

Cutting federal funding for tribal higher education grants is wrong

Written by By David Conejo RMCHCS CEO Guest Columnist
Friday, 13 March 2020 04:37



For the third year in a row the Trump administration has proposed eliminating funding for a Native American college scholarship program which gives assistance to thousands of tribal students across the country. His Bureau of Indian Education is proposing cuts of almost \$40 million for the Higher Education Grant Program for the 2021 budget.

The Higher Education Grant Program helps undergraduate students, who are determined to have a financial need. Most of the students served by ONNSFA fall into that category. Need-based students receive \$2,500 per term, which helps students cover the balance of tuition and fees, room and board, textbooks, and transportation costs.

Federal funds, provided through the Higher Education Grant to the Navajo Nation, 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.

The Higher Education Grant Program is a highly effective program that provides funds for undergraduates. An average of 1,291 Navajo students attain college credentials, including Associate degrees, Bachelor's degrees or certificates each year. An average of 117 students attain Master's or Doctorate degrees each year. Navajo Nation funds are used to provide awards to students in this category.

Many students served by these grants attend colleges and universities within the Four Corners region - New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. A single undergraduate student living on campus may expect to pay \$30,628 per year at Arizona State University, \$28,396 per year at Northern Arizona University, \$25,374 per year at Fort Lewis College and \$22,912 per year at

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the University of New Mexico.

These scholarships are crucial. Many students will not be able to attend college without them. According to the Department of Diné Education, \$13.4 million of that went to 3,565 Navajo students in 2019. The Trump administration has tried to eliminate the grant in each of its last two budget proposals, but Congress would not agree with the White House.

At Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services (RMCHCS), we provide medical treatment for members of the Navajo Nation and others across McKinley County and are involved in many activities that benefit the community. We also provide care for those who are homeless and suffer from substance abuse at our WellSpring Recovery Center. It is not too difficult to connect the dots between a lack of education, poverty, poor behavioral health and occasionally death.

We see the correlation between a good education and good health. Therefore, we disagree with the proposed budget cuts and support the Navajo Nation students who need funding for college. We urge Congress to once again reject the Trump administration's attempt to eliminate the Higher Education Grant Program as it did in 2019 and 2020. The White House has made it clear that it is not interested in providing support to Native Americans seeking a college education and would rather keep a college degree out of their reach.

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