

TRIO and Upward Bound: History, Programs, and Issues – Past, Present, and Future

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This article briefly traces the history of the TRIO programs and provides evidence of their effectiveness in closing educational opportunity gaps in U.S. society. It also examines the criteria for participation in TRIO programs, focusing on the evolving definitions of educational disadvantage relative to TRIO eligibility. In looking at TRIO's Upward Bound program specifically, the article presents a synopsis of over 30 years of research and program evaluations of this initiative, along with recommendations for improving Upward Bound's effectiveness.

A HISTORY OF THE TRIO PROGRAMS

In August 1964, in the midst of his administration's "War on Poverty," President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act. This legislation gave rise to the Office of Economic Opportunity and its Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds or, as they have since become more commonly known, the nation's TRIO programs. As part of this statute, the first TRIO initiative, Upward Bound, came into existence, followed soon thereafter by Talent Search, which was created by the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. When the HEA was first reauthorized in 1968, it established TRIO's Student Support Services program and transferred all of TRIO from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Office of Higher Education Programs. When the HEA was reauthorized in 1972, the fourth TRIO program, Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC), was created. The expansion of TRIO's reach and outreach continued in 1976 with the creation of the TRIO Staff and Leadership Training Authority (SLTA). The fifth TRIO program, the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, was created in 1986. Most recently, in 1990, the U.S. Department of Education created the Upward Bound Math/Science Program, which is administered under the same regulations as other Upward Bound programs.

TRIO Participation Criteria

According to Wolanin (1996), the reauthorization of the HEA in 1980 was particularly important, politically and philosophically, for the adoption of two key concepts regarding eligibility for participation in TRIO programs. The first of these was consideration of students' status as the first in their families to pursue higher education (first-generation-college students or candidates). The second was consideration of students' prior performance. The first-generation-college criterion was important as a determinant of educational disadvantage, Wolanin notes, because it shifted TRIO eligibility requirements in a more encompassing direction by looking at the origin and impact of nonfinancial

barriers to access and success in postsecondary education. Politically, this new stance empowered TRIO advocates to build a comprehensive coalition in Congress, not just of elected officials whose constituents were poor people but of those whose constituents had been denied opportunities for or otherwise deterred from postsecondary education. Regarding the prior performance criterion, Wolanin maintains that it is "an even more important core concept of TRIO, both philosophically and politically" (p. 1). Philosophically, he contends, this focus means that TRIO programs are not demonstration programs; rather, they are "an integral part of student aid" (p. 1). Politically, Wolanin states, "prior performance has facilitated the development of an extensive cadre of experienced TRIO professionals who have gained a political sophistication and experience that has enabled them to become a nationwide network of people able to protect and expand TRIO" (p. 1).

Much controversy has been generated over the past few decades about definitions of educational disadvantage relative to TRIO program eligibility. The first group to evaluate Upward Bound, the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), was able to circumvent this controversy by selecting a definition that describes these individuals as members of groups that historically have been underrepresented in higher education and that are below national averages on educational indices (Kendrick & Thomas, 1970). According to Levin (1986), pupils who are defined as "educationally disadvantaged" lack the home and community resources that enable them to succeed in conventional educational settings. Due to poverty, racial/ethnic and cultural distinctions, or linguistic abilities, the educationally disadvantaged have been shown to have low academic achievement and/or to drop out of the educational pipeline at high rates and at early stages. Ordinarily, he maintains, these students are found among the economically disadvantaged, racial/ethnic minority groups, and new immigrant and non-English-speaking populations.

Amos and Grambs (1968) described the educationally disadvantaged as "the products of a culture that has not provided them with the motivation, opportunity, experiences, and relationships that will enhance their chances of competing successfully with their fellow citizens in all phases of life" (p. 1). However, Thomas (1970) is critical of this definition because it implies that the cultures of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States, unlike those of the European American majority, are the reasons for the former groups' disproportionately low-income status or unequal opportunity. As Thomas contends:

The terms "disadvantaged," "high risk," etc., are viewed with disdain by the groups to which the terms have been attached. Besides connoting a diminution of worth, these terms have a way of not placing emphasis on the fact that it is our society that has produced the high risk, disadvantaged and deprived students. (p. 26)

In the past, as long as the educationally disadvantaged were just a small minority of the population, they could be absorbed into low-skilled occupations or relegated to the status of the unemployed without direct consequences to the economy (Levin, 1986). Today, however, in the wake of demographic estimates that the nation's minority populations collectively will soon be the majority, the need to prepare these populations for the academic and occupational challenges of the next millennium becomes increasingly urgent. For example, within the first 10 years of the 21st century, almost 50% of all occupations in the U.S. will require the higher levels of knowledge and skills once reserved for the elite few (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Were it not for federal programs like TRIO, the nation's response to this impending crisis would be negligible.

