together reveals how precarious these colleges really were financially. And the speed with which the presidents found each other and created an organization says a great deal about the sense of urgency they felt. By no later than 1971, key leaders within tribal colleges and a couple of outside observers were proposing some kind of meeting of the colleges. There are different accounts of how this proposal developed, suggesting that several people were working informally across the country to find their counterparts at other tribal colleges.

David Risling (Hoopa), now retired from the faculty at the University of California-Davis, helped establish several Indian associations in the 1960s and participated in the founding of D-Q University near Davis. He recently described the role he played in arranging the first meeting. He recalls that in 1971, the year D-Q University was founded, he sent a staff member to make connections with representatives of the three other tribal colleges then in existence. His interest, even then, was to affiliate for the purpose of securing federal money. Another early interest was accreditation. This was a special concern to D-Q University, with was given control of a former Army site on the condition it become a fully accredited institution of higher education.

Risling also tapped into his extensive network of colleagues across the country, which included both Helen Scheirbeck, an employee in the Office of Education (now Department of Education) in Washington, and Pat Locke, who was with the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education in Denver. Both are American Indians (Lumbee and Hunkpapa Lakota, respectively) who, in different ways, were deeply committed to the cause of education. These women played an important role in the early days of the consortium and in arranging the first meeting. Recalls Risling: "It was Helen who made the arrangements to go to Washington and meet."

In October 1972 the first colleges at last sat around the same table. Their meeting was convened by four people familiar with both the individual colleges and the larger landscape of Indian higher education: David Risling, Jr., Gerald One Feather, Helen Scheirbeck, and Pat Locke. Attending the meeting were the presidents and other representatives of all tribal colleges then founded: Navajo Community College, Hehaka Sapa College of D-Q. University, Oglala Sioux Community College, Sinte Gleska College, Turtle Mountain Community College, and Standing Rock Community College.

Wayne Stein, who has written extensively on the history of tribal colleges and now teaches at the Montana State University, says this meeting helped the presidents see just how much they had in common. Although each emerged independently and out of its own community, they were all small, geographically isolated, and served some of the poorest students in the nation. Too, they all reflected a commitment to Indian leadership; their boards were primarily or exclusively Indian, and most presidents were also Native American. But what stood out, above the rest, was their poverty. According to Stein, "They all suffered from chronic under-financing and funding unpredictability..." By the end of the meeting, the group had named itself the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and identified its first priority: building a stable financial base. It was Helen Scheirbeck who encouraged the colleges to apply for funding of their consortium through Title III of the Higher Education Act.

1973-1980: Building an Institution

In 1978, the tribal colleges accomplished the goal they had identified five years earlier. In that year Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act, the first piece of federal legislation written and lobbied for by American Indians. This legislation authorized $4,000 for each full-time Indian student enrolled in tribal colleges (a figure later raised to $5,820). For this reason alone, the act remains AIHEC's single most important achievement. At last the colleges had a permanent source of financial support -- or at least it looked that way when President Carter signed the legislation into law.

The victory was hard won. Years of constant work were required of AIHEC's young staff and all college presidents. They had to overcome their own inexperience with Washington's ways and confront innumerable political barriers. Unsympathetic bureaucrats had to be educated and appeased. Opposition from the White House was at first strong. Numerous legislators were suspicious of the colleges and questioned their legitimacy.

Unexpectedly, the colleges were also caught in a larger political battle over Indian self-determination. In this era, the federal government turned the idea of self-determination into policy by allowing tribal governments to take over the management of some programs previously run by, in most cases, the Bureau of Indian Affairs or Indian Health Service. Key national Indian organizations, while largely sympathetic to tribal colleges, were swayed by arguments that federal legislation for the colleges weakened this fledgling effort. In their view, money being passed directly from the federal government to the colleges circumvented the authority of tribal governments.

Tribal college leaders fought their battle on several fronts, according to Janine Pease-Pretty on Top, who wrote a detailed account in her 1994 doctoral dissertation. They traveled to Washington repeatedly and attended meetings of Indian associations. Strategies changed several times, and when the college leaders finally decided to pursue their own legislation, drafts underwent almost constant revision in response to the concerns and criticisms of these divergent interests.

All this was what David Gipp calls the "central driving force" in AIHEC. And even today, a discussion of AIHEC's history is dominated by this effort to win legislation. But this was not AIHEC's only contribution in this era. David Gipp was AIHEC's first permanent executive director, serving from 1973 to 1977. When I asked him what the importance of the consortium was to the colleges in its first years, he acknowledged the focus on federal funding. "Obviously it became a major priority and still is," he says. He emphasizes, however, that the mission of AIHEC was not just to get money out of Washington but to serve colleges and especially their students in many different ways.

