

# **Educational Empowerment of Native American Students: A Tribally Controlled College Leads the Way**

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Founded in the 1970s to address educational and cultural needs of Native Americans, Tribal Colleges<sup>1</sup> in their relatively short period of existence “have had a major impact on the lives of Native Americans” (O’Laughlin 3). These institutions of higher learning with their unique system of knowledge and value transmission have become increasingly significant to Native students’ educational attainment and established themselves as a viable education model for many American Indian students, who otherwise might not have been able to attend and graduate from a university.

Drawing upon existing secondary literature and original empirical data gathered during fieldwork in 2007,<sup>2</sup> it is the purpose of this essay to demonstrate how a particular Tribal College in Montana, Salish Kootenai College (SKC), positively impacts the education of individual American Indian students. While every Indian Nation and their higher education institutions are unique, these findings can, to a certain extent, also be translated and applied to Tribal Colleges in general.

A brief overview of the legal and social developments that led to the emergence of Tribal Colleges in the United States marks the beginning of this article. By placing the Tribal College Movement into its historical framework, I will provide the necessary background for an understanding of the reasons and the particular time for the development of Tribally Controlled Community Colleges. These remarks are followed by a summary of essential concepts and basic characteristics of Tribally Controlled Colleges that contain information about the mission of TCUs, differing types, academic degree offerings, as well as student, staff and faculty characteristics. Moving from these introductory remarks about Tribal Colleges in general to the specific situation at Salish Kootenai College, which in many ways exemplifies Tribal College characteristics, the main part of this essay will analyze in depth the colleges’ specific demographic situation and its role in individual student empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> Although “Tribal College” and all synonyms are in most cases spelled with lowercase letters, I deliberately chose to capitalize these terms in order to emphasize their important and unique status in the higher education landscape of the United States.

<sup>2</sup> I utilized prevalent ethnographic field research methods, such as participant observation, informal discussions, and interviews. Quantitative methods included statistics, institutional self-studies, reports, and college catalogs. Interviewee remarks can be distinguished from secondary literature in that they do not feature page numbers (e.g. Dolson). In some cases interviewees wished to remain anonymous. They are marked by a capital “A” and a corresponding number (e.g. A5).

### **The Emergence of Tribal Colleges in the United States**

As the influence of Euro-Americans on the North American continent grew, effective educational systems by Native people, based upon Native societies' values and conveying fundamental knowledge from one generation to the next, eroded and were systematically replaced by formal non-Native education efforts (Fleming 241). Over time, there were several entities, such as religious groups and federal governmental organizations that established and influenced an educational modus that still has ramifications for Native people today. Acculturation and assimilation were the main forces behind the educational strategies of these two groups (Reyhner and Eder, "A History" 1). Many education scholars characterize the higher education efforts, namely using white values and standards, as unsuccessful, assimilationist and irrelevant to Native people (Raymond 19-23). There was a scarcity of programs for Native students at institutions of higher education, and only few Native students attended these programs. A lack of interest on the part of federal and state authorities regarding Native educational attainment continued to be the norm during the 1950s and early 1960s, although American Indian student achievement levels were low and dropout rates high (Morris and O'Donnell 3-4).

Tribal Colleges were created as a response to many decades of ineffective and unsuccessful ethnocentric education efforts and in order to help increase Native Americans' access to higher education. Moreover, a growing American Indian youth population and an increased awareness of the importance of higher education for tribal culture and reservations caused tribal leaders to start Indian Colleges in the 1970s. Tribally Controlled Colleges evolved at a time when social, political, and legislative changes, as well as the drive for more self-determination, allowed for transformations in the higher education system (Robbins 83).

Post-secondary assistance was provided in a limited form by the Higher Education Act in 1965. The Kennedy report on the educational status of Native Americans in 1969 confirmed the devastating results of past educational policies throughout the centuries and recommended an increase in the involvement of Native Americans in education matters (Oppelt 32, 117). Henrietta Mann poignantly states that this report "resulted in federal legislation that ushered in the era of Indian self-determination in education and the genesis of the tribally controlled community college movement" (xviii). The passage of the Indian Education Act in 1972 and the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act in 1975, including some reference points to higher education, were further steps towards educational self-control by Native people (Thompson 175-176). In light of this growing desire for Indian self-determination, American Indians established the Tribally Controlled College and University Movement.

