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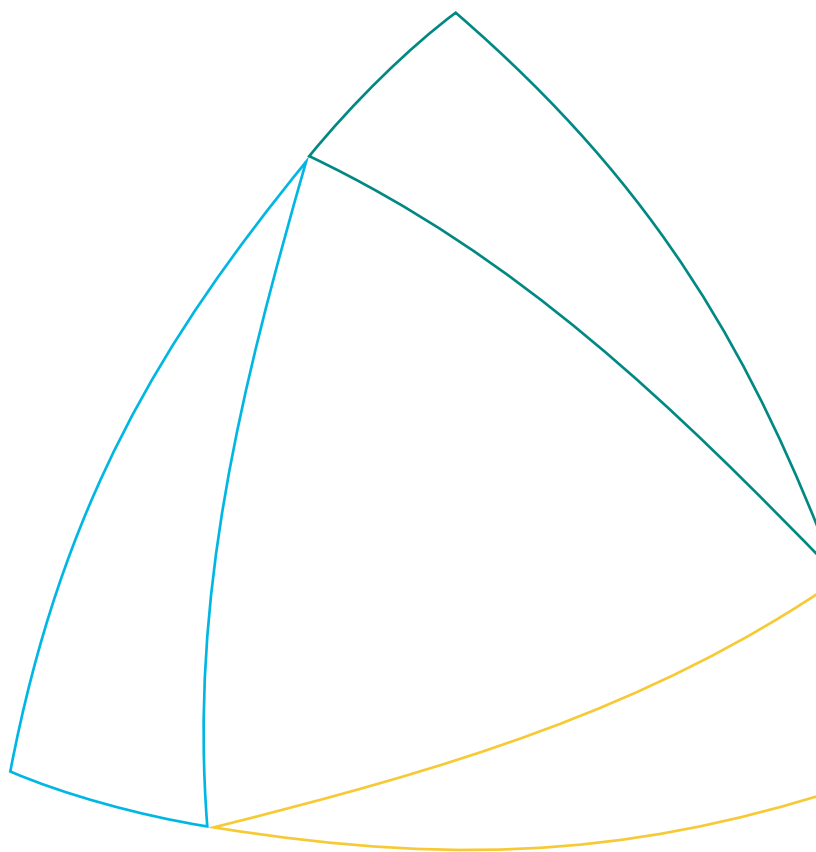
STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

## **MISSION DRIVEN, COMMUNITY FOCUSED: TRIBAL COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

MOLLY E. HALL-MARTIN



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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Molly E. Hall-Martin (*Kul Wicasa Oyate/Lower Brule Lakota*) is a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at the University of Iowa. She currently serves as a SHEEO intern. Her research focuses on the implementation and impact of higher education policy, especially as it pertains to Indigenous students. She also studies the policies and politics surrounding Confucius Institutes, higher education governance, governing boards, and state agencies.

## FOREWORD

The nation's 37 American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) serve some of the most rural students and communities in the U.S. Spanning 16 states from Alaska to Arizona and California to Michigan, the TCUs operate more than 75 campuses and sites in Indian Country. TCUs were established for two critical reasons: to address the unmet higher education needs of American Indians and to preserve tribal cultures, languages, and lands. Far from simply replicating the mainstream higher education model, TCUs provide place-based and culturally-grounded curricula, extended family support systems, and community educational and development services essential to overcoming the socioeconomic challenges facing many tribal communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented extraordinary challenges to TCUs, in part because of the many ways they serve their communities. In addition to providing educational services, TCUs are important resources for tribal community development, research, public information, and economic development, serving as a kind of network hub for a wide range of AIAN stakeholders involved in tribal nation building. The most immediate reaction to the pandemic, as is described in this policy brief, involved standing up online instructional programs rapidly while ensuring that students had access to both devices and Internet connectivity – where no such programs, systems, or connectivity existed previously. TCUs responded admirably to these challenges. The longer-term response continues to take shape. A new focus on online and hybrid academic programming, telework opportunities, and a planned national broadband infrastructure are laying the foundation for an entirely new opportunity space in which TCUs could play a central role. This new frontier includes new and emerging digital manufacturing technologies, data-intensive program management tools, smart city technologies adapted to rural and remote settings, and most important, the prospect of multiple TCUs and tribal communities coordinating resources to leverage 21st century technologies to drive tribal prosperity that is consistent with tribal values and priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be a catastrophic global tragedy. Yet, it is also proving to be a catalyst for an entirely new paradigm for networked communities as regional and global economic drivers. TCUs are well positioned to contribute substantively to this transformation.

