February 28, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC  20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the nation's 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities, which together are the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, I am writing to strongly urge you to reinstate the separate Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities. The reestablishing of a White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities is a necessary step to ensuring that the first Americans are included in new and existing strategies to achieve your vital national goal – to lead the world in college degrees conferred by 2020.

The nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), which operate over 75 campuses in the 15 states within whose geographic boundaries 80 percent of American Indian reservations and federal Indian trust land lie, are unique public institutions of higher education, providing high quality, culturally-based education opportunity to American Indians and Alaska Natives who have been largely excluded from state- and federally-supported higher education programs. Chartered by their respective federally-recognized Indian tribes or the federal government, TCUs have a special relationship with this government, recognized in the U.S. Constitution and established by more than 400 treaties, several Supreme Court decisions, Congressional action, and the ceding of more than one billion acres of land to the federal government. This political relationship demands our special attention. However, over the past several years, the federal commitment to tribally-controlled higher education has waned at times, and the majority of TCUs remain the most poorly funded institutions of higher education in the country. In fact, TCUs still cannot fully participate in many federally-supported higher education and research programs, and their funding lags far behind even that of other Minority Serving Institutions.

To support the vital work of TCUs and in an historical recognition of Tribal sovereignty and tribal control of Indian education, President William J. Clinton established the first White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities by Executive Order, in 1996. Acknowledging the "integral and essential" role that TCUs have in their communities, including helping Indian tribes create economic opportunity, build an American Indian/Alaska Native workforce, and preserve rapidly disappearing Indigenous languages, President George W. Bush signed a new TCU Executive Order within 18 months of taking office and maintained it throughout his presidency.

The unique status and immense value of TRIBAL institutions of higher education must be acknowledged. We strongly believe that just as the Historically Black Colleges and Universities were singled out for special recognition and attention by continuing their own executive order --- the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities must be immediately be restored.

Respectfully,

Carrie L. Billy
President & CEO