The Navajo Tribal Council was the first tribal entity that decided to improve the postsecondary education of its people and opened the first Tribally Controlled Community College in the US. Navajo Community College, known today as Dine

College was founded in 1968 on the Navajo Reservation in Tsaile, Arizona, and laid the groundwork for many more Tribal Colleges to come (Bordeaux 11).<sup>3</sup>

Besides the important role of Dine College, an essential part of the Tribal College Movement was and continues to be the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) founded by the first six Tribal Colleges in 1972 (Gipp and Faircloth 2). This organization was crucial in the development of Tribal Colleges and their achieving national recognition as institutions of higher learning (Morris and O'Donnell 31). Convincing Congress that the funding of Tribal Colleges is part of the trust responsibility of the federal government towards Indian Nations resulting from treaties between these two parties is one of the most important achievements of AIHEC (Dehyle and Swisher 114). AIHEC's tireless efforts towards this goal were rewarded in 1978, when Congress passed the Tribally Controlled Community College Act. This landmark decision assured a federal support method for Tribal Colleges and made funding more stable than in the years before. In so doing, this act "paved the way for the continued existence of these colleges" (Gipp and Faircloth 3). The establishment of the American Indian College Fund in 1989 is another accomplishment AIHEC can be credited for. The fund was created "to promote personal, corporate, and foundation gift-giving to support the tribal college movement" (Morris and O'Donnell 31).<sup>4</sup> Today 34 Tribal Colleges and Universities are part of AIHEC (Gipp and Faircloth 2).

Further federal legislative acts that were significant for the Tribal College Movement include the Equity in Education Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-32) which enabled Tribal Colleges to obtain assistance and funding through a variety of programs. Furthermore, in October 1996, President Clinton signed Executive Order 13021, which established the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities. This legislation not only promoted Indian language and culture retention, but also sought to increase federal funding for Tribal Colleges, and it worked to develop new partnerships with federal agencies. The executive order was reaffirmed by President Bush in his first term in office (Fleming 252).

According to Stein, another fundamental aspect in the evolution of Tribally Controlled Colleges is the fact that these institutions of higher learning would not have emerged without the support of tribal councils. These councils approved each Tribal College and therefore legitimized them to the tribal communities, who were often skeptical of this development at first ("A History" 221-22). The support of tribal communities and the general community, as well as students attending these schools, were important elements for a successful beginning. Assistance from mainstream higher education institutions in the form of financial aid to students or cross-crediting of courses,

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<sup>3</sup> Although there were proposals for Tribal Colleges before (see proposals by Breuninger, Parker, Burnette & Forbes), Navajo Community College was the first college for and controlled by Native people.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, AIHEC provides student scholarships and raises money to build an endowment (Boyer, "Native American Colleges" 42). The organization was also instrumental in the formation of the Student Congress, the Tribal College Journal, and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education.

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as well as small grants by philanthropic institutions also helped the Tribal College Movement progress (Robbins 89).

### **Tribal College Characteristics**

As this short historical overview has shown, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) are postsecondary educational institutions founded and governed by American Indians for American Indians. While the great majority of Tribal Colleges are tribally chartered and controlled through boards of directors that are entirely or predominantly Native American, there are also three other categories of Tribal Colleges. Tribally Controlled Vocational Technical Institutions, such as Crownpoint Institute and United Tribes Technical College are chartered by one or more federally recognized tribes and funded under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act. Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute and Haskell Indian Nations University are representatives of the third category, namely those colleges that are owned, operated and funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Finally, a federally chartered college, the Institute of American Indian Arts, is governed and managed through a national board of trustees appointed by the president (O'Laughlin 7-8; AIHEC "The Collective Spirit").