Al Kuslikis, Sr., Associate for Strategic Initiatives  
*American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)*

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, college campuses across the country scrambled to transition to online learning as the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the United States. While some were able to transition to virtual learning with relative—though not completely seamless—ease due to existing virtual infrastructure, other institutions were essentially starting from scratch. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) fall into the latter category, with the majority transitioning from 100% in-person to 100% virtual in a matter of weeks. Staying true to their mission to serve their tribal communities, TCUs acted to ensure that their students, and their entire communities, maintained access to their education in the face of a pandemic.

### ACCREDITATION, FACULTY, AND ONLINE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, few TCUs were accredited to offer online coursework. Those with previous accreditor authorization were either approved for courses rather than programs or had recently been approved to offer programs online. These online offerings had much lower enrollments than their face-to-face counterparts and were mostly provided asynchronously. One TCU representative said that it was fairly recently that they, “received permission...to offer online classes, but not online programs. And so that’s where we’ve been at for the past several years of offering classes, but not programs...getting our feet wet and doing online classes before the pandemic hit.” For those TCUs that had “gotten their feet wet,” the transition went more smoothly than at other campuses. “...We already had several faculty members who were familiar with online teaching and were able to be sort of mentors for those who weren’t. So that definitely helped in the whole process.”

Though there were limited offerings online prior to spring 2020, many TCUs had an online learning management system (LMS) in place to facilitate in-person coursework and communication between faculty and students. “We had brought in [an LMS] as the online learning platform, and we had it several years before March 2020. We had that platform just as a vehicle to help our students and faculty better interact and to provide access to information.” However, having an LMS for the institution did not ensure that faculty were comfortable with it or prepared to use it as the primary mode of instruction. One president said, “Several of the faculty continued or finished off the semester with paper packets and phone calling because they were adept [at those methods] and [were] uncomfortable in using the technology...We set up training for them—at their discretion—because I’m not going to make an elder...do online.”

### TECHNOLOGY AND BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS

Faculty preparation and training were not the only hurdles facing TCUs in the transition to fully online learning. TCUs are fighting issues of rurality and access to the type of affordable, high-speed internet that makes online learning possible. According to a 2018 study from the American Indian Policy Institute, 18% of reservation residents have no internet access at home, and 33% rely on cell phone service for at-home internet.<sup>1</sup> The internet access that does exist is expensive and spotty. Representatives from AIHEC said, “We knew going into Spring 2020 that tribal colleges

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1. Howard, B. & Morris, T. (2019.) *Tribal technology assessment: The state of internet service on tribal lands*. American Indian Policy Institute, Arizona State University. [https://aipi.asu.edu/sites/default/files/tribal\\_tech\\_assessment\\_compressed.pdf](https://aipi.asu.edu/sites/default/files/tribal_tech_assessment_compressed.pdf)

have the slowest and most expensive internet access of any institutions of higher education. We had several...below 100 megabits per second or slower. Nationally, for two-year institutions, the average internet speed in February 2020 was 500 megabits per second and 3.5 gigabits for four-year institutions.” TCUs also faced a hardware gap, with the colleges themselves having older equipment than their counterparts and their students primarily accessing the internet through their smartphones rather than tablets or laptops.

