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Many of you know that in our community—the college access and success world, the TRIO world—we started highlighting first-generation students as far back as 1980 when we introduced that term “first-generation student” into the policy discussion and into the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Act not only authorizes TRIO, but all the other federal supports for first-generation students and low- and middle-income students as well – Pell Grants, Federal Work-Study, SEOG, GEAR UP, and the federal student loan programs.

Our next President will be Joe Biden – a first-generation college graduate. While not the first, President-elect Biden will be one of our more recent first-generation presidents and, as such, has a sensitivity and understanding of first-generation students and their families. More importantly, he understands their potential to contribute to the leadership of our country. First-generation students will be the leaders in all aspects of our society if that potential is cultivated.

Several years ago, I had the privilege to hear the President-elect speak about his experience being a first-generation student and I’d like to share some of his remarks with you now. I hope that his words bring you and your students an assurance and comfort that a Biden Administration shares and appreciates the goals of our community.

About First-Generation College Celebration Day

The Center for First-Generation Student Success, in partnership with COE, is proud to support the National First-Generation College Celebration on November 8. Once you are ready, share your 2020 plans through the Institution Highlight Intake form. Soon after submission, your plans will appear on the National First-Generation College Celebration page.

While we hope you will take advantage of this particular day, which marks the anniversary of the signing of the Higher Education Act of 1965 for celebrations, we encourage you to incorporate the first-generation student experience into your programming throughout the academic year. Learn more at coenet.org.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

President-elect Biden: A First-Gen President Who Knows First-Gen Issues

by Maureen Hoyler

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ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2020

COE President Reminds TRIO Community That We Need Not Face Challenges Alone

by Maura J. Casey

The Council for Opportunity in Education’s Update during the annual conference began with President and CEO Maureen Hoyler showing on her first slide a picture of an open yearbook, with many student pictures crossed out, indicating that they were missing. She noted that there were many students at all levels of education from urban and rural backgrounds who are no longer connected to education because of the COVID-19 pandemic. “But one fact is very real,” Hoyler said. “You are best positioned to recover the people who are missing. There is a story in the Bible about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one that is lost. I encourage each of you to find the one that is lost, or the 10, or the 100 lost, and to help your institutions find them.”

Hoyler went on to quote something said to her at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. “John Hernandez told me, ‘We can meet this crisis, but we have to be better coming out of this than we were going in.’” She recalled COE’s associate vice president of technology as saying. She said that the steps taken to avoid personal contact during the pandemic is especially difficult, and offices that operated together on a daily basis are now scattered. “COVID is isolating, but depend upon the people around you. You don’t have to come up with all the big ideas alone,” Hoyler said.

Hoyler also reflected on the ongoing political process to gain support for low-income, first generation and minority students, noting that COE had advocated for $450 million in emergency funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that the Higher Education Act would not be signed into law this year and would not be taken up until the next Congress is elected. If the administration changes as the result of the presidential election, Hoyler said, the organization’s goal will be to advocate for doubling the current appropriation for TRIO and to double the amount of money available for Pell grants. “They are tied together,” Hoyler said. “An investment in Pell without non-financial supports [which TRIO programs provide] is not a good investment,” she said.

She referenced the recent death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the lessons her approach held when struggling for more progress. “We started with the premise that the people whose minds she needed to change were not so much hostile as uncomprehending. Nobody gives up power easily,” she said, noting that, in the political process, failure can often be temporary. “Losses often set the groundwork for winning.”

Addressing the number of institutions whose Upward Bound grants were not renewed, Hoyler said, “We lost 8 percent of continuing programs, and that is consistent with historic statistics. We lost far too many tribal colleges.” She pointed out that COE staff is available to critique applications from members before they are submitted. The COE member institutions which take advantage of that service rarely lose funding. Finally, to those who worried about the needs of students going unmet, Hoyler reminded student support professionals that they have some flexibility in their budgets to help students with the technology they lack. Program regulations specifically cover purchases of hardware and software. “You have tremendous authority to move and create items in your budget,” Hoyler said. “Act from a position of strength.”

