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'National Tribal Colleges and Universities Week' to guide native students across America

Nikki DiRico Anchor/Reporter Mar 3, 2021 Updated 8 hrs ago



Video player thumbnail showing a graduation ceremony. Text: 'National Tribal Colleges and Universities Week' to guide native students across America. Updated 8 hrs ago

UPDATE 3/4/2021: According to Senator Jon Tester's office, the resolution passed Wednesday night and 'National Tribal Colleges and Universities Week' officially began on February 28, 2021.

BROWNING, Mont. - Blackfeet Community College President Dr. Karla Bird is weighing in on U.S. Senators Jon Tester and Steve Daines' efforts to recognize tribal college triumphs on the national level and what that could mean for the future of Blackfeet Nation.

Monday the Senate announced officials led a bipartisan group of colleagues by designating the week beginning Feb. 28 as "National Tribal Colleges and Universities Week," which would highlight the importance of higher education in Indian Country.

"We've always been appreciative of their time but if this passes we do have a formal designation and it just really solidifies the commitment to Indian education," Bird said.

Montana officials have identified the ups and downs of secondary native education institutes for decades, but now they're working to highlight everything on a larger platform. The Senate must pass the resolution to officially take effect, then Blackfeet Community College could coordinate with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium to make any official celebration plans following local public health guidelines. According to Bird, nothing of the sort is set up for this week so far. Senator Tester's office expects plans to be passed sometime this week. For now, Bird is focusing on the positive influence her school has on students and staff both on and off the reservation.

"I think there's a sense of gratitude for the recognition. Tribal colleges, we're very unique in our educational system and we're able to provide Tribal Center education, we're able to provide education in some of the most remote communities, and we're able to serve unique populations in a sense that a large portion of our students are parents, a lot of students are first-generation students. To have recognition of our entities and our tribal education system is really an honor," Bird said.

Although COVID19 brought a difficult year of remote learning, her students and staff have worked hard to achieve success. Bird uses the President's List grade point average ranking system to define academic excellence.

"When COVID19 happened it was a very challenging time for us here at Blackfeet Community College. We shifted to remote learning and provided students with all of the resources they would need to work from home but our students were very successful. We found our enrollment (this Fall) was at 419, which was higher than the previous year when we were near 356. We've seen an increase in enrollment and at the end of the semester our President's list came out and we had over 90 students on our President's List, meaning that they received a 3.5 or higher as a grade point average. To me that's nearly 1 in 4 of our students. We're seeing a significant amount of success with online education," Bird said.

She attributes such success to more flexible hours of learning at home, a different format that is compatible with many different types of lifestyles, and being able to reach different demographics. Full time employees and stay at home parents can learn online on their own time.

During the pandemic, Blackfeet Community College offered a free Piikani online language class to the community with no capacity cap. Bird said the American Indian College Fund Transformative Grant made this possible and people can learn valuable professional and personal skills through her courses.

"We provide a type of education that you can not seek anywhere else through a Piikani-centered education. When students attend college here they really are in some ways finding themselves as a member of the Blackfeet Tribe or Piikani nation and that foundation is so imperative to successful endeavors in the future," Bird said.

Normally, Bird and select students would be visiting Washington, D.C. this week the meet with lawmakers and share their stories.

"When we go to Washington we call it 'Legislative Week.' Now we're doing it on Zoom but it's all about the students. Our students would prepare students, have dialogue with representative. We've always been so appreciative to have the ear of our legislatures and our representatives to share the success of tribal colleges and share our students' stories," Bird said.

She's hopeful this week will become nationally recognized and serve as a guiding light for native people across America.

"We really believe tribal colleges can build a solid foundation for our students," Bird said.

Tribal Colleges and Universities offer Native American students access to knowledge and skills grounded in cultural traditions and values. Montana is home to seven Tribal Colleges and Universities, the most of any state. These institutions serve thousands of Native and hundreds of non-Native students every year. Across the country, there are 37 Tribal Colleges and Universities operating 75 campuses in 16 states.