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News Release

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Navajo Nation Issues Request to Congress to Restore Federal Funding for Scholarships

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer today voiced concern about the Trump Administration's proposal to eliminate funding for the Higher Education Grant within the Bureau of Indian Education's FY 2020 budget request.

"The Higher Education Grant is a huge benefit for thousands of Navajo students each year and for the future of the Navajo Nation," President Nez said. "It's very disappointing that these funds continue to come under threat by this administration. We will look to our leaders in the House and Senate to restore these funds during the budget process."

Vice President Lizer said, "As a recent non-traditional student, I strongly urge President Trump to reconsider this cut. The ability to continue its ascent to national prominence in its academic endeavors, the need to continue its growth and enhancement rather than cuts and dwindling capacities with regard to higher education. This is the way for our future generations to be able to attain the American Dream."

Last Thursday, the Department of the Interior posted FY 2020 budget justifications for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education. For the second year in a row, the Trump Administration is proposing to eliminate funding for scholarships, including the Higher Education Grant, which provides funds to the Navajo Nation through a P.L. 93-638 contract.

The budget justifications were posted weeks after the DOI initially announced through a March 11 press release that President Donald Trump presented a \$936.3 million Fiscal Year 2020 budget for the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which for the first time is being presented separate from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In the same press release, Acting Interior Secretary David L. Bernhardt said, "The President's Fiscal Year 2020 budget for the Bureau of Indian Education supports his goals for tribal self-determination by improving education services to Indian Country. This budget recognizes the BIE being as important to tribes in the education of their children as the BIA is to supporting them in the management of their trust lands and resources."

Rose Graham, ONNSFA director, said it is of major concern that this is the second time Trump Administration has proposed zeroing out funding for the Higher Education Grant.

“Higher education is a powerful force for change,” Ms. Graham said. “The ONNSFA is working to significantly increase the number of Navajo students attaining college degrees. Many students we serve would not be able to attend or graduate from college without financial assistance provided through the Higher Education Grant.

For academic year 2017, a total of \$9.97 million in federal funds was awarded to 3,879 students. Another \$14 million from Navajo Nation revenues and income from trust funds and corporate and private donations was awarded to more than 5,544 students.

“The cost of higher education is a challenge for Navajo students,” Ms. Graham said. “There is a lot they have to overcome to even step into a college classroom. Every measure should be taken to ensure students have the opportunity to attain some form of higher education.”

A demographic analysis of the Navajo Nation using 2010 Census and American Community Estimates reveals that of the population 25 years or older, approximately 7.7 percent have an Associate’s degree, 4.2 percent have a Bachelor’s degree and 2.9 percent have a graduate or professional degree.

In addition to financial assistance and scholarships, funds from the Higher Education Grant contract are used to pay for operating and personnel costs of the scholarship office including 28 full-time jobs.

Ms. Graham pointed out that the Trump Administration’s zeroing out of scholarship funds is not just a Navajo concern. “Higher Education Funds would be zeroed out for all tribes served by the BIA, not just the Navajo Nation. Funding to organizations that provide scholarships to graduate students such as the American Indian Graduate Center is also proposed to be eliminated.”

“We are grateful that Congress acknowledged how important scholarship funds are to all Native Americans when they restored funding last year,” Ms. Graham said. “We are hopeful that once again, members of Congress ensure that the Higher Education Grant remains intact.”