Tribally Controlled Colleges have a dual mission that distinguishes them from any other higher education institution. On the one hand, they combine Western higher education models with traditional American Indian forms of knowledge to prepare students for employment or continuation of higher education at mainstream universities. On the other hand, they work to ensure that students are culturally grounded (Stein, "American Indian and Minorities" 1). As Machamer points out, Western and traditional educational systems do not necessarily have to be "mutually exclusive but can inform and sustain each other" (11). Students can gain "the necessary intellectual tools from the academic and vocational/occupational curriculum and the pride, knowledge, and strength from the Indian/Tribal curriculum to succeed" (Stein "Indian/Tribal" 32). Tribal Colleges are unique in that they are the only colleges in the world that support and teach their tribal groups' respective cultural values and languages. This commitment towards cultural preservation and transmission forms what Stein calls the bedrock upon which Tribal Colleges have been formed ("Indian/Tribal" 32).

Although Indian Community Colleges are as unique in size, facilities, and degree programs as the tribes they serve, there are several aspects these institutions share. They serve the smallest minority in the US and cater to a group who otherwise might not have been able to attend and graduate from a university (AIHEC "Tribal Colleges" A-1-A-2). The majority of TCUs serve geographically isolated Native American populations on or near reservations (Thornton 35). Accredited by regional accreditation agencies, all Tribal Colleges started out as two-year institutions with certificate and associate degree offerings, responding to the initial goal of Indian Colleges to provide vocational training and job preparation. Although the majority of these TCUs remain two-year community colleges, some have also begun to offer Bachelor and Master's degrees. Additionally, all Tribally Controlled Colleges have articulation and transfer agreements, as well as partnerships with four-year degree granting universities (Kaya 244). According to data

from 1998, the majority of TCU students earn Associate degrees (73%), followed by Bachelor's degrees (14%) and Certificates (13%). The degrees and programs offered at Tribal Colleges are directly related to tribal community needs, with the most popular fields of study being business, health professions, education, computer/office technology and vocational/technical trades (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, *Championing Success* 21).

Tribal Colleges, although open-admission schools, have a predominantly Native American student body that differs from traditional student populations at mainstream universities. The majority of students at TCUs are older than average college students. Nonetheless, a recent trend is that student bodies at many Tribal Colleges are growing younger, and more students of traditional college age enroll at these institutions (AIHEC "Who goes" C-3). Also, most students at TCUs are female. According to AIHEC, in the academic year 2004-2005, 52% of all enrolled students at Tribal Colleges were American Indian females, whereas only 28% were American Indian males (AIMS Fact Book 33). Further characteristics of Tribal College students are that a significant number of students are single parents, or they have other family obligations. Moreover, many students are part of the first generation in their family to attend a college (Carnegie Foundation 31). According to a study by the American Indian College Fund, half of all students at a Tribal College attend part-time, and many have job responsibilities outside of school. The income of students and their families is in most cases far below the national average, and therefore most require federal aid (Cunningham & Redd 13).

Although American Indians constitute a significant proportion of administrators, staff, and students at TCUs, the great majority of instructors at Tribal Colleges, 61%, are non-Natives with efforts underway to increase the number of Native faculty. Despite salaries sometimes considerably lower than at other colleges and difficulty in finding adequate opportunities for spouses, studies by Richard A. Voorhees found that Tribal College faculty tend to be satisfied with their jobs and more altruistic than their colleagues at mainstream universities (Voorhees and Adams 20). Tribal College faculty are proportionally somewhat younger than their counterparts at non-Indian universities, and many instructors' motives for teaching include a sense of commitment to the respective Indian communities, as well as the desire to make a positive difference in the lives of students (Voorhees 2-8).

### **Salish Kootenai College**

Salish Kootenai College is a Tribal College located on the Flathead Reservation in the northwestern part of Montana.<sup>5</sup> Chartered in November 1977 by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, it is according to Gerald Slaten:

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<sup>5</sup> The Flathead Indian Reservation is home to three tribes: the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille. The Salish and Pend d'Oreille are Salish-speaking tribes. Historically, the Salish and Pend d'Oreille have been close neighbors. The Kootenai speak a separate language (Brown, "Note on Tribes").

