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Building Brighter Futures for Indigenous Learners: A Report on the Yearly Evaluation of the BBF Program

2026 | BUDHATHOKI, R., AYSON, G., EARLE, M., & DEHGHANSAI, N.

AUTHORS

Rita Thapa Budhathoki, M.A., M.R.P.E.

Gladys Ayson, B.A., Ph.D.

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

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

PEER REVIEWERS

Internal:

Yancy Craig, B.A. (Hons.)
Vice-President, Indigenous and Government Relations
Six Nations of the Grand River (Oneida)

Sue Bradley,
Director,
Building Brighter Futures

External:

Victoria Steele, B.Sc., Hons.
Métis



FIRST AUTHOR RITA'S POSITIONALITY

Rita Thapa Budhathoki is an Indigenous researcher from Nepal. Her background in Indigenous community research shapes her interpretation and understanding of the context behind the Indigenous students' experiences. She presents findings with the utmost respect for the Indigenous students involved, ensuring information is accurate and provides relevant, practical value to them.

COVER DESIGN—*OL' STYLE GINGLE* 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 have been creating for as long as I can remember, but started taking it seriously in 2016. As I attended the School of Art at the University of Manitoba and received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2021. From here, I started creating because I found this was the best way to express myself and show my journey of reconnection 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 $180 million through more than 50,000 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 *Building Brighter Futures* program recipients who shared their experiences with us and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. We also wish to acknowledge Indspire's staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, whose support has enabled us 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 in giving back to their communities, are truly inspiring and tell the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

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

RESEARCH SPONSORS

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

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ABSTRACT

Indspire's Building Brighter Future (BBF) program provides bursaries to support Indigenous students in pursuing their post-secondary education by easing their financial burden. This report presents the results of an evaluation of the BBF program, examining outcomes for Indigenous students who received the program in 2024-2025. A total of 3,368 individuals participated in the survey. Among them, 65% identified as First Nations, 32% as Métis, and 3% as Inuit. Nearly half of the respondents (47%) were aged 18 – 24 years, with women comprising 75% of the sample. Over half of respondents (59%) had a bachelor's degree. The highest proportion of respondents was from Ontario (22%), while respondents from Prince Edward Island and the Yukon were minimally represented (less than 1% each).

- **BBF Program Impacts**
  Ninety-nine percent of respondents reported that receiving BBF funding improved their ability to focus on their studies, and 95% of respondents reported that the BBF program improved their ability to complete their studies. Furthermore, almost all respondents reported that funding freed them from financial stress, allowed them to spend more time with family and friends, and gave them more time to participate in cultural activities, which enhanced their sense of belonging.
- **Academic Outcomes**
  Overall, 96% of respondents had either completed their studies or were actively working towards completion. Additionally, 88% of respondents achieved a grade average of either "A" or "B".
- **Employment Outcomes**
  Among the graduates, 36% were already employed or had secured jobs, and 24% were planning to apply for employment. Although only 21% of employed respondents were working for Indigenous employers, the majority indicated that their work had a positive impact on their communities.
- **Feedback on BBF Program**
  Respondents suggested several process improvements to the BBF program, including simplifying document uploads, adding a virtual help option and FAQ sections, and introducing a continuous multi-year application model that allows for annual updates rather than requiring students to complete a full reapplication each year.

"It had such a positive impact on me, and I am forever grateful for the help and support from Indspire. It allowed me to fully focus on my school and hockey and allowed me to see my family and have good groceries and took off a big stress from my shoulders."

– BBF Recipient

"With the wonderful help from Indspire...[I was able to] focus on self-improvement, studies and being the best you can. The future is ours and Indspire opens the door for us to succeed."

– BBF Recipient

"Indspire's financial support helped me reduce my working hours, spend more time with friends and family, and focus on my studies without the stress of money or other bills. I continued working to keep myself busy and have a small income for transportation, including gas and parking at school."

– BBF Recipient

The BBF program is vital in helping Indigenous students pursue post-secondary education. Findings from this research highlight the value of broadening support and outreach so that more Indigenous students may access funding and complete their studies.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Post-secondary attainment among Indigenous Peoples in Canada reflects continued participation across diverse educational pathways. According to the 2021 Census, nearly half of Indigenous adults aged 25 to 64 have completed a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, underscoring their active engagement in higher education and skills development (Melvin, 2023). This attainment is crucial, as higher educational levels are strongly associated with improved labour market outcomes and career prospects for Indigenous Peoples (Melvin, 2023).

However, Indigenous Peoples continue to face significant historical and systemic barriers in pursuing post-secondary education (Durmush et al., 2024). For instance, Indigenous post-secondary students frequently report food and housing insecurity and are often forced to select institutions based on affordability rather than program fit, all of which are strongly associated with lower retention and completion rates (Assembly of First Nations, 2022). Furthermore, enduring socioeconomic barriers, such as lack of culturally relevant resources and financial hardship, continue to impact post-secondary completion and limit career prospects for Indigenous students (NWAC, 2024).

To address barriers faced by Indigenous post-secondary students, Indspire launched the BBF program with the mission to empower Indigenous youth and strengthen their educational attainment. Within this framework, the program serves as a central initiative, providing financial support that enables Indigenous students to focus on their academic pursuits and fostering sustainable career pathways after graduation. Each year, Indspire reviews the program's impact and carefully assesses the kinds of support Indigenous students need to thrive in both their studies and future careers. This report presents the findings of the BBF Indigenous Learner Progress Survey (ILP Survey) conducted among recipients from 2024-2025.

Purpose

The ILP Survey aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the BBF program in helping Indigenous students achieve their educational and professional aspirations. The survey was focused on several themes:

- **Assessing Impact**
  Evaluating how the scholarship influenced recipients' academic performance and career development. This includes examining whether financial support led to improved grades, expanded career opportunities, and/or any other outcomes.
- **Understanding Perceptions**
  Gathering feedback from recipients on their satisfaction with the support provided through the BBF program, as their input is essential for identifying the programs strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Identifying Challenges**
  Recognizing issues students experienced that may hinder their educational success.
- **Informing Future Improvements**
  Using the collected insights to refine the program's design, delivery, and accessibility, ensuring it remains effective and supportive for future recipients.

