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Tribal colleges brace for further destructive impact of federal funding cuts

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Tribally controlled colleges serve surrounding tribal communities and are vital to its community members.

Fort Peck Community College

Tribal colleges are struggling more than usual as they feel the impact of reduced federal dollars they urgently need for financial stability. Federal spending cuts have drastically affected state [higher education](#) across the nation, and tribally controlled colleges have additional uncertainties in light of the financial reductions.

One such stressed tribally controlled college is **Fort Peck Community College** in northeastern Montana, which serves an isolated rural

community. Due to sequestration, not only is the college unable to hire the quality math and science instructors it needs, but it also struggles to retain its current faculty whose members are experiencing results of the college's funding problems. Faculty members are dealing with pay freezes and short-term contract offers as well as multiple role assignments. Mark Sansaver, the college's grants manager, said he is unsure how much of the faculty will leave in the coming year, but he expects it will be five.

The 36 other tribal colleges that deliver education and services for 88,000 students from the more than 230 federally recognized Indian tribes have the same story to tell. Across the board nationally the federal spending cuts that went into effect in March could have damaging consequences on K-12 schools as well as all public colleges, and even research universities that also feel the frustration of funding cuts. But the financial cuts are especially hurting for tribal colleges that depend on federal programs for the operating support needed to serve their mostly low-income students, and without much in the way of state funding or other donations.

Cheryl Crazy Bull, president of the **American Indian College Fund**, said that the Universities Assistance Act of 1978 provides the majority of funds to operate tribal colleges. In addition, tribal colleges are dependent on competitive grants from federal agencies such as **National Endowment for the Humanities** and **National Science Foundation**. Consequently, any cuts to the Act and the granting agencies will negatively affect the tribal colleges and cause them to end programs and cut courses.

As it is faculty and staff at tribal colleges are already paid less than their peers elsewhere in the country. As an example, at **United Tribes Technical College** in North Dakota faculty members on average make \$40,000 and \$45,000, while at similar colleges not far away faculty can earn up to \$60,000. The college struggles to keep their faculty in place as employees leave for higher paying positions. At nearby colleges salaries are significantly higher. According to figures from American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), an American Indian faculty member at a tribal college on average earns \$38,762 to \$41,271, while at **North Dakota State** instructors on average earn \$53,300 (2012 data, the American Association of University Professors).

College Presidents Are Worried

Tribal college presidents are very worried. According to Cheryl Crazy Bull, the American Indian College Fund president, at a recent American Indian Higher Education Consortium conference tribal college presidents expressed their worries. “They spoke of their deep concerns – almost fear – that they will end up with a 30 percent cut in operations,” she said.

Tribal colleges are essential in Indian country. They play a vital role here, and without the full set of resources from Education Department programs and federal grants the effects could be detrimental, not only for their students but also for the surrounding tribal communities and its members that these colleges serve.

Additionally, according to Cheryl Crazy Bull, because tribal colleges are affordable they are

attractive options for students not members of federally recognized tribes. Too, the colleges are significant employers in the communities and therefore have a major economic impact on these areas. Colleges employ a range of workers including cafeteria servers, maintenance workers, and faculty who depend on the college's funding health for their jobs. A full range of community social services are also provided, such as food and nutrition services, GED classes, and wellness programs that often are the first to go when there are college funding cuts.

Some tribal colleges are seeking help from their tribes to help ensure college programs do not vanish. In addition, the North Dakota legislature and organizations such as the AIHEC have given support. In fact, support from the Fort Peck Tribes helped increase funding for Fort Peck Community College, which in turn saved its wellness program. Without the tribal funding support, the college would have had to cut that program, according to Mark Sandsaver the Fort Peck grants manager.

For now tribal colleges are bracing for further funding cuts, yet hoping for the best. "And I just know that if funding goes in the other direction, it would mean having a greater impact in tribal communities and being able to help students move back into their communities and make significant and profound change," Sandsaver hopefully said.

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