



COUNCIL for OPPORTUNITY in EDUCATION

**Testimony of Maureen Hoyler  
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Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

***“Strengthening Federal Access Programs to Meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century Needs: A Look at  
TRIO and GEAR UP”  
January 15, 2014***

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the HELP Committee, I deeply appreciate this opportunity to participate in today’s roundtable. The Council for Opportunity in Education’s (COE’s) 900 member colleges and community agencies are committed to increasing college access and success for low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. They view the federal support for TRIO and GEAR UP as a necessary component of their efforts. More than 9,000 TRIO and GEAR UP educators are on the front lines of our country’s continuing efforts to expand college access and success, and they are particularly appreciative of your willingness to consider their views as you prepare for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. They recognize that as a country we are far from realizing the very ambitious goals of the Act, and are deeply committed to improving TRIO and GEAR UP so that we as a nation can come closer to realizing those goals.

Over the past year, each of the state and regional associations affiliated with COE has sought input from its members regarding our recommendations. In general, these recommendations fall into six categories, which I will discuss in succession.

- Reinforce the historic connection between student financial assistance and college access and success programs. As early as 1965, Congress recognized that low-income students faced two sets of obstacles in successfully preparing for, enrolling in and graduating from college. The first set of obstacles is financial. Today, the federal government invests well over \$140 billion annually in higher education grants, loans, work-study programs, and tax credits so that students and families are able to address these financial obstacles. But for many students and families, the non-financial obstacles – lack of information, limitations in academic preparation, lack of peer and family support, and other factors – present equally troubling barriers. The Federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs assist students and families in recognizing and overcoming these obstacles and in a very real sense constitute an insurance policy for the much-larger investment in student financial aid.
- Foster collaboration with state, institutional and privately-funded college access and success efforts. Just as student financial assistance for low-income students requires a package made up of grants, loans and work-study support most often from federal, state and institutional sources, state, institutional and private support for college access and success programming should be encouraged. Privately-funded college access and success partners are working collaboratively with TRIO in many cities and states including Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania. COE has introduced one such model with support from the GE Foundation. Any barriers to collaboration among

such programs should be removed, and where possible vehicles should be made available to introduce more broadly in institutions, agencies and schools the practices first utilized in TRIO and GEAR UP. However, there is a fundamental error in the temptation to view programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP as demonstration programs. The federal role in assuring equal opportunity in higher education is critical; the need for federal support and leadership in this area remains as great today as it was in 1965.

- Continue the authorization of evaluations within the TRIO subpart and maintain their focus on program improvement. The TRIO community understands the very real obstacles that low-income students, first-generation students and students with disabilities face in preparing for and graduating from college. We want to improve our efforts – but we also want to build on our successes.
- Protect Congressional intent in the TRIO funding process. The current TRIO legislation mandates that TRIO applications be funded in rank order based on scores on the application and the institution's success in meeting previously-agreed-upon outcomes defined by Congress. In several of the last competitions, the Administration has introduced competitive preference priorities, which had the effect of giving institutions and agencies in individual states or regions preference over institutions and agencies in other states or regions. COE recommends restricting the Administration's ability to introduce such priorities without Congressional consent.
- Reduce regulatory burden where it detracts from an institution's ability to serve students. Current legislation requires that institutions and agencies sponsoring TRIO programs track students for as many as 10 to 12 years following the last provision of service. In some TRIO programs, such tracking is definitely cost-effective. In others, particularly programs such as Talent Search, where the cost per student is less than \$450 and the imposition of this requirement can involve tracking thousands of students, it may interfere with service delivery. We would ask the Committee to revisit these requirements.
- Strengthen efforts to serve special populations in TRIO. A number of Members of this Committee have introduced legislation that speaks to TRIO's effectiveness in serving students in foster care or aging out of the foster care system, as well as students who are homeless. Our members are particularly concerned that the language included in the legislation promotes the provision of long-term, continuing services to students from these groups, and we look forward to working with the Committee on this issue.

Thank you very much for considering these concerns.