Indspire

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.



Bridging Support: Aligning Donor Priorities with Indigenous Student Need in the BBF Program

2026 | DE MELO, M., NORRIS, D., EARLE, M., & DEHGHANSAI, N.

AUTHORS

Michaela de Melo, Ph.D.

Dakota Norris, B. Comm. Hons., M.E.S. (in progress)
Gwich'in Nation

Megan Earle, B.A. Hons., M.A., Ph.D

Nima Dehghansai, B.A. Hons., M.Sc., Ph.D.

PEER REVIEWERS

Internal:

Mallory Rose, MBA
Vice President, Communications & Marketing, Indspire,
Curve Lake First Nation

External:

Riel Tétreault, M.A. Economics
Métis (Métis Nation British Columbia)

Krystal Gray, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. Student



COVER DESIGN—*CONNECTIONS* BY MICAELA GILBERT

My name is Micaela Gilbert. I am an Anishinaabe Artist from Sagkeeng First Nation. Now, I am located in Winnipeg, Manitoba on Treaty 1 Territory. I am a painter and illustrator, and I have been creating for as long as I can remember, but started taking it seriously in 2016. I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2021 from the School of Art at the University of Manitoba. From here, I started creating because I found this was the best way to express myself and show my journey of reconnecting with my Anishinaabe culture through art.

ABOUT INDSPIRE

Indspire is a national Indigenous registered charity that invests in the education of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families, and communities. In partnership with Indigenous and private- and public-sector stakeholders, Indspire educates, connects, and invests in Indigenous people to help them achieve their highest potential. Indspire provides resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success in education for Indigenous youth. Since 1996, Indspire has awarded over $313 million through more than 93,000 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside of the Canadian federal government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking our previous Building Brighter Futures program recipients who shared their experiences and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. Through the support of Indspire staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, we are able to provide thousands of bursaries, scholarships, and awards each year to students pursuing post-secondary education and training.

At Indspire, it is important for us to provide space for Indigenous communities to feel seen, represented, and celebrated. The success experienced by Indigenous students, and the ways they use their education to demonstrate reciprocity and to give back to community, are truly inspiring and tells the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

Chi-Miigwetch for the hope and encouragement that you all bring.

RESEARCH SPONSORS

This project is funded in part by the Government of Canada | Canada

SUNCOR | SUNCOR ENERGY FOUNDATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5	ABSTRACT		
6	INTRODUCTION	Background	6
		Purpose	7
8	METHOD	Objective	8
		Methodology	8
		Ethical Considerations	8
9	RESULTS	Key Findings	9
		Growth Trends in Recipient Numbers and Donor Engagement	10
		Recipient Demographics and Donor Priorities	11
		Study Level	14
		Study Programs	17
26	DISCUSSION		
28	REFERENCES		
29	APPENDIX A:	PROGRAM NAMES AND ORIGINAL CLASSIFICATIONS IN BBF AND INDSPIRE'S DONOR DATABASES	
31	APPENDIX B:	DONORS' ANNUAL RANK, TOTAL NUMBER, AND AVERAGED RANK FOR PROGRAMS MATCHED	
32	APPENDIX C:	RECIPIENTS' ANNUAL RANK, TOTAL NUMBER, AND AVERAGED RANK FOR PROGRAMS MATCHED	
33	APPENDIX D:	TOTAL DONOR FUNDING (IN CAD) ALLOCATED AND PERCENTAGE OF DONOR FUNDING (%) BY PROGRAM AND BY BURSARY YEAR	

ABSTRACT

This report is the third phase of a comprehensive analysis aimed at enhancing the alignment between Indspire's Building Brighter Futures (BBF) program and donor funding strategies. Phase 1 examined trends among BBF bursary recipients, offering insights into the demographics and program preferences of Indigenous post-secondary students. Phase 2 focused on donors, exploring their priorities in terms of demographic criteria and program support.

This analysis compares BBF recipient profiles with donor contribution patterns to assess how effectively funding aligns with student need. The analysis shows that student demographics are generally aligned with donor priorities, as most donors have broad eligibility criteria that include students of all genders and Indigenous groups. However, donors are often more selective about which programs of study are supported. On average, 59% of donors specify one or more targeted programs. Moreover, a mismatch exists between BBF recipients' preferred programs and donor priorities. The findings highlight a consistent gap: Donor funding is more concentrated in STEM-related programs, while the highest student demand and financial need are in health, social sciences, and education. Students who are pursuing post-secondary education in donor-preferred fields tend to have more of their financial need met by the BBF program. Addressing this misalignment represents a key opportunity to strengthen the impact of BBF funding.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has outlined seven Calls to Action related to education, with access to financial support for students in post-secondary education being a key focus. Financial support remains a critical factor in enabling Indigenous students to pursue and complete post-secondary education. Launched in 2020, Indspire's National Education Survey (NES) was developed to understand the experiences of Indigenous students in post-secondary education and to explore the outcomes for those supported through Indspire's BBF bursary program. Findings from the NES provide strong evidence that scholarships can significantly improve educational outcomes (D'Antimo & Dehghansai, 2024):

- Approximately 73% of BBF recipients agreed that financial support was critical to completing their studies.
- 90% reported that it positively impacted their academic experience.
- Close to two-thirds of respondents either *Strongly Agreed* (45%) or *Agreed* (28%) that they may not have completed their education without this support.
- 90% of respondents *Strongly Agreed* (55%) or *Agreed* (35%) that financial support allowed them to spend more time focused on their studies.
- Nearly half (47%) of BBF recipients reported a GPA of "A" (80 – 100%), and 42% reported a GPA of "B" (70 – 79%).

While access to post-secondary education for Indigenous students in Canada has improved in recent years—for instance, between 2016 and 2021, the proportion of Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 who held a university degree increased from approximately 11% to 16%—systemic barriers, including financial challenges, continue to affect completion rates (McKeown et al., 2018; Melvin, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2023). Donor contributions directly support scholarship programs like the BBF program, helping to reduce financial barriers and enabling more Indigenous students to pursue and complete their education.

It is important to understand how donor support aligns with the profiles and needs of recipients. When this alignment is strong, the impact of financial aid is maximized. In cases where gaps exist between donor priorities and student need, Indspire may need to bridge the gaps to better meet evolving demand for support. While access has improved, financial barriers remain a defining constraint—making the effective alignment of donor funding with student need critical.

Purpose

Indspire's Research and Impact department analyzed trends from the past five years (2019 – 2024) of the BBF program to explore recipient characteristics and patterns in funding opportunities. This work is part of a broader effort to assess both student need and donor support within the program.

Phase 1 of this project, documented in Building Brighter Futures: Examining Bursary Trends across 2019 to 2024 (de Melo et al., 2025), focused on Indigenous students by analyzing recipient demographics, financial needs, and areas of academic interest. Phase 2, Building Brighter Futures: A Look at Donor Trends from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024 (de Melo & Dehghansai, 2025), examined the role of donors in supporting these programs, including the number of donors, total sponsorship amounts, and preferences related to funding allocation (e.g., target provinces, Indigenous groups, gender, and program types).

This phase (Phase 3) assesses how well donor funding aligns with Indigenous student need within the BBF program. This comparison identifies areas where donor support could be more strategically aligned with student need. For example, it examines whether recipients' preferred programs align with the types of programs that donors prioritize for funding. The insights gained will inform future donor engagement and program development, ultimately enhancing support for Indigenous learners through Indspire.

The goal is to identify where funding can be more strategically directed to maximize impact.

METHOD

Objective

This analysis compares BBF recipient profiles with donor funding priorities across four bursary years (2020 – 2024) to identify areas of alignment and gaps across demographics, study level, and program choice. To achieve this, a structured framework was applied that: (1) identified discrepancies between recipient profiles and donor priorities, (2) assessed areas of alignment and misalignment, and (3) informed the definition of targeting priorities to support future priority actions.

