February 8th, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

As an important component of the national effort to lead the world in graduation rates by 2020, we urge you to sign, without further delay, a new Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities. A revitalized White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities is one of the best ways to help ensure that the first Americans are included in new and existing strategies to achieve our vital national goal.

The nation’s 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), which operate 76 campuses in the 15 states within whose geographic boundaries 80 percent of American Indian reservations and federal Indian trust land lie, are unique community-based institutions of higher education, providing high quality, culturally-based education opportunity – from cradle through career – 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 important 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/Alaskan 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.
We urge you to continue this vital national effort – begun and sustained in a bipartisan way by the previous two administrations – by signing a new Executive Order on Tribal Colleges and Universities as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Senator Max Baucus

Senator Jon Tester

Senator John Hoeven

Senator Tom Udall

Senator Mark Begich

Senator Lisa Murkowski

Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand

Senator Heidi Heitkamp

Senator Amy Klobuchar

Senator Al Franken

Senator Patty Murray

Senator Tim Johnson