

Lifelong Education Opportunities

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Witness:

Ms. Pamela Boisvert

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Vice President

Testimony

Chairman Enzi, Senator Kennedy and distinguished members of the Committee, I am very honored to testify before you today on the important topic of Lifelong Educational Opportunities for Americans. My name is Pamela Boisvert and I serve as Vice-President of the Colleges of Worcester Consortium in Worcester, Massachusetts. Among its other offerings, the Consortium provides educational counseling and placement to low-income adults throughout Massachusetts through a Federal TRIO Educational Opportunity Center grant. In this instance, Massachusetts and Wyoming share another similarity, for in Wyoming as well, a Federal Educational Opportunity Center hosted by the University of Wyoming provides educational counseling and placement services to adults throughout the state.

I certainly join with the other witnesses in emphasizing the increasing need for life-long learning programs with particular attention paid to low-income adults because low-income adults are the least likely to participate in such activities, as seen in the following data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS ENGAGED IN CONTINUING EDUCATION BY INCOME

\$20,000 or less 28%

\$20,001 to \$35,000 39%

\$35,001 to \$50,000 48%

\$50,001 to \$75,000 56%

\$75,001 and above 59%

It is also true that adults from low-income households are the least like to receive employer support for educational activities.

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS RECEIVING EMPLOYER SUPPORT FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION BY INCOME

\$20,000 or less 48%

\$20,001 to \$35,000 58%

\$35,001 to \$50,000 66%

\$50,001 to \$75,000 76%

\$75,001 and above 75%

Certainly the Federal TRIO community brings a long history to this issue. For example, the TRIO EOCs for Massachusetts program, which I direct, was first funded in 1974 and currently serves over 7,000 clients per year at an annual cost of less than \$150 per client. Services are offered at a network of sites throughout the state in Boston, New Bedford,

Lynn, Worcester, Springfield and Pittsfield. All six sites also provide services at satellite centers including job services offices, welfare offices, vocational rehabilitation services offices, public libraries, churches and schools. In Wyoming, TRIO EOCs often operate from agricultural extension offices as well.

Services offered by TRIO EOCs are wide-ranging and can be tailored to meet the needs of individual clients. All services are offered to ensure that the clients are made aware of the importance of additional education, particularly postsecondary education if appropriate, and the possibilities that such education provides. Individualized assistance is provided to ensure that the educational program selected is appropriate to the client's abilities and career interests.

Of course, a key component of participation in continuing education for low-income adult students is securing adequate financial aid. Accordingly, a great deal of time is spent in assisting students in learning about financial aid available, and considering the advantages and disadvantages of various types of aid, particularly loans. The EOC works closely with loan guarantee agencies to assist individuals who may have defaulted on previous loans to enter into an appropriate repayment plan so that their loan status does not jeopardize their ability to re-enter a postsecondary program.

Low-income adult students generally must contend with complexity in their lives and a limited network of support to manage that complexity. For example, 57% of low-income adult students in postsecondary education work full-time, compared to 33% of traditional students. Additionally, 64% of low-income adult students support dependent children compared to 8% of traditional students. So in addition to assisting students in identifying an appropriate academic program and secure the resources to enroll, it is often necessary to assist clients in securing support from other academic and social services agencies. One of the major strengths of TRIO's Educational Opportunity Centers is that they are education brokers, not charged with filling seats in a particular program, but rather looking at the needs of each individual and providing them with the best academic "fit" possible. The EOCs for Massachusetts program has an annual program enrollment rate of 45%.

Massachusetts is home to rapidly-growing immigrant populations, an expanding knowledge-based economy, and a shrinking "native-born" population. Education has historically been a cornerstone of our economy, both in terms of education-related jobs as well as jobs requiring a higher education. Service related industries, including health fields and technology, are also showing significant growth. Self-sufficiency in Massachusetts now demands some form of postsecondary education, and TRIO is well positioned to provide access services leading to the American dream.

I would like to share two stories of current EOC clients with you.

Story I. Arianne arrived at the EOC office through the encouragement of her counselor at the local housing authority. This 35 year-old African-American single mother has struggled within the walls of poverty her whole life. Her undiagnosed learning disability prevented her from ever succeeding in school. She dropped out at an early age, gave birth to a son 16 years ago and has struggled to provide for him since. She worked hard to obtain her GED and was able to have her disability diagnosed.

Still she struggled to make ends meet. She lost her minimum wage job, found herself homeless and lost custody of her child. Again she struggled to find her way. Now receiving public assistance, and through the encouragement and efforts of her Education

Advisor at the EOC and her Self-Sufficiency counselor at the local housing authority, Arianne has been able to work with the State Rehabilitation Center to obtain services related to her disability. Career assessment testing through the EOC has confirmed that she has the strong interest and abilities necessary to achieve her dream of becoming an Occupational Therapist. Her desire is to help children with disabilities. She is now registered for summer semester classes at the local community college taking those pre-requisites necessary to enter the occupational therapy assistant's program that she has been accepted to in the fall. Arianne and clients like her need so desperately to be able to rely on those services provided by EOC and its collaborations with local social service organizations. These collaborative efforts have been instrumental in assisting so many in achieving self-sufficiency and success.

Story II. Edlira Gostivari came to America from Albania in May 1999. She has been using the Worcester EOC services since August 1999. At first, she got help in applying for the ESL program at Clark University and Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) to improve her limited English skills. We assisted her in both the admissions application process and the financial aid application process at those schools. In Spring 2002, Edlira completed the ESL program at QCC. In Fall 2002, she enrolled in the Business Office Support Specialist Associate in Science program at QCC. She will complete that program in May 2005. She plans to transfer to Becker College, Anna Maria College, or Worcester State College in Fall 2005 to earn a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science, History, or Legal Studies. She would like to attend Law School after she completes her Bachelor's Degree. The Worcester EOC has assisted Edlira effectively in achieving her educational goal successfully. Using our services, as an immigrant with limited English skills, she has become proficient in English and studied successfully in American colleges. I believe she will achieve her dream of becoming a lawyer with her strong will, high motivation, and the continuous efficient assistance from the Worcester EOC.