TRIO Program Descriptions

The Department of Education awards grants to private and public institutions of higher education and other organizations to establish the following TRIO initiatives at various sites across the country:

- (1) *Upward Bound*: Upward Bound targets youth between 13 and 19 years old (grades 9 through 12) who have experienced low academic success. High school students from low-income families whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree or military veterans with only a high school degree are eligible to participate. The program's goal is to increase the rates at which the targeted students enroll in and graduate from postsecondary institutions by providing fundamental support such as help with the college admissions process and assistance in preparing for college entrance examinations. It engages participating students in an extensive, multi-year program designed to provide academic, counseling, and tutoring services along with a cultural enrichment component, all of which enhance their regular school program prior to entering college. Most Upward Bound programs also provide participants with a college experience through a five- to eight-week, full-time residential summer program at a postsecondary institution. The summer experience is reinforced with weekly tutorial and mentoring services during the school year.
- (2) *Talent Search*: The Talent Search program seeks to identify individuals from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education, yet who might otherwise be overlooked in the college preparation process. It is charged with providing these students with academic, career, and financial counseling to help them graduate from high school and enroll and succeed in the postsecondary institution of their choice. The program also serves high school dropouts by encouraging them to reenter the educational system, complete high school, and pursue postsecondary education.
- (3) *Student Support Services (SSS)*: SSS programs provide college students from disadvantaged backgrounds with assistance in meeting basic college requirements, opportunities for academic development, and motivation to successfully complete their postsecondary education. The goal of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants and facilitate their transition from one level of higher education to the next.
- (4) *Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC)*: EOC provides counseling and information on college admissions and financial aid options to qualified low-income, first-generation-college, and underrepresented minority (TRIO-eligible) adults who want to enter or continue a program of postsecondary education. The goal of the EOC program is to help these adults successfully negotiate the college application process and successfully complete degree programs.
- (5) *Staff and Leadership Training Authority (SLTA)*: The SLTA provides funding to enhance the skills and expertise of TRIO project directors and staff. Acceptable training experiences include conferences, seminars, internships, and workshops. The SLTA also funds the production of training manuals for TRIO employees. Training topics are based on priorities established by the Secretary of Education and announced in the *Federal Register*.
- (6) *The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program*: The McNair program prepares TRIO-eligible participants who are enrolled in institutions of higher learning, and who have demonstrated strong academic potential, for doctoral studies by involving them in mentoring, internship, and research, and other scholarly activities. Student Affairs staff work closely with program staff to help McNair participants meet their undergraduate requirements, investigate graduate opportunities, enroll in graduate school, and successfully complete advanced degrees.
- (7) *Upward Bound Math/Science Program*: This initiative establishes specialized Upward Bound centers designed to strengthen the mathematics and science skills of TRIO-eligible high school students. The goal of the program is to help these students recog-

nize and develop their potential to excel in these and related fields, and to encourage them to pursue postsecondary degrees and careers in mathematics- and science-based fields.

A FOCUS ON UPWARD BOUND

What the Research Literature Says About Upward Bound

For 30 years, Upward Bound has established and operated programs at institutions of higher education and other qualified organizations that improve the likelihood that disadvantaged youth will graduate from high school, enter a postsecondary institution, and complete their degrees. As determined by Burkheimer, Riccobono, and Wisenbaker (1979), who led a team of RTI researchers in a comprehensive, longitudinal evaluation of Upward Bound programs from 1973 to 1978:

The Upward Bound Program was found to have an impact on educational aspirations, postsecondary education progress, and persistence. Impact appears to be related to participation patterns of former participants: those with typical participation patterns generally exhibited more positive outcomes than those with atypical patterns. . . . [T]he greater overall progress of participants is attributable to their greater rates of entry to postsecondary education and to their propensity to attend four-year institutions. It can be concluded that the Upward Bound program is effectively meeting its mandated objective to provide participants with the skills and motivation necessary for entry and success in education beyond high school. (p. 133)

Eighteen years later, however, in two retrospective analyses of the RTI studies, Mathematics Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) (1997a, 1997b) came to mixed conclusions about Upward Bound's effectiveness. Whereas MPR's investigations found Upward Bound to have no effect on participants' high school academic preparation or grades, it concluded that the program had a positive effect on students' college enrollment. The MPR studies further noted that Upward Bound had positive effects on its participants' overall educational attainment but no effect on their persistence in college. These conclusions were supported by Hexter (1990), who earlier wrote:

These studies [RTI's] have shown a demonstrably positive effect of Upward Bound on college participation and, less consistently, on postsecondary retention and graduation.