STUDY DESIGN

Methodology

A cross-sectional online survey, administered via SurveyMonkey® from May to June 2025, explored the impact of the BBF program on recipients' education, employment, and overall well-being. The survey invited all 2024-2025 BBF bursary recipients (*n* = 8,823) to share their experiences and feedback. Of the total number of recipients, 38%, or 3,368 recipients, responded to the survey.

Both numerical and narrative data were gathered to facilitate a thorough understanding of BBF recipients' educational experiences. Numerical data were analyzed via descriptive statistics. Leximancer (qualitative data analysis software) was used to extract the main themes and key concepts from the qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

All individual information shared by survey respondents remains confidential to designated staff at Indspire. Only aggregate and summary data are shared externally. This is crucial, as it allowed students supported through Indspire to share their input and experiences in confidence. Participants were assured that responses to the ILP Survey would not affect any decisions on future applications made to Indspire's BBF program. They were also informed that, by voluntarily participating in the survey, they gave Indspire consent to use their responses in relevant research studies for the benefit of Indigenous students. For more information on how participant data is handled, please refer to Indspire's *Privacy Policy*.

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 1 presents an overview of survey respondents' demographic characteristics. In terms of Indigenous identity, gender, age, highest level of education, and province, the survey respondents were similar to the broader BBF recipient population (see De Melo et al., 2025). Most respondents were women (75%) and First Nation (65%). Just over half of respondents had attained a bachelor's degree (59%), and roughly a quarter (22%) were from Ontario.

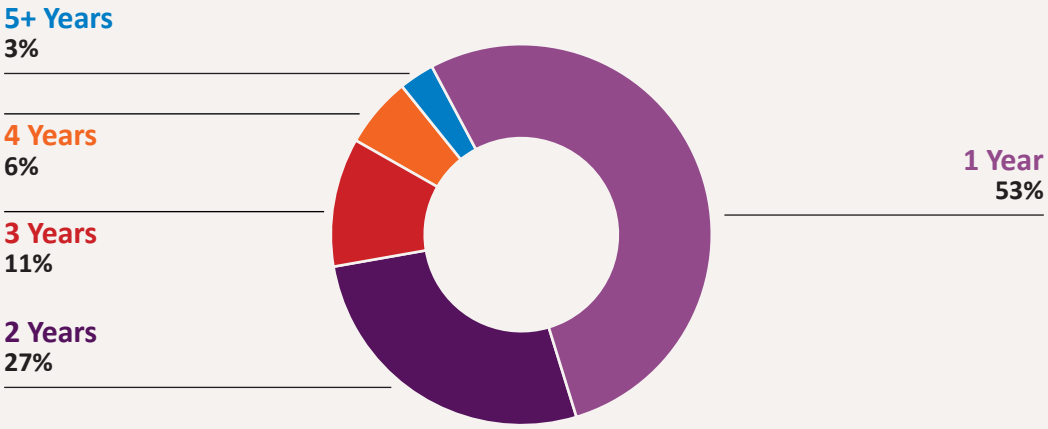
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	Variables	Number of Recipients	Percentage
Indigenous Identity	First Nations	2,204	65%
	Métis	1,070	32%
	Inuit	92	3%
Gender	Female	2,524	75%
	Male	785	23%
	Diverse	57	2%
Age in Years	< 18	187	6%
	18 – 24	1,583	47%
	25 – 34	884	26%
	35 – 44	478	14%
	45 – 54	183	5%
	55 – 64	46	1%
	> 64	5	< 1%
Highest Level of Education	Certificate	294	9%
	Diploma	629	19%
	Associate degree	23	1%
	Bachelor	1,971	59%
	Professional Designation	121	4%
	Master	266	8%
	Ph.D.	54	2%
Province	Ontario	725	22%
	Manitoba	581	17%
	Alberta	602	18%
	Saskatchewan	589	17%
	British Columbia	384	11%
	Quebec	134	4%
	Newfoundland and Labrador	96	3%
	Northwest Territories	76	2%
	Nunavut	59	2%
	Nova Scotia	56	2%
	New Brunswick	46	1%
	Yukon Territory	12	< 1%
	Prince Edward Island	6	< 1%

Distribution of BBF Program Bursaries

Bursaries through the BBF program are provided annually, and as such, students may repeatedly receive funding over the course of their education. Figure 1 depicts the total number of years recipients received bursaries, including the 2024-2025 fiscal year. Of 3,364 recipients who responded to the survey, more than half (53%) were first-time recipients.