Methodology

The analysis draws on two Indspire datasets and their associated methodology, as well as results previously published in Indspire reports (de Melo et al., 2025; de Melo & Dehghansai, 2025).
The BBF database contains information collected from recipients during the 2019-2020 to 2023-2024 bursary years. This dataset includes demographic and academic details for over 33,000 bursary recipients.

Indspire's donor database includes data from service agreements signed between Indspire and approximately 680 donors, including organizations, companies, and Indigenous bursary programs from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024. This dataset captures donor funding preferences related to gender, Indigenous identity, provinces, levels of study, and study programs.

To align study program categories between the BBF recipient database and the donor database, a manual reclassification was necessary. Indspire's donor database used broader, more simplified categories, while the BBF database offered more detailed and diverse program options. To ensure consistency across the datasets, careful matching of categories was required. The corresponding categories between databases are presented in Appendix A.

As Indspire's donor database covers a shorter period (from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024) to that of BBF database (2019-2020 to 2023-2024), this comparative analysis uses only data from the overlapping years 2020-2021 to 2023-2024 to maintain consistency. A full BBF report has already been published (de Melo et al., 2025), and ongoing work to examine trends in Indspire's databases will help guide and improve the direction of its programs (e.g., Budhathoki et al., 2025).

Ethical Considerations

All data were anonymized and analyzed in aggregate in accordance with Indspire's Privacy Policy. This approach respects the confidentiality of individual recipients while allowing the production of insights to support Indigenous students. Indspire's donor database does not disclose donors' names, email addresses, or other identifying information to external parties. In this report, donor identities are also kept anonymous. The Research and Impact team adhered to the privacy policy established by Indspire. For more information on how participant data is handled, please refer to Indspire's Privacy Policy.

RESULTS

Key Findings

- **Total Recipients**
  The BBF program grew in both recipient participation and donor support from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024. Recipient numbers rose by 34%, with the most notable increase occurring in 2022-2023. Donor numbers grew by 66% overall, despite a brief decrease in 2022-2023.

- **Gender Distribution**
  Most BBF recipients are women (approximately 73%), and most donors (on average 95%) do not specify gender in their funding criteria. A small proportion of donors (5%) express a preference for supporting female students. This aligns with the overall gender distribution of BBF recipients and does not appear to create any imbalance in access to support.

- **Indigenous Identity**
  Most BBF recipients identify as First Nations, and while a small number of donors express preferences for specific Indigenous groups—mainly First Nations—the vast majority (94%) keep their criteria open. This enables broad access to funding for all Indigenous students.

- **Provincial Representation**
  A significant proportion of donors (36%) have established criteria targeting one or more provinces. Notably, the top five provinces prioritized by these donors—Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan—closely align with the provinces of origin of most BBF recipients.

- **Study Levels**
  Undergraduate and graduate students represent 65% of BBF recipients, aligning with donor priorities. However, a notable gap exists as 22% of recipients pursue diplomas, yet only 2% of donors target this level. Open criteria from 83% of donors help bridge this gap and support students across all study levels.

- **Study Programs**
  While Indspire's funding approach is broadly inclusive, donors tend to be more selective: On average, 59% specify one or more targeted programs of study.

- **Funding Priority and Program Preference Alignment**
  A clear mismatch exists between BBF recipients' program choices and donor funding priorities. While Business and Law & Justice are strongly valued by both groups, BBF recipients are more likely to enroll in Health-Related programs, Social Sciences, Social Work, and Education—fields that receive comparatively less donor funding compared to Engineering, Technology, and Trades programs, which receive higher donor funding but are pursued by a smaller proportion of recipients.

- **Percentage of Financial Needs Met**
  For top preferred programs among BBF recipients, financial need was only partially met (average 26%), with modest improvement between 2020-2021 and 2023-2024. Donor funding to these programs remained mostly stable over time, except for Business, which saw increased contributions, as it was ranked among donor-preferred programs as well. Among donor-preferred programs, a higher average of financial need was met (about 34%), with donor funding increasing steadily across years.

Growth Trends in Recipient Numbers and Donor Engagement

Both recipients and donor participation increased significantly over the four bursary years studied (2020-2021 to 2023-2024). Both the number of recipients and donors increased over this period—from 6,240 to 8,363 recipients and from 221 to 366 donors (Table 1).

The largest year-over-year increase in recipients occurred in 2022-2023, with a 14% rise. This upward trend continued into 2023-2024, with an additional 11% increase. The number of donors also rose significantly, growing by 40% between 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Although there was a slight decline of 2% in 2022-2023, donor numbers rebounded in 2023-2024 with a 20% increase. These trends highlight continued growth in program participation and support by donors, despite some year-to-year variation in donor engagement.

Table 1: Number and Year-Over-Year Growth of BBF Recipients and Donors Over the Past Four Bursary Years

	Recipients		Donors	
Bursary Year	**Number**	**Growth**	**Number**	**Growth**
2020-2021	6,240	–	221	–
2021-2022	6,599	6%	309	40%
2022-2023	7,522	14%	304	-2%
2023-2024	8,363	11%	366	20%

Recipient Demographics and Donor Priorities

The objective of this section is to assess whether scholarship recipients are equitably represented across gender, Indigenous identity (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), and province or territory of the recipients' community, and to evaluate the alignment between recipient profiles and donor priorities. To address this, we compared recipient demographics with donor-defined priorities related to gender, Indigenous identity, and community or provincial focus.

Gender

BBF recipients were predominantly women (73%) across the four bursary years (Table 2). Male recipients accounted for about 27%, while recipients identifying as another gender represented less than 1% of the total.

Most donors (an average of 95%) did not specify a gender criterion in their funding preferences. Among the small proportion who did, roughly 5% expressed a preference for supporting women. These proportions remained consistent over time, with no strong year-over-year trend in gender-specific funding.

In conclusion, gender remains a flexible criterion among donors. The modest preference for funding female Indigenous students aligns with the overall gender distribution of BBF recipients—who are predominantly women—and does not appear to create any imbalance in support.

Table 2: Recipient Gender Distribution and Donor Gender Criteria by Bursary Year

	Recipients				Donor Criteria	
Bursary Year	Female		Male		All Genders	Women Only
2020-2021	4,510	72%	1,681	27%	95%	5%
2021-2022	4,863	74%	1,665	25%	95%	5%
2022-2023	5,506	73%	1,926	26%	96%	4%
2023-2024	5,938	71%	2,326	28%	95%	5%
Average	**5,204**	**73%**	**1,900**	**27%**	**95%**	**5%**

Note: *Recipients identifying as another gender represent less than 1% of the total.*

Indigenous Identity

Patterns similar to those found in examining gender were found when examining Indigenous identity. The majority of BBF recipients were First Nations (69%), followed by Métis (28%) and Inuit (4%). Over time, the proportion of First Nations recipients has gradually decreased, accompanied by a slight increase in the proportion of Inuit recipients.

On the donor side, the vast majority (average of 94%) did not specify a preference for supporting any particular Indigenous group (Table 3). Among those who did, First Nations was the most specified group among donors (4%). A small proportion of donors target Inuit recipients (2%), while fewer than 1% choose to support a combination of two Indigenous groups.

These findings suggest that, although there is some recognition of specific Indigenous groups in donor preferences, most funding opportunities remain open to all Indigenous students. The modest preference among donors for funding First Nations recipients increased from 1% in 2020-2021 to 5% in 2022-2023, stabilizing at 5% in 2023-2024. This trend aligns with the majority representation of First Nations recipients in the BBF program and suggests a growing donor focus, while overall support remains balanced due to the continued prevalence (above 90%) of open funding criteria.

