



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

**AUG 26 2010**

Dear Tribal Leader:

I am writing to inform you that as of August 6, 2010, the accreditation status of the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI), changed from “accredited” to “candidate for accreditation.” The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting agency for SIPI and other organizations of higher learning in the 19 states of the North Central region, has taken this step following a periodic review and evaluation examining SIPI’s record from 2000 – 2010.

I am deeply concerned about this setback for the Institute and its students. Since being sworn in as Assistant Secretary in May 2009, I have felt no duty more keenly than the responsibility to improve educational opportunities for our young people. In traveling to more than 32 states this year and having had the privilege of meeting with many of you, I know that we share a profound commitment to the education and well being of our children as a top priority.

In response to this development at SIPI, 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. The Office of the Assistant Secretary is working in close coordination with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Director Keith Moore, together with SIPI President Dr. Sherry R. Allison and the entire SIPI community to expeditiously address and alleviate the deficiencies identified by the HLC in its review. On a positive note, the HLC report noted the high degree of commitment demonstrated by SIPI representatives to the school’s mission and students and to improving its operations. The HLC further acknowledged the credible plans proposed by the BIE for remediation of SIPI’s accreditation issues.

In the interim, I want to let you know what this means for the students, what the next steps will be, and to invite you to contact us with your questions and concerns as we work together to remedy the situation.

- Impact on Students

The two most important questions for students and their families are: 1) whether they are still eligible for financial aid, and 2) whether credits earned at SIPI will transfer to other colleges and universities.

First, I am pleased to report that as a “candidate for accreditation,” SIPI retains all Federal funding and all students attending SIPI remain eligible to qualify for Federal and New Mexico State financial aid programs.

Second, I want to assure you that all students who earned credits while SIPI was “accredited,” including those earned during the Summer 2010 trimester, will still be able to transfer those credits to other higher education institutions, as usual.

The credits earned by SIPI students *after* August 6, 2010, and before SIPI regains “accredited” status may still transfer to other institutions with the permission of that institution. The SIPI officials are in discussions with the New Mexico Higher Education Department and 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 SIPI credits earned after August 6, 2010, will continue to transfer to all New Mexico colleges and universities. I have also directed the BIE to work with out-of-state colleges and universities on a case-by-case basis to assist students seeking to transfer these credits. Our discussions have been positive so far, and we are hopeful that other institutions will continue to accept credits from SIPI.

- Next Steps

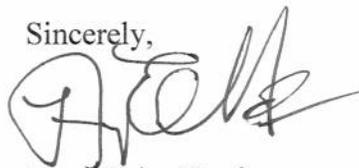
On August 6, 2010, SIPI became a “candidate for accreditation” for a minimum of 1 year following the HLC letter.

As an initial step in responding to the HLC, we are developing a Performance Improvement and Accountability Plan (PIAP) that will serve as the roadmap to full accreditation. In addition, SIPI will host a comprehensive HLC evaluation team visit in March 2011. The evaluation team will determine whether SIPI continues to meet the eligibility requirements for “candidate for accreditation” and whether SIPI is making reasonable progress toward meeting the Criteria for Accreditation. Throughout this process, we will also be working with you as tribal leaders, the U.S. Department of Education, the SIPI Board of Regents, and the SIPI community to ensure that SIPI regains its status as an “accredited” institution as quickly as possible.

We invite you to provide your input as this process moves forward. Please contact BIE Director Moore at (202) 208-6123 or SIPI President Allison at (505) 346-2348, with your questions and concerns regarding the SIPI accreditation process. A copy of the July 3, 2010, Public Disclosure Notice from the HLC about SIPI is available at <http://www.sipi.edu> by clicking on the HLC's accreditation link.

With your support, we will restore SIPI to full accreditation status and ensure that SIPI continues to offer quality post secondary education programs for Indian Country.

Sincerely,



Larry Echo Hawk  
Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs