Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today announced that he has taken steps to address the change in accreditation status of the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI), a Bureau of Indian Education post secondary institution of higher learning in Albuquerque, N.M., by its accrediting organization, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. SIPI's status was changed from "accredited" to "candidate for accreditation" following a periodic review and evaluation by the HLC that examined the Institute's record from 2000 to 2010.

"I am deeply concerned about this setback for SIPI and its students," Echo Hawk said. "In response to this development, I have directed my education team to take all necessary steps to regain SIPI's status as a fully accredited institution as quickly as possible. To that end, the Office of the Assistant Secretary is working in close coordination with Bureau of Indian Education Director Keith Moore and SIPI President Sherry Allison to swiftly address and alleviate the deficiencies identified by the HLC."

The Assistant Secretary outlined his response to SIPI's change in status in a letter to tribal leaders dated August 26, 2010.

The change to "candidate for accreditation" status, which became effective on August 6, 2010, will not affect SIPI's eligibility for federal funding or its students' eligibility for federal and state financial aid programs. It also will not affect the transferability of academic credits earned by students prior to the August 6 effective date. Credits earned after August 6 and prior to SIPI regaining full accreditation, however, may transfer only to institutions that will permit them.

Allison, who was named president in December 2009, was formally notified of the change in status by the HLC in a letter dated July 2, 2010. According to the HLC, which performed its review in a site visit that took place the same month, SIPI failed to meet the first four of five criteria the Commission uses for all post secondary institutions. The HLC did note the high degree of commitment demonstrated by SIPI representatives to the Institute's mission and students and to improving its operations. The HLC also acknowledged as credible the BIE's plans for remediating SIPI's accreditation issues.

The Assistant Secretary and his education team will be working with tribal leaders, the U.S. Department of Education, the SIPI Board of Regents and the SIPI community over the coming months to prepare for the next HLC evaluation team visit, which is scheduled for March 2011. At that time, the team is expected to determine whether SIPI is continuing to meet "candidate for accreditation" eligibility requirements and if it is making reasonable progress toward meeting the criteria for full accreditation. In the meantime, the BIE and SIPI are developing a Performance Improvement and Action Plan (PIAP) to serve as a roadmap for the Institute's return to full accreditation status.

SIPI officials also are in discussions with the New Mexico Higher Education Department and other relevant associations in New Mexico, including the New Mexico Association of Community Colleges, New Mexico Independent Community Colleges and the New Mexico Council of University Presidents, with the goal of ensuring that credits earned after August 6 will continue to be transferable to all in-

state colleges and universities. The BIE will work with out-of-state institutions on a case-by-case basis to assist SIPI students seeking to transfer credits. The BIE is responsible for ensuring the implementation of federal education laws, including the No Child Left Behind Act, in 183 BIE-funded elementary and secondary schools and residential programs located on 64 reservations in 23 states serving approximately 42,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students and employing over 5,000 teachers, administrators and support personnel.

The BIE also provides resources and technical assistance to 124 tribally administered BIE-funded schools, 26 tribal colleges and universities and two technical colleges. It also directly oversees two post secondary institutions: SIPI and the Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan.

SIPI is a National Indian Community College established in 1971 at the request of the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico and other federally recognized tribes in the U.S. to help train American Indians and Alaska Natives for employment. It is advised by a national, tribally appointed Board of Regents. SIPI provides career technical training and transfer degree programs to students from the nation's 564 federally recognized tribes. It offers competitive job training programs; granting of Associate of Applied Science, Associate of Arts and Associate of Science degrees; and opportunities to transfer into four-year degree programs. SIPI's fall 2009 enrollment was 657 students from over 150 tribes.

The August 26, 2010, letter from Assistant Secretary Echo Hawk to tribal leaders may be viewed at http://www.indianaffairs.gov/idc/groups/public/documents/text/idc010785… .

The July 2, 2010, letter from the Higher Learning Commission to SIPI President Allison may be viewed at http://www.indianaffairs.gov/idc/groups/public/documents/text/idc010792….