

College Becomes Reality

To help end the cycle of poverty through education, Partnership with Native Americans (PWNA) offers scholarships, college grants, emergency funding, college readiness camps, and literacy and school supplies through their American Indian education program, AIEF.



Meet Vaughn V., AIEF scholar and future engineer

The challenges faced by families living on Indian reservations are many and can dissuade Native youth from pursuing their education. Native American families experience a disproportionate rate of poverty. Higher unemployment rates further complicate students seeking post-secondary education. These challenges contribute to low school attendance and high dropout rates — up to 70 percent in high school — and only 13 percent earn college degrees.

PWNA's AIEF program increases college access for Native American students. The strengths of the scholarship students funded by AIEF are evident in every sentence of the thousands of essays read and scored by PWNA's Scholarship Committee each year. Common elements include love of family, respect of culture, success in overcoming obstacles and a strong desire to continue their education and support their tribal community.



Vaughn has chosen a life goal not easily attained.

Vaughn V., a recently awarded student, shared in his AIEF application essay, "This scholarship will help me financially but it will also provide me with encouragement. I have chosen a life goal not easily attained. As an individual who has personally suffered from symptoms of poverty, I cannot imagine myself pursuing any other goal."

Vaughn shares, "Experiencing poverty first hand, you don't think anything of it until you're introduced to a bigger side of society. My motivation is helping my community... there's a lot we can do... I'm really excited to make some of the changes happen."

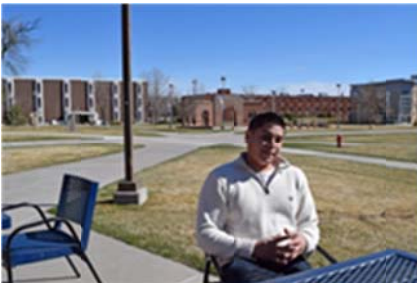
Vaughn is a junior attending the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology (SDSMT) to complete a B.S. in Industrial Engineering. The campus was fairly empty the day PWNA visited, but Vaughn was in the SDSMT Student Union with an open Calculus book. He shared, "I did not see myself as an engineer growing up. I had no interest in doing math and science. I didn't see the value in it." Yet, once he realized Industrial Engineering held the greatest opportunities for him, he changed his major. Vaughn explains, "Engineering was the best route, but I wasn't prepared for math and science. I gave up so many times, but I was persistent... and here I am taking Calculus 3 and going onto Differential Equations."



Vaughn studies calculus in the SDSMT Student union

During his freshman year of college, Vaughn learned many organizations want to support students and that student loans should be the last resort. Understanding this changed his financial situation. Vaughn adds, "I encourage anyone going to college or looking into it to really investigate Native American scholarships and funding opportunities... I've received AIEF and other funding from the Chamber of Commerce, the Udall Foundation, my tribe and NASA."

Vaughn recalls receiving the AIEF award letter saying, "I was so excited because it was just a huge relief. Even more touching was getting the card — the Christmas card from this organization — and also getting the gift packages twice a year.



Vaughn received AIEF and other scholarships for Native students

To see an organization add a personal touch to the scholarship, it's a blessing by far." Clearly grateful for the support, Vaughn says, "it allows me to be an influential person in my son's life."

Vaughn's parting thought for scholarship donors is, "Thank you — thank you so much! You help people you may never meet... it's through your support I can remain in school — I WILL FINISH!"

Committed to championing hope for a brighter future for Native Americans, PWNA through its AIEF program has awarded more than 2,300 scholarships for Native American students. AIEF added graduate-level scholarships in 2009, funding more than 150 to date. Unlike traditional funders that seek out the "best and brightest," AIEF looks for students who have faced challenges and persevered despite adversity, the "best bet" student who will finish college despite lower GPAs and ACT or SAT scores.