



Written Testimony of Angelique Albert, CEO
Native Forward Scholars Fund
For the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearings
March 17, 2026

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on funding priorities for Fiscal Year 2027 (FY27). My name is Angelique Albert, and I serve as the CEO of the Native Forward Scholars Fund. I am here today to present FY27 funding recommendations for the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Education higher education scholarship and financial aid programs.

Native Forward Scholars Fund (Native Forward)

Established in 1969, Native Forward (formerly the American Indian Graduate Center) is the largest direct scholarship provider to Native students in the United States supporting students pursuing undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees in all fields of study. With the stated goal of meeting the unmet needs of every Native scholar, Native Forward serves an important role by functioning as a central resource for Native students as we partner with the federal government, Tribes, foundations, corporations, and individual donors to sustain and expand scholarship support. Native Forward also recognizes that financial aid alone is not enough to ensure student success. Native students often navigate institutions that were not built with them in mind, and we have developed culturally grounded support systems, critical academic guidance, and nationwide mentorship programs to help them thrive. These services provide students with the tools, community, and advocacy they need to persist, graduate, and join the workforce.

For more than 50 years, Native Forward has empowered over 22,000 students representing more than 500 Tribes across all 50 states. Through more than \$350 million in scholarships and support services, we have worked to ensure that every Native student who seeks higher education can access it. Despite these annually appropriated dollars and fundraising efforts, available funding can only cover a portion of the overall rising costs of attendance. Thus, students and families are still shouldering a great financial responsibility.

Native Forward scholars gain critical knowledge and expertise through their college and university experiences, becoming highly skilled contributors in their communities and the broader workforce. They return home equipped with the skills needed to strengthen Tribal Nations. Today, thousands of former scholarship recipients are employed across the country, generating significant economic and social impact.

FY27 Funding Recommendations:

Since the 1980s, Native Forward has served as the primary federal scholarship program administrator for three higher education financial aid programs funded through the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). The following sections outline each program's purpose, current impact, and FY27 funding recommendations to ensure the federal investment keeps pace with growing demand for Native professionals.

Special Higher Education Scholarship Program (SHEP)

Native Forward respectfully requests an increase for the Special Higher Education Program from \$4,992,000 to \$7,000,000 in FY27.

The Special Higher Education Scholarship Program (SHEP) is composed of three components that support the commitment to higher education and successful post graduate employment. This includes:

Graduate Level Financial Aid: This program provides graduate level financial assistance to Native students pursuing advanced degrees that strengthen Tribal governance and sovereignty, build community and workforce capacity, and address shortages in high-demand fields. The program primarily supports students in law, education, business, psychology, counseling, public health, and behavioral health—all areas where Tribal Nations and federal agencies face persistent workforce gaps. In Academic Year 2024-2025, SHEP graduate level financial assistance funded 163 graduate students with an average award of \$9,000.

Despite its impact, SHEP faces significant unmet need. Last year alone, Native Forward documented \$6.7 million in unfunded need among qualified applicants. This gap represents Native students who were fully eligible, academically prepared, and committed to serving their communities but could not be supported due to limited federal funding.

Loan For Service Program (LSP): This program provides financial assistance in the form of loans to Native students pursuing degrees in high demand fields such as education, nursing, behavioral health, social work, business, and professions essential to Tribal governments and federal agencies. In exchange for financial assistance, recipients commit to serving in eligible positions that directly benefit Tribal communities, such as roles within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau Indian Education, Tribal governments, and Tribal organizations.

In Academic Year 2024-2025, the program supported 99 students, with an average grant of \$15,000 per recipient, and Native Forward documented \$2.5 million in unmet need. Since 2020, participation in the LSP has doubled, reflecting both rising educational costs and the urgent need for Native professionals in critical workforce sectors across Indian Country.

The LSP is one of the most effective federal investments in Tribal workforce development. It combines financial aid, accountability, and direct service commitments, ensuring that federal dollars translate into real capacity in Tribal communities. Native Forward maintains strong oversight and tracking of loan recipients, documenting high completion rates and successful placement in eligible service positions. This structure ensures a measurable return on investment: students graduate, enter high-need fields, and fill positions that otherwise remain vacant.

