

Camren Price '25 celebrates getting his TRIO SSS stole last spring with Rosangelis Aybar, a sociology major from East Stroudsburg, Pa. The stoles are bestowed during a new spring event on campus, the Threads of Triumph celebration.





College is hard

TRIO makes it a little easier. by WILL DUBE

For Dr. Pamela Thompson, commencement is the best day of the year. The assistant dean of academic success and advising at Pitt-Bradford loves seeing students walking across the stage to receive their diplomas as well as watching their proud families in the stands celebrating their accomplishments. It is a culmination of a journey that Thompson has dedicated her professional life to enhancing for all students regardless of their backgrounds.

“College can be tough for everybody, but for folks who come from reduced economic circumstances, have varying learning abilities or are the first in their families to go to college, it can seem insurmountable,” Thompson said. “Academic success programs can make all the difference in helping the students who need it the most in achieving their dreams.”

Pitt-Bradford’s holistic programming in academic success is designed to provide training in the hard skills such as test taking, math and writing that students need to succeed in their courses. In addition, it supports development of soft skills that enhance the path to graduation, such as better time management, selecting the right friend group and how to best use downtime to recharge.

The Academic Success Center is where these programs live. The center is home to tutoring, advising, a writing center, a math center and TRIO Student Support Services. It also creates a warm and friendly community of peers, staff and faculty who support each



Nine TRIO students graduated in December: from left, Madelyn Ristau, an early level education major from Warren, Pa.; Taylor Frantz, an accounting major from Ridgway, Pa.; Allison Schmader, a business management major from Sheffield, Pa.; Jashzara Chambers, a sociology major from Bradford; Shaun Wu, a biology major from Barrigada, Guam; Ebennie Davis, a computer information systems and technology major from Mount Oliver, Pa.; Daisy Cheshire, an environmental studies and environmental science major from North Huntingdon, Pa.; Jennifer VanSickle, a communications major from Bradford; and Candy Vasquez, a sociology major from Limestone, N.Y.

other and make students' college experience more well-rounded and less stressful.

"Our goal is to help students enjoy all aspects of college life, academically and socially," Thompson said. "We have a strong and dedicated team that is highly invested in our students' success. And when they graduate and move on to the next phase of their lives, we all celebrate!"

TRIO SSS supports students who are most at-risk for not finishing college. The U.S. Department of Education initiative is part of a suite of eight programs that help low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities earn bachelor's and graduate degrees. Pitt-Bradford received its first TRIO SSS grant in 2005 and today supports 160 TRIO students per academic year.

Eligible students can join the program as freshmen and receive services through graduation. Each participant is paired with a TRIO adviser who provides additional academic guidance in partnership with the university's academic and faculty advisers. TRIO advisers also help students navigate all aspects of the college journey —

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from selecting majors and minors to obtaining internships and supporting career exploration, job searching and graduate school assessment.

Additionally, peer mentors provide further help to students in adapting to college life, helping individuals make friends and recommending community activities and groups to join. TRIO also offers financial literacy education, financial aid planning and leadership training that can further ensure students have all the resources



At top, TRIO students take advantage of a dedicated study space. At right, Dr. Pam Thompson, assistant dean of academic success and advising, visits with students.



they need to make informed decisions about how to continue with their educational journey.

"As a first-generation college student, the transition to a university environment was a little overwhelming," said Kelsey Brown '24. "I felt like I was handling it on my own, but after realizing I could join TRIO and get that added help, everything got easier. My adviser provided amazing emotional support, was always available to answer my questions and made me feel like I had someone in my corner who was there to help me achieve my goals."

Brown also took advantage of the program's leadership training and career planning classes, which helped prepare her for her current role as an alumni engagement coordinator with Pitt-Bradford's Office of Philanthropic and Alumni Engagement. In that position, she continues to pay it forward by managing events such as Backpack to Briefcase, a networking event for students with alumni working in various fields.

"I was so proud that at the most recent Backpack-to-Briefcase, 11 of the 21 participants were TRIO students," she said.

TRIO's personalized approach and structured programming also played a major role in the educational and career journey of Scott Pattison '19. A native of Bradford, Pattison visited the TRIO booth at student orientation and discovered he was



Cedric Arline '25 (left) adjusts his TRIO SSS stole and regalia while getting ready for Commencement exercises last spring.



eligible to take part. Having the support of an academic adviser and a TRIO adviser who worked together to support his needs played a major role in his academic success. His TRIO adviser also helped him pick a new major, investigate internships and ensure he made deadlines for various applications.

“He encouraged me to look at an internship in finance to help ensure that was the career path I wanted,” Pattison said. “I ended up getting a position at RBC Wealth Management in Pittsburgh, which led to my first job after I graduated.”

Pattison later returned to Bradford, where he currently works at Zippo Manufacturing Co. Having been promoted twice, he now serves as a licensing specialist.

“I would not be where I am today without the support and encouragement of the TRIO program,” he said.

The gratitude felt by graduates is echoed by TRIO staff, who dedicate many hours to providing

direct support and a personal touch that can make the ultimate difference.

“I was a first-generation student myself and did not realize TRIO services were an option,” said Erik Austin '12, who served as a TRIO adviser at Pitt-Bradford from 2015-20. “As an adviser, I spent a lot of time sharing information about TRIO to make sure those who could benefit from the program didn’t miss out on the opportunity for support.”

In his current role as director of the TRIO Scholars Program at Westminster (Pa.) College and as past-president of the Pennsylvania Association of TRIO Programs, Austin continues to serve as an advocate and promoter for TRIO and academic success programs in general.

“I want every student to take advantage of these initiatives because they work,” he said.

Austin’s enthusiasm was echoed by Warren Shaw '97, Pitt-Bradford’s current TRIO director during the recent celebration of the 40th anniversary of National TRIO Day. In front of an audience of current TRIO students, alumni, staff and University leadership, he applauded TRIO participants for taking the most important first step, asking for help.

“National TRIO Day celebrates this program and its impact but, more importantly, it allows us to honor all of you who reached out, asked for help and then did the hard work necessary to achieve your goals. For all of us who support you that is the ultimate reward,” Shaw said.

Thompson, who took part in the Upward Bound TRIO program at Springhill College in Mobile, Ala., before enrolling as an undergraduate student at Alabama A&M University, also noted that the numbers back up the qualitative examples of success.

“The average GPA for TRIO students at Pitt-Bradford is 3.05; 89% of participants are in good academic standing; and 55 students made dean’s list for fall semester,” she said.

Moving forward, Thompson and university leaders are investigating opportunities to enhance outcomes for the academic success initiatives that are already in place and further expand services so all students across campus can receive the help they need to succeed.

“Our ultimate goal is to create a strong and permanent support structure that can ensure that no student is ever left behind,” she said.



Dr. Gillian Boyce, center, founding director of TRIO SSS at Pitt-Bradford, celebrates the program’s initial grant with U.S. Rep John Peterson and Dr. Livingston Alexander, president, in 2005.