Table 3: Recipient Indigenous Identity Distribution and Donor Criteria by Bursary Year

	Recipients			Donor Criteria		
Bursary Year	First Nation	Inuit	Métis	All Groups	First Nation	Inuit
2020-2021	70%	3%	27%	96%	1%	2%
2021-2022	71%	3%	26%	95%	2%	2%
2022-2023	67%	4%	29%	91%	5%	1%
2023-2024	66%	4%	30%	92%	5%	1%
Average	**69%**	**4%**	**28%**	**94%**	**3%**	**2%**

Community—Province

The geographical distribution of BBF recipients was analyzed based on the provinces of their Indigenous communities. The highest number of students come from Ontario (26%), followed by Alberta (18%), Saskatchewan (16%), Manitoba (14%), and British Columbia (11%) (Table 4).

Most donors (64%) did not specify a preference for a particular province, instead maintaining open eligibility across the country. However, a high proportion (36%) have established criteria targeting one or more provinces (Table 5). Among donors with provincial targets, the majority (27%) consistently focus on a single province across all bursary years. Notably, the top five provinces targeted by donors—Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan—align closely with the provinces of origin of most BBF recipients, indicating a strong match between donor priorities and student demographics.

Because many students are from the provinces that are preferred by donors, their funding is likely to reach a large proportion of BBF recipients. At the same time, donors with open criteria help ensure that students from provinces not specifically targeted can still receive support to pursue their post-secondary studies.

Table 4: Yearly and Overall Average Distribution of Recipients in Top Five Provinces and Corresponding Donor Criteria

		Bursary Year				
Province	Category	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Average
Ontario	Recipients	29%	25%	25%	24%	**26%**
	Donor Criteria	31%	27%	31%	30%	**30%**
Alberta	Recipients	18%	19%	19%	18%	**19%**
	Donor Criteria	16%	16%	17%	17%	**17%**
Saskatchewan	Recipients	14%	16%	16%	17%	**16%**
	Donor Criteria	8%	10%	10%	9%	**9%**
Manitoba	Recipients	13%	13%	15%	14%	**14%**
	Donor Criteria	9%	7%	7%	7%	**8%**
British Columbia	Recipients	12%	11%	10%	10%	**11%**
	Donor Criteria	12%	18%	18%	21%	**17%**

Table 5: Yearly Percentage and Average of Donor Criteria for Province

Donor Criteria	Bursary Year 2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Average
All Provinces	61%	70%	61%	64%	**64%**
One Province	31%	23%	28%	24%	**27%**
Two Provinces	3%	2%	3%	4%	**3%**
Three Provinces	3%	2%	3%	4%	**3%**
Four Provinces	< 1%	< 1%	2%	2%	**2%**
Five or More Provinces	2%	2%	3%	2%	**2%**

Priority Action—Geographic Reach

Given the demographic findings, Indspire could prioritize expanding geographic reach in underrepresented areas. Donor criteria related to gender and Indigenous identity are largely broad and inclusive, supporting equitable access across BBF recipients. In contrast, geographic criteria are more frequently restrictive, with over one-third of donors targeting specific provinces—most commonly Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. While this focus aligns well with the provinces of origin of most BBF recipients, it highlights a potential area for action. Expanding outreach and awareness of financial support programs such as BBF in provinces that are less frequently targeted could help broaden participation and further support post-secondary access for students across Canada.

Study Levels

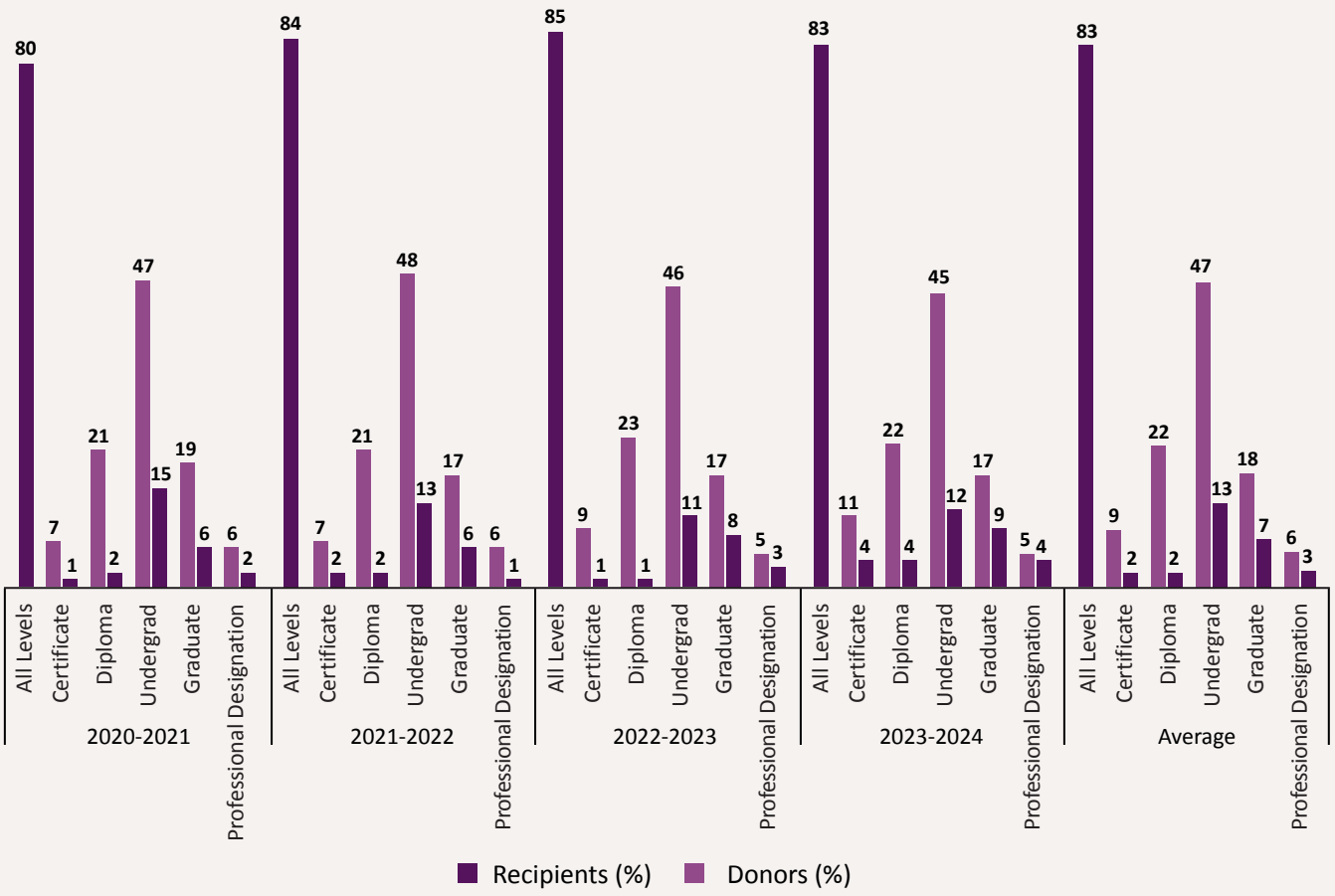
This section examines the alignment between funding priorities and recipient needs across different levels of study.

An analysis of study level criteria over the past four academic years reveals that the majority of BBF recipients are enrolled in undergraduate programs, accounting for an average of 42% of recipients (Figure 1). This is followed by students pursuing Diplomas (22%), Graduate studies (Master's or PhD, 18%), Certificates (9%), and Professional Designations (6%).

A key gap exists at the diploma level: 22% of recipients pursue diplomas, while only 2% of donors explicitly fund them.

Most donors (83%) have open criteria, supporting students at all levels of post-secondary education. However, some funders specify one or more targeted study levels, including Certificate, Diploma, Undergraduate, Graduate, and Professional Designation programs. Among these funders with targeted criteria, Undergraduate and Graduate studies are the most frequently prioritized, with an average of 13% and 7% of funders respectively, identifying these levels as their focus (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Yearly Percentages of Recipients and Donor Criteria by Study Level



The distribution of study levels among BBF recipients has remained relatively stable over the past four bursary years. Undergraduate and graduate programs consistently emerge as the primary targets for donors, reflecting clear funding priorities. Together, undergraduate and graduate students account for 65% of BBF recipients, highlighting the importance of continued donor support at these levels to sustain the long-term success of the BBF program.

