



The Alyce Spotted Bear & Walter Soboleff
Commission on Native Children

Virtual Hearing: Tribal College and University Panels
Thursday, December 3, 2020 at 1 pm and 2:15 pm (Eastern)

This is the written testimony of Cynthia Lindquist, President, Cankdeska Cikana Community College (CCCC) with contact information provided in the letterhead. Dr. Lindquist is a member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe and has been President of CCCC since 2003.

I am most grateful for the establishment of the Commission on Native Children that includes the acknowledgment of two exemplary tribal leaders, Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff. Saying their names holds each of us to a high standard for work ethic and dedication. I am also appreciative of those selected to serve as members of the Commission on Native Children, as they are well-qualified professionals who will get something done. Thank you for the opportunity to support the purpose and efforts of the Commission on Native Children through my participation on the panel and submission of written testimony.

The three questions posed for the second panel are:

- *What's one creative idea you've had to support your students and community that you'd implement if you had the opportunity and resources?*
- *We know that TCUs have Native language and culture programs for students. What is your college doing to reach out to the community with those language and culture programs?*

- *What has the impact of COVID-19 been on your educational and community efforts? What supports would be helpful right now?*
- 1) If I had the opportunity and resources, the one creative idea I would implement would be to turn CCCC into an elite Dakota preparatory, residential school for high school juniors and seniors, along with college freshmen and sophomores!
 - 2) CCCC's core theme is *Think Dakota, Live Dakota* with Dakota culture and language courses and programming, staffed by Spirit Lake elders and knowledge keepers. For the fall 2020 semester, our Dakota language instructor has a class for the Spirit Lake Tribal Council members (six people) twice a week that is being conducted in-person in the Council chambers and following CDC protocols for the pandemic. Two of those Council members will achieve their associate's degree when they complete the class in December, but they will also be conversational speakers of the Dakota language!
 - 3) Like everyone, everywhere, CCCC and the Spirit Lake Dakota community are overwhelmed by the many losses and exhausted in dealing with the pandemic! At this juncture in dealing with COVID-19 for nine months, having the political delegation and federal offices just check in with us directly would not only be helpful, but also comforting. We need national leaders to be united in supporting the science and medical professionals as to the protocols for addressing the coronavirus.

Let me provide some background for my responses:

The Spirit Lake Tribe is located primarily in Benson County, North Dakota, in the northeastern part of the State. Tribal enrollment is 8,064, with about 4,400 members living on or near the reservation

boundaries. Approximately 37% of the population is under the age of 18 (Spirit Lake Tribe Enrollment Office 10/2018). Benson County has nearly double the U.S. Poverty Rate of 14 percent, and the Tribe's unemployment rate has hovered at 57% for years (2010 U.S. Census). The reservation high school graduation rate is 55% for 2013-2015, according to the ND Department of Public Instruction (2017). Only 72% of Spirit Lake tribal members are high school graduates, compared to 89.3% for all North Dakotans (2010 U.S. Census). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 28% of the U.S. population has bachelor's degrees, 26% for North Dakotans, and only 7% for the Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe.

Historical trauma, institutional racism, endemic poverty, drugs, rural isolation, extreme winter weather, and now the coronavirus, are all interrelated factors that affect and impact families and children on the Spirit Lake reservation. An analysis conducted by the State and Tribal officials in North Dakota determined that American Indian children in North Dakota were more likely than white children to have experienced:

- Neighborhood violence (5.3 times)
- Parental incarcerations (5.1 times)
- Witnessing domestic violence (4.2 times)
- Living with someone with alcohol/drug problems (3.8 times)
- Living with someone with mental illness (3.0 times)
- Divorce/parental separation (2.2 times)

(Adverse Childhood and Family Experiences (ACFE) Among American Indian Children in North Dakota: Analysis of 2011-12 National Survey of Children's Health Data. ND Department of Public Instruction, ND Department of Health 2017)

Studies reveal that high ACFE scores are associated with later life risks and conditions such as obesity, substance abuse, depression, and lung, heart, and liver disease. They are also linked to homelessness and criminal justice involvements.

In 2017, CCCC coordinated and supported several other studies with high school students attending the four schools that serve the Spirit Lake reservation regarding education and employment. Those studies are available on CCCC's web site (www.littlehoop.edu) under the Research menu. The surveys were conducted on all the North Dakota reservations, with those reports available on the CCCC web site for each school/community. A telling result was that the students at the reservation high school not only had lower scores for confidence in general, but also for obtaining employment.

As part of this survey work with high school students, and specific for Spirit Lake, interviews were conducted with 20 students – 10 who were in school and 10 who had dropped out. The results of the interviews were not made public, but were shared with the Spirit Lake Tribal Council and the Tribal Stakeholder Advisory Board, who oversaw the research process.

