

Xest sxlxalt and kisuk kyukyit my Bison Family,

I write to you this morning with inspiration from the Fall Montana Tribal College Association (MTCA) and American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) Board Meetings, which are being held in the homelands of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians¹. Although my heart is at home with Salish Kootenai College, having the opportunity to gather in solidarity and collaborate to find solutions that support the collective work of all our Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) throughout Montana and the Nation is both inspiring and helpful.

This meeting holds the special emphasis of considering what makes our TCUs who and what we are and how we can support one another in our sustainability. Collectively, TCUs are institutions built to support the workforce and education needs of the Tribal Nations we serve, grounded in our cultures, languages, values, spirituality, and social systems. Salish Kootenai College embodies this by meeting the call of our ancestors and elders—our people deserve the very best education possible, both culturally and academically.

The meetings I am attending today and tomorrow are aimed at taking a hard look at how we can use our collective sovereign rights as chartered institutions to meet this call—the collective call of our Tribal Nations—by coming together to determine how TCUs can and should look, and by building our own accreditation system to ensure we can continue to strengthen this important work we do. I look forward to returning home with strengthened conviction and inspiration for the work we have ahead of us—as we mirror these efforts at SKC—and in partnership with our collective TCUs.

This two-day trip is especially helpful this fall as we find ourselves in the midst of a new era—an era aimed at reconnecting with our foundations, our Mission, our cultures, and our languages, and how we want to move forward together as a Tribal College. It comes at a time when we can really take a hard look at how we are perpetuating those goals, and how we can approach this important work in even more efficient and effective ways to better ensure the long-term sustainability of SKC for the futures of our Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the people of our homelands, the many Tribal Nations we serve, and our future generations.

Talking circles and individual conversations with students, employees, and other campus stakeholders, as well as extensive quantitative data analysis, have provided the guidance for the Institutional Gaps Analysis (Gaps Analysis) that was recently shared with campus. The resulting Gaps Analysis has highlighted SKC's successes, identified the root causes of the challenges we face, and provided actionable recommendations. One overall takeaway relates to how SKC has grown exponentially since our foundation was laid in 1976 and 1977. Through nearly 50 years, SKC has grown to serve the expressed needs of our Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Even as our infrastructure and processes have remained largely unchanged,

¹ <https://www.visitgreaterpalmsprings.com/blog/post/native-american-history-of-greater-palm-springs/>

SKC has come to be recognized as the “Harvard of Tribal Colleges”. SKC has become a place that provides all students with the greatest academic opportunities possible within our region—ranging from workforce certificates to bachelor’s degrees, and for more than five years, master’s degrees as well.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a “university” is defined as follows²:

...an institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees...specifically: one made up of an undergraduate division which confers bachelor's degrees and a graduate division which comprises a graduate school...

That, my friends, is exactly what our Salish Kootenai College has become. We are still recognized, however, as an educational institution that grants two-year degrees.

During this national climate of educational uncertainty, many of our TCUs are taking a hard look at the reality of the expansive work we truly do. In an effort to gain the recognition and access to resources necessary—and at the continued recommendation of our current accrediting body, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), as well as for the sake of sustainability—the SKC Board of Directors and I have decided SKC must change our name. Four of our fellow TCUs have made this transition already³. As part of our 50-year celebration in the Fall of 2027, Salish Kootenai College will honor the legacy and goals of our Founders by gaining recognition as a university—*Séliš Ksnanka Qlispé University* (SKQU).

Two years later, in the Fall of 2029, SKQU will begin classes in a semester format, likely with the option for block scheduling to even better support student success. This timeline, along with the additional resources we are collectively working to solidify, will allow our campus community to plan for and implement these transitions carefully and considerately.

This brings us back to our more immediate efforts. Our next step in this long-term plan is for campus stakeholders to use the findings from the Gaps Analysis and come together to think carefully and strategically about how we move forward over the coming years. By the end of this calendar year, we aim to have a strategic plan for this work in place. That Strategic Plan will provide the foundation for us to consider how we carry out our work in the years ahead.

I look forward to embracing this critical and exciting work with each and every one of you – students, campus stakeholders, and our Tribal and community partners.

Remember, Bison move through storms together. We can do this together for the good of all!

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/university>

³ <https://www.aihec.org/tcu-roster-and-profiles/>