However, there is a notable mismatch between the proportion of recipients pursuing diplomas (22%) and the relatively low level of donor support specifically designated for this level of study (2%). Despite this discrepancy, the impact is mitigated by the fact that most donors (83%) maintain open criteria, allowing them to support students across all levels of post-secondary education.

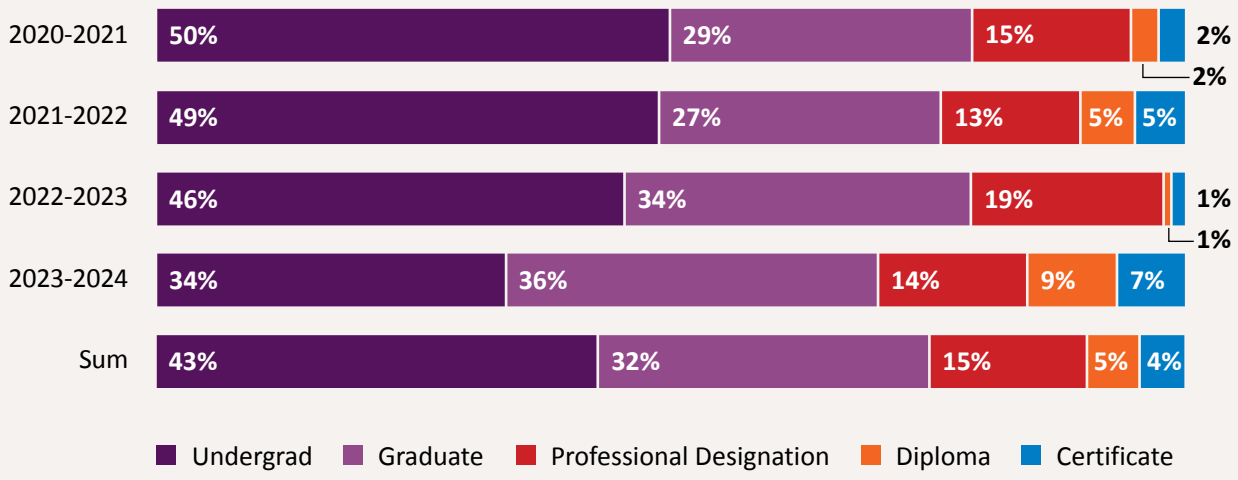
Study Level Breakdown by Donor Funding

Most donor funding does not specify a study level (83% of donors on average across the years). Where donor contributions are allocated to specific study levels, undergraduate and graduate studies receive the largest share, together accounting for 75% of donor-specific allocations across the four bursary years (Figure 2). Notably, 15% of designated donor funding is directed toward professional designation programs. This is noteworthy given that, on average, only 6% of BBF recipients pursue professional designations, compared to 22% and 9% who pursue diplomas and certificates, respectively. Despite this mismatch, relative to previous years, donor funding for diploma and certificate programs increased in 2023-2024, reflecting 16% of designated funds compared to just 2% in 2022-2023, 10% in 2021-2022, and 4% in 2020-2021 (Figure 2).

Priority Action—Study Level

Despite donors' broad support across all study levels, gaps remain between donor priorities and the programs BBF recipients are pursuing. Many students enroll in diploma and certificate programs, yet these levels have historically received comparatively less targeted funding. The increase in funding for these programs in 2023-2024 suggests improvements. Moreover, undesignated funding can help fill these gaps and support those in programs that receive less targeted funding.

Figure 2: Annual and Cumulative Proportions of Donor Funding Allocated by Study Level (Based on Donor-Defined Criteria)



Study Programs

The objective of this section is to examine whether the distribution of BBF recipients across study programs aligns with the allocation of donor funding, and whether students' financial needs are being equitably met across programs.

To identify discrepancies, we compared the relative proportion of BBF recipients across study programs with donors' targeted programs, as reflected in donor funding allocations. We also assessed the extent of misalignment between student financial need and donor funding priorities—specifically, where donor support does not align with student need.

Top Programs

Indspire supports students across a wide range of programs and disciplines throughout their educational journeys. While Indspire's funding approach is broadly inclusive, donors tend to be more selective: On average, 59% specify one or more targeted programs of study (in 2023-2024, specific criteria reached 63%). This reflects a more restricted approach compared to the flexibility observed in donor preferences for student demographics and levels of study.

While the authors used *Classification of Instructional Programs* (CIP) codes to analyze recipient choices in the original report (De Melo et al., 2025), the data on donor priorities were collected using a simplified set of categories (see Appendix A). Therefore, in this section, a higher-level analysis using broader category groupings than in previous BBF reports was utilized. This was necessary to align bursary data with the original donor dataset, which did not follow the CIP structure.

As a result, the figures in this section are not directly comparable to earlier analyses (de Melo et al., 2025). For example, in the BBF report, Health Professions and Related Programs and Business, Management, Marketing and Related Support Services ranked among the top recipient choices among over 40 program categories. However, in this comparative analysis, Social Sciences and Social Work emerge as prominent areas of recipient demand among 24 program categories. This difference likely stems from the way CIP categories have been consolidated—several fields that were previously disaggregated may now fall under the broader umbrella of Social Sciences. For instance, if recipients of Health-Related, Nursing, and Medicine programs are summed, they total 5,462, which is more than Social Science and Social Work individually (3,627 and 3,313, respectively). Thus, these differences should be kept in mind when interpreting the alignment between recipient demand and donor allocations in this section.

Among BBF recipients, the most preferred programs include Health-Related fields (along with Nursing and Medicine), Social Sciences, Social Work, Business, Education, Law & Justice, and Humanities (see Table 6). In contrast, donors tend to prioritize programs such as Business, Engineering, Technology, Law & Justice, Trades, Science, Environment, STEM, and Education. Donor funding is concentrated in STEM-related fields, while student demand is highest in Health-Related, Social Sciences, and Education.

While Business and Law & Justice appear among the top choices for both groups, most other areas are not aligned. For instance, Health-Related, Social Sciences, Social Work, and Education are consistently among the most common choices for recipients but attract relatively few donors. Conversely, Engineering and Technology programs rank highly among donor priorities but are not among the top programs pursued by BBF recipients. This indicates a misalignment between donor interests and actual student enrollment trends. For a detailed year-by-year analysis, check Appendix B and Appendix C.