COE Welcomes New Board Officers

by Maura J. Casey

The COE Board of Directors gained inspiration and leadership Sept. 23 during a plenary session that saw the installation of new officers and a send off from the former board chair.

Kyle Ethelbah, director of TRIO programs at the University of Utah, stepped down as 2019-2020 COE board chair but will continue to serve on the board as the immediate past chair. He advised the new officers to “stay nimble, stay humble, and stay connected,” as he reflected on his year of service. He passed the gavel to the 2020-2021 board chair, Sari Byerly, who is the assistant vice president in the Office of Student Affairs at Idaho State University.

In her first speech to the TRIO community as the board chair, Byerly recalled her struggles to complete her bachelor’s degree and fears that she would not advance beyond serving as the manager of a fast-food chain. Her “life plan,” she said, was to obtain a doctorate but that goal seemed very far away as she teetered on the verge of homelessness. A student employee position in the University of Utah’s TRIO program gave her hope and purpose.

Byerly said the events of the last months have exposed the inequality and social injustice that is too often a product of TRIO students’ lives. She said, “We need their voices. We must arm them with what they need.” She said that during her tenure she hoped to honor the past, work smart in the present, and prepare for the future.
TRIO Achievers Speak of Hardship, Gratitude: ‘TRIO Was the Launch Pad I Needed’

by Maura J. Casey

COE honored five exemplary TRIO alumni during its annual National TRIO Achievers celebration on Wednesday, September 22. During the virtual awards ceremony, recipients shared their experiences and reflected on how TRIO programs changed their lives for the better. Their stories follow.

Marvin R. Pendarvis is a lawyer and South Carolina state representative elected from the 113th District, which includes the North Charleston area where he grew up. As a low-income, first-generation student, he entered the TRIO Opportunity Scholars Program (Student Support Services) at the University of South Carolina. “The seeds my ‘mama counselors’ planted bore fruit in so many ways,” he said, saying they made him feel more confident in attending college. He graduated from law school in 2014. Three years later he ran for the legislature and won. Rep. Pendarvis said he is proud to work on issues such as affordable housing for people of low income. “Their issues are my issues,” he said. “I understand what it is like to come from meager means. I can’t thank TRIO enough for taking a chance on me.”

As a high school student, Richard Perez thought his adult life would revolve around running his family’s landscaping business in San Antonio, Texas. But a Project STAY Talent Search advisor at South San High School had other ideas, and encouraged Perez to go to college. He became the first in his family to earn a college degree, from Texas University. He then earned a master’s degree in public administration from the University of Kansas. Mr. Perez served as special assistant to the secretary of Housing and Urban Development during the Clinton Administration and served two terms on the San Antonio City Council. He then became the first Hispanic CEO and President of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, a position he has held for 13 years. Mr. Perez credited much of his success to his long-ago Talent Search days. “I wouldn’t be here today as president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce if it weren’t for TRIO,” he said.

McNair Scholar Albert Leon Venegas is a scientist working in the Antibody Development and Protein Engineering Department at AstraZeneca, doing research that may prove critical in combating the coronavirus pandemic. His career is the fulfillment of a dream. Despite growing up in a single-parent, low-income household, he said, “I always wanted to be a doctor.” Majoring in Molecular, Cell, and Development Biology at St. Edward’s University he suffered from “imposter syndrome,” wondering if he really belonged. But when he enrolled in the McNair Scholars program, Venegas said he found support and learned the lessons that helped him move forward, even when the difficulty of graduate work sometimes overwhelmed him. Even now, he said, he relies upon what he calls his “McNair lesson book,” to give him confidence when he needs it.

Less than 3 percent of physicians in America are African American women. No wonder, then, that when Antoinette Danvers enters a room at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City, she often sees patients’ faces light up. Like those patients know that Danvers was once a 13-year-old immigrant from rural Jamaica struggling in the Bronx. Her first school assigned her to a classroom for students with learning challenges. Administrators realized their error when she excelled at state standardized tests. She soon entered the Upward Bound Math and Science Program at Bronx Community College and after graduation majored in pre-med at Cornell University. “Upward Bound made me feel like I was part of a family,” she said. Danvers took a year off between her bachelor’s degree and medical school to be an Upward Bound mentor. She is passionate about her work at Montefiore. “During the pandemic, our institution was the hardest hit, but we got through it,” she said. In the past, her journey as a physician, my goal is forever to return to the Bronx.”