As a tribal member, an elder, and someone in a position of leadership (CCCC President), it was devastating to read the narrative of the interviews with the 20 Spirit Lake high school students. My initial reaction was to want to know who they were, to pull them out of the 'home' and to try protect them and keep them safe! These 16 and 17 year-old individuals had no idea what stress or burdens they were carrying and that they should just be 'normal' teenagers, not wondering where they were going to get food to feed their younger siblings or if mom/dad was OK because they were on a binge or

incarcerated. A female respondent told of how she tried to hang herself because of sexual abuse by a relative; her friends found her in time, and they all went to school the next morning! And yet, these students also expressed hope in wanting to make something of themselves but, were unsure as to how to do that.

As tribal members, these high school students ultimately become students at CCCC. CCCC's enrollment has been approximately 200 students per semester with primarily Native students, but we average 12-15 non-Natives each semester. The typical CCCC student is a 32-year old single mother with three children who works but who is also eligible for federal financial aid. Most CCCC students are not prepared for college work, do not understand the college pathway, and lack the confidence that they can and will succeed in completing college. This is in addition to the historical trauma, institutional racism, economic hardships and lack of opportunity, along with the lingering suspicion that education is not 'something good' given many of our parents and grandparents were products of boarding schools, which were about forced assimilation.

1) So, back to question one and my response that if I had the opportunity and resources, I would create a Dakota Preparatory School that would be elite with a waiting list! This would be a residential school for high school juniors, seniors, and college freshmen and sophomores. Students would achieve their high school diploma or equivalency, then the associate degree, then transfer out for the bachelor's. There would be strict rules for personal conduct and expectations following Dakota cultural values. Uniforms would be worn by all – faculty, staff, students. Students would live in communal housing that would accommodate single and family students. Each student

would have living and school/college assignments that are monitored. All costs would be covered, included a living wage stipend, as an integral component of the curriculum would be budget and personal finances. It would be a protected and nurturing environment toward the development of students into adulthood.

- 2) Like all the tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), our core mission is the teaching, learning, and perpetuation of Native culture and language. Tribal elders, healers, and knowledge keepers are integral to accomplishing that core mission. Pre-pandemic, CCCC hosted many community, cultural events and activities, in addition to the academic classes for Dakota culture, history, and language. CCCC has suffered irreplaceable losses due to COVID-19, and at this time, it is not over. We are assessing what we have in way of documented cultural teachings, specific to the Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe. This assessment is creating an inventory of tools – i.e. VHS tapes, voice recordings, videos, etc. – that captured Spirit lake elders, healers, and tribal leaders. This inventory will be shared and digitized for use by CCCC faculty, as well as others, such as school teachers or tribal programs. Positive outcomes due to the pandemic is the use of technology, the connection of people and organizations, and the sharing of resources that is strengthening and expanding indigenous cultural knowledge.
- 3) The Spirit Lake Tribe and CCCC established and followed the CDC guidelines for COVID-19 in March, 2020, for mask wearing and social distancing. Our community had very few cases up until early fall; since then, it has skyrocketed, just like the rest of the country. There have been, and continues to be, significant losses – many tribal elders and knowledge keepers and also younger tribal members, such as the CCCC Head Start Director. Fortunately, as a small community

college, CCCC has been able to adapt and respond with all efforts toward student retention, not only using online platforms for classes to better engage students, faculty, and student services staff.

The impact for our Head Start program is most troubling as that program not only serves children 0-4 years old, but also includes pregnant woman. How do you deliver child development education programming remotely for 0-4 year olds? CCCC Head Start became a 'hot spot' within Benson County and North Dakota on October 1, 2020, due to more than half the Head Start staff coming in close contact or testing positive for COVID-19 and thus having to quarantine. We have not had children in the classrooms since September, and tentatively – hopefully – plan for children to return in late January, 2021.

CCCC Head Start is delivering meals and activity packets (for the older children) to 75 homes. Of those 75 homes, 16 do not have computers, six do not have internet, and the 69 who do have internet are not sure how long they can keep the service because they cannot pay for it. CCCC built a beautiful Head Start facility that opened in the fall of 2018. The center has 19 classrooms, but generally, the program only operates 12-14 classrooms, as we do not have teachers with bachelor's in Early Childhood Education (ECE) as required by current law.

The Spirit Lake community needs credentialed tribal members to staff the Head Start program, the Tribe's child care center, and Tribal social services. To achieve this, we need funding for students that is sufficient to carry them through getting terminal degrees, with cohort style programming that focuses on tribal systems and structures. I am hopeful for CCCC's Head Start program, as we

have just been awarded a partnership grant from the Office of Head Start that will train 25 tribal members to achieve a bachelor's in ECE. I believe this might be a 'model' for the development of professional staff for the various child services programs needed for tribal communities. It would take federal and private funding to implement.

There is no word in Dakota for child. They are called wakanheza – sacred little ones. Every new mom and dad hopes to be a good parent and for the very best for their child. Academic and cultural education is the pathway to help parents achieve that goal. That is the work of tribal colleges and universities.

Pidamaya...thank you.



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