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A dream, a long time in the making.... The dream is to provide culturally relevant higher education for the Salish and Kootenai people within their own community. The realization is Salish Kootenai College.”

Previous to the establishment of Salish Kootenai College, the higher education situation for the Native people on the Flathead Indian Reservation was anything but bright. During the period from 1935 to 1976, only 41 tribal members earned a college degree (“SKC” 2). Tyro speaks of a 50% drop-out rate of Salish and Kootenai tribal members in mainstream higher education facilities before Salish Kootenai College was created (61). The lack of a support system for Native American students, culture shock, isolation, financial difficulties and inadequate academic preparation constitute some of the reasons why only few Native students and Salish/Kootenai tribal members attended or graduated from a mainstream college before the establishment of Salish Kootenai College (O’Donnell 23).

With social, political and legislative changes underway in the 1960s and 70s, and as a response to decades of ineffective education, tribes in Montana, among them the Confederated Salish and Kootenai, started to establish their own institutions of higher learning on their respective reservations. Created to improve Indian education on the reservation, SKC was established in January 1977 (O’Donnell ii, 1-26).

The first years of operation were not just characterized by the struggle of finding facilities. Funded by a mix of partly unsteady federal, state, and tribal grant programs, SKC suffered from what O’Donnell refers to as a lack of “internal structure and ... external support that defined an institution of higher education” (109). Funding problems as well as unresolved matters such as credit transferability and accreditation were core issues the college had to deal with in the beginning. In 1979 SKC submitted an application to the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges and received candidacy status in 1980. With candidacy status, the college was qualified for federal financial aid programs for students. This status also helped to strengthen SKC’s academic reputation and credibility with external organizations. In 1984, as the first Tribal College in Montana and the northwest United States, SKC received full accreditation status. The main funding problems were alleviated with the positive conclusion of a feasibility study, which was vital in efforts to receive funds for Native students from the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act (O’Donnell 93-166). Despite federal funding, the college was nevertheless forced to apply for additional grants in order to survive. In 1981 Salish Kootenai Community College was renamed Salish Kootenai College (SKC). For many foundations willing to support the college, the term community college misleadingly implied that SKC was supported by local taxes. The name change was made to avoid confusion about the status of the college and to ease the donation process. The college’s support by the tribes varied according to economic conditions and was also subject to regulations of the accreditation agency, since the college needed to remain at ‘arm’s length’ from the tribal government (O’Donnell 141, 171-173).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The expression ‘remaining at arm’s length’ refers to the importance of Tribal Colleges to be as independent as possible from tribal governments in budgeting, financial planning, and governance.

Based on educational needs assessments in 1976 and 1981, as well as various tribal surveys, the college developed degree and study programs that aimed at meeting the needs of individuals, the community, and tribal organizations (O'Donnell 146-162). The first courses offered at SKC were forestry classes, reflecting the dominant industry on the reservation and the importance of the timber industry in western Montana, as well as the need for qualified tribal members educated in forest technology. Programs in secretarial skills reflected the need for employees in tribal offices, and the early childhood education degree responded to the lack of qualified personnel for day care and Head Start programs on the Flathead Reservation (Machamer 24).

Even with many obstacles to overcome in the beginning, it soon became clear that Salish Kootenai College was offering a higher education alternative that many found preferable to previously available non-Indian colleges. Slater argues that the college provided more “comprehensive and effective college, vocational, and adult education services for Indian people on the Flathead Reservation than all the efforts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs since the Hellgate Treaty of 1855” (O'Donnell 251). Until 2006, SKC awarded 2,536 certificates, associate and bachelor degrees to its students. In the year 2006 alone, 194 degrees were conferred to graduates, thereby creating the largest graduating class in the history of Salish Kootenai College (AIMS SKC 1).