Clinical psychologist Ashley Doukas’ passion is to serve victims of trauma, particularly survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, at Bellevue World Trade Center Health Program. “What they say about psychologists being wounded healers is true,” she said. Her passion to help others came from painful childhood experiences such as her father’s hospitalization for mental illness and her parents’ loss of their family home. Her parents were high school graduates with little expectation that she could go to college. She assumed they were correct. That changed when she attended high school and enrolled in the Talent Search program sponsored by the University of New Hampshire. Doukas’ counselor, Carolyn, peppered her with practical questions. “Can you afford the SAT? Have you thought of college? Do you know what you would want to major in?” she recalled, smiling. The answers were no, no, and no. She went on to attend the University of New Hampshire, becoming the first from her family to graduate from college. With the help of the McNair Scholars program, she enrolled in the New School for Social Research and earned her MA and Ph.D in clinical psychology, becoming a board-certified psychologist. Since then, she has decided to return to the Bronx. “TRIO was the jet fuel and the launch pad I needed.”
During two webinars this year, a panel of international students discussed their experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic and shared their hopes that the current worldwide protests for racial justice would lead to increased equity in postsecondary education. The webinar series is convened by COE partners Global Access to Postsecondary Education (GAPS) and ECHO Center for Diversity Policy (The Hague, Netherlands) and hosted by COE. Catherine Millett, GAPS chair, led the webinar, and Pravini Baboeram, ECHO program manager, facilitated the student discussion.

Students discovered they shared many of the same problems when the pandemic shut down schools, campuses, and businesses—a lack of resources, both physical and psychological, to continue their studies.

In Brazil, lack of access to technology has been a major barrier for remote learning, said Mateus Gomes, an engineering student at the University of Campinas, noting that the university has formed partnerships with corporate sponsors to provide devices for students. Of racial problems in Brazil, he said, “We have one George Floyd case every 23 minutes.” The current protests have increased the pressure for legal reforms to improve the lives of Black citizens, who make up more than half of Brazil’s population.

The Loss of a “Safe Space”

COVID-19 brought to light many socioeconomic inequities in the developing country of Jamaica, where racism may not be overt, but the higher education system retains aspects of its colonial origins, said Shanari Fearon, a student at the University of the West Indies. In Jamaica, underrepresented groups, such as students with disabilities, “were left hanging,” she said. Student-athletes, who remain stigmatized as athletes only, were also isolated. All students lost out academically during the disruption, and “we also lost the emotional support” of the university, she said. “Students use the university as their safe space.”

Rudzhan Mamphweli, a student at the University Venda, described disproportionate impacts of the pandemic and of the shutdowns in South Africa on Black students, particularly in rural areas where lack of technology, and access to technology, are major barriers. Simply shifting courses online hasn’t helped those who have no access to the internet, he said.

Low-income students in the U.S. face similar financial difficulties, according to Maribel Sanchez, a TRIO Student Support Services participant at Wichita State University who works in the university’s diversity office.

When campuses closed this spring, Sanchez and others who rely on on-campus jobs found themselves scrambling to apply for college COVID-relief funds to cover rent and food. Sanchez had an additional burden worrying about the health and safety of her parents, who were essential workers and do not speak English.

The pandemic—and the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the globe—have increased the pressure on higher education institutions, said Afua Acheampong of Nottingham Trent University in the UK. The Black Lives Matter movement “has started to make racial inequality an issue for everybody, not just the BAME (Black and Minority Ethnicity) community, and that puts more of the onus on the institution rather than on the BAME and Black students that have to suffer” its effects, she said.

Acheampong said her university modified some of its requirements to become more flexible out of the recognition that certain groups may need more support than others. For instance, international students who remain on campus when the rest of the institution shuts down are often isolated, whereas those who return home may lack resources and struggle with the logistics of online learning amid time differences. She sees the new normal as bringing major changes in teaching and learning with the increased use of student voices and a greater appreciation of disparities in time and resources available to diverse groups.