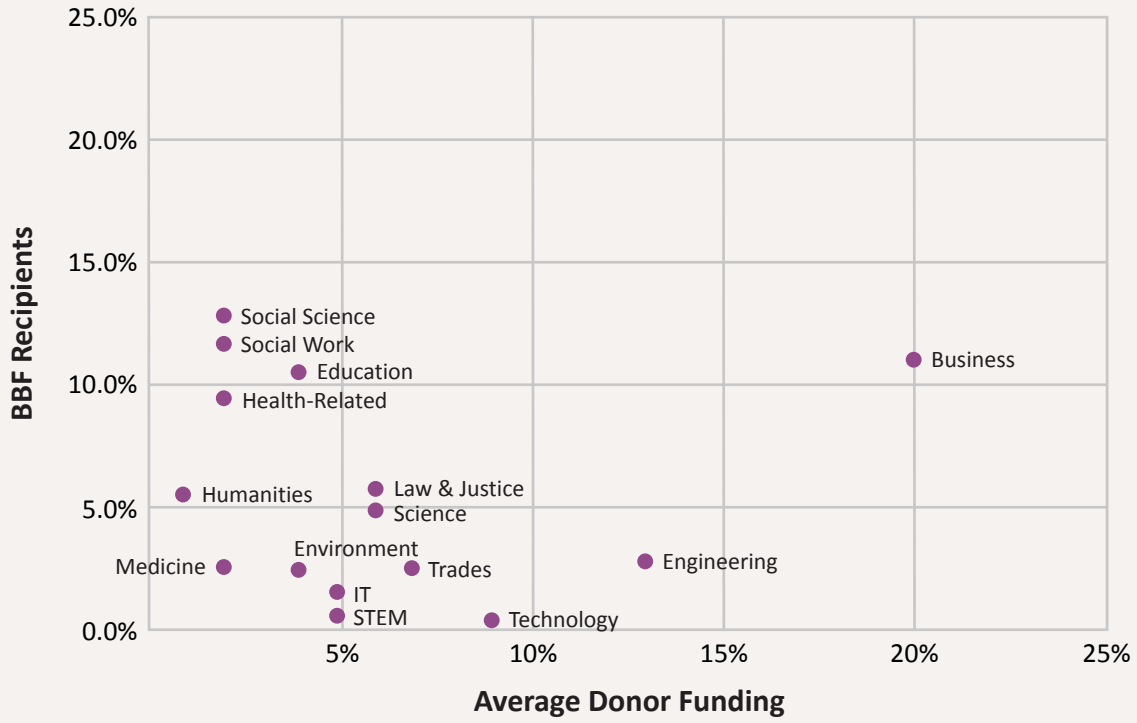
Table 6: Average Rank[1] in Recipients' Choice and Donor Criteria by Program Matched

Program Matched	Average Rank—BBF Recipients	Average Rank—Donor Criteria
Social Science	1.0	15.5
Social Work	2.3	16.5
Business	3.0	1.0
Education	3.8	10.0
Health-Related	5.0	11.5
Nursing	6.0	15.5
Law & Justice	7.3	5.5
Humanities	7.8	17.3
Science	9.0	5.8
Fine Arts	11.0	17.8
Engineering	11.3	2.0
Other	12.0	21.8
Medicine	13.3	21.0
Trades	13.8	5.5
Environment	14.8	7.0
Public Policy	15.3	18.5
IT	17.0	10.8
Journalism	17.8	18.25
Essential Services	19.3	12
Art	20.0	13.5
STEM	21.5	8.75
Aviation	21.5	18
Technology	23.3	3.5
Urban Planning	23.5	23.5

1 "Average rank" reflects the relative importance of each program based on the preferences of BBF recipients and donors. For each year, programs are ordered from largest to smallest according to the number of recipients or donors targeting them. The program with the highest number is assigned a rank of 1, the second highest a rank of 2, and so on. Ranks are calculated annually, then averaged across the four-year period.

To assess whether programs are receiving funding proportional to the number of students, the percentage of BBF recipients in each program was compared with the average donor funding allocated to that program (Figure 3). This comparison allows for assessment of whether fields with more students are receiving an appropriate share of donor support. From the figure, it can be observed that certain programs, such as Business, have comparatively high funding relative to the proportion of recipients, whereas programs with many students—such as Health-Related fields, Social Science, and Education—receive less funding. This suggests that donor support does not always align with student representation across programs.

Figure 3: Relationship Between the Relative Percentage of BBF Recipients in Key Study Programs and Distribution of Average Donor Funding



A recent assessment by Employment and Social Development Canada (2025) identified 103 occupations projected to face a moderate to high risk of labour shortages between 2024 and 2033. Among these, occupations in Health, Education, Law, and Social, Community, and Government Services were flagged as facing a high risk of shortage. These fields correspond to programs that are highly popular among BBF students and are associated with greater job stability and higher earning potential after graduation—indicating that many Indigenous graduates are pursuing in-demand careers with strong employment prospects. Three-quarters of all projected job openings over the 2024 – 2033 period are in occupations that usually require post-secondary education. The same assessment also identified program categories expected to experience labour surpluses. Notably, strong donor priorities remain for Business and Trades, which are fields projected to face surpluses.

Recipient Financial Needs

Programs with the highest financial need—particularly health-related and social programs—are not receiving proportional donor funding. Financial need was calculated as the difference between recipients' total expenses and total income, both reported by recipients on their BBF application forms. The average financial need for each program by year, as well as aggregated over the entire period from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024 is presented below (see Table 7).

Programs that are top preferences among BBF recipients, such as Health-Related (e.g., Medicine and Nursing) and Social Work, are associated with high average financial need (above the cross-program, multi-year average of $12,840) and show no consistent decline in financial need over time. These programs could therefore be important targets for future funding and support. Conversely, programs highly prioritized by donors—such as Environment, Technology, Trades, Science, and Engineering—are associated with lower average financial need, typically below the cross-program, multi-year average of $12,840.

Table 7: Annual Average Financial Need (CAD) by Program in Descending Order

Program Matched	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Average
Medicine	$26,316	$22,905	$22,632	$20,602	$23,114
Aviation	$11,154	$14,916	$21,567	$17,683	$16,330
Law & Justice	$15,208	$12,500	$14,585	$15,793	$14,522
Health-Related	$13,458	$13,203	$14,652	$14,681	$13,999
STEM	$13,408	$11,498	$12,697	$16,937	$13,635
Social Work	$13,118	$12,294	$13,807	$14,699	$13,479
Art	$12,680	$10,879	$13,529	$16,003	$13,273
Nursing	$13,068	$11,927	$12,750	$13,808	$12,888
Education	$12,543	$12,129	$13,294	$13,453	$12,855
Business	$12,397	$12,288	$12,386	$14,185	$12,814
Urban Planning	$16,685	$11,628	$11,664	$10,650	$12,657
Fine Arts	$12,825	$10,268	$12,197	$14,016	$12,327
Humanities	$11,669	$10,826	$12,671	$13,316	$12,121
Public Policy	$12,271	$10,822	$12,586	$12,233	$11,978
Engineering	$12,433	$10,340	$11,630	$12,641	$11,761
IT	$13,017	$12,002	$10,583	$11,044	$11,661
Journalism	$12,636	$10,774	$10,679	$12,528	$11,654
Social Science	$11,546	$10,280	$11,328	$12,623	$11,444
Environment	$11,344	$10,236	$11,583	$12,278	$11,360
Tech	$14,894	$12,345	$7,940	$9,260	$11,110
Essential Services	$10,737	$10,162	$11,411	$11,409	$10,930
Science	$11,538	$9,737	$10,096	$12,024	$10,849
Other	$10,248	$9,934	$11,165	$11,871	$10,805
Trades	$10,887	$9,171	$10,706	$11,616	$10,595
Average					**$12,840**

Funding Priorities Versus Student Need

Students in donor-prioritized programs have a higher proportion of their financial need met (34%) compared to those in high-demand programs (26%). To better understand where donors are prioritizing their support, donor contributions were analyzed using data from Indspire's donor database (de Melo & Dehghansai, 2025) and compared to students' financial need met. The goal was to estimate total funding directed to each study program and its alignment with student need.

The percentage of donor funding allocated to each program was calculated by dividing the sponsor funding[2] dedicated to that study program by the total sponsor funding[3] for each year. It is important to note that these percentages are not exclusive to a single program, as donors often support multiple areas of study. For instance, a donor selecting Technology, STEM, and IT would have their contribution counted under each of those programs.

An overview of total sponsor funding and the corresponding percentage of donor funding by program across four bursary years (2020-2021 to 2023-2024) is presented in Appendix D. Figures 4 and 5 compare the percentage of sponsor funding (Indspire's donor database) with the average student financial need met (BBF database) across the most frequently selected programs by BBF recipients and by donors, respectively, over the four-year period.