About 90 percent of Upward Bound participants entered postsecondary education, compared with 72 percent of non-participants;

Some 74 percent of Upward Bound participants enrolled at four year institutions, compared with the 43 percent rate of non-participants; and

Some 20 percent of Upward Bound students graduated from four-year institutions, compared to 5 percent of non-participants. (pp. 57-58)

In other research reviewing the impact of Upward Bound on students' academic persistence, Young and Exum (1982) referred to the program's influence as "incremental," noting that "the more years of participation, the more successful the outcome among participants" (p. 219). They recommended two to three years' participation in Upward Bound as having the "most significant impact" (p. 219).

The findings of MPR's (1997b) study of Upward Bound's short-term effects were based on data from more than 2,800 students in their first year or two of high school. With regard to postsecondary education expectations, MPR's comparison of Upward Bound applicants from 1992 to 1994 with other students from similar grades and socioeconomic backgrounds revealed that the former had higher educational attainment expectations, were better prepared academically, and had parents who were generally more involved

in their children's school-related activities.¹ The study further revealed that 20% of eligible applicants did not participate after being offered a slot in the program. Students cited numerous reasons for declining such as taking a job, transportation difficulties, and family issues. It also showed that Hispanic and Asian students were more likely to participate after being selected than African American students. In terms of age, younger students were more likely to participate than older students, a finding that may be due to the fact that the former typically were not of working age and had not begun looking for employment.

The substantial relationship between students' employment or need for employment and their participation and/or persistence in Upward Bound suggests that one approach for increasing participant retention may be to develop and/or expand job opportunities available through the program. This recommendation is supported by a survey conducted by MPR (1997b), which showed that Upward Bound retention was higher in programs offering year-round work experience than in those offering less than year-round employment. That study found that almost 40% of the participants at the study site left Upward Bound within 12 months. Again, the most common reason cited for exiting the program was to take a job. As the executive summary of the MPR (1997a) study concludes:

The program's drop-out rate, however, impedes the program's potential effectiveness. An important area for staff attention is devising programmatic strategies that more effectively contend with work pressures on teenagers and allow entrants to achieve the benefits associated with sustained involvement in Upward Bound. (p. xviii)

The literature suggests that Upward Bound's short-term impacts are concentrated in two areas: participants' course taking in academic subjects and their educational expectations. The MPR (1997b) study found that Upward Bound participants earned more high school credits in English, social studies, foreign languages, mathematics, and science than did nonparticipants. This suggests that, at least for the short-term, participation in Upward Bound accelerates low-income students' educational progress. Earlier studies had criticized Upward Bound programs as being mostly remedial in nature; however, the MPR (1997a) study clearly defends the program's academic focus:

A rich and challenging academic program is a central focus of most Upward Bound projects. Although the previous evaluation prompted concern that Upward Bound projects devoted inadequate time to academic instruction, recent evidence counters this view. Indicators: Number of courses offered; nature and content of courses—more than 2/3rds of Upward Bound projects focus on instruction that is not remedial; and course requirements—80 percent of projects require students to complete at least six courses. (p. xv)

Strengthening Upward Bound Through Educational Reform

Many proven educational reforms and initiatives can not only ease the burden on today's Upward Bound programs but also help to strengthen the programs. Among these are strategies aimed at increasing the amount of time that teachers, especially teachers in high schools serving Upward Bound's target populations, spend on professional development (MPR, 1997a). Indeed, professional development has been associated with the perception of significant improvements in teaching (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 1995; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1999a, 1999b). Without professional development, school reform will not happen. National leaders can adopt rigorous standards, set forth a visionary scenario, compile the best research about how students learn, change the nature of textbooks and assessment, promote teaching strategies that have been successful with a wide range of students, and change all of the other elements

¹ The comparison sample was drawn from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey of eighth graders.

involved in systemic reform, but unless the classroom teacher understands and is committed to reform and knows how to make it happen, those dreams will come to naught. The magnitude of change sought demands a carefully crafted, well-supported professional development design.

Additionally, the quality of teaching students receive must be as much a focus of attention as the number of courses they take. As a report of the National Commission on Teaching and the Nation's Future makes clear, more than one-quarter of newly hired public school teachers in 1991 lacked the qualifications required for their jobs, and nearly one-fourth of all secondary teachers did not minor in their main teaching field (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The Commission's report further notes that the least qualified teachers were most likely to be found in schools with higher poverty rates and larger numbers of minority students—exactly the schools that most Upward Bound participants attend. Such teachers also have been found to predominate in classes serving students in the lower tracks—again, a key source of Upward Bound participants. Moreover, in schools with the highest minority enrollments, students had less than a 50% chance of getting a science or mathematics teacher who held a license and a degree in the field he or she taught.

