

**The National
American Indian Business Leaders (AIBL) Program**

Testimony For

Native American Youth Activities & Initiatives

Good morning Senator Campbell and other distinguished members of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs. It is with great honor and seriousness that I present myself and my testimony to you.

My name is Paula Healy, I am an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, however I live with my husband and family on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Fort Belknap, Montana. I am currently pursuing a Masters In Community and Economic Development from New Hampshire University and serve as the President of the American Indian Business Leaders' National Student Advisory Board. I am here today to visit with you regarding the merits of the American Indian Business Leaders (a.k.a. AIBL) Program.

I believe that to understand the challenges and opportunities facing American Indian youth and their future opportunities, we must also understand the social, economic and educational conditions under which we as American Indian people live. For instance, many of our American Indian college students today are first generation participants in higher education, and those who do attend college are a very small percentage of the overall Indian youth population.

According to the Solidarity Foundation's 1996-97 study of mainly reservation-based college students, explanations offered for a high college drop-out rate include lack of self-esteem, poor quality of secondary schools, a troubled home life, or parents that did not encourage students to excel. Alcoholism was overwhelmingly chosen as the single greatest problem affecting their home communities, followed by drug abuse, and then unemployment.

In essence, I believe that building reservation leadership holds the key to increasing higher education participation so that we may stimulate a tribal community's economic productivity subsequently breaking the pernicious cycle of federal dependency. Leaders must be identified and trained, building upon the Indian principle of learning by doing. The correlation is clear between knowledge, belief, and learning to that of purpose, service, doing, and results. The underlying basis for a successful Indian leader builds from Indian culture, and does not sacrifice Indian identity.

Being a member of AIBL for the past four years, I believe AIBL is the answer to helping our young people face the challenges of tomorrow, it provides us with equitable opportunities for success, and helps us develop the ability to walk and compete within two separate worlds.

AIBL is designed to stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit and leadership skills in our American Indian youth to support tribal economic development efforts across the United States. AIBL accomplishes its program objectives through chapter organization and development at the student and professional levels. AIBL Student Chapters are designed to provide peer support, leadership and mentoring opportunities, career guidance, business networking connections, and internship placement opportunities. Student chapters provide an “extended family” support system to help students facilitate the transition of being away from home while attending school.

In only five years, AIBL has organized 34 post-secondary student chapters across the U.S.; sixteen at the tribal college level and the remaining eighteen at the university level; it has also organized seven high school chapters and two elementary student chapters. With an active presence in fifteen states, AIBL’s current student membership is four hundred plus.

I believe that AIBL is a strong advocate of leadership development and experiential education, as both rejuvenate ancient and highly successful American Indian educational

techniques, breaking down the barriers between formal and informal education. In fact, similar to the U.S. Information Agency's Fulbright Fellowships (which has mentored such notables as Anwar Sadat and Margaret Thatcher), I believe that as a national organization, AIBL has the ability to motivate the best and the brightest.

AIBL provides hope and gives direction to its members for future orientation, showing us as students that we have choices and we have the ability to fulfill our dream(s). It provides us with a means to be successful, increasing our skills through leadership training and culturally appropriate career development activities.

Today, I know that AIBL's main barrier in continuing its efforts is lack of capacity-building resources. AIBL has identified the organizational structure and support materials needed for its program. However, this organization that serves a tremendous economic development gap within Indian Country is in critical need of the financial ability to put its plans into action. AIBL has the vision and the strategy and in addition to placing money in prevention, counseling, or recreation for youth, I think it would be wise to try nurturing or planting the seeds of economic revolution. Given adequate financial support, I would be excited to see what our own youth can do to create businesses and economic solutions that face Indian Country.

I hope this committee will take the initiative to explore this option for our youth. Thank you for your time and I wish you the best in the job that you do for Indian people and America.