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Bacone College Closes After 145 Years

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After nearly a century and a half in operation, Bacone College has officially shut down, ending Oklahoma’s oldest continually running higher education institution. Once founded to serve Native American students through faith-based education, the small private liberal arts college collapsed under years of mismanagement, declining enrollment, and a loss of purpose.

Founded in 1880 as Indian University, Bacone College began with just three students in a Cherokee mission house and grew into a historically significant institution for Native communities. The Muscogee-Creek Nation donated the land for its campus, and for much of

its history, Bacone focused on educating Native American students within a Christian framework. Over time, however, that mission began to drift.

In its early 20th-century prime, Bacone nurtured a strong Native identity. Leaders like President B.D. Weeks recruited Native faculty, developed Native arts programs, and fostered a reputation as an intertribal institution. The famed Ataloa Hall, built partly from sacred Native sites, became a cornerstone of a growing Indigenous art movement. However, decades later, faculty and insiders began raising concerns that the college was veering away from its founding purpose.

Leadership Failures

By the early 2000s, critics said Bacone's administration had sidelined outspoken Native faculty, diluted cultural programming, and failed to foster an environment that welcomed and retained Native students. Patti Jo King, who led the American Indian Studies program from 2013 to 2019, said there were no serious efforts to educate staff on how to serve Native students respectfully. "Administrators, faculty, and staff often fell into the bad habit of lumping all of the Native students together under the general heading 'Indian,'" King told *Inside Higher Ed*.

Financial instability, too, had become a chronic issue. From a peak of over 1,100 students in 2010, enrollment plummeted to just 106 by 2023. That steep decline cut deeply into tuition revenue, further destabilizing the institution. In the last decade alone, Bacone cycled through four presidents and struggled to maintain staff and facilities. Accreditation troubles, lawsuits, crumbling infrastructure, and mismanagement became regular headlines.

Bacone pursued recognition as a tribal college, a status that would have unlocked federal support. However, it never met all federal requirements, including formal governance by a federally recognized tribe and a majority-Native board. Despite charter agreements with several tribes, the U.S. Department of Education never granted the designation.

In February 2024, the *Associated Press* reported that the college was near collapse. Spring classes were cancelled, and a bankruptcy filing soon followed. Although Bacone's leadership initially claimed a revitalization was underway, the Higher Learning Commission revoked its accreditation in July 2025, citing an array of institutional failures, including limited board oversight, lack of funding, and suspension of enrollment.

Soon after, a federal judge approved a transition from Chapter 11 to Chapter 7 bankruptcy, signaling liquidation and a formal end to Bacone's operations. Court documents revealed troubling details, including an alleged \$16,500 loan payment authorized by then-President Leslie Hannah on a loan in his name. A bankruptcy trustee accused the administration of "gross mismanagement."

Reflecting on the loss, Hannah acknowledged the institution's fate. "My understanding is this is the death of Bacone," he told the Muskogee Phoenix.

Though its mission was once powerful, Bacone ultimately succumbed to a combination of leadership instability, dwindling finances, and a failure to adapt.