High academic standards are also important facets of education, and a critical aspect of the key issues facing Upward Bound and other TRIO programs. High academic standards are a must if large numbers of our nation's students are to be able to compete in a global and technology-driven economy. Responding to an NCES (1999a) survey, teachers reported incorporating instructional strategies aligned with high standards (56%) and assisting all students to achieve to high standards (52%) to a great extent more frequently than they reported engaging in other reform activities. Only 44% of high school teachers, however, reported assisting all students to achieve high standards to a great extent. These disparities in terms of reform approaches and at the high school level can be explained by the lack of preparedness teachers' concede regarding their ability to deal with certain populations of students. Another NCES (1999b) study found that although 54% of the teachers surveyed taught limited-English-proficient (LEP) or culturally diverse populations of students, and 71% taught students with disabilities, relatively few teachers who taught these students about (20%) felt very well prepared to meet the needs of such students. Twenty-six percent reported that they were in great need of information to help their LEP students, and 31% reported needing more information on helping students with disabilities achieve high standards.

One promising school reform initiative worthy of mention here is High Schools That Work (HSTW), a project of the Southern Regional Education Board (AFT, 1998). This program, launched in 1987, was designed to help raise the academic achievement levels of career-bound students (those who, upon entering high school, do not intend to prepare for admission to a four-year college). Its main goal is to increase students' educational and career opportunities by helping participating schools replace their general and vocational tracks with an academic core of high-level mathematics, science, and English courses that is integrated with quality vocational studies. HSTW has many obvious strengths. It is designed to help students achieve to high standards. It puts proper focus on, and helps provide, high-quality professional development. It stresses the importance of providing struggling students with a structured support system. It helps to define, upgrade, and mesh essential academic and vocational skills. Moreover, it provides a system of student assessment, data collection, and feedback that can help spur continuous improvement.

HSTW is currently being implemented in more than 650 schools in 21 states nationwide. Working with and through state education departments, HSTW officers place an emphasis on connecting the schoolhouse, district office, and state in long-term collaborative efforts. An HSTW coordinator, employed by the state, is trained to facilitate and oversee most

aspects of the program, including implementation of support and technical assistance site visits, which are conducted at least every three years. Though the research on HSTW is still preliminary, it is clear that a large number of schools have been helped to make the kinds of substantive reforms that lead to higher student achievement as a result of this program; a significant percentage, however, have yet to show meaningful improvement. Notwithstanding, schools that faithfully implement all of the program's components have shown the most dramatic gains, with scores approaching those achieved by the nation's college-bound students.

CONCLUSION

A critical issue facing the Upward Bound program of the future is how to provide for the numerous students who meet the program's eligibility criteria but do not receive any precollege assistance. According to the MPR (1997a) executive summary:

On one level, this issue involves questions about whether to use increases in funding to initiate new projects in unserved communities (the course followed by the program in recent years), or to increase the number of students served by existing projects, or both. The influence of size on projects' effectiveness will be a key factor in answering these questions. (p. xvi)

As Franklin (1984) contends, Upward Bound and other compensatory approaches to the education of low-income students will not alone suffice to cope with the demands and tasks that rapid social and technological changes impose upon today's youth. As a matter of national educational policy, he recommends taking a close, hard look at the degree of collaboration that exists between K-12 and postsecondary institutions. He also suggests that greater emphasis be placed on compensatory education programs for targeted groups during the elementary school years to make Upward Bound less of a "one-shot" program and thus more viable. The use of many other proven, comprehensive educational reforms and initiatives such as those described by Fashola and Slavin (1997) can not only ease the burden on Upward Bound but also strengthen the program considerably. The MPR study (1997a), for example, recommends implementing strategies such as high school-business sector partnerships between schools serving large numbers of Upward Bound-eligible students and their potential employers.

Upward Bound intervenes in the lives of underachieving low-income high school students by uplifting and developing their academic and sociocultural strengths to the maximum while minimizing their academic and sociocultural weaknesses (Franklin, 1984). Although research supports the effectiveness of Upward Bound's programs, more emphasis needs to be placed on reaching those students who are eligible for the programs but are not being served. If we as a nation are dedicated to closing the gap of educational opportunity between disadvantaged and advantaged students, we must direct our efforts toward improving the academic and technical skills of our future workforce, decreasing the dropout rates, increasing graduation rates, and assisting students in making a smooth transition from high school to the postsecondary educational arena.

TRIO and Upward Bound programs cannot achieve these objectives in a vacuum, however. They must be implemented and supported in conjunction with other efforts to reach and maintain high academic standards for all K-12 students. They must be bolstered by an emphasis on hiring high-quality elementary and secondary school teachers and giving them the tools they need, including meaningful professional development. Additionally, these programs must be coordinated with other proven, research-based school reforms. These are some of the answers to questions related to our efforts to close the gap of educational opportunity and ensure a better tomorrow for all of our nation's youth and communities. True to the TRIO example, the earlier we start, the better chance we have of meeting with success.

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