Figure 1: Proportion of 2024-2025 Recipients by Number of School Years Funded



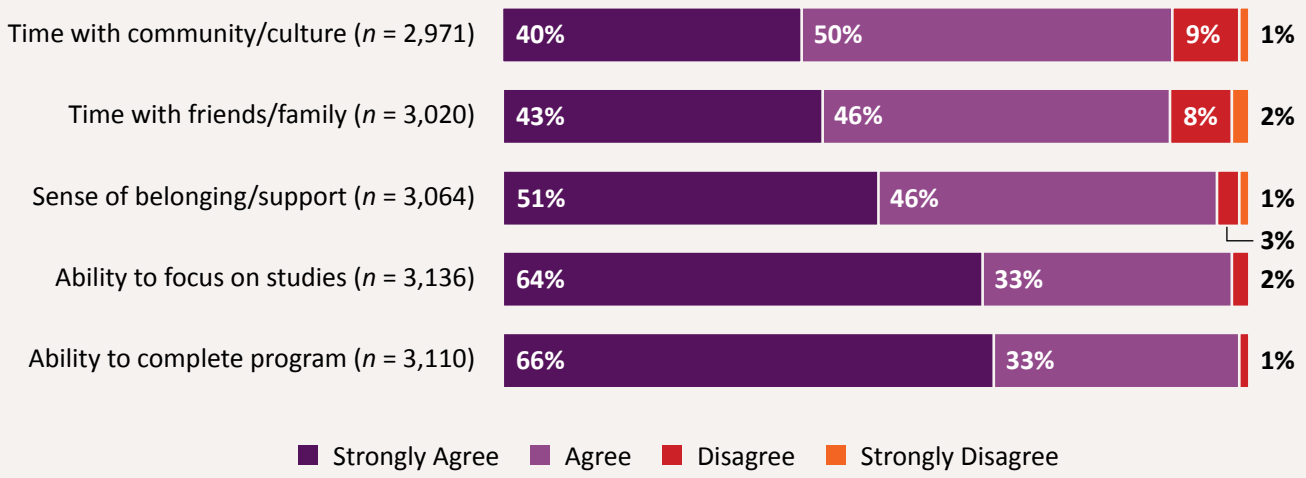
Note: n = *3,364*

BBF Program Impacts

The impact of the BBF program was assessed through five statements rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Two of these statements focused on academic impact, and three explored family and community connectedness. In addition, respondents provided information about their experiences within the topics of personal growth and contributions to their communities in open-ended text responses.

As shown in Figure 2, the BBF program had a strong positive impact on both academic and community connectedness. Nearly all respondents (89 – 99%) reported that BBF funding better enabled them to focus on their studies, complete their program, spend more time with friends, family, and community, and foster a sense of belonging and support.

Figure 2: Impacts of the BBF Program



Note: *Recipients' perception regarding the impacts of BBF program.*

In the open-ended responses, many participants explained that the support helped them cover essential expenses such as groceries and educational materials, which reduced financial stress and allowed them to more effectively concentrate on their studies.

> ***"The funding I received from Indspire helped alleviate the financial burden of tuition, textbooks, and living expenses, allowing me to focus more fully on my studies and community involvement. Indspire's support felt like a vote of confidence in my potential."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

"It has allowed me to focus on school and extracurriculars. It has taken the weight off me to pay tuition. If I had not received this award, I would have had to take out student loans …"

– BBF Recipient

Respondents also emphasized that the bursary created time and mental space to engage more deeply with their families, friends, and communities. This support strengthened their sense of belonging and improved their overall mental well-being, helping them feel more grounded, supported, and motivated in both personal development and academic performance.

"It helped me immeasurably, allowing me to focus on school without having to constantly worry about finances. I've had a very challenging year mentally, and through that, I've connected myself with the Indigenous student safe space and community members at my school. This bursary has allowed me to work at my own pace and have room to try and better my mental health in the meantime."

– BBF Recipient

"It had an impact on my mental health in that it reduced my financial stress. Because of inflation and economic uncertainty (threat of tariffs, etc.) I spent a lot of time worrying about finances and contemplating whether the choice to return to my master's degree was the best financial decision for me. The support from Inspire, was a huge relief for me and helped to reduce anxiety and financial stress."

– BBF Recipient

"It solidified a sense of belonging I was missing. Others are more supportive of me than family."

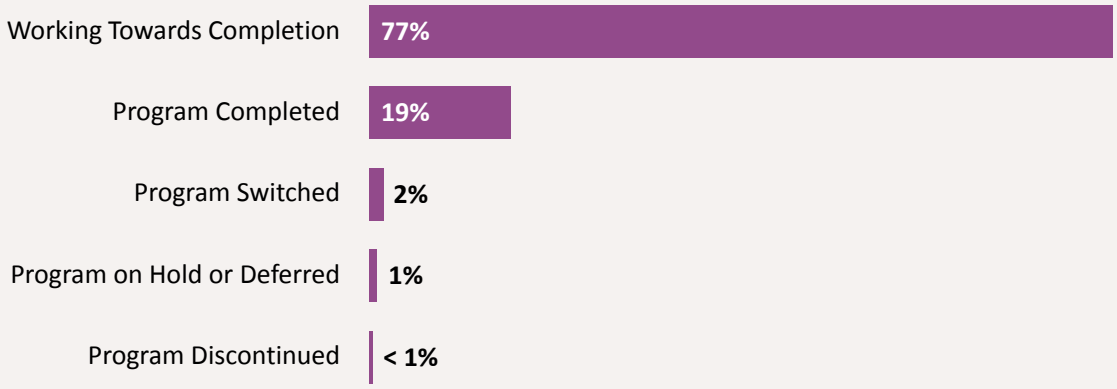
– BBF Recipient

Educational Outcomes and Impact

Academic Achievements

In reporting on their academic progress, 77% of respondents indicated they were continuing their program and 19% had already completed their programs. A small group (2%) transferred to different programs while remaining in school, showing flexibility and pursuit of a better academic fit. Only 1% deferred or paused their studies, and fewer than 1% withdrew altogether (see Appendix A and Appendix B for the reported reasons for deferral and discontinuation, respectively). These findings suggest strong academic advancement among BBF recipients overall.