When considering the programs most frequently selected by BBF recipients (Figure 4), financial need was only partially met by the awards (26% on average). While there was a modest improvement between 2020-2021 and 2023-2024, a significant proportion of student need remains unmet. In parallel, the percentage of sponsor funding directed toward these same programs has remained relatively stable over time, with the exception of Business, where a noticeable increase in donor contributions was observed.

When the analysis was repeated—this time focusing on the most popular programs among donors (Figure 5)—it was observed that the average percentage of financial need met was relatively higher, at approximately 34%. This represented a general improvement from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024, with the exception of Health-Related programs, where the percentage of need met declined over time.

2 Sum of donor contributions to each program across the four bursary years (2020 – 2024). Donors who allocated funding to more than one study program (e.g., a single donor selecting Technology, STEM, and IT) are counted within each relevant program and are not differentiated across programs.

3 Sum of donor contributions plus government-matched funds across all programs, including funding that did not have program criteria.

For programs prioritized by donors, there was also a clear increase in the percentage of donor funding allocated to each program across the four bursary years. This trend indicates that donor contributions are increasingly concentrated in areas of specific interest. As a result, students enrolled in these programs tend to receive higher levels of financial support, with a larger portion of their financial needs being met compared to students in less donor-supported fields. However, the situation is complex, and students' needs are far from being fully addressed, as the extent to which their financial needs are met depends on multiple factors, including total expenses, personal circumstances, and economic considerations—such as rising living costs that may outpace scholarship increases.

Figure 4: Average Financial Need Met and Distribution of Donor (or Sponsor) Funding in the Top Ranked Programs Among BBF Students Over Years

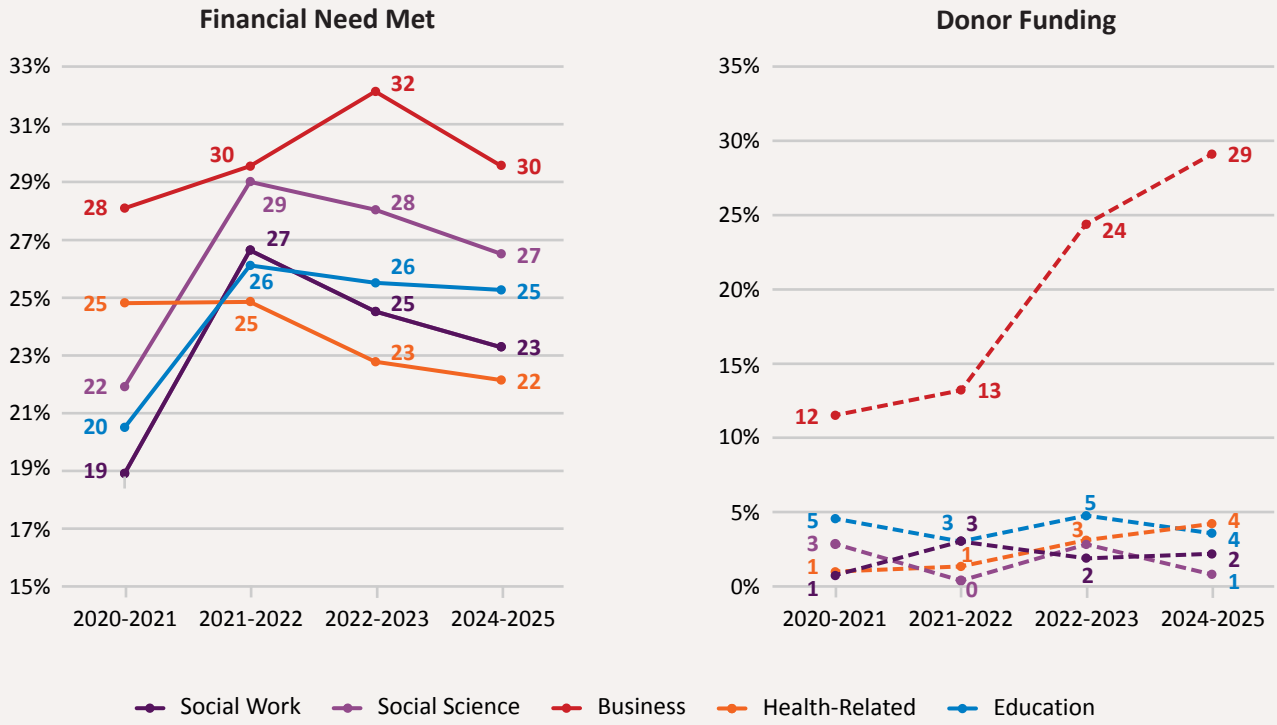
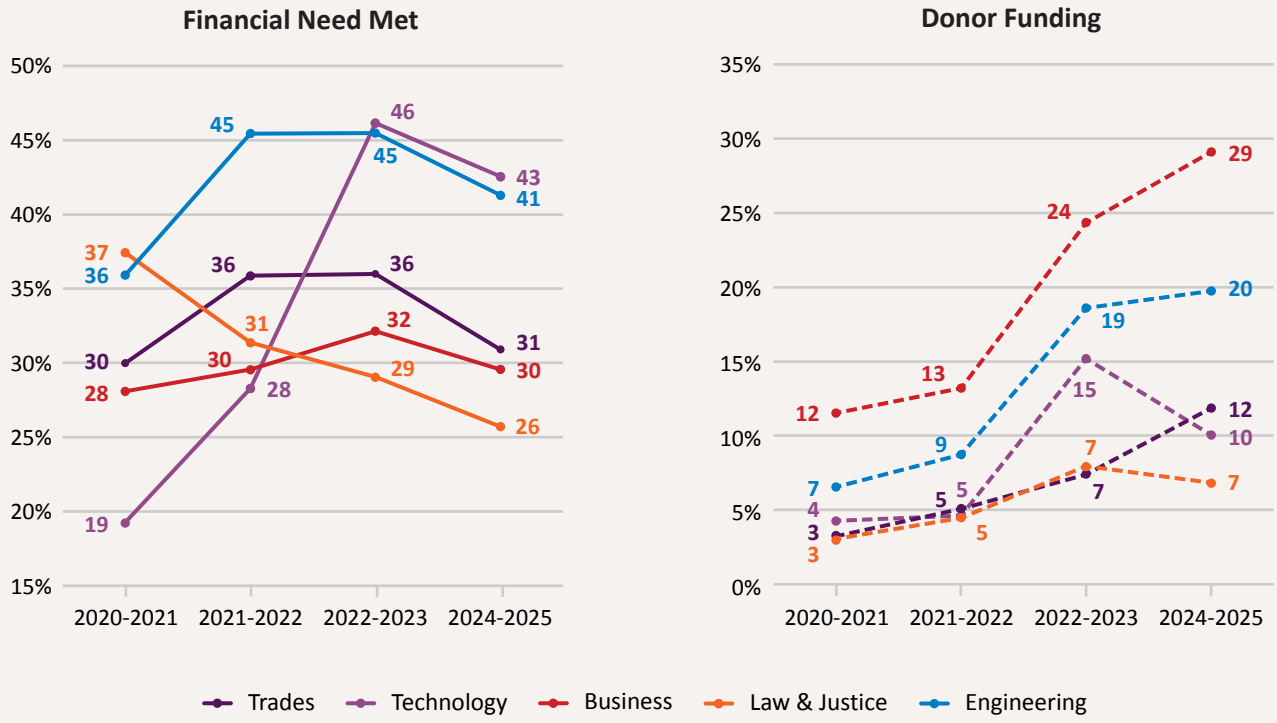


Figure 5: Average Financial Need Met and Distribution of Donor Funding in the Top Ranked Programs Among Donors Over Years



It is important to recognize that a student's ability to work—and the number of hours they can realistically commit to paid employment—is shaped by a range of interconnected factors that ultimately influence their income and financial need metrics. Students' study/work balance is often constrained by structural and personal circumstances, including family responsibilities, geographic context, and the demands of their academic program. In particular, programs with high credit loads, mandatory clinical or field placements (Health-Related fields), or intensive studio and laboratory components are likely to leave limited flexibility for traditional part-time employment. These constraints can substantially reduce students' earning capacity.

