
FICTION vs. FACT – Data, TRIO, and Student Success

On May 2, 2019, New America published *Closing the Evidence Gap in Higher Education*,ⁱ which argues for better data collection and evaluation of higher education programs serving low-income, first-generation, and minority students. We agree. Unfortunately, this report falsely claimed that robust educational research is not taking place. On the basis of that false contention, the report attacked the Federal TRIO Programs as operating without evidence of effectiveness.

So let's set the record straight:

FICTION: “[T]he U.S. Department of Education is forbidden by law from undertaking the kind of rigorous evaluation that is needed to affirm [TRIO programs] effectiveness...Congress added a provision to the Higher Education Act in 2008 banning the Department from ever conducting randomized controlled trials of...any TRIO program.”

FACT: Section 402H(b) of the Higher Education Act explicitly instructs the Department of Education to “rigorously evaluate the effectiveness” of the Federal TRIO Programs and to “identify institutional, community, and program or project practices that are effective in...fostering the success of individuals and students in postsecondary education.”

The only evaluation practices that are prohibited within TRIO are those that would (1) require a program to over recruit students in order to populate a sample for a study (i.e., “bait-and-switch”) or (2) require the denial of services for an eligible student as part of a study design. Beyond these guidelines, the Department of Education is REQUIRED to conduct evaluations in order to determine the effectiveness of TRIO. Indeed, as noted on pages 18 and 19 of the New America report, the Department of Education recently concluded an evaluation of best practices within TRIO’s Upward Bound program using random assignment.ⁱⁱ

FICTION: “With more than 50 years under the belts of several of the TRIO programs, the federal government still does not have a firm grasp of how well its grantees are performing.”

FACT: This statement ignores the volumes of data collected and published by the Department of Education that highlight successful outcomes within TRIO. For example:

- TRIO Student Support Services participants at two-year institutions attain degrees/certificates or transfer at a rate of 41% after three years as compared with just 21% of similarly-situated first-time freshmen.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 80 percent of college-ready seniors who participated in TRIO’s Talent Search program enrolled in college as compared with just 46% of students from families in the lowest income quartile.^{iv}
- Moreover, 86% of college-ready seniors who participated in TRIO’s Upward Bound and Upward Bound Math/Science programs enrolled in college as compared with just 46% of students from families in the lowest income quartile.^v

FICTION: “[P]rior experience points [are] statutorily mandated bonus points given to existing grantees that make it difficult for new participants to obtain grants...”

FACT: Prior experience points are not automatically awarded – to ANY grantee. Rather, they are earned based on the successful achievement of objectives (related to such factors as college enrollment and college retention) that are approved by the Department of Education. Failure to achieve such objectives results in a failure to receive prior experience points.

Further, in the last set of TRIO grant competitions during Fiscal Year 2017, more than 350 grants were awarded to applicants that did not have the benefit of prior experience.

FICTION: “[T]he TRIO lobby, as a part of the powerful higher education industry that wields influence with many lawmakers, is a significant obstacle to improving and expanding the use of evidence-based policies in higher education.”

FACT: Minority, first-generation, and low-income students as well as the educators who work with them, have the right to regularly testify before Congress and to speak with their individual representatives; indeed, they frequently do so. This right is fundamental. Students, alumni, families, and others who know first-hand the benefits of TRIO programs (and who have excellent, supporting data) should share that information with Congress. It is precisely because of continued disparities in college opportunity that TRIO advocates must remain engaged in the fight to protect educational opportunity programs.

ⁱ McCann, Clare (2019). *Closing the Evidence Gap in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: New America Foundation, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/closing-evidence-gap>.

ⁱⁱ Alina Martinez, Tamara Linkow, Hannah Miller, and Amanda Parsad, *Study of Enhanced College Advising in Upward Bound: Impacts on Steps Toward College* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, October 2018), <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20194002>.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, *Persistence and Completion in Postsecondary Education of Participants in the TRIO Student Support Services Program*, Washington, D.C., 2015, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/ss-hea-report-2015.pdf>.

^{iv} Cahalan, Margaret, Perna, Laura, Yamashita, Mika, Franklin, Khadish. 2017. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2017 Historical Trend Report*, Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennaAHEAD). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Student Service, *Fast Facts Report for the Talent Search Program*, Washington, D.C., 2016, available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triotalent/ts-fastfacts2016.pdf>.

^v Cahalan, Margaret, Perna, Laura, Yamashita, Mika, Franklin, Khadish. 2017. *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2017 Historical Trend Report*, Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennaAHEAD). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, Student Service, *Upward Bound and Upward Bound Math-Science Programs: Postsecondary Outcomes Report*, Washington, D.C., 2016, available at <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/ub-ubms-outcomes2016.pdf>.