Today, Salish Kootenai College, operating on a quarter system and lead by founding president Joseph McDonald, offers Certificates and Associate degrees to its students. Unlike many Tribal Colleges which are two-year schools, SKC's students can also register for eight Bachelor's degrees (Robbins 57). Salish Kootenai College also has articulation agreements with Montana's four-year colleges and universities.

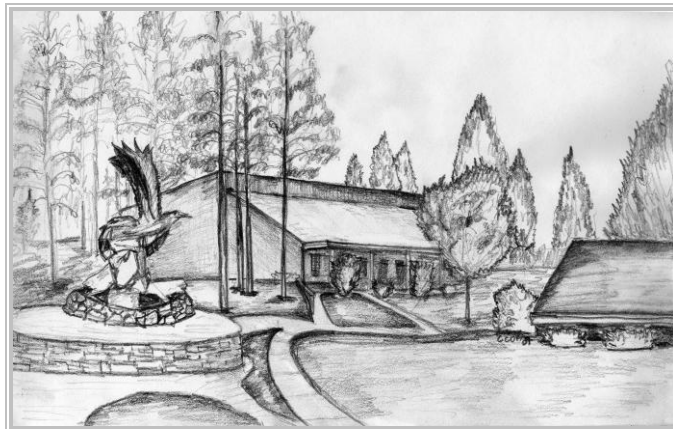


Figure 1: Salish Kootenai College Campus , Source: Drawing by Camilla Cok Bozeman, Montana.

In addition to traditional on-campus course offerings, SKC is widely recognized among Tribal Colleges as a leader in online and distance education providing Internet-based and satellite courses. Courses are also delivered through video conferencing and through the local TV station (*SKC Catalog* 1-15).

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Although an open-admission school, Salish Kootenai College has a predominantly Native American student body. In the fall quarter of 2005, 872 of 1,087 students (80%) were Native American. Whereas Salish Kootenai tribal members and descendents represent 37% of native enrollment, the college also attracts students from many different Indian Nations throughout the North American Continent (AIMS SKC 1, 28). In 2005-2006, for instance, students from 107 federally recognized tribes attended SKC (SKC webpage 1). SKC is unique among Tribal Colleges in Montana in its diverse student population, with students representing such a wide array of different Indian Nations. Moreover, the college has the largest percentage of non-Indian students of all Tribal Colleges in Montana (Stein).

As already mentioned in section 2, the majority of students at Tribal Colleges are female. This also holds true for SKC. In 2005, 684 students (63%) were female and 403 (37%) male. Full-time students make up 69% of the student body, whereas 31 % attend part-time (AIMS SKC 1). In recent years, students at SKC have also become younger, a trend that can be seen at many Tribal Colleges in the nation.

The college employs full and part-time instructors, and prefers its teaching personnel to have master's or doctorate degree. In some cases, teaching personnel are not required to have a formal degree. This is the case for classes related to Native American culture. These are taught by instructors and cultural experts who are endorsed by one of the cultural committees on the Flathead Reservation. In vocational education programs, faculty members need to demonstrate relevant degrees, certification, and expertise in their fields (SKC Self-Study IV-3).

As is the case at many Tribally Controlled Colleges in the nation, although the numbers have increased, Native Americans are still a minority among the faculty of SKC, while staff are mainly American Indian (SKC Self-Study IV-3). Increasing the number of native faculty is complicated by various factors, such as the availability of better paying jobs for tribal members off the reservation, the relatively small numbers of Native Americans with advanced degrees, an increased focus on academic certification by accreditation agencies, and a higher percentage of non-Indians applying due to the population composition on the Flathead Reservation (Voorhees and Adam 20). Despite these obstacles, SKC's goal is to recruit more native faculty, especially tribal members (A 4). The aim is to have native faculty who understand the specific needs of American Indian students, and who serve as a role model Native students can identify with (Ceballos). The number of SKC alumni who started to work at the college after graduation attests to the efforts of the college to educate and rear its own personnel. It will nonetheless remain a challenge for Tribal Colleges in general, and SKC more specifically, to enlist more Native faculty and staff.

