

**United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training**

**KEEPING COLLEGE WITHIN REACH:  
Sharing Best Practices for Serving Low-Income and First-Generation Students**

**Prepared Testimony by (Rev.) Dennis H. Holtschneider C.M.  
President, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Hinojosa, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak with you about the importance of higher education opportunity for students from low-income and first-generation families in an institution like DePaul, about the critical role and limitation of TRIO programs in fostering that opportunity and what the next Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act might achieve.

**SERVING LOW-INCOME AND FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

College access and success remains as critical a challenge for our country as it was half a century ago when TRIO programs were established. Given the increased importance of educational attainment in today's global knowledge economy and the persistent educational gaps between those from affluent and low-income households, it is perhaps even more of a challenge than it was then. Whether we look at this from a social equity

or an economic competitiveness perspective – and I do not think we can separate the two – we will not move forward on either front without substantially improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for those students with limited economic means.

This is certainly an important matter for us at DePaul. As with many other Catholic colleges, DePaul has been at the forefront of higher education opportunity since its founding. The university opened its doors in Chicago when there was no public higher education provision in the city and was a pioneer in offering college opportunities to immigrants, women, Jews and students of color. Today we remain distinctive among private, selective institutions in that a steady improvement in the university's quality and reputation over the past few decades has not been at the expense of our mission-based commitment to educational opportunity. While about a third of our entering freshmen are from first-generation college families or those qualifying for the Pell grant, almost a fifth of them are both first generation *and* low-income, the eligibility definition for TRIO.

Additionally, a quarter of our freshmen are students of color from underrepresented groups. And we enroll far more graduates of Chicago Public Schools – a system in which 85 percent of students are from low-income families – than any other selective private university. More importantly, we graduate them. The graduation rates for CPS students at DePaul – overwhelmingly low income – and for Pell students generally mirror those of

the university as a whole. And as we are no longer the “little school under the el” as we used to be known, but the largest Catholic university in the country with nearly 25,000 students from all parts of the United States and internationally, we know something about scalability.

We have maintained and indeed strengthened college opportunity and attainment by acting on many fronts. It is a core commitment that is reflected in our admission policies and strategies, our need-based financial aid policies, our teaching and advising practices, our intentionally small class sizes, and in the way we design academic and student support programs on multiple levels.

Much of what we do has been redesigned in recent years as we sought to complement a long-standing commitment to access with a commensurate focus on attainment. For example, we realigned our remedial coursework to allow entering freshmen to take the courses they needed over the summer for free so that they could make the most of their financial aid eligibility and be in better shape to stay on track to degree. We implemented a highly successful mentoring program for men of color to build on our existing first-year mentoring program for students of color. We completely redesigned gateway courses – those courses like organic chemistry or calculus where students often drop out of college if they fail the course. We added supplemental instruction, and we have substantially upgraded advising services and academic planning resources across the university.

Our focus on educational opportunity is deeply embedded in our culture. It is what attracts people to work at DePaul, and it is what gives them satisfaction when they know they are in the business of changing student lives.

### **TRIO PROGRAMS**

Our focus on educational opportunity also finds expression in our TRIO programs, which we have viewed not just as support programs, important though that is, but as institutional reflections of our mission commitment and strategy. TRIO programs have not just been successful at DePaul in programmatic terms – I will return to that in a moment – but in what they have taught us about the needs and aspirations of low-income and first-generation students, and about their capacity to succeed.

#### **I. PROGRAM HISTORY**

TRIO grew out of the “War on Poverty” a half century ago. The first program, Upward Bound, was established by the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964. The Higher Education Act brought us the second program – Talent Search – and by the end of the decade there were three programs (including Student Support Services): hence the name TRIO. Now there are seven programs providing a pathway to and through college for low-income students, first-generation students, students from under-represented groups, students with disabilities and veterans.

What unites all of these programs is the understanding that issues of poverty and opportunity will not be fully addressed without education. What unites them further is the realization that financial aid is not enough to guarantee academic success for those who are first-generation college goers.

TRIO programs are not race based, but income based. They are economic opportunity programs and, if ever there was a time when this needs to be restated, it is now. With federal financial aid, TRIO and higher education expansion during the sixties and seventies, many more students from low-income backgrounds got access to higher education. That trend stopped sometime in the 1980s and has been stalled ever since. A mounting body of evidence suggests that the educational attainment gaps between affluent and less affluent students has been widening. For example, while high-income students increased their college completion rate from a third to a half between 1989 and 2007, low-income students completing college increased from only 5 percent to 9 percent (Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, *Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion*, National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2011). This is not a matter of lack of aspiration. It is not a matter of lack of ability. We know that there are many low-income students who are qualified to go to college right now – we have plenty of examples in Chicago – and many more who could be if they had access to high quality education from pre-school and elementary school onward.

