

U.S. House Subcommittee Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations

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Testimony of Virgil Rambeau

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Witness on Behalf of the Council for Opportunity in Education

Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Cole, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Virgil Rambeau, and I am a member of the Walker River Paiute Tribe, from Schurz, Nevada. Currently, I reside in Sacramento, CA. I am here today in support of a \$219 million funding increase in the Federal TRIO Programs, which is administered by the Department of Education.

I am a first-generation student. I was raised in a low-income, single-parent household, which experienced substance abuse and mental health struggles. As a youth, I never had any dreams of becoming anything when I grew up.

After graduating from high school, I made my first attempt at college when I enrolled at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). After two semesters, I stopped out to work. A few years later I found myself at Chabot College in Hayward, CA. I managed to keep pace with a full academic load and at least two waiter jobs. However, the need to earn money became a matter of survival. So, again I was forced to drop out of college.

During this time of my life, my struggle with alcoholism began. Alcoholism cost me my job and housing, which resulted in homelessness. My days were dark and every day was worse than the one before. Over time, I started to have suicidal ideation and this scared me. I had reached out to

my family in Nevada, and they helped me get back to the reservation, which is the start of my recovery. My sobriety date is June 11th, 2011.

I restarted my academic journey through TRIO's Educational Opportunity Center in Las Vegas in 2009. It was here that I met Kyle Ethelbah, at that time he was the Director of University of Nevada, Las Vegas' Adult Educational Services Program. Unlike the more well-known TRIO programs like Upward Bound or Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers help adults like me re-enter the education pipeline and successfully navigate the complex college admissions and financial aid processes. Kyle worked with me one-on-one to guide me through the first steps of completing the FAFSA and guided me on my journey to enrolling at the College of Southern Nevada. Kyle was one of the first Native American professionals that I had ever met. Like me, he was also from a first-generation, low-income background. Kyle inspired me to support the Native American community.

My academic success would not be possible without the combination of federal and state aid from various sources, along with tribal and non-tribal scholarships. Financial aid covered at least 80% of my academic expenses, primarily from the Pell Grant and State Grant. Words cannot express how grateful I am for the financial aid that is provided to low-income students. It provided me with an amazing college experience. I developed strong interpersonal relationships with Native American and non-Native American students and professors. It also gave me an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of college students and community members, via internships and participating on student committees. The motto for my alma mater is 'Redefine the Possible.' I believe that financial aid supported me with redefining the possible in my life.

My academic journey started with one goal, which was to complete what I had started years ago at the community college level. In 2013, I graduated with a Social and Behavioral Sciences Associate in Arts from Sierra College, in Rocklin, CA.

In 2016, I graduated from the California State University, Sacramento, otherwise known as Sac State, with a Bachelor of Social Work and a minor in Native American Studies. My undergraduate program taught me how historical trauma impacts tribal communities throughout Indian Country. In 2019, I graduated from Sac State with a Master of Social Work, at the age of 43. My education strengthened my critical thinking skills and taught me to question everything. It also strengthened my resilience.

Today, I am employed as an Associate Clinical Social Worker (ACSW) at the Sacramento Native American Health Center (SNAHC) where I provide mental health services to American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth, between the ages of 10-24, and their families. In my current position, I am accruing hours towards licensure so I can meet my next goal – to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

I would not be where I am today without the academic, financial, social, and cultural resources that were provided to me as an undergraduate and graduate student. Although I made many attempts, it was TRIO that finally put me on the path to achieving my academic goals. While TRIO is only able to serve a fraction of first-generation, low-income students who are eligible for services, I was one of the lucky ones. It is my hope that as a result of my testimony today, the Subcommittee will answer the calls of many throughout Congress to double or even triple TRIO funding. Because of TRIO, today my narrative is one of hope and inspiration. Today every day is better than the one before. Thank you.