### **Individual Student Empowerment at Salish Kootenai College**

Since their emergence in the 1970s, Tribal Colleges have brought educational opportunity to reservations and encouraged the educational attainment of individual American Indian students. Many Tribally Controlled Colleges provide higher education



to Native Americans who were not adequately served by mainstream postsecondary institutions before (AIHEC “Tribal Colleges” C-1). Salish Kootenai College is no exception. One tribal member emphasized that SKC was opened “to give our [Salish & Kootenai] children a chance, an opportunity for higher education” (Dolson).

Chartered by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council and controlled by a board of directors that consists of enrolled Salish and Kootenai tribal members, the first important feature of SKC is its provision of an affordable and accessible higher education to its mainly native students (Bigcrane). Offering an affordable education is a challenge the college has to face every quarter. Although Tribal Colleges like Salish Kootenai College are funded by the Tribally Controlled Community Act (TCCA), they receive far less funding than nontribal community colleges. Compared to public community colleges, they receive about \$1,700 less per student, and in comparison to four-year universities almost \$5,000 less (Thornton 23). The amount appropriated by the TCCA has never matched the authorized funding. Specifically, in 2006, the amount allocated per student was only \$4,550, although \$6,000 was authorized by Congress. Additionally, already limited federal support does not keep up with growing enrollment, and the overall funding level has continually declined since 1982 (Hill 9). Salish Kootenai College, as many other TCUs can only rely on tuition and fees on a small scale because many Native students’ socioeconomic backgrounds would not allow for substantial increases in tuition (AIHEC “Tribal Colleges” E-3). Although reliance on restricted and competitive soft money makes long term planning challenging (SKC Self-Study VII-4), it is one of many ways the college tries to keep tuition for its students affordable.

Like many Tribal Colleges that are situated on their respective reservations, SKC’s location enables Salish and Kootenai students to remain on their home reservation and in their home community. This constitutes an important aspect for many SKC students, who are unwilling or unable to leave their home community due to family obligations or job responsibilities. Students can attend college in their own community and in a familiar cultural setting, which, according to Pavel, strengthens the students’ cultural identity (145).

This leads to a second crucial aspect of Tribal Colleges in general and SKC in particular. The college offers higher education in a culturally based and culturally sensitive environment (Perez). Margaret Perez points out that students at SKC are “able to learn in an atmosphere that is conducive to practicing their culture and traditions” (“Circle of Nations”). This way, students can get involved in their own culture and are “given an opportunity to learn about Salish and Kootenai, and the Pend d’Oreille people” (Bigcrane). At Salish Kootenai College culture-related activities such as powwows, traditional singing and drumming are offered. Moreover, students have the opportunity to take part in cultural celebrations and tribal ceremonies. The Agnes Vanderburg Summer Camp, which allowed students to “learn Indian traditional skills and to practice Indian culture,” is one example of cultural education at the college (O’Donnell 146). Held in the summer months, the Agnes Vanderburg Camp is led by the well-known Salish elder Agnes Vanderburg and taught the language, customs and crafts of the Salish and Pend

D'Oreille (O'Donnell 146). Offerings like these provide Native students with the opportunity to learn about their tribal heritage and they in turn can help preserve and revitalize tribal culture.<sup>7</sup>

Academically, the implementation of Native American learning styles, including instruction in a more cooperative, relaxed, and informal teaching style than at mainstream universities as well as the preference of interactive oral methods to reading or writing activities, contributes to a culturally based education (Kelley 3).<sup>8</sup> The college is also sensitive to cultural values and cultural expression through other means. The importance of extended family support is recognized through SKC's policy of students being excused from school in case of illness in the family. Students can also leave school when cultural ceremonies take place (Lozar). In Native cultures, elders play a significant role and are respected for their knowledge and wisdom. Salish Kootenai College acknowledges this importance of tribal elders, which can be seen in the fact that college buildings are named after Salish and Kootenai elders. As a sign of respect, the college also closes its doors when a tribal elder dies (Whitaker). Consequently, the cultural values and beliefs of students are not changed, but reinforced and supported (Boyer, "Tribal Colleges" 118).

