

Trump Administration proposes eliminating tribal scholarships

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
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Rose Graham, director of the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Assistance, is hopeful that Congress will once again reject the Trump Administration's attempt to eliminate the Higher Education Grant Program, as it did in 2019 and 2020.

"The Trump Administration has made it abundantly clear that it is not interested in providing support to Native Americans seeking a college education," Graham said.

"It appears the Trump Administration is doing its best to keep a college degree out of reach of Native Americans."

That view is shared by Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., who said, "President Trump's budget makes it clear that the education, health, and wellbeing of Native communities isn't a priority for his administration. It's unacceptable and counterproductive that President Trump is yet again proposing to eliminate Tribal scholarships for Native students. This budget - and its cruel cuts to vital programs - is dead on arrival,"

Luján continued, "Native students deserve every opportunity to further their education, and I'll continue fighting to protect these critical scholarships."

He won't be alone in that effort. Other members of the N.M. delegation spoke up in support of Tribal scholarship funding. Congresswoman Deb Haaland, D-N.M., said, "Scholarships open opportunities up for students to further their education, but each year the Trump Administration works to gut education funding that levels the playing field for Native students and puts their futures at risk."

"I know what it's like to rely on scholarships to cover the cost of school, and as we move through the budget process in Congress, I will be advocating for full funding for education priorities like scholarships," Haaland added.

In the Senate, the response was just as strong. Senator Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., said,

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“Supporting opportunities for Native students to attend colleges and universities enhances their future and strengthens communities across Indian Country. We need to be empowering tribal communities - not cutting off the resources and support they need to succeed.”

Heinrich believes that earning a college degree shouldn't be a luxury, but something that every family can afford. In an effort to make that happen, he introduced the Degrees Not Debt Act to increase the federal Pell Grant and hold states and universities accountable for reducing costs and improving student outcomes.

He has also cosponsored the FUTURE Act which would reauthorize \$255 million per year in mandatory federal funding - which expired on Sept. 30, 2019 - for an additional two years.

Senator Tom Udall, D-N. M., who on Feb. 10 lashed out at the Trump Administration's budget cuts for slashing Medicaid, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Interior Dept., did not mince words when it came to the way in which the Trump budget is treating Tribal scholarships.

“The Trump administration has continued to show its disregard for our trust and treaty obligations to Tribes with this budget proposal that would undercut educational opportunities for Native students. Nevertheless, I will keep working in a bipartisan way on the Senate Indian Affairs and Appropriations Committees to defeat these misguided budget priorities and invest in Native education,” Udall said.

“Navajo students already face tremendous challenges when they seek a college degree,” Graham said. “Many could not afford a college education without the support provided through the Higher Education Grant Program.”

Federal funds, provided to the Navajo Nation through that grant made up more than 53 percent or \$13.4 million of the \$25.3 million awarded to students in 2019. Other sources of funding included Navajo Nation funds of \$10 million, trust funds of \$1.3 million, and corporate funds of \$545,606.

“Our students need every available financial-aid resource to attain a college education, even if

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it's a fraction of the total cost of attendance," Graham said. She speculates that the Trump Administration's rationale for eliminating the Higher Education Grant Program is to make student loans a primary source of funding for college.

"We do not encourage students to take loans," Graham said. "There are too many people who are not able to retire due to huge student loan debts that have not been paid off."

Graham said the ONNSFA office is currently working to secure Forward Funding for the Higher Education Grant Program, so that federal funds are provided to tribes well before students begin school.

"It will take a concerted effort to get Congress to restore funds for the Higher Education Grant Program and institute Forward Funding," she added.

Graham is encouraging students and their parents to email or call members of Congress to ask for funds to be restored to the Higher Education Grant Program. She points out that more than 13,000 students submit applications to ONNSFA for financial aid. The number of calls can make a significant impact.

A majority of students served by ONNSFA attend colleges and universities within the Four Corners region - N.M., Ariz., Utah and Colo. A single undergraduate student living on campus may expect to pay \$30,628 per year at Ariz. State Univ., \$28,396 per year at Northern Ariz. Univ., \$25,374 per year at Fort Lewis College and \$22,912 per year at the Univ. of N.M.

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