From 1973 to 1978 AIHEC had staff and resources that it would not have again until the mid 1990s. It was, for a few years, a largely self-supporting institution, with an office in Denver and a staff of at least four. Funded through dues and several grants, including a major grant from the Ford Foundation, the consortium directly supported the work of colleges by offering training and development for faculty and staff at the colleges. It was expected to act as an accrediting body. And it was to have a voice in Washington, not just as an advocate of their own funding but also in "the formulation and implantation of postsecondary education policy, rules and regulations," as articulated in AIHEC's mission statement.

AIHEC was also a resource for other tribes eager to start their own colleges. In Montana, for example, Janine Pease-Pretty on Top gives credit to the consortium for starting the tribal college movement in her state. "We were very interested that people in the Dakotas had actually chartered colleges," she says. "It was very, very exciting." But she and others needed practical advice. In 1976, she asked AIHEC staff to meet with a statewide alliance of Indian educators who were working on adult education programs. The consortium agreed and for a full week, David Gipp, Perry Horse (Kiowa), and other staff members offered a kind of "Tribal College 101" seminar.

"They were wonderful," recalls Pease-Pretty on Top. "Fabulous. And within just a year or two, all of us had gone home to get our charters organized to take before the tribal councils." Today, each of the seven tribes in Montana has a college. Together, they make up almost one-quarter of all tribal colleges in the nation.

By the late 1970s the consortium had an impressive list of accomplishments. But expenses were also growing. Its work in Washington was especially costly and strained the resources of the whole organization. "They were running into a cash flow problem," says John Forkenbrock, a congressional staff member who had helped the colleges win passage of their legislation.

Annual dues paid by the colleges were minimal -- something like $1,000 from each institution -- and clearly not enough to pay for the cost of their office and staff salaries. With funds drying up,

staff left, and some of the office space was leased out to another Indian organization. Eventually, the only person remaining was Leroy Clifford (Oglala Lakota), who had been hired as AIHEC's second executive director after David Gipp left in 1977 to become president of United Tribes Technical College. Clifford maintained the consortium's Denver presence through the early 1980s, drafting their legislation's rules and regulations.

1981-1989: Survival

AIHEC's mission statement never changed, but its ability to fulfill its mission became limited, at best. Without the staff or resources to provide technical assistance, gather data, or explore self-accreditation, the consortium focused all energy on preserving funding from its legislation. And they had to do it in an increasingly hostile political environment. This was the start of the Reagan administration, and for the tribal colleges, the goal was simple survival.

The colleges discovered the difference between authorized funding and actual appropriations. Congress had authorized $4,000 for each full-time Indian student in the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act. But appropriations -- the amount actually released -- are determined by each year's budget negotiations. It is perfectly legal to appropriate far less than the amount authorized. It is even possible to appropriate nothing at all.

In 1980, when funding was first released, appropriation was slightly more than $2,000 per student. It climbed to nearly $3,000 the following year. But then it began an uninterrupted decline until 1989, when a mere $1,900 was appropriated. By this time, the colleges were receiving just 33 percent of their authorized funding, which had increased to just under $6,000.

Although the colleges had few resources, a presence in Washington was absolutely essential. By 1984, AIHEC colleges gathered their meager dues and invited John Forkenbrock to become their executive director. Forkenbrock first worked for the consortium in 1981 when the Tribally Controlled Community College Act underwent its first re-authorization. But when Leroy Clifford left and the Denver office completely closed, Forkenbrock took full responsibility for what remained of the consortium and its agenda. AIHEC became a Washington-based association, although it existed in the form of one part-time contractor and some badly photocopied stationery.

But the American Indian Higher Education Consortium survived, and it is important to remember why. AIHEC was always far more than an office and paid staff. The heart of the consortium was the presidents. Policy decisions were never delegated to AIHEC's staff (when an office existed) but were proposed and debated by the presidents themselves, who gathered as a board at least four times a year. And when there was work to be done -- letters to be written, members of Congress to visit, legislation to be drafted or reviewed -- presidents usually led the effort. In this sense, every tribal college president was part of AIHEC's staff.

So even in this era of painful austerity, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium was more than it appeared to be. AIHEC continued to have a strong presence in Washington because the presidents made it a priority to travel back East to give testimony and meet with

representatives, even if they had to pay for air fare out of their own pockets -- as several did -- and stay in some remarkably unsavory hotels.