Figure 3: Program Progress



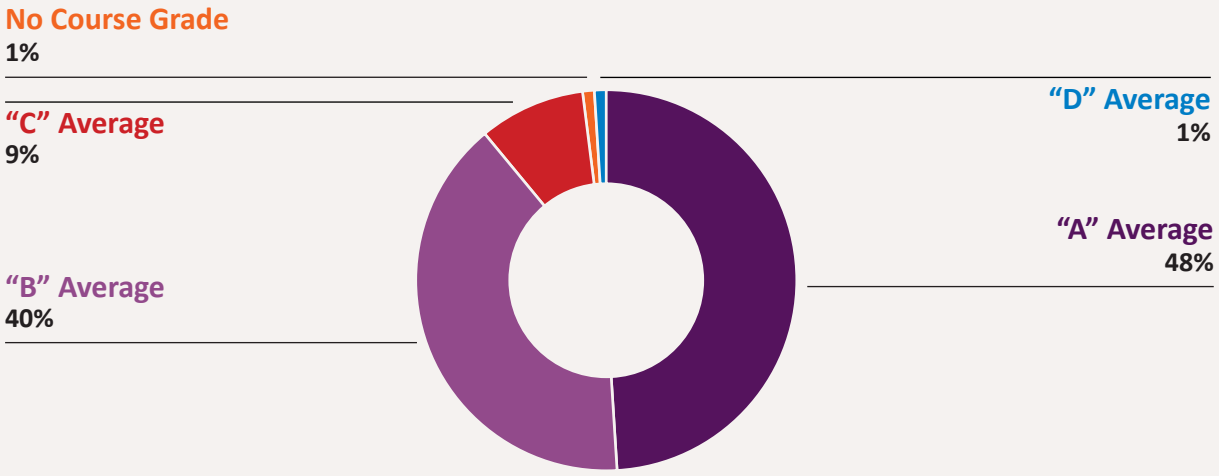
Note: *Proportions calculated based on total recipients (*n = *3,368).*

> ***"Thanks to the financial support from Indspire, I was able to prioritize my education. Being in engineering, I currently take six classes a semester plus five to six labs, so having the option to not work during the school year allowed me to stay on top of my studies while having spare time for myself and friends."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Grade Scores Obtained by Recipients

Figure 4 presents the distribution of academic performance among respondents. Nearly half (48%) reported an "A" average, making it the most common grade, followed by 40% with a "B" average. Smaller proportions achieved a "C" average (9%) or a "D" average (1%). Overall, the data indicate that most of the respondents performed at a high academic level, with most grades clustered in the "A" and "B" ranges.

Figure 4: Program Grade Point Average (GPA)



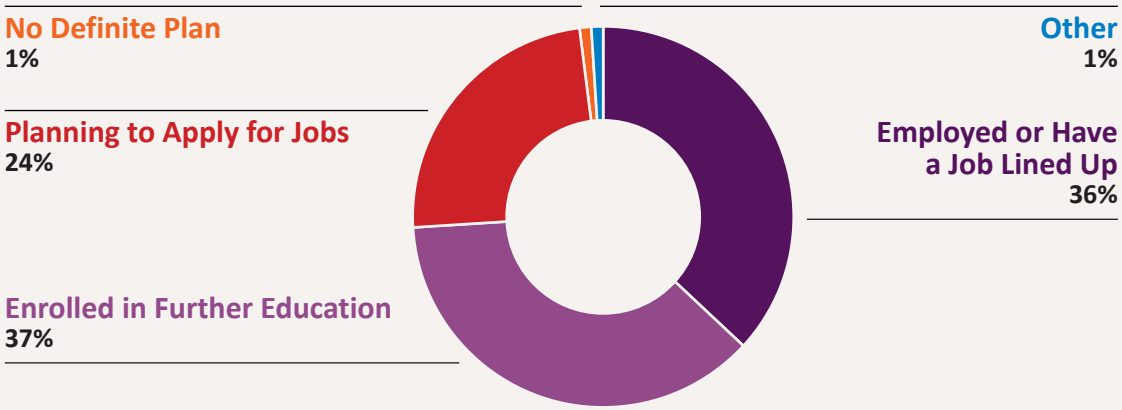
Note: *Recipients' program GPA (*n = *3,334).*

> ***"The financial support that I have received from Indspire has allowed me to focus solely on my studies and complete assignments on time and accurately. Instead of having to be rushed if I had to work a lot of extra hours to pay for more of my schooling, it has truly helped me excel in my program."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Post-Graduation Transitions

Figure 5 presents the post-graduation plans of the 653 respondents who have completed their studies. Over one-third of the respondents (36%) had already secured employment, while nearly a quarter (24%) planned to apply for jobs. Another 37% reported that they had enrolled or planned to pursue further studies. Only a small proportion of respondents had either no definite plans or other plans (1% each).

Figure 5: Post-Graduation Plan

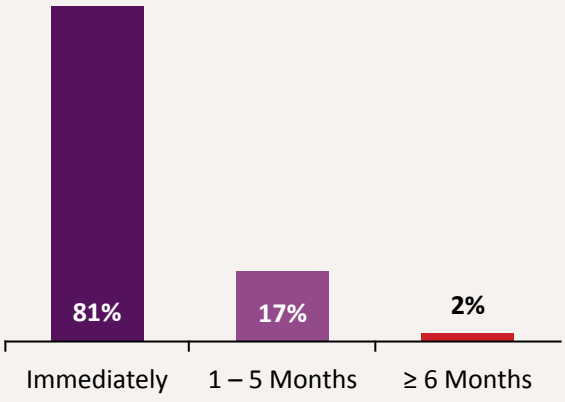


Note: *Proportions calculated based on total graduates (*n = *653).*

Employment and Social: Outcomes and Impact

Among the respondents who completed their studies (*n* = 653), 36% (*n* = 238) reported securing employment. Of these, 222 provided additional details about their job experiences. As shown in Figure 8, most respondents (98%) obtained employment within five months of graduation.

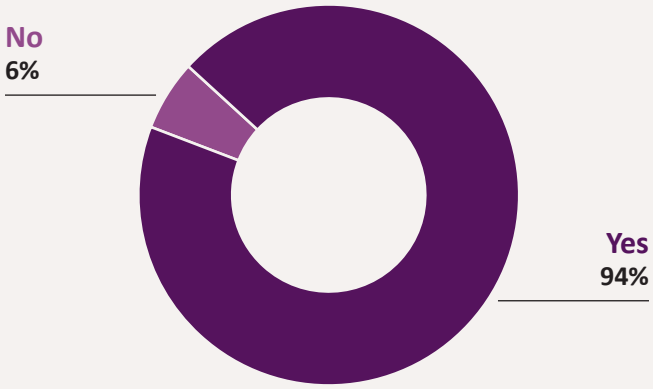
Figure 8: Time to Find a Job



Note: *Length of time to find a job after graduation (*n = *219).*

Figure 9 indicates that 94% of respondents hold positions directly aligned with their fields of study, reflecting the BBF program's strong relevance to labour market needs.