Priority Action—Study Programs

Study program eligibility should be a key focus for action, as it appears to be one of the most restrictive criteria among Indspire donors. Current funding patterns reveal a misalignment between donor priorities and student financial need.

Targeted and flexible funding could be directed toward programs most frequently selected by BBF recipients and where both donor funding and unmet financial need remain highest, notably Health-Related fields, Social Sciences, Social Work, and Education.

When donors demonstrate flexibility, Indspire has the opportunity to engage donors in conversations about opportunities to broaden or adjust program criteria by sharing up-to-date, evidence-based information on student demand, financial need, and funding gaps by program. This approach could help reduce observed gaps between donor priorities and evolving student demographics and needs.

DISCUSSION

This analysis highlights consistent patterns between recipient profiles and donor priorities over the four bursary years discussed, focusing on growth, demographics, and alignment. Understanding these patterns is important, as it underscores where donor support could be better targeted to meet the actual needs of students. The results presented here can help Indspire enhance the effectiveness of the BBF program by identifying funding gaps that are most critical to student success and informing program efficiency by highlighting areas where new funding would close the largest gaps between student need and available support. Specifically, the analysis provides guidance across four key dimensions: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and employment relevance.

Demographic analysis showed that donor criteria around gender and Indigenous identity were generally broad and inclusive, supporting equitable access across diverse groups, with most donors not specifying gender or Indigenous group preferences (95% and 94%, respectively). However, geographic criteria tended to be more restrictive. Over a third of donors targeted specific provinces—primarily Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Notably, these top five provinces align closely with the provinces where the majority of BBF recipients originate, demonstrating strong geographic alignment, while highlighting opportunities to expand awareness and support in underrepresented regions.

Study level analysis showed that most donors maintain open criteria without restricting funding to specific levels, supporting equitable access across undergraduate and graduate programs, which represent the majority of BBF recipients. However, non-degree programs—diploma and certificate—receive very limited targeted funding despite representing a substantial portion of recipients. This gap highlights opportunities to enhance program effectiveness, since targeting support for non-degree students could be critical to ensuring program completion and academic success. It could also improve employment relevance, as many non-degree programs provide skills aligned with labour market demand, meaning targeted support could enhance students' career outcomes.

Program of study is the most specified eligibility criterion among donors, with 59% defining one or more preferred programs. However, alignment between donor priorities and student choices is inconsistent. While some programs—such as Business and Law & Justice—are prioritized by both donors and recipients, many others show a clear mismatch. Health-Related (along with Medicine and Nursing) and Social Work are frequently chosen by students, but less often targeted by donors, whereas Engineering and Technology programs receive significant donor support despite being less popular among recipients.

DISCUSSION

From an effectiveness perspective, the most critical funding gaps are found in study programs with high and persistent financial need. Programs most frequently selected by BBF recipients—particularly Health-Related (along with Medicine and Nursing), Social Sciences, and Education—consistently show higher average financial need and substantial unmet need, indicating strong potential impact from targeted funding. In terms of efficiency and equity, the largest gains would come from addressing programs where student demand is high, but donor funding remains comparatively low. From an employment perspective, several high-demand programs correspond to fields facing a high risk of labour shortages—such as health, education, law, and social, community, and government services, indicating that additional funding would both support student success and address critical workforce gaps.

This misalignment contributes to an unequal distribution of financial support across programs, with donor-preferred programs receiving increasing contributions and a larger portion of students' financial need being met compared to areas with less donor support. Addressing this gap will significantly increase the impact, equity, and effectiveness of BBF funding.

REFERENCES

Budhathoki, R., D'Antimo, S., & Dehghansai, N. (2025). Building Brighter Futures for Indigenous learners: A report on the yearly evaluation of the BBF program. *Indspire*. Retrieved April 1, 2026, from https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/D25_00254_2025-BBF-For-Indigenous-Learners_Yearly-Evaluation_English-1_3_2026.pdf

D'Antimo, S., & Dehghansai, N. (2024). Building brighter futures for Indigenous learners: Insights into the national education survey. *Indspire.* Retrieved on March 26, 2025, from https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2024_Building-Brighter-Futures_English-REV-1_2_2026.pdf

de Melo, M., Reid, B., Ayson, G., & Dehghansai, N. (2025). Building Brighter Futures: Examining bursary trends across 2019 to 2024. *Indspire.* Retrieved on March 12, 2026, from 2025-BBF-Bursary-Trends-2019-to-2024-Report-English.pdf

de Melo, M., & Dehghansai, N. (2025). Building Brighter Futures: A look at donor trends from 2020-2021 to 2023-2024. *Indspire.* Retrieved on March 12, 2026 from 2025-BBF-Donor-Trends-2020-2024_Report_EN.pdf

Employment and Social Development Canada (2025). *Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS): Occupation Data*. Retrieved February 5, 2025, from https://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/content.jsp?cid=occupationdatasearch&lang=en

Melvin, A. (2023). Postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes among Indigenous peoples in Canada: Findings from the 2021 Census (Catalogue no. 75-006-X). *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved January 6, 2025, from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00012-eng.htm

McKeown, S., Vedan, A., Mack, K., Jacknife, S., & Tolmie, C. (2018). *Indigenous educational pathways: Access, mobility, and persistence in the BC post-secondary system*. British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer. Retrieved March 12, 2026, from https://www.bccat.ca/publication/indigenousedpathways2018/

Statistics Canada. (2023). An update on the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous Peoples and the non-Indigenous population in Canada: Highlights from the 2021 Census. *Government of Canada.* Retrieved from January 6, 2025, from: https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1690909773300/1690909797208

APPENDIX A: PROGRAM NAMES AND ORIGINAL CLASSIFICATIONS IN BBF AND INDSPIRE'S DONOR DATABASES

Program Names	BBF Program Category—Broad Umbrella	Donor Program Category
Science	Science	Science
Law & Justice	Law	Law & Justice
Nursing	Nursing	Nursing
Public Policy	Public Policy	Public Policy
Business	Business	Business
Humanities	Indigenous Languages and Studies	Humanities
Environment	Environmental	Environment
Engineering	Engineering	Engineering
Other	Academic Upgrading	*No matching category*
Fine Arts	Fine Art	Fine Arts
Journalism	Communications	Journalism
Other	Agriculture	*No matching category*
Art	Visual Arts	Art
Health-Related	Veterinary Medicine	Health-Related
Law & Justice	Justice	Law & Justice
Essential Services	Essential Services	Construction
Essential Services	Architecture	Construction
Aviation	Aviation	Aviation
Art	Aesthetics	Art
Social Science	Social Sciences and Humanities	Social Science
Other	Professional Development	*No matching category*
Other	Library	*No matching category*
IT	Computer Studies	IT
Health-Related	Kinesiology	Health-Related
Trades	Trades	Trades
Health-Related	Dental Health	Health-Related
Trades	Service Trades	Trades
Health-Related	Health	Health-Related
Health-Related	Pharmacy	Health-Related
Public Policy	Multidisciplinary/Interdisciplinary Studies	Public Policy
Environment	Natural Resources and Conservation	Environment

(Continued...)