In addition, the colleges had found a small but loyal cadre of supporters on Capitol Hill. Alan Lovesee, a staff attorney for the House Subcommittee on Indian Education as well as the House Advisory Study Group on Indian Education, was a strong advocate for the colleges for many years. And John Forkenbrock proved to be an articulate spokesman and conscientious administrator who established good rapport with Congress. The House and Senate Appropriations Committees soon learned, for example, that key student and financial data provided by AIHEC were more accurate than that provided by the BIA.

At the close of the 1980s, AIHEC had not broken new ground. But it preserved what it had already won. And it was poised for the next era of growth.

1989-Present: Growth and New Opportunities

Aside from extinction, the tribal colleges really had nowhere to go but up by the end of the decade. Crude attempts to scale back the federal budget continually threatened funding to vulnerable social and education programs, including the tribal colleges. Yet no other meaningful sources of financial support had been found. Most national foundations still ignored tribal colleges when they applied for grants and their own tribes remained as poor as ever.

But during the 1990s, the national climate suddenly began to change in important ways.

First, America's view of Indians grew more sympathetic and even sentimental. Their needs were again being acknowledged and, thanks to "Dances With Wolves" and several other movies, they were put into the spotlight of popular culture. After two decades, non-Indian educators and policy-makers finally started to notice tribal colleges. Of special importance was the release of a brief but highly complimentary policy report on the tribal colleges by the Carnegie Foundation, which was then headed by my father, Ernest Boyer.

This document gave the colleges the kind of visibility and, especially, credibility they needed to take advantage of the larger climate of interest and concern. Like a barometer of the tribal colleges' fortunes, the level of federal funding reversed its downward slope and began climbing again. Full funding -- AIHEC's Holy Grail -- eluded the colleges, but appropriations increased significantly for the next several years. It was the start of a new era.

With growing confidence, the colleges also reached out more aggressively to the private sector for financial support. By the mid '80s, they were holding annual fund-raising dinners in Washington. This early effort led the college presidents to develop the American Indian College Fund in 1988. With its own board and staff, the College Fund's mission was to build endowment and scholarship funds by working with foundations, corporations, and individual donors. It was, and continues to be, an enormously successful effort.

At the same time, the tribal colleges established a quarterly journal, Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education. Although it began as a small and inelegant publication, it

helped carry the tribal colleges' message throughout Indian Country and, especially, to educators and policy-makers nationwide. For the first time, the tribal colleges had a common forum and spoke to the nation with one voice.

In Washington, AIHEC's legislative agenda was also growing. John Forkenbrock left to direct another education association. As his replacement the colleges contracted with Georgianna Tiger (Blackfeet), an established Indian lobbyist familiar with education issues. At first, she worked under the same terms as her predecessor: on her own and part time. But over the next several years, her budget was increased and, incrementally, her staff grew from occasional part-time help to several full-time employees. Her first tiny, smoke-filled office near Union Station grew to a small suite of offices. By 1994 the colleges -- reflecting their growth and maturity -- purchased their own free-standing office building in Alexandria, Virginia, where AIHEC headquarters are today.

AIHEC's work still focused on preserving the tribal colleges' legislation, but the tribal colleges also began looking for new opportunities. The consortium began working aggressively to be added to the list of land grant colleges supported by the Department of Agriculture. At the same time AIHEC was working to secure a Presidential Executive Order on behalf of the colleges. Both initiatives were expected to open new doors in Washington, making the colleges eligible for new partnerships and new grants and, in this way, broadening their base of federal support.

Within a few years these efforts were successful. The Executive Order was a particularly difficult project, but was guided past many barriers by AIHEC's current director, Veronica Gonzales, and the consortium's growing staff.

At this point, history merges with current events. In the future, those who write AIHEC's history will surely mention important contemporary initiatives. A major Kellogg Foundation grant is now targeting tribal colleges as part of a $22 million program in American Indian Higher Education. There is interest in sharing courses through telecommunications which may, some day, allow tribal colleges to offer their own degree programs via distance learning technology. A fledgling interest in international indigenous education is inspiring some college presidents to reach out to colleagues in the South Pacific and Central America. With expanding funding from significantly increased dues and grants, AIHEC is also returning to its original mandate, offering technical assistance to new or struggling colleges. It has started a comprehensive data collection project that will track students at all member colleges and document their progress after graduation.

In this way, the significance of the consortium continues to grow. At first, it helped break down barriers and encouraged early college leaders to see how much they had in common. Next, it allowed the colleges to bring resources from the outside back into their campuses, ensuring survival of the movement. But now, the colleges are recognizing that they have something important to offer the nation in return. Through the consortium, colleges are joining a national conversation, showing that what they have learned can benefit all of American higher education and the nation as a whole.