Figure 9: Job Alignment with Studies



Note: *Percentage of recipients reporting job relevance to study (*n = *222).*

As illustrated in Figure 10, 21% of employed respondents worked for Indigenous employers, while 79% were employed by non-Indigenous employers.

Figure 10: Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Employer



Note: *Graduated recipients working with Indigenous or Non-Indigenous employer (*n = *222).*

In Figure 11, a larger proportion (88%) reported that their work had a positive impact on their Indigenous communities.

Figure 11: Works Impact on Indigenous Communities



Note: *Percentage of graduates reporting impact of their work on Indigenous communities (*n *= 222).*

Financial Confidence and Sources of Support

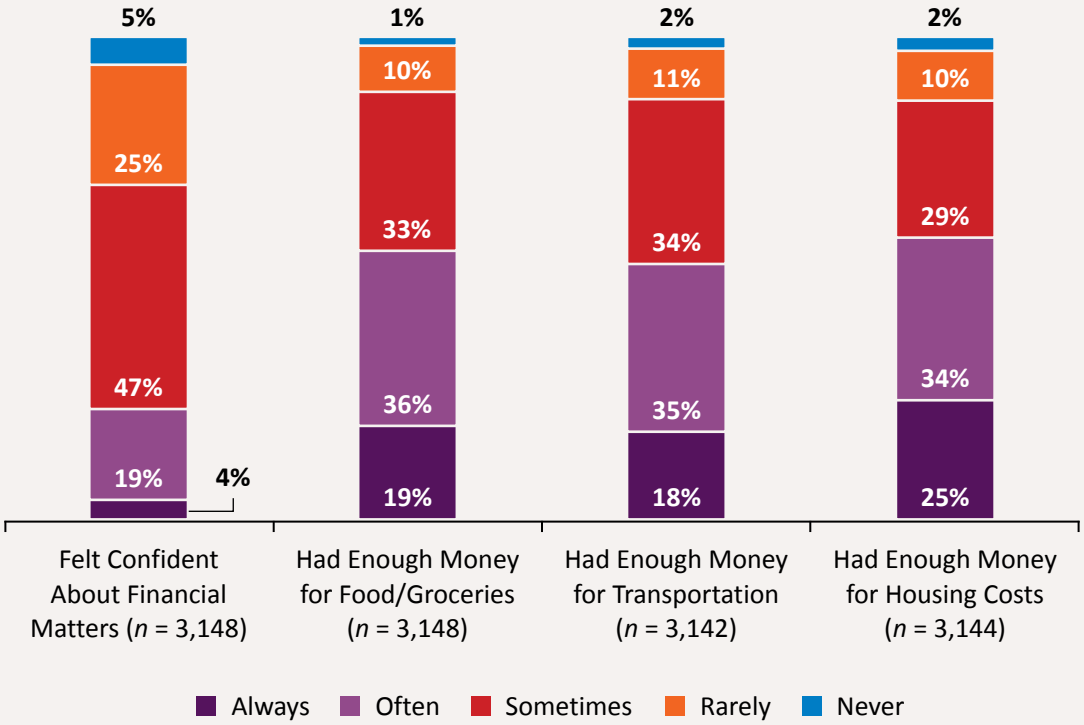
To understand how the BBF program, along with other funding, contributed to respondents' ability to meet essential expenses and support their studies, respondents were asked about their financial management and support.

Financial Confidence

Four survey items focused on confidence in managing finances and having sufficient funds for essential expenses such as food, groceries, transportation, and housing. Respondents rated these statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Always* to *Never*, providing an overview of their financial well-being during their studies.

Less than a quarter (23%) reported *Always* or *Often* feeling confident about their financial matters. In contrast, a majority reported *Always* or *Often* having sufficient money for food and groceries (55%), transportation (53%), and housing costs (59%). Figure 6 shows the full breakdown of responses for each statement.

