



INDIAN COUNTRY SNAPSHOT:

Navajo Nation

In 2016, seeking to address a critical shortage of qualified Navajo doctors to provide quality, culturally appropriate healthcare to its growing population, the Navajo Nation forged an MOU with the University of Arizona's Colleges of Medicine (UA) to create the Navajo Nation Future Physicians' Scholarship Fund. The agreement – which the two parties renewed in 2022 for another five years – gives financial aid (through scholarships provided by Navajo's Department of Diné Education that are matched with equal funding awarded by UA) to fully cover the tuition, fees, and related academic support costs for up to seven Navajo scholars each year as they work towards obtaining a pre-medical degree at UA's Tucson and Phoenix campuses.¹ “Designed to prepare students from rural and economically challenged parts of Arizona to qualify for entrance to medical school,”² the initiative prepares future doctors to provide care in critical-need areas of Navajo community-based healthcare specialization such as internal medicine, family medicine, obstetrics, and pediatrics.³ Fund recipients who obtain the pre-medical degree – seven Navajo Nation citizens have done so to date – earn guaranteed admission to UA's Doctor of Medicine program and then move on to multi-year medical residencies either with IHS or hospitals in other parts of the country.⁴ They then are required to return home to the Navajo Nation to provide care to their fellow citizens, delivering the Nation a vital return on the significant educational investment it has made in them.⁵ As UA sees Navajo's commitment to the Fund's beneficiaries, “They are investing in you, and the way that you can repay them is serving the community.”⁶ Nearly a decade after its establishment, the Future Physicians' Scholarship Fund is enabling Navajo students “to fulfill their aspirations of becoming physicians, while serving as role models for Navajo youth who want to follow in their footsteps.”⁷ In 2023, Navajo signed a similar MOA with UA to train Navajo citizens to become licensed medical veterinarians, addressing a critical shortage on the reservation.⁸

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¹ University of Arizona (UA) Health Sciences, “UA Colleges of Medicine and Navajo Nation Sign Agreement Establishing Scholarship Fund for Navajo Medical Students,” March 10, 2016 (<https://diversity.uahs.arizona.edu/news/2016/ua-colleges-medicine-and-navajo-nation-sign-agreement-establishing-scholarship-fund-navajo>, accessed April 17, 2024)). UA pays the full tuition for participating students and the Navajo Nation covers the same amount for the students’ living expenses (Rose Graham, Director, Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship & Financial Assistance, Correspondence with NCAI, January 31, 2025).

² The University of Arizona Health Sciences, “College of Medicine Tucson Financial Aid – Future Physicians Scholarship” webpage (<https://financial-aid.medicine.arizona.edu/types-aid/scholarships#:~:text=Navajo%20medical%20students%20who%20receive,post%2DMD%20medical%20residency%20programs>, accessed October 11, 2024).

³ Graham, Correspondence with NCAI, January 31, 2025.

⁴ Graham, Conversation with NCAI, July 31, 2024; University of Arizona College of Medicine Phoenix, “Pathway Scholars Program – Curriculum” webpage (<https://phoenixmed.arizona.edu/pathway/curriculum>, accessed October 14, 2024). According to the Navajo Nation Office of Scholarship & Financial Assistance, seven Navajo Citizens received their medical degrees from UA through the Future Physicians’ Scholarship Fund between the initiative’s launch in 2017 and 2024; and as of October 2024, there were two Navajo students receiving financial support to pursue UA medical degree through the Fund (Rose Graham, Email correspondence with NCAI, October 9, 2024).

⁵ The MOA – renewed in 2022 to extend the agreement’s term and original provisions – stipulates that Navajo medical students “who receive support from the Navajo Nation Future Physicians’ Scholarship Fund, and earn their medical degrees, will be required to serve the Navajo people for a minimum of five years upon completing their post-MD medical residency programs” (UA Health Sciences, March 10, 2016).

⁶ Kaylee Stock, “University of Arizona College of Medicine announces new scholarship for Navajo students,” *Downtown Devil*, March 18, 2016 (<https://downtowndevil.com/2016/03/18/78469/university-of-arizona-college-of-medicine-announces-new-scholarship-for-navajo-students/>, accessed April 3, 2018).

⁷ Francisco Moreno, UA Health Sciences Assistant Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion (UA Health Sciences, “UA Colleges of Medicine and Navajo Nation Sign Agreement Establishing Scholarship Fund for Navajo Medical Students,” March 10, 2016). As Moreno explained in 2016, “We know there is a nationwide shortage of physicians, particularly in rural areas, and that reservations are among the hardest hit” (Ibid.).

⁸ The Navajo Nation Office of the President, “Navajo President Buu Nygren signs agreement with UA to train Navajo veterinarians,” Press Release, June 6, 2023 (<https://opvp.navajo-nsn.gov/navajo-president-buu-nygren-signs-agreement-with-ua-to-train-navajo-veterinarians/>, accessed December 9, 2023).