Salish Kootenai College is moreover striving to incorporate American Indian and Salish/Kootenai culture into its curriculum, programs, and activities (Tyro 55). Accordingly, the college tries to incorporate Native and tribal culture not only into cultural classes, but also into non-cultural courses, such as in the academic fields of business, science, forestry, history and education (AIHEC "Tribal Colleges" B-1). For instance, in education courses, such as "Teaching the American Indian Child," prospective teachers learn important information on the education of American Indian elementary and middle school students in order to meet their unique educational needs. The course, among other objectives, also explores the importance of traditional beliefs and Indian teaching methods, as well as the impact of Native American teachers on Native students (Ruhman 1-9). Thus, students are encouraged to provide cultural input into the class and learn to apply Native values in their workplaces.

However, it should be noted that the incorporation of Native culture and/or specific Salish and Kootenai culture into non-cultural classes is not an easy task. As noted earlier, SKC has a diverse student body that, besides Salish and Kootenai students includes a substantial number of Native students from many other Indian Nations and cultures. Consequently, it is a challenge for some college affiliates to determine to what extent Salish and Kootenai values, as well as other tribes' values, can be combined and included into the curriculum. For instance, one interviewee felt that more emphasis should be placed on Salish and Kootenai culture rather than on other tribal culture(s) in general (A 6).

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<sup>7</sup> The preservation of culture and language constitutes an important component of SKC's mission. There are, however, some interviewees who feel that more efforts should be directed towards the perpetuation of Salish/Kootenai culture and language at the college (A 18, A 5).

<sup>8</sup> It is my observation that the extent to which Native teaching styles are incorporated is mainly up to the individual departments and teaching personnel.

Besides the colleges' efforts towards providing a culturally sensitive learning environment and curriculum, every certificate and degree program at SKC has general education requirements. The SKC Catalog emphasizes that "consistent with SKC's mission as a tribal college, general education construction advances knowledge and awareness of Native American cultures, particularly the Salish, Pend d'Oreilles, and Kootenai tribal cultures, histories, and languages" (16). Students, according to their degree program, have to complete a certain number of credits in Native American Studies to graduate. All students, regardless of their major, attend a course on the history of Native Americans in the United States (Dolson).

A third important feature of Salish Kootenai College, as pointed out by various interviewees, is its focus on motivating and helping students to succeed, combined with its responsiveness to students' needs (Harmon). McDonald illustrated SKC's response to students' needs in reporting that "SKC students say they feel that they are treated as important individuals and that their personal needs are taken into consideration" (McDonald in Robbins 58).

The college helps learners in achieving their goals by providing a supportive learning environment to its students (Tyro 324). Due to similar backgrounds, beliefs and ideals, students can relate to each other, and a sense of community and belonging, as well as a family-like atmosphere, positively influences students' success (A 6). Further important aspects in creating a supportive and motivating learning environment for students at Salish Kootenai College are small class sizes and individualized attention. In 2003, the average class size was 18 students, and in 2005, with an average of 14 students, the class size was even smaller (AIMS 21). Being a student at a small college offers multiple advantages. The teacher-to-student ratio is a lot lower than at mainstream colleges, and with smaller classes more one-on-one instruction, more individual attention, and closer relationships with faculty are possible (Zimmer).

According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy "faculty play an incredibly important and distinct role for students attending TCUs" ("Championing" 17). At SKC, faculty as well as staff constitute a crucial component for successful student learning, (Kinkade). At the Dental Assisting Program, for example, students and faculty/staff work closely together in achieving educational goals. All dental assisting students interviewed emphasized their close relationship with faculty members, as well as the departments' advising competency.