Figure 6: Recipients' Financial Experience During the Study Period

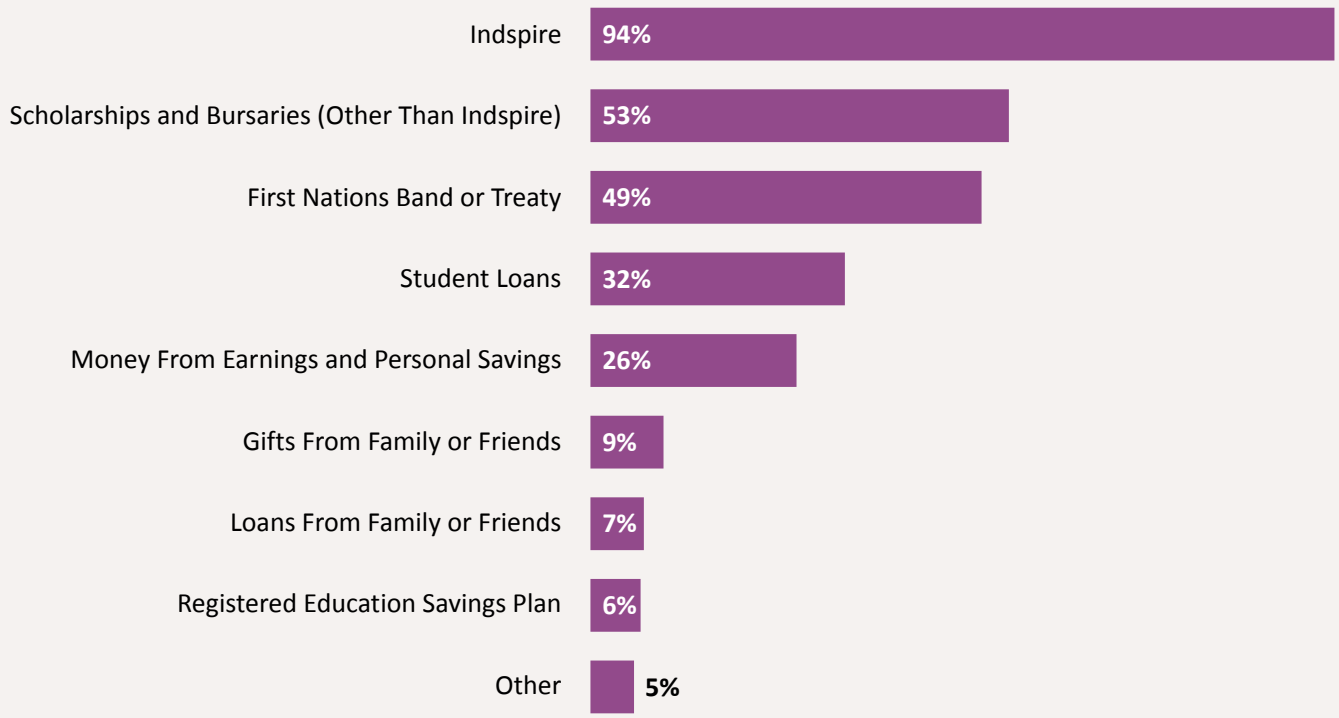


> ***"Inspire helped me with the cost of gas to and from (130 km one way) school, unexpected hotel stays, cost of food while in school (9:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.) and supplies for schooling such as notebooks, craft supplies for art projects, etc."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Sources of Support

Respondents were asked to identify up to three financial sources they felt contributed most to their education. As shown in Figure 7, a large majority (94%) identified Indspire (BBF program) as their primary source of funding, followed by 53% who reported scholarship and bursaries from other sources, and 49% who mentioned First Nations band or treaty (see Appendix C for a report detailing how recipients used BBF bursaries across various expenditures).

Figure 7: Funding Sources Contributing the Greatest Amount to Education



Note: *Percentage of recipients reporting funding source impact (*n = *3,368). Respondents were asked to identify the top three financial sources.*

Respondents' Program Recommendations

Respondents were asked to share their experiences with the bursary/application process and provide recommendations for enhancing the bursary application. Most respondents said the application process was easy and straightforward. However, a few suggested that the document upload feature could be simplified to make submission smoother.

> ***"The application process is overall straightforward, but there are a few areas that could be improved … simplifying or streamlining the document submission process such as transcripts or proof of enrollment through a centralized portal would reduce stress during busy academic times."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

> ***"Some parts of the online application portal can feel overwhelming or confusing especially for first-time applicants. A more user-friendly interface, with clearer guidance or video tutorials, could reduce anxiety and help ensure all required documents are uploaded properly."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

A few respondents suggested transitioning to a "live" or multi-year application model for students in long-term programs. They noted that allowing for simple annual updates, rather than entirely new applications, combined with proactive check-ins from Indspire, would reduce administrative stress, build student confidence, and allow for a greater focus on their studies.

> ***"It would be helpful to create an application that can be considered ongoing or live if you are in a multi-year program. Creating updates seems more efficient than needing to fully reapply, and or receiving communication that follows up on your completion and upcoming year to encourage reapplication would build a lot of strength and confidence."***
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

> *"Allow students to receive awards for all semesters that they attend, not just one."*
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Many respondents reported that waiting a long time for a bursary result is stressful and asked for quicker updates on acceptance or rejection.

> *"Being a little more transparent with accepted claims, it is stressful waiting for long periods and being unsure if you are going to receive the funding necessary to continue schooling."*
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Some respondents suggested increasing the bursary amount, noting that rising costs and inflation make the current support insufficient.

> *"I like the Indspire application process. It is one of the simplest bursaries I've had experience applying to. To improve, the only thing I would recommend is to offer larger amounts. I am so grateful for the amounts given, however, with the inflation of cost of living, tuition, and everything, I haven't seen a match in funding increases …"*
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

Several respondents recommended increasing the BBF program's visibility so that more Indigenous students can benefit from it. They suggested wider promotion through schools, community centres, and online platforms to ensure potential applicants are aware of the available support.

> *"Overall, the process was easy and straightforward. The only thing I would ask for is more advertising! I wish I knew about this award sooner, and I'm sure many others would like to be aware of this amazing opportunity."*
>
> **– BBF Recipient**

COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS YEAR'S FINDINGS

The BBF program continues to play a vital role in supporting academic achievement, career growth, and community impact. Roughly half of the 2024-2025 survey respondents indicated that they had received BBF funding across multiple school years, and 80% said that BBF funding helped them focus on their studies, complete their education, maintain familial and cultural connections, and strengthen their sense of belonging. These findings are consistent with the 2023-2024 BBF evaluation and suggest the program's legacy of helping Indigenous students succeed in their academic journeys (Budhathoki, R. et al., 2025). Future evaluations could explore how the program might create new or deeper impacts beyond sustaining these already strong metrics.

In terms of post-graduation transitions, 36% of graduates in the current survey reported being employed, which is lower than the 47% reported in the previous year's survey. However, among those who were employed, 81% secured a job immediately after graduation compared to 71% in the previous year's survey. This suggests that while the overall employment rate has declined, those who found jobs experienced quicker transitions into the workforce relative to last year's respondents. This mixed pattern highlights both the success of BBF recipients in finding employment, as well as the need to broaden employment opportunities for graduates.

Compared to last year, respondents' reported ability to pay for rent, food, and transportation increased by 2 – 6%. Overall confidence in managing financial matters increased by 3%. These trends suggest that the BBF program is helping Indigenous students manage essential expenses more effectively. However, qualitative feedback indicates that funding should be increased to better meet needs as costs rise due to inflation.

Overall, findings suggest that BBF funding continues to alleviate financial stress and enable Indigenous students to focus more fully on their studies. These findings underscore the crucial role that Indspire has in fostering a stable and supportive environment for academic success.

