NAVAJO TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY: RESPONDING AND ADAPTING TO COVID-19

Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) and American Rescue Plan (ARP), Navajo Technical University received urgently needed funding to immediately transition to online learning platforms, modify campuses for health and safety concerns, and address the digital divide challenges in Indian Country. Our students received emergency grants, laptops, tuition assistance, and internet stipends to help them stay enrolled in courses. As we continue to support students during this difficult time and develop a plan to “return to normal,” TCUs need your continued support to address ongoing and increasing needs.

Graduation. The dedication, determination, and hard work is proof of the perseverance that each of these students have shown to complete their education regardless of the pandemic. Three separate commencements were held in the NTU Wellness Center. The funding allowed us to host the Spring 2021 commencement outdoors with social distancing and in an open-air environment complete with all the necessary PPE to protect all attendees, special guests, and community members. The event was authorized by the Navajo Nation Risk Management due to the work NTU put into place for documenting and adhering to all the pandemic protocols for the university.

Commencement for the Spring 2021 was held outdoors. A total of 85 students graduated on May 13, 2021 – 2 GED, 38 certificates, 27 associate degrees, and 18 bachelor degrees. July 26, 2021 – A Master’s degree commencement and hooding ceremony was held for six students.

The Commencement for the Fall 2021 was held indoors with protocols in place. A total of 84 students graduated – 42 certificates, 29 associate degrees, 11 bachelor degrees, and 2 master degrees. Three separate commencements were held in the NTU Wellness Center. CARES funding provided the necessary purchase of outdoor awnings, PPE supplies necessary to ensure safe indoor and outdoor events.

Outdoor Learning Classroom/Gazebos (OLC/G). Trades students and instructors from the Construction and Welding departments remained focused on creating outdoor learning spaces for classroom instruction due to the social distancing and classroom occupant protocols put in place by the Pandemic Response Team.

The CAREs funding allowed for purchase of the kits and all supplies necessary to construct the OLC/G at many of the campuses. The trades students were able to continue to meet face-to-face and learn building trades knowledge during the pandemic. The structures were further supported by a generous donation of solar systems packages that allowed the Energy Systems department to give students actual experience in installation of the solar systems. Students utilized the funding to also purchase raw materials to create all the desks and benches for the classrooms.

The practical, hands-on experience tied to the entire project included project management, trades knowledge & skills, communication and marketing and school spirit. The pandemic created an opportunity to envision possibilities despite the ugliness of the negative impact to the community.

The pandemic created an opportunity for students to envision possibilities despite the ugliness of the negative impact to their community. Without the funding, the innovation and drive of students’ vision would not have become a reality.

TCUs continue to need financial support for student-driven projects to incorporate classroom learning into real world application.
**REQUEST: $40 million TCU IT Service Fund**  
**USDA – Rural Utility Service**

The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide and underscored the lack of broadband access across Indian Country. To address these deficiencies that could leave Indian Country – and AI/AN students – behind the rest of the U.S. for generations, Congress must act to establish a permanent TCU IT Service Fund within the USDA-Rural Utilities Service Program. An annual $40 million set-aside for TCUs, which are 1994 land-grant institutions served by USDA, would help cover rapidly increasing network, connectivity, and equipment costs, maintenance, infrastructure expansion, and IT staffing.

Congress recognized this need in the pandemic and attempted to provide support to TCUs by including them in the new NTIA Tribal Connectivity Broadband program. Unfortunately, due to NTIA’s design of the program, to date, not even one TCU has been awarded direct grants.

**NAVAJO TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY: Broadband and IT Challenges**

- Students are provided IT support in laptop loaner programs and Wi-Fi devices; however, connectivity to the towers remains a daily challenge without line sight of towers, the devices cannot connect.
- Students and faculty are faced with transportation/travel expenses in order to travel to locations where a connection can be established. Many students and faculty travel over 40 miles to a location to connect to the internet for zoom classes, email and other technology-dependent resources to learn and teach.

**NAVAJO TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY: Construction, Maintenance, Rehabilitation**

Faculty and student housing top the list of desperately needed facilities to enable our institution to increase enrollment at all campuses. Housing assistance may help for the one site that is located off the reservation as apartments and housing are readily available for rent; however, on-reservation sites are challenged by land acquisition, regulations from multiple agencies, and most definitely, construction dollars to create the housing.

The existing reservation dormitories on the main campus are in dire need of maintenance. Preventative maintenance and upgrades are needed as the university is not supported by any maintenance/rehabilitation funding. The existing buildings were just released to the university after multiple years of oversight by the Navajo Housing Authority. The facilities are now in control of NTU, but there are many structural and rehabilitation activities that are on hold until funding is secured to make the repairs/renovations. The main campus also maintains family housing units and faculty units that were built when the institution was first created, over 40 years ago. The units need total renovation and rehabilitation.

There is a need for rehabilitation funds to either demolish or renovate the west end of the old dorm that is now empty due to the “Great Flood” that destroyed the building’s usefulness. The east side of the building is utilized by faculty, nursing department, law department and Building Information Systems program. The HVAC and layout of the building is not optimal for program delivery, but the university has had to make do with what is available for classes.

Many of our programs are currently housed in old modular buildings that are necessary to house faculty and provide classrooms. Each program presents its own unique challenges to HVAC and foundations. If we were able to secure facilities funding to build new classrooms, office spaces, administration offices, residential units for staff, faculty and students, we could expand our program offerings by being able to recruit more faculty and attract more students to an improved campus environment.

**TCU Students, Faculty, Staff and Communities deserve to receive financial support to create quality, safe environments to learn, teach, work and live that are comparable to the non-reservation-based institutions of higher learning. Funding is critical to achieve a higher standard with respect to educational settings.**