

SISSETON WAHPETON COLLEGE: TCU Ongoing Challenges During COVID-19 Pandemic 117th Congress – February 2021

Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA). Sisseton Wahpeton College received urgently needed funding to move classes online to the extent possible and begin to address tremendous digital divide challenges. We were also able to provide emergency grants, equipment, and tuition assistance to our students to help them stay enrolled in classes. As we continue to support students during this difficult time and plan for on-site classes, our needs are growing. To address current pandemic-related challenges and plan for an uncertain future, TCUs need your ongoing support.

CARES and CRRSAA Funds at Sisseton Wahpeton College

- Student aid
- Safety/Sanitation
- Continued IT upgrades
- Classes are inadequately sized for reduced spacing due to physical distancing.
- Professional development for distance learning
- Ongoing student support.
- Expansion of learning, cafeteria, kitchen, and student support areas to accommodate for physical distancing.



Narrative: The College has had to react to the pandemic in many ways. Aside from this reactionary period, the college began to deliver courses for the entire campus, excluding culinary arts and carpentry. This endeavor required nearly a complete overhaul of the technology infrastructure in terms of IT upgrades to support distance learning platforms, classroom and labs, changes for physically distant instruction, and creating sanitary barriers in all office spaces for essential employees. Students were provided with laptops, emergency aid, online tutoring and counseling, and digital training in how to use new technology, but many times this was not sufficient. Many students are parents and have children receiving online instruction. The student may need to decide between caring for their children or attending a college class.



Ongoing Challenges at SISSETON WAHPETON COLLEGE

- Emotional, mental, and behavioral health concerns
- Short grant period – too short for TCUs and students
- Authorized uses needs to be expanded to include student learning and social area
- College placement and certification area is too small to accommodate enrollment even when the numbers have been reduced because of COVID.
- Limitations on CARES Act funding restricts from practical expansion, but allows for unsightly modular buildings that will be impractical if the pandemic ever resolves.

Narrative: Sisseton Wahpeton College is a beautiful college that sits on several hundred acres of land that was leased from the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate. The college has been working on a master strategic plan in collaboration with the American Indian College Fund and the Cunningham Group. The plan has revealed the need for increased spacing for the college. Due to the physical distancing mandates brought on by COVID19: classroom sizes have been reduced to less than half; the cafeteria has limited seating and cooking area; the student dormitory has been reduced to single occupancy; and the student support center is too small to include student support that is greatly needed during these pandemic times. The college has increased much of the technology inside the existing classrooms and safely spaced areas for physical distancing, but this has greatly hindered the student enrollment. The college needs to expand its campus walls pragmatically to allow for the return of our students, not add unsightly buildings outside the scope of our master plan.

REQUEST: \$24 TCU IT Service Fund: USDA – Rural Utility Service

The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide and homework gap and underscored the lack of broadband access across Indian Country. To address these deficiencies, Congress should establish a *permanent TCU IT Service Fund* within the existing (and previously under-used) **USDA-Rural Utilities Service Program**. An annual \$24 million set-aside for TCUs, which are the 1994 Land-grant institutions, is needed to cover ongoing equipment costs, maintenance and upkeep, infrastructure expansion, and IT staffing. If TCUs had adequate funding for IT service and infrastructure support, they would have already put in place many of the community-based mobile hot spots needed to address the “homework gap” on many reservations.



Sisseton Wahpeton College: Broadband and IT Challenges

- Cost of broadband is a greater issue for the Sisseton Wahpeton College and the students on the Lake Traverse Reservation than is access.
- Reoccurring monthly charges are a challenge, especially for more expensive software packages (e.g. Jenzabar and antivirus/malware).
 - The transition to subscription-based models for software used in classes, such as Adobe, Microsoft Office, and others places a greater burden on the college’s IT budget.
 - This is worse when students need access to this software when not on campus, as the college is unable to purchase a license or the software.
- Reliable and clean electrical power is a major issue, with blackouts and brownouts/spikes constantly damaging systems and lowering their lifespan.
 - Funding for appropriately sized generators and surge protector for the line would be a major help.
- Dedicated and predictable grant funding to upgrade workstations, servers, network devices, and software on a regular schedule more consistent with industry standards.
 - Until the last few months, some of the primary servers at SWC nearly a decade old and were running with out-of-date OS versions.
- **The greatest challenge is lack of funding for IT personnel and continuing professional training.**

Cost of Broadband for Sisseton Wahpeton College

- National average cost per Mbps is [\\$0.14 in the U.S. per month](#) (New America).
- College pays \$0.291 per Mbps (best rate based on 1 GB service) per month. Lowest level package is 250 Mbps with a cost of \$0.476 per month.
- Students and faculty at home pay \$0.291 per Mbps (best rate based on 1 GB service) per month. Lowest level package is 50 Mbps with a cost of \$1.279 per month.
- For low-income students this is a monthly bill that they are unlikely to be able to pay.
- Access is limited in more remote areas of the Lake Traverse Reservation.



REQUEST: \$500 million TCU Construction Fund: DOI – Bureau of Indian Education

A recent AIHEC survey of TCUs revealed a list of chronic facilities-related maintenance and rehabilitation needs, including student and faculty housing, classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. The TCUs have an estimated total need of \$489.75 million in deferred maintenance and rehabilitation and need \$837 million to fully implement existing master plans. A dedicated TCU deferred construction and maintenance/rehabilitation fund through the DOI-BIE would help meet the 21st century needs of *all* TCUs, including technology-enabled facilities; campus renovations; IT infrastructure; and facilities necessary for career, technical, and pipeline programs.

Sisseton Wahpeton College: Facilities Needs -- Construction, Maintenance, Rehabilitation

Narrative: Since the onset of COVID19 pandemic, like most Tribal Colleges, SWC began to offer its courses online. This is not the most desirable method of education delivery for the college or its students. As time progressed, the college students were offered an opportunity to take hybrid courses that allowed onsite delivery. However, this meant reduced classroom sizes for instruction. While onsite instruction is the college and its students’ most desirable method of instructional delivery, the campus is not sized adequately to house more students. The classrooms have been cut by more than half of their typical capacity. Our dormitories have been reduced to single occupancy suites, rather than double, again reducing our capacity by 50%. Our cafeteria and kitchen area have been reduced in size. The college’s student support and services area have been drastically reduced. This is all because of COVID. We cannot simply add unsightly modular to our campus, as it has taken years and years to accomplish a learning environment that does not cause further destruction of the natural environment surrounding the college. SWC greatly appreciates the funds provided by the federal government to assist us in trying to dissuade this malady from overwhelming our population, but we would greatly appreciate the ability to expand our physical and social distancing space by expanding the walls of our existing buildings, to spreading them out and disrupting our master plan any more than it has already been disrupted by this pandemic.