CONCLUSIONS

Finding from the ILP Survey suggest the BBF program is achieving its purpose in supporting Indigenous students' post-secondary education. Recipients are not only succeeding academically, but also transitioning into meaningful careers, many of which directly benefit their communities. Beyond academic and employment outcomes, the results also suggest that the program fosters a stronger sense of connection, belonging, and empowerment among recipients.

The consistency of these results with previous years (e.g., 2023-2024) highlights the program's ongoing value as an investment in education, community development, and future leadership. As this report suggests, the BBF program is a vital contributor to positive change, helping recipients personally and professionally thrive, while strengthening the Indigenous communities they serve.

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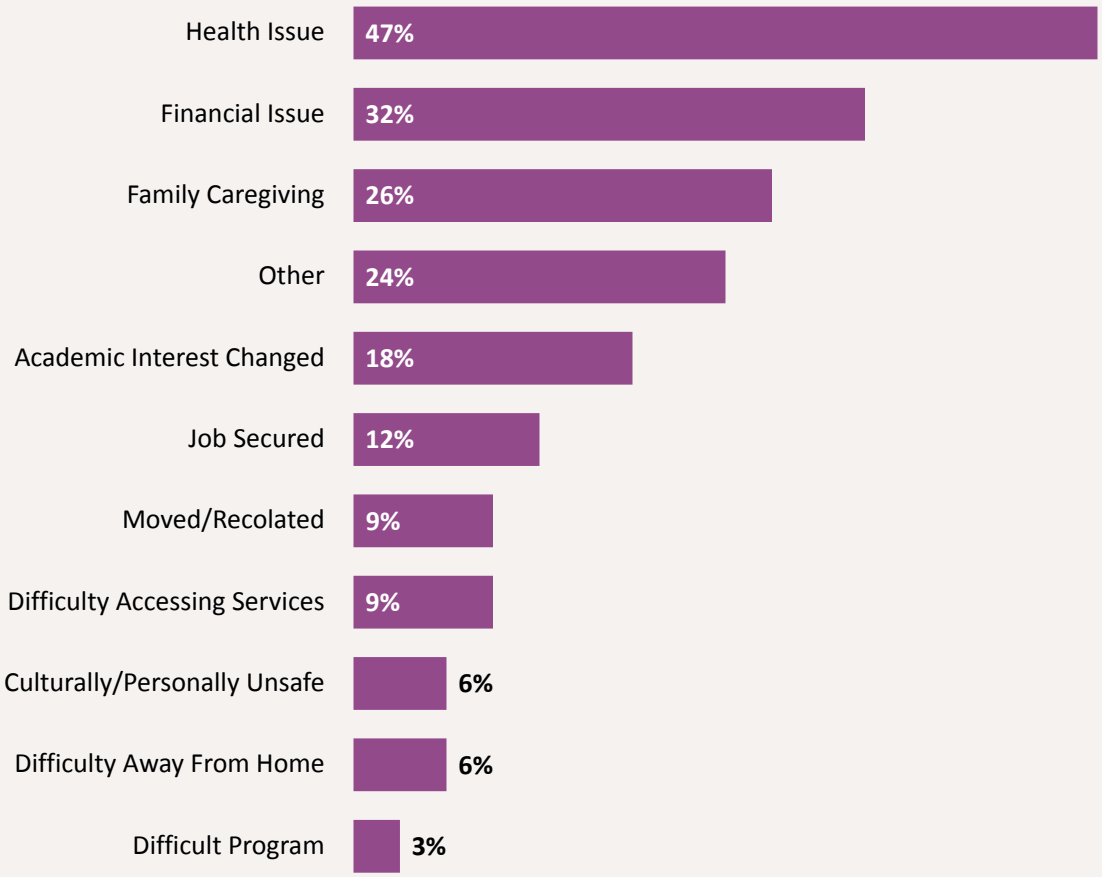
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APPENDIX A:
RECIPIENTS' REASONS FOR PROGRAM DEFERRAL

Less than 1% of respondents deferred their program. Of those who did, they were allowed to select multiple reasons. Health issues were the primary issue, reported by nearly half (47%), followed by financial challenges (32%) and family obligations (26%).

Figure A.1: Reasons for Program Deferral



Note: n = *34*

APPENDIX B: DISTRIBUTION OF RECIPIENTS REPORTING REASONS FOR PROGRAM DISCONTINUATION

The two respondents who were unable to continue their studies were asked to select their reasons for leaving from multiple options. Both respondents selected employment opportunities as the reasons for discontinuing their studies, while one also mentioned financial difficulties as a contributing factor.