As briefly noted in part 2 of this essay, Voorhees and Adams assert that Tribal College faculty tend to be more altruistic than faculty at mainstream universities, and many people work at tribal institutions of higher education not for personal gain but rather for altruistic motives and towards a higher goal (20-21). Stein further points out that "the strongest characteristic" of staff and faculty is their "dedication to the students" ("Tribal Colleges" 264). At SKC, these characteristics clearly apply as well. McDonald described the teaching faculty at SKC as very committed. For instance, despite busy schedules, faculty and staff members have an open-door policy. They find the time to help students with problems in class and also assist and help find solutions for students

with attendance problems (Morris and O'Donnell 19). Faculty also provide encouragement and motivation (Boyer, "Native American Colleges" 34). These attributes, combined with the caring nature and emotional support of faculty and staff, help SKC students persist through college and enable them to be successful. Helping students achieve their goals and "going the extra mile" for their students is not just true for faculty, but for staff working at Indian Colleges as well (McKenzie 29).

Like many Tribal Colleges, SKC has a wide variety of student support services that are specifically geared towards Native students and their needs. It shows the importance of serving students and makes it clear that at Tribal Colleges like SKC serving the student comes first (O'Dell). Subdivided into several departments, Student Services at the college assist students with all issues related to college success, such as helping students with entrance requirements and program completion, as well as instructional, student life, and job placement services (*SKC Catalog* 4-9).

In an interview Wayne Stein points out that Tribal Colleges are patient and willing to bring students "up to speed academically." Through high school equivalency programs, tutoring, and special preparatory courses prior to enrollment the college helps to alleviate the oftentimes inadequate academic preparation of new students. At the Career Center, students get necessary educational information and tutoring services are available. Flexible and expanded programs at SKC in the form of television- or Internet-based classes also allow employed and nontraditional students to receive higher education (*SKC Catalog* 3-9). In addition to the academic support, Salish Kootenai College is also responsive to study-related students' needs. The Career Center, for instance, assists with finding employment in the form of job recruitment and placement activities (*SKC Self-Study* III-27). Counseling is available to students through the counseling office. At the cafeteria/Student Union building students can socialize, eat and study, and many of the activities planned by the Student Senate take place at this building. In the Student Senate, as well as in other student organizations, students can gain experience in leadership, communication, governance, and community building. Additionally, the college offers recreational activities to its students, such as basketball, volleyball and golfing (*AIMS* 1-50). The provision of child care, student housing, and a transportation system are other crucial components for students' success at SKC (Fisher). The SKC Child Care Center provides a place for children whose parents are studying and exposes children to Salish and Kootenai values, traditions, languages, music and art (*SKC Self-Study* III-42). Through student housing, students and their families are offered convenient and affordable on-campus accommodations. For students without a means of transportation, the SKC transportation system ensures mobility and the opportunity to reach the SKC campus and other locations on the reservation (*AIMS* 1-50).

### **Closing Remarks**

Prior to the creation of Salish Kootenai College, the higher education situation for Native people on the Flathead reservation was suboptimal, and a high drop-out rate of Salish and Kootenai tribal members in secondary education attested to the fact that mainstream higher education efforts were generally unsuccessful. This trend was

effectively reversed by establishing a Tribal College on the Flathead Indian Reservation at which graduation rates today are rising steadily. The college meets the educational needs of its students and provides accessible, affordable higher education in a culturally based learning environment. As a student-centric institution of higher learning, it focuses on motivating and helping students succeed, and responds to specific Native student needs. SKC incorporates a family-like atmosphere, small class size, and individualized attention. Salish Kootenai College is also providing a team of dedicated faculty and staff, as well as academic and study-related student support services that positively impact students' academic performances.

As this article has demonstrated, Salish Kootenai College, like many other Tribally Controlled Community Colleges in the US, fulfills a significant role in educating its Native student population, and therefore presents an important higher education model for its Native American student population. The inability of mainstream universities to respond to the specific needs of American Indian students, coupled with the growing demands of Native people for higher education opportunities as offered through Tribal Colleges, represent clear indications that TCUs, like Salish Kootenai College, will continue to play a crucial role in educating individual Native Americans in the future.

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