What has perhaps been forgotten over time is that TRIO was always intended to be the programming complement to Pell grants. Pell grants have had a massive impact on educational opportunity in this country. But the issues that low-income and first-generation students struggle with in elementary and high school don't go away once they enter college, if they enter college. The academic deficits accumulated over a lifetime, the lack of role models at home or in the community, the lack of time – TRIO students are incredibly busy we know working part-time or even full-time jobs and caring for family members while in college – all of these things do not magically disappear. TRIO programs aren't remedial programs – that is another common misconception. They simply provide an effective way to target attention, resources and support to a population that is eager to succeed if the opportunity is there.

## **II. TRIO PROGRAMS AT DEPAUL**

We have had two TRIO programs at DePaul since the late 1990s, Student Support Services and McNair Scholars. Student Support Services serves 200 eligible participants a year and is designed to increase graduation rates for low-income and first-generation students. McNair is a more specialized and intensive program for 30 eligible students a year – it has the ambitious goal of preparing low-income and first-generation students and students of color from underrepresented groups for doctoral studies and faculty careers. Let me first give you a few simple data points, for we know a lot about the profile and success of TRIO students at DePaul.

- Students who participate in our TRIO programs are both low income and first generation.

- Most of them are from Chicago Public Schools, predominantly the neighborhood schools.
- Their academic profile when they enter the university is measurably weaker than that of the freshman class as a whole. To be eligible for Student Support Services, a student has to show “academic need” for the program whether it be through low standardized test scores, grades or other academic deficits. But listen to this:
- Our latest graduation rate for Student Support Services students was over 80 percent, ten percentage points above the institutional average.
- Over a quarter of our Student Support Services students progress to McNair – remember, these are students who entered our doors with academic deficits.
- And when we look at McNair, we see that over 80 percent are going on to graduate school within three years and to some of the best graduate schools in the country.

Let me make it a little more real. Violeta was originally one of those Student Support Services students with academic need at DePaul but whose achievement was such that she was admitted to McNair and is now at the American University in Cairo on a Fulbright. Carlos found his way – by accident he tells us – from a culinary arts program to an International Baccalaureate program in Chicago Public Schools (another high impact program, I should mention and one that DePaul has been very much involved with in Chicago), was a Student Support Services participant who also made it to McNair

and is now close to completing his doctoral program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Marlene, a DePaul Student Support Services participant, went on to study medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine after graduating from DePaul and is now, after a stint working at the University of California at Irvine, a pathologist at Advocate BroMenn Medical Center in Normal, Illinois. What amazing journeys these students have had, and what contributions they will make in the future! And there are so many other stories like these.

No, TRIO programs are not remedial. They are support programs to provide critical mentoring and information to move students from ambition to success. Indeed, I'd argue that TRIO forces us to reexamine widely held low expectations about low-income students and students from groups underrepresented in higher education. In fact, they are teaching us a good deal about the capacities, abilities and very real potential of TRIO students, many of whom are turning into high achievers. We are learning not to see access in minimal terms, about just getting students through, and are starting to build on that in what we think are some very exciting ways.

Let me give you just one example. Three or four years ago we started to notice that a very interesting thing was happening. Admission to the McNair program is quite difficult and the standards are high. But the McNair program started to get inundated with applications. In 2011, we had over a hundred applications – strong applications – for seven or eight openings in the program. What to do? These were DePaul students



who wanted the opportunity McNair could provide them, and they had the academic qualifications for admission. But we were limited by program regulations on how many we could enroll. And the income eligibility criteria were such that some very highly qualified low-income students and low-income students of color had to be turned away because they were just shy of the criteria threshold. Some were also unable to participate in McNair because their interest was in professional degrees, such as medicine and law, while McNair only supports students intending to pursue a PhD. The university decided that this was both a need and an opportunity. We found the resources to increase the capacity of McNair and created a complementary program – the Arnold Mitchem Fellows program – supported by institutional funds. In this way we have been able to essentially double the capacity of McNair, and though it is too soon to see the results in terms of graduate school progression, we can see that achievement levels and retention in the program are equally as high.

Though it is not required, DePaul contributes substantial funding from institutional resources to its TRIO programs. The most dramatic example is the funding we provide to McNair participants to study abroad. This is not something that TRIO funds will cover, but we discovered over time that some of our McNair students were finding ways to study abroad and that the experience was having a truly transformative impact on them in terms of subsequent academic performance, confidence and a general expansion of their horizons. We slowly assembled the funding, and now about two-

thirds of our McNair students either study or conduct research abroad. We firmly believe it is one of the most transformative things they do.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

TRIO programs are only one part of our multi-faceted approach to serving first-generation students at DePaul. But the program has an outside effect, and we firmly believe in its value. That said, we also believe TRIO could be improved in the next reauthorization cycle.

First, we would like to see a simplification of TRIO regulations concerning student eligibility. At present, there are two separate processes for students to certify themselves sufficiently poor to be eligible for Pell and for TRIO. That's needless, and it causes much too much internal work for us in the university. Rather than making every university in the country independently review the net taxable income for each TRIO student (and/or their families of origin), TRIO eligibility should simply follow Pell eligibility. If a student has already been certified as sufficiently poor to be eligible for Pell funding, it would greatly simplify the administration of these programs if that designation similarly made them TRIO eligible. That would allow us to apply the TRIO funds for student support rather than cause us to assign lengthy staff hours toward needless administrative work.