Table B.1: Reasons for Program Discontinuation

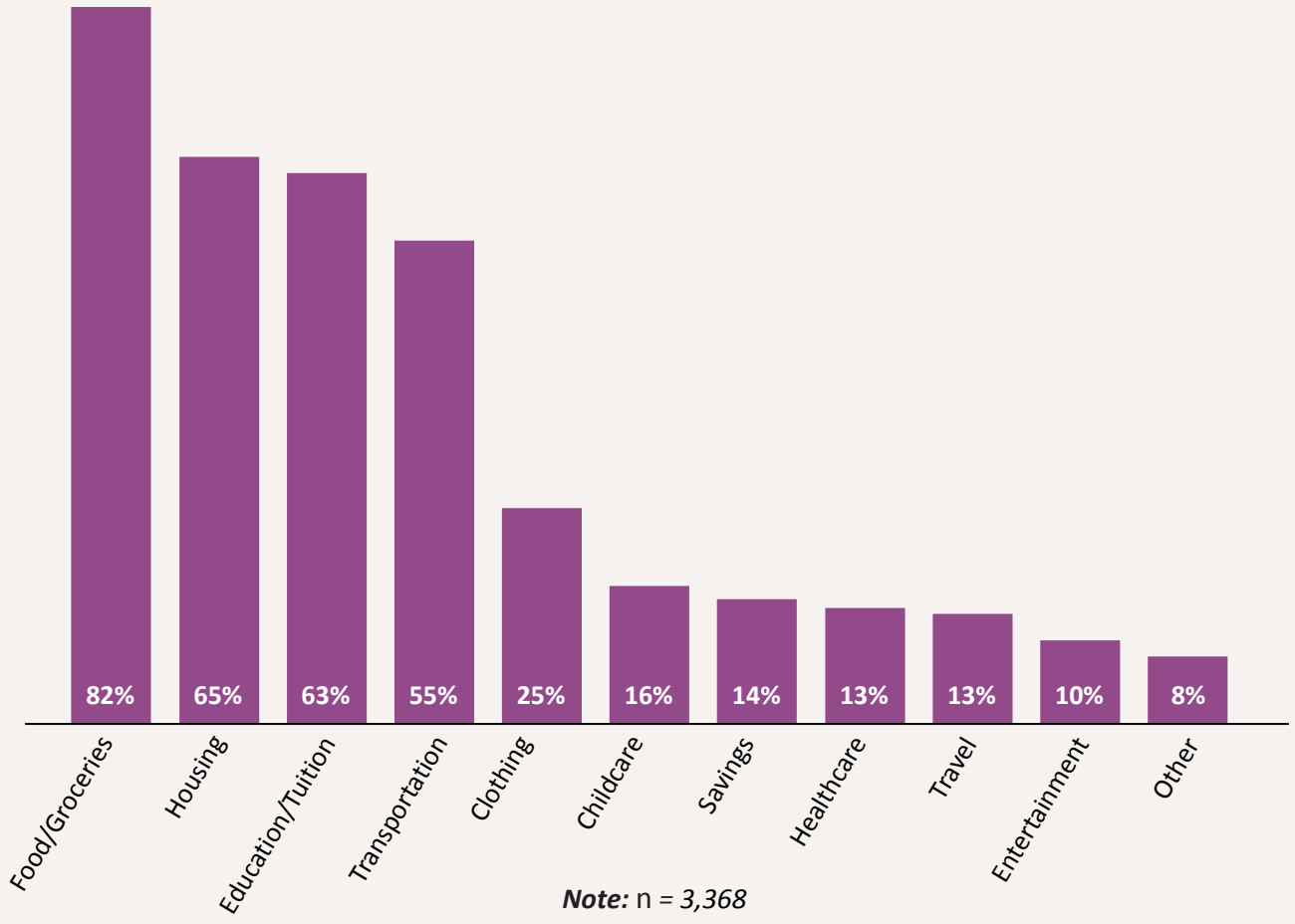
Reasons for Program Discontinuation	Number	Percentage
I am employed or have a job lined up.	2	100%
I can't financially afford to continue the program.	1	50%

Note: n = *2*

APPENDIX C: BBF FUNDING UTILIZATION ACROSS DIFFERENT EXPENDITURE CATEGORIES

When indicating how funds were spent, respondents were able to select multiple uses. The majority of respondents spent BBF funds on food/groceries (82%), followed by housing expenses (65%) and educational-related expenses (63%).

Figure C.1: BBF Fund Uses

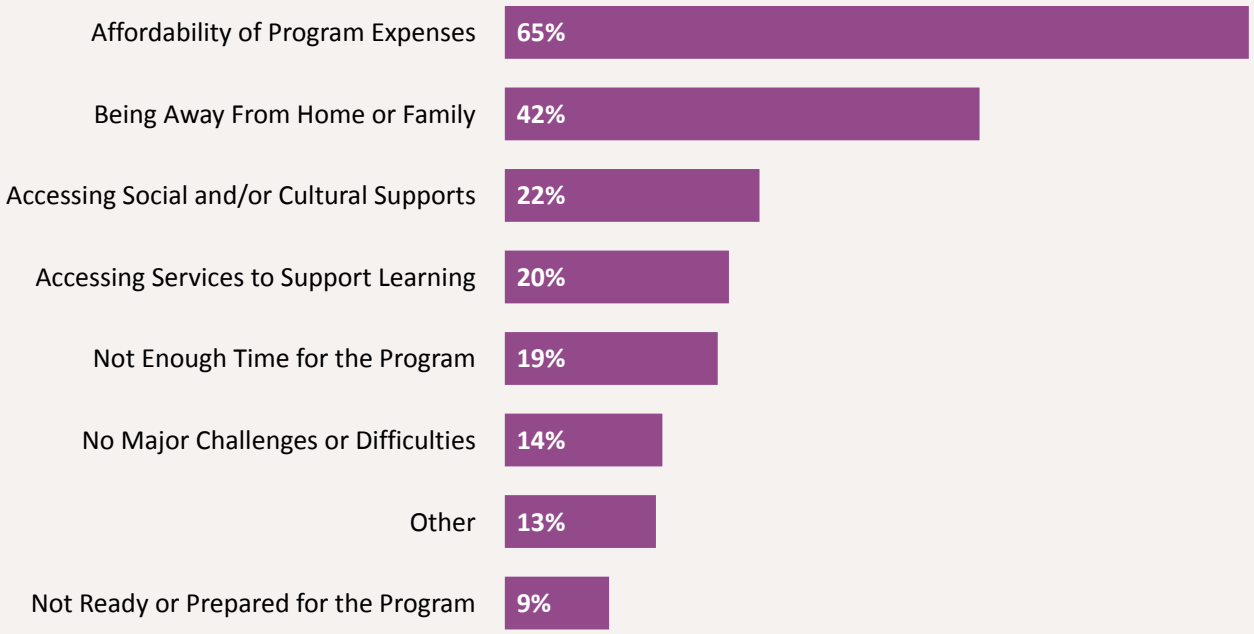


Note: n = *3,368*

APPENDIX D:
RECIPIENTS' CHALLENGES DURING THE PROGRAM

Respondents were asked to indicate up to three challenges they faced during their study program. Affordability of program-related expenses was the top challenge, reported by more than half of the respondents (65%). The next most common difficulty was being away from home or family (42%).

Figure D.1: Challenges During Program



Note: n = *3,368*

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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