



February 4, 2022

New Mexico Senate
Senate Finance Committee
490 Old Santa Fe Trail
Santa Fe, NM 87501

Sent via email only

Honorable Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

We, the New Mexico Indigenous Youth Council (IYC), write to express our full support for Senate Bill 140 (SB140), the Opportunity Scholarship Act. Established within the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department in early 2021, the IYC seeks to elevate Indigenous youth voices in the State of New Mexico and cultivate the next generation of Indigenous leaders. The IYC consists of representatives aged 16-25 from the 23 Nations, Tribes, and Pueblos of the state. One of our top priorities is access to higher education. We believe that SB140 addresses this priority and supports Native American students in seeking the career pathways that will provide family sustaining incomes and strengthen Tribal workforce and communities.

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's executive budget recommendation invests \$85.5 million for a comprehensive free college package, only 1% of the state budget. This crucial financial aid program will not only benefit recent high school graduates but also first-generation and non-traditional adult learners who may not be eligible for other scholarships. There are 11,408 Native American students enrolled in public higher education institutions and Tribal colleges in New Mexico. The Opportunity Scholarship Act would simplify the financial aid process and support up to 35,000 students, and in turn, thousands of Native American students across New Mexico.

The six-credit hour minimum will create greater access to state financial aid for students that are working, have family and cultural responsibilities and will meet the diverse needs of New Mexico students. This credit hour reduction is critical to increasing access for students who previously had to decide between higher education and their personal circumstances and responsibilities. Now, they will no longer have to choose. It is this access that is beneficial for our Native American students, whether they are enrolling immediately after high school or returning as an adult learner.

We applaud Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham for her leadership and forward-thinking decision to invest in New Mexico's Tribal students and communities, and we look forward to opening more doors for students to succeed.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to New Mexico students. We appreciate your time and consideration of this important initiative impacting Native American students, families, and Tribal communities that can bring positive impacts for generations to come.

Sincerely,

New Mexico Indigenous Youth Council

Jeremy Begay (*Mescalero Apache Tribe*)

Trinity Roybal (*Pojoaque Pueblo*)

Triston B. Black (*Navajo Nation*)

Ian Teller (*Navajo Nation*)

Alysia Coriz (*Kewa Pueblo*)

Kaylee Wood (*Jicarilla Apache Nation*)

Shayna Naranjo (*Santa Clara Pueblo*)