

# Trump federal cuts threaten Native American universities and tribal sovereignty

**Jane Wise****23 February 2025**

The Trump administration's aggressive efforts to slash the federal workforce have dealt a severe blow to Native American educational institutions, exacerbating the long history of violent dispossession and ongoing oppression of Indigenous communities under capitalism.

The administration's mass firings, executed under the guise of "government efficiency," are dismantling essential services and threatening the future of tribal self-determination.

Among the hardest-hit institutions is Haskell Indian Nations University, which has been forced to lay off dozens of employees, placing its accreditation at risk and jeopardizing student services. Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has similarly lost seven employees, and broader cuts have ravaged agencies that provide critical support to Native communities.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has lost 188 employees, while 2,600 Department of the Interior workers have been dismissed. Initially, 20 percent of the Indian Health Service workforce faced layoffs, although these cuts were later withdrawn following significant backlash. However, the pattern is clear: Native-serving programs are on the chopping block.

The layoffs are part of a broader restructuring orchestrated by Elon Musk, who has been granted sweeping powers by Donald Trump over federal agencies through the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

Under Musk's directive, the Trump administration has implemented large-scale reductions in the federal workforce, specifically targeting federal oversight agencies, public education, and environmental protections. These cuts serve the dual purpose of funding tax breaks for the wealthy and increasing

allocations to military and law enforcement agencies.

Trump's executive order, which enabled the firings, mandates federal agency heads to undertake mass layoffs while specifically targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The implications are clear: tribal educational institutions, many of which operate under Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) contracts, are facing an existential crisis.

Sierra Two Bulls, an Oglala Lakota from the Oglala Sioux Tribe, was among those laid off. She had been a faculty member at Haskell Indian Nations University for six months after serving as an adjunct instructor for seven years.

Beyond the loss of her position, Two Bulls expressed deep concern for her students, many of whom will now face disruptions to their education. Speaking to the *LastRealIndians* website, she said, "I am devastated and heartbroken not only for myself and my colleagues but also for all our students. The first is my job security with great benefits like my healthcare plan. The second is I am no longer able to teach and empower our next generation of Native students who are our future leaders."

The ISDEAA, passed in 1975, was a concession to the struggle for tribal self-governance. The law granted Native nations greater control over education, healthcare, and other essential services, allowing tribes to contract with federal agencies to administer their own programs.

The act empowered tribes to direct resources according to their needs, fostering self-governance and cultural preservation. It allowed tribes to assume control of educational institutions, ensuring that curricula reflect Indigenous knowledge and traditions.

The Trump administration's mass firings, however,

undermine the very foundations of ISDEAA, as the loss of federal personnel stalls the administration of self-determination contracts and leaves tribal schools and colleges in limbo.

The consequences of these cuts are dire and far-reaching. The mass layoffs at BIA and the Department of the Interior signal a broader rollback of financial support for tribal programs, leading to uncertainty and budget shortfalls for Native-run institutions.

With fewer personnel to process contracts and oversee programs, tribes face delays in receiving federal funds, threatening education, healthcare, and infrastructure projects. By slashing the workforce responsible for administering self-governance agreements, the administration is effectively re-centralizing power in Washington D.C., stripping tribes of their hard-won autonomy.

The layoffs at Haskell and SIPI are only the beginning—tribal colleges and universities across the country will struggle to maintain faculty, student services, and accreditation.

Tribal leaders have spoken out against the administration's actions, calling them an assault on treaty rights and self-determination. Chase Iron Eyes, Executive Director of the Sacred Defense Fund, condemned the cuts, stating, “Indian country is experiencing catastrophic blows because of a lack of understanding of the distinct political status of Tribal Nations and Native America. It is not appropriate legally for the federal government to cut critical trust and treaty obligations that Indian Country depends on.”

Others have echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that these cuts violate the federal government's fundamental responsibility to honor its commitments to Indigenous communities.

Tribal nations have long resisted federal overreach through legal action, coalition-building, and economic independence. Many are preparing lawsuits against the latest round of layoffs, citing past successes in challenging funding cuts that violated treaty rights.

Inter-tribal organizations like the National Congress of American Indians and the Native American Rights Fund are pressuring Congress to reverse harmful policies, while tribes lobby legislators to override Trump's executive orders.

Tribes have successfully sued the federal government in the past over treaty violations, and the judiciary has

historically upheld many tribal sovereignty claims. However, the current Supreme Court, stacked with Trump appointees and right-wing justices, is not likely to rule against his administration.

Nor is lobbying Congress a means to defend Native institutions, given the subservience of both Republican and Democratic legislators to Trump's right-wing wrecking operation.

The layoffs affecting Native education are not an isolated event. They are part of the broader assault on the working class, as the Trump administration slashes jobs while funneling billions into its imperialist agenda.

The dismantling of Native educational institutions should serve as a warning to workers everywhere—these policies are designed to enrich the ruling elite on the backs of the working class.

The fight to defend Native education and tribal sovereignty must be understood as part of the broader struggle against the capitalism system, which systematically exploits and oppresses Indigenous peoples and the working class alike. Workers—both Native and non-Native—must recognize their shared interests and organize against the ruling class's attacks on public services, social programs and democratic rights by forming rank and file committees in their schools, communities, and workplaces.



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