Pre-Law Summer Institute (PSLI): The PSLI strengthens the access of Native students entering the legal profession by providing intensive academic preparation, mentorship, and exposure to legal careers. This program supports long-term Tribal sovereignty by increasing Native representation in law and public policy. The American Indian Law Center, Inc. administers this program.

Science Post Graduate Scholarship Fund (SPGSF)

Native Forward respectfully requests an increase for the Science Post Graduate Scholarship Fund from \$6,450,000 to \$8,000,000 in FY27.

The Science Post Graduate Scholarship Fund (SPGSF), established in 2014, provides financial aid to Native undergraduate, graduate, and professional students pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The program was created to expand Native representation in scientific research, health professions, engineering, natural sciences, and other technical fields essential to environmental stewardship and economic development.

Over the past five academic years, SPGSF has supported an average of 194 scholars per year with awards averaging roughly \$21,000 per student which reflects the high cost of STEM programs particularly in medicine, engineering, and health sciences. The program serves both undergraduate and graduate students, with 63% pursuing graduate or professional degrees and 37% pursuing undergraduate STEM degrees.

SPGSF supports students in some of the most critical and high-need fields across Indian Country, including medicine, engineering, public health, biology, veterinary medicine, nursing, computer science, environmental science, physical therapy, and natural resources. These fields directly align with Tribal workforce priorities and federal obligations in areas such as health care delivery, environmental protection, infrastructure development, and climate resilience. Even with its proven impact, SPGSF was unable to meet \$8.6 million in documented financial need for eligible students in Academic Year 2024-2025.

Rising Demand and Growing Need

The documented funding gap for Academic Year 2024-2025 for these BIE financial aid and scholarship programs was \$17.8 million. Native Forward has experienced an unprecedented surge in demand for scholarship support in Academic Year 2025-2026. More than 12,000 Native students applied to Native Forward for financial aid— a 50% increase from the previous year. This dramatic increase reflects the broader reality facing Native students nationwide. This includes rising postsecondary costs, the unmet financial need among Native students, limited campus-based aid, and a growing awareness of Native Forward’s scholarship opportunities. Based on FY26 BIE appropriated funding levels, Native Forward could only support 629 students and documented an unmet student financial need of \$340 million to date, leaving thousands of qualified applicants without financial aid due to limited federal funding.

Economic Impact

Native Forward conducted an economic impact study in FY 2023–24, and the power of scholarship support cannot be underestimated.ⁱ

- The net impact of scholarship recipients currently employed in the national workforce totaled \$296.0 million in added income—equivalent to supporting 3,070 jobs.
- The U.S. invested \$36.9 million to support Native Forward, and in return, the economy is projected to grow by \$519.2 million over the course of scholarship recipients' working lives.
- Society will also benefit from \$108.6 million of public and private sector savings.
- For every dollar invested in Native Forward yields \$17.00 in economic return as long as FY 2023-24 scholarship recipients remain active in the workforce.

This measurable return reflects the power of investing in Native students and the long-term benefits that ripple through Tribal Nations and the country as a whole.

Conclusion

Native Forward appreciates the Subcommittee's ongoing and consistent support for increased postsecondary education access for Native students. For decades, the Subcommittee has historically understood that higher education opportunities must be accessible to Native students and that the federal government has a responsibility to support those who seek education as a pathway to economic development and improved quality of life. This responsibility is grounded in the federal government's treaty and trust obligations to Tribal Nations. Continued investment in Native students is a direct fulfillment of these commitments and a critical component of upholding the Nation's legal and moral responsibilities.

The FY27 funding recommendations in this testimony represent a strategic and necessary investment in the next generation of Native leaders and professionals. Native Forward stands ready to work in partnership to ensure our Native students and Tribal Nations have the resources they need to thrive.

ⁱ Native Forward Scholars Fund, *The Economic Value of Scholarships Provided by Native Forward Scholars Fund* (Albuquerque, NM: Native Forward Scholars Fund, May, 2025)