Second, while TRIO program regulations technically permit collaboration between TRIO programs and other educational opportunity programs on our campuses, it is our

experience—at least with respect to Student Support Services—that the regulation prohibiting commingling of funds discourages institutions from any significant collaboration. Moreover, extensive reporting requirements deter institutions from creating programs that would serve larger numbers of students. For example, the annual performance report prepared by Student Support Services programs must include 36 data fields for each individual student participating in the program. McNair programs seeking continued funding are held accountable for doctoral degree completion rates even though these completions may occur years after students have left the program. Compounding matters, no funding – none – is allocated to support these reporting requirements, resulting in an immense project for programs with only two to three staff members largely devoted to delivering program services. There is simply so much paperwork in the reporting requirements that universities have created stand-alone programs that serve discrete numbers of students and that can be more easily reported according to the requirements. There's no good reason for this. It's inefficient, and some easing of the requirements could be more effective without compromising the goals of the program. I would suggest that a clearer message encouraging and rewarding creative approaches to program collaboration within institutional settings would go some way to building capacity.

Third, there appears to be little incentive for TRIO programs to collaborate or coordinate activities across institutions. In many settings this may be not be much of an issue. But let me take the case of Chicago. To my knowledge there are over fifty TRIO programs in

Chicago's city schools, community agencies and colleges. I have no doubt that they are doing good work as individual programs. But as far as I know, there is no incentive for these programs to work together or even share data to harness a more unified effort. Working together, the Chicago universities could partner more easily with the many high school Upward Bound and Talent Search programs, offering students real pathway programs that ease their transition to college. Just as importantly, we could together create ways to assess the collective impact of TRIO in Chicago. For now, however, individual institutions create primarily institution-based programs. That's a shame.

I hope you will explore ways to strengthen, improve and expand TRIO so that effective programs are rewarded. I believe policy revisions that provide greater flexibility at the program level, incentives for collaboration, both within institutions themselves and also with external partners, and creating sensible reporting requirements are specific areas for attention.

### **REAUTHORIZATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT**

Let us not forget, however, that even the best of TRIO programs cannot unilaterally achieve the lofty goal of equal opportunity and success. I would therefore like to take a moment to offer a few thoughts on how the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act might complement the commendable spirit underlying the TRIO programs—and indeed DePaul's core mission—to open doors for underserved student populations. As you approach this reauthorization, I encourage you to consider assuring

proper use of data, improving aid administration, and easing regulatory burdens to afford maximum opportunity to meet the needs of our country's neediest students.

First, the recent focus on college value and completion is laudable, and we at DePaul take that challenge very seriously. Attrition can be particularly damaging to low-income students, who will struggle to overcome education debt if they are unable to complete their program and obtain a degree. However, we must be careful that in demanding better outcomes for our underrepresented students, we do not establish a system that reduces their access to begin with. Any data measuring student success must accurately and fairly reflect student outcomes. For example, graduation rates must account for transfer students and students who take longer than average to complete their programs. Otherwise completion data for schools like DePaul with large numbers of non-traditional and low-income students may be misleading. Data-driven policies must carefully balance these concerns to avoid unintended consequences for educational opportunity.

Second, this next reauthorization will doubtlessly focus on improving the administration of federal aid. In an era of constant innovation in how we deliver educational services, I encourage you to introduce flexibility in how we administer aid to students taking advantage of such innovative methods as competency-based learning programs.

Congress might likewise consider how technological and programmatic innovation could transform the administration of aid itself, such as through a universal loan portal where

students could easily access information on the Web about all of their loans, in one place, regardless of where the loans originated.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to mention the increasing regulatory burden our institutions have faced in recent years. While we recognize the value of transparency and accountability, each additional regulation ultimately increases students' costs and consumes student resources. As highlighted in August 2013 correspondence to this Subcommittee from the American Council on Education on behalf of educational associations and accreditation organizations, the growth of sub-regulatory guidance for those regulations has likewise limited universities' ability to focus on student service. We therefore endorse the authors' resulting recommendation that Congress engage in a cost-benefit analysis for new regulations and consider adopting a zero-sum approach for any new reporting requirements. Through these and the other avenues noted above, reauthorization efforts can better complement the lofty goals and successes of the TRIO programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

Again, thank you. We know TRIO has worked at DePaul and is continuing to work though we are feeling the constraint after several years of flat funding and cuts. I know there are misconceptions about the programs, and I understand that there is always the temptation to try to do something new. But TRIO goes to what we know is the key barrier to educational opportunity and attainment: economic circumstances. We cannot afford to continue losing talent in the way we have been doing. TRIO should

continue to be at the heart of our shared commitment to ensure that every student who has the desire and ability to go to college should have the opportunity to do so.