Matheus Gomes is an engineering student at the University of Campinas in Brazil.
by Leticia Cruz

Our program has a strong track record of success. My academic coordinator is the “uncle” to all of our students. I’m the “mother.” We have a very family oriented program. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the students here at Texas A&M International University are Hispanic and 75% of those students qualify for this program. We watch them like hawks from the time they first come in. We meet with their parents and we get to know them because there are a lot of things happening at home that don’t have their parents here. They need that kind of support just in case anything happens.

We provide that type of support here. We’ll buy groceries to carry them to the end of the week, when students have gotten ill. When students have been in car accidents and have gone to the hospital, we get those telephone calls at home at night. As soon as they’re accepted into the program, we provide them with our personal phone numbers so if anything happens, they can call us. We have spent evenings and days in the hospital with students, while waiting for their parents to come. That’s some of the paternal support we have provided in order for a student to be successful. You cannot look only at the academic part. You have to take care of the whole student in order for that student to be successful.

Our program is unique. It is unique as the people who run it. As my mother used to say, brothers and sisters are as different as the fingers in my hand: every student comes with different as the fingers in my hand: every student comes with different experiences and needs. We need the parents, we need the aunts, the uncles, the brothers and sisters, and this forms a great connection of trust. Having the confianza allows us to say “let’s continue to come and receive the support. Something we build with our students is confianza, which is trust. Having the confianza allows us to say “let’s sit down and talk about this” with the student when they get off track. If we don’t build that confidence and trust, the student is not going to be comfortable coming in and there are a lot of things happening at home that we do not see. We will not judge. We’ll just listen. The student will walk away breathing a little bit easier knowing that the support is there from us here in our program.

It is important to be hands on. Not only to the Latin culture, but in all cultures here in the United States. We have students that come into the university from the surrounding areas. Some of them come from Houston, San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley. So it is important to have students who are coming from these areas.

CoE hosts "Rise Up" panel and shares tools for student voting and civic engagement

by Jonathan Elkin

On Wednesday, September 9, COE hosted the webinar Rise Up! TRIO: The 2020 Elections, And You! The presentation encouraged TRIO to take advantage of this critical moment, advocate for students, and educate them about the power of civic engagement.

During the webinar, TRIO students, program staff, and leaders also shared best practices for nonpartisan advocacy, including how to connect with elected officials and candidates in two formats: hosting a town hall or candidate forum, and hosting virtual TRIO advocacy meetings with elected officials.

Webinar panelists focused on student voting rights and connecting with elected officials and candidates. Panelists included Clarissa Unger, Director, Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition; Gabrielle Slaughter, Program Manager, Andrew Goodman Foundation/My Brother’s Keeper; and James Prince Jr., President, South Carolina TRIO Association.

James Prince, Jr., President of the South Carolina State TRIO Association and University of South Carolina Upward Bound Program Coordinator, shared his experience planning and hosting a July student town hall with elected officials.

“We do Policy Seminar organized by COE every year, but we knew it was important to connect with our legislators all year round. As TRIO we aren’t just building students’ academic skills, but helping them be well-rounded citizens. We weren’t sure our students would be interested in the event, but we had a huge turnout and our students kept asking more and more questions of the legislators – some even asked how to get into politics themselves.”

Students should visit vote.org to complete critical voter registration steps and get reminders about key election dates! For where, when, how, and what to bring to vote by state, TRIO students should view these Campus Vote Project Guides.

WATCH this short video featuring Leticia Cruz and her TRIO students here.

WATCH this recording of the September 9 webinar here.
TUES. NOV. 10 | 3:00 - 4:15 p.m. ET

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TRIO STEM CLUB
ABOUT

Equality is a publication of the Council for Opportunity in Education. It is published four times each year. This publication is available free of charge to Institutional Members. For non-members, the cost of a subscription is $500.

Send articles that deal with national issues of interest to particular TRIO programs, program news, and information to the following address:

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