Knowing that they were already facing an uphill battle with ensuring that their students had access to the equipment, software, and internet to complete online coursework, TCUs immediately focused their efforts on how best to provide that access to their students and communities. To provide internet access to students and members of the community, some TCUs set up hot spots around the community, but due to an increased demand for hot spots at the onset of the pandemic, this was not a scalable option for many institutions. Others partnered with state, local, or tribal internet service providers to provide access to homes at rates partially subsidized by the college itself. Administrators from one tribal college designed a reimbursement program: “We made a plan. If a student were to send us their bill, we would reimburse them for the ability to use their cell phone as a hot spot.”

## CARES ACT

To ensure that students had access to the hardware and software they needed, TCUs turned to outside funding—including that from the CARES Act—to purchase or upgrade laptops or tablets to lend to students. One administrator explained, “We’ve upgraded everything, and we’ve mostly used CARES Act money. But through other networks that we have, they sent us laptops, some books, some [tablets]...The issue becomes that everybody’s overwhelmed because the demand [is so high]. So getting the equipment in here becomes an issue and then having enough staff time to get them up and running to get them out to people.”

CARES Act funding was used for more than just providing technology access. The funding was essential for ensuring that students were not facing a financial situation that would make continuing their education impossible. Emergency relief funds were created to help combat housing and food insecurity. Other CARES Act dollars were used for financial aid. When it came to using that funding, TCUs wanted to make sure it was used in a way to have the most impact on student retention and success, whether through direct payments, the purchasing of technology, or for covering the cost of tuition for the semester.

The CARES Act funds, while a welcome relief, did not come without issues. Most notably, they created an administrative burden for understaffed departments and employees who were already stretched thin. TCU administrators, already familiar with the restrictions often imposed with federal funding, were careful in ensuring that every penny spent was in compliance to avoid having to deal with returning any payments later, but with shifting guidance this was often difficult and slowed the colleges’ ability to spend the funds. One TCU president explained:

*I know our finance office probably felt this very heavily, just trying to process funds and know that they were able to get a consultant on board to specifically just monitor the CARES Act funding to make sure that there was a handle on it. When it was released to the colleges, when it was released to us, it was still uncertain what the criteria was going to be to spend it...and I was really apprehensive about just getting it out there until I knew for sure what the criteria was, so we erred on the side of caution.*

## SUPPORT

As institutions across the country continue to navigate the virtual learning space in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, TCUs need more support from the federal and state governments. The most needed area of support is that of funding. A representative from AIHEC said:

*Look at funding equitably as opposed to equally. Almost all the CARES Act funding TCUs received to address the pandemic was calculated as a percentage of existing programs that compared TCUs to other institutions—not to their unmet need. The problem with formulas like the one used in the CARES Act is that they do not take into account where institutions are in terms of development and need, or whether the underlying program is equitably distributed. Institutions are different, and some institutions might need more assistance, particularly to address historical funding gaps. Be careful when you're developing a formula. Ask yourself whether the formula is built on a foundation of historical inequities and decades of invisibility and inattention. Make sure that all institutions are visible and included. That's really important.*

The other major request from TCUs: open, clear, and meaningful communication. “It would be nice if they would check on us.”

## CONCLUSION

As colleges and universities begin to imagine a post-pandemic future, it is important that policymakers do not forget the inequities the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare. These inequities were not caused by the pandemic itself, but the pandemic made them more visible. Inequities in funding and technological infrastructure threatened the success of students across the country and especially those students served by TCUs. Federal policymakers should focus on developing equitable funding mechanisms for institutions of higher education. Infrastructure programs should emphasize tribal communities and encourage partnerships between the federal government, state governments, and tribal governments to increase access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet. Policymakers at every level should maintain open lines of communication with TCUs. TCUs are resilient and will continue to work to serve their entire communities, but they should not have to do it alone.



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3035 CENTER GREEN DRIVE, SUITE 100, BOULDER, COLORADO, 80301  
303.541.1600 • SHEEO.org