PROGRAM NAMES AND ORIGINAL CLASSIFICATIONS IN BBF AND INDSPIRE'S DONOR DATABASES (...continued)

Program Names	BBF Program Category—Broad Umbrella	Donor Program Category
Technology	Tech Studies	Tech
STEM	STEM	STEM
Public Policy	Leadership Studies	Public Policy
Urban Planning	Planning	Urban Planning
Health-Related	Fitness and Sport, Kinesiology	Health-Related
Medicine	Medicine	Medicine
Education	Education	Education
Social Work	Social Work	Social Work
Other	Tourism	*No matching category*
Essential Services	Essential Services	Oil Gas
Essential Services	Essential Services	Mining
Other	*No matching category*	Creative Writing

APPENDIX B: DONORS' ANNUAL RANK, TOTAL NUMBER, AND AVERAGED RANK FOR PROGRAMS MATCHED

Program Matched	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Total Number of Donors	Average Rank of Donors
Business	1	1	1	1	**518**	**1.0**
Engineering	2	2	2	2	**158**	**2.0**
Technology	3	5	3	3	**270**	**3.5**
Law & Justice	5	4	4	8	**216**	**5.3**
Trades	6	3	6	7	**226**	**5.5**
Science	4	6	7	6	**206**	**5.8**
Environment	9	7	8	4	**174**	**7.0**
STEM	17	8	5	5	**182**	**8.8**
Education	8	10	10	12	**94**	**10.0**
IT	11	14	9	9	**110**	**10.8**
Health-Related	10	13	12	11	**94**	**11.5**
Essential Services	16	11	11	10	**94**	**12.0**
Art	7	9	24	14	**62**	**13.5**
Nursing	12	15	18	17	**54**	**15.5**
Social Science	14	17	13	18	**58**	**15.5**
Social Work	22	12	19	13	**68**	**16.5**
Humanities	19	20	15	15	**40**	**17.3**
Fine Arts	18	19	14	20	**30**	**17.8**
Aviation	15	18	20	19	**26**	**18.0**
Journalism	20	21	16	16	**32**	**18.3**
Public Policy	13	16	22	23	**36**	**18.5**
Medicine	24	22	17	21	**32**	**21.0**
Other	21	23	21	22	**16**	**21.8**
Urban Planning	23	24	23	24	**22**	**23.5**

APPENDIX C: RECIPIENTS' ANNUAL RANK, TOTAL NUMBER AND AVERAGED RANK FOR PROGRAMS MATCHED

Program Matched	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Total Number	Percentage	Average Rank
Social Science	1	1	1	1	**3,627**	**12.6%**	**1.0**
Social Work	3	2	2	2	**3,313**	**11.5%**	**2.3**
Business	2	3	4	3	**3,139**	**10.9%**	**3.0**
Education	4	4	3	4	**2,973**	**10.4%**	**3.8**
Health-Related	5	5	5	5	**2,679**	**9.3%**	**5.0**
Nursing	6	6	6	6	**2,095**	**7.3%**	**6.0**
Law & Justice	7	7	7	8	**1,614**	**5.6%**	**7.3**
Humanities	8	8	8	7	**1,552**	**5.4%**	**7.8**
Science	9	9	9	9	**1,344**	**4.7%**	**9.0**
Fine Arts	11	10	10	13	**776**	**2.7%**	**11.0**
Engineering	10	11	12	12	**769**	**2.7%**	**11.3**
Other	14	12	11	11	**751**	**2.6%**	**12.0**
Medicine	13	13	13	14	**688**	**2.4%**	**13.3**
Trades	16	14	15	10	**677**	**2.4%**	**13.8**
Environment	15	15	14	15	**641**	**2.2%**	**14.8**
Public Policy	12	16	16	17	**566**	**2.0%**	**15.3**
IT	18	17	17	16	**380**	**1.3%**	**17.0**
Journalism	17	18	18	18	**323**	**1.1%**	**17.8**
Essential Services	19	19	19	20	**234**	**0.8%**	**19.3**
Art	21	20	20	19	**195**	**0.7%**	**20.0**
STEM	20	22	22	22	**125**	**0.4%**	**21.5**
Aviation	23	21	21	21	**117**	**0.4%**	**21.5**
Technology	22	23	24	24	**68**	**0.2%**	**23.3**
Urban Planning	24	24	23	23	**78**	**0.3%**	**23.5**

APPENDIX D:
TOTAL DONOR FUNDING (CAD) ALLOCATED AND PERCENTAGE OF DONOR FUNDING (%) BY PROGRAM AND BY BURSARY YEAR

Programs	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023		2023-2024				
	Total Donor Funding	Donor Funding	Total Donor Funding	Donor Funding	Total Donor Funding	Donor Funding	Total Donor Funding	Donor Funding	Sum of Total Donor Funding	Average Donor Funding	Growth
Business	$1,245,900	12%	$1,708,883	13%	$2,346,462	24%	$3,973,368	29%	$9,274,613	20%	219%
Engineering	$710,900	7%	$1,130,585	9%	$1,789,944	19%	$2,696,353	20%	$6,327,782	13%	279%
Technology	$462,700	4%	$603,813	5%	$1,462,982	15%	$1,371,585	10%	$3,901,080	9%	196%
Trades	$356,400	3%	$661,900	5%	$714,725	7%	$1,620,003	12%	$3,353,028	7%	355%
Science	$344,400	3%	$562,485	4%	$624,419	6%	$1,530,257	11%	$3,061,561	6%	344%
Law & Justice	$323,347	3%	$582,151	5%	$764,150	8%	$930,900	7%	$2,600,548	6%	188%
STEM	$86,000	1%	$396,102	3%	$863,039	9%	$858,200	6%	$2,203,341	5%	898%
IT	$326,400	3%	$380,000	3%	$560,150	6%	$975,500	7%	$2,242,050	5%	199%
Environment	$229,000	2%	$443,583	3%	$408,670	4%	$901,220	7%	$1,982,473	4%	294%
Education	$492,700	5%	$385,843	3%	$457,540	5%	$487,543	4%	$1,823,626	4%	-1%
Health-Related	$103,900	1%	$171,900	1%	$299,190	3%	$575,071	4%	$1,150,061	2%	453%
Mining	$22,000	0%	$10,000	0%	$106,000	1%	$935,503	7%	$1,073,503	2%	4,152%
Social Work	$77,900	1%	$394,393	3%	$183,000	2%	$295,100	2%	$950,393	2%	279%
Medicine	$66,000	1%	$308,600	2%	$327,100	3%	$186,501	1%	$888,201	2%	183%
Social Science	$309,000	3%	$51,333	0%	$270,333	3%	$111,733	1%	$742,399	2%	-64%
Art	$537,500	5%	$164,205	1%	$0	0%	$87,280	1%	$788,985	2%	-84%
Humanities	$5,500	0%	$5,500	0%	$270,214	3%	$199,300	1%	$480,514	1%	3,524%
Oil & Gas	$49,000	0%	$98,000	1%	$118,000	1%	$157,000	1%	$422,000	1%	220%
Journalism	$109,128	1%	$62,128	0%	$82,720	1%	$82,020	1%	$335,996	1%	-25%
Construction	$18,080	0%	$79,100	1%	$9,680	0%	$179,000	1%	$285,860	1%	890%
Nursing	$45,660	0%	$92,380	1%	$54,580	1%	$57,300	0%	$249,920	1%	25%
Public Policy	$107,780	1%	$99,540	1%	$5,000	0%	$32,500	0%	$244,820	1%	-70%
Fine Arts	$5,000	0%	$10,280	0%	$161,680	2%	$31,680	0%	$208,640	1%	534%
Aviation	$114,700	1%	$42,600	0%	$22,600	0%	$38,600	0%	$218,500	< 1%	-66%
Urban Planning	$79,200	1%	$13,200	0%	$40,200	0%	$45,200	0%	$177,800	< 1%	-43%
Creative Writing	$6,000	0%	$18,000	0%	$5,280	0%	$5,280	0%	$34,560	< 1%	-12%

Indspire

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.

Head Office

Box 5, Suite 100
50 Generations Drive
Six Nations of the Grand River
Ohsweken, ON N0A 1M0

1-855-INDSPIRE (463-7747)
Fax: (866) 433-3159

Toronto Office

555 Richmond St. W.
Suite 601
Toronto, ON M5V 3B1

indspire.ca | @Indspire