



FROM ACCESS TO IMPACT:

Education as the Engine of Economic Mobility

COE'S 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE WALTER O. MASON, JR.

Awards Luncheon



**THE PREMIER CONFERENCE
for College Access & Success Professionals**

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#COEAC2026 • San Diego, CA • September 16-19

WALTER O. MASON, JR.



The Late Walter O. Mason, Jr., a pioneering advocate for educational equity, was born on May 5, 1922, in Oklahoma. After earning a bachelor's degree from Langston University and a master's from Oklahoma State University, he pursued doctoral studies at the University of Oklahoma. He served as a special assistant to the president of the University of Oklahoma. The Tuskegee Airman had a passion for education that led him to a distinguished career in secondary education before he became a pivotal figure in the development of the TRIO programs.

In 1963, while serving as the executive director for the Community Action Programs for Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County, Walter was selected to help draft the Higher Education Act of 1965. This work laid the foundation for TRIO, and Walter played a crucial role in creating TRIO Upward Bound. He contributed to writing the first regulations for the program, served on the committee that named it, and helped design its original logo.

In 1968, as director of Upward Bound at Oklahoma Baptist University, Walter spearheaded the professional organization of Upward Bound directors in Oklahoma, leading to the chartering of the Oklahoma Division of Student Assistance. His leadership expanded when, in 1971, he became the senior program officer for Region VI of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In this role, he urged TRIO personnel across Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas to unify, resulting in the founding of the Southwest Association of Student Assistance Programs (SWASAP)—the first region in the nation to become a cohesive, professional TRIO association.

Walter's unwavering dedication to TRIO was evident throughout his life. He remained a vocal advocate, generously sharing his expertise to strengthen the programs he loved. His legacy endures, having shaped the lives of countless students until his passing on August 17, 1986.

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Texas A&M University—
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Corpus Christi, TX

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Idaho Business for Education
Boise, ID

Karen Smolarek

University of Wisconsin—
River Falls
River Falls, WI

Chelsey Toms

West Virginia University
Institute of Technology
Beckley, WV

Robin Williams

Oregon TRIO Association
Astoria, OR

Yara Zoccarato

Western Connecticut State
University
Danbury, CT



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LUNCHEON PROGRAM

PRESIDER

Jeff Kahliden

DIRECTOR, GRANT MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Dallas College

2025-2026 CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, COUNCIL FOR
OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

LUNCH

ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE 2026 FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE CELEBRATION DAY AWARDS

PRESENTATION OF THE 2026 WALTER O. MASON JR. AWARDS

PRESENTER

Jeff Kahliden

2025-2026 CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, COUNCIL FOR
OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

Dallas College

WALTER O. MASON, JR. AWARD RECIPIENTS



Sam Blanco, III

DIRECTOR, PRE-COLLEGE TRIO PROGRAMS

University of California, Davis

For more than three decades, Sam "SB3" Blanco III has made TRIO personal. As director of pre-college TRIO programs at the University of California, Davis, Sam leads one Upward Bound and three Talent Search programs, continuing a 34-year career at his alma mater that has included service as an academic coordinator and director for Upward Bound and as assistant director and director for Talent Search. His connection to UC Davis and the students he serves runs deep, and that connection is evident in the relationships he maintains long after students leave his programs. Former students are not names on an old roster to Sam. He remembers them, their families, their stories, and the dreams they shared with him years ago.

That ability to build lasting relationships is at the heart of Sam's impact. He has spent his career giving students his time, his encouragement, and, most importantly, a chance to see something greater for themselves. Whether teaching math during an Upward Bound summer program, guiding students toward college, or reconnecting years later with a former participant who has built a career of their own, Sam approaches the work with genuine care. Sam does not check off a box and keep it moving. He takes the time to connect. After more than three decades in TRIO, he remains committed to understanding what students need and making programs work for them.

Sam has brought that same commitment to the larger TRIO community. A member of the Western Association of Educational Opportunity Personnel (WESTOP) for more than 34 years, he has served as Northern California Chapter Treasurer and President and as WESTOP President in 2017. His service has been recognized with the WESTOP Service Award in 2015 and the Steve Holeman Award in 2024. Nationally, Sam most recently served as chair of the Council for Opportunity in Education's 2022–23 Board of Directors. Through it all, colleagues have come to know "SB3 from UCD" as someone who consistently shows up, whether to advocate for TRIO and its students, support his university, develop his staff, or simply be there for a friend.

Sam's greatest legacy, however, cannot be captured by titles or awards. It lives in the people whose lives intersected with his. It is in the former students who carry his lessons into their families, workplaces, and communities; the staff members he helped develop who have gone on to serve students elsewhere; and the generations of young people who learned from Sam that their goals were possible. Sam earned his bachelor's degree in economics from UC Davis in 1992 and a master's degree in educational administration from Sacramento State University in 1999, and he extended his commitment to young people through four years of service as a trustee for the Woodland Joint Unified School District. Together with his wife of 25 years, Pam, and their two daughters, Sam has built a life rooted in family, education, community, and service. TRIO is stronger because Sam Blanco has spent 34 years showing up, giving of himself, and reminding students through both his words and his example that someone believes in what they can become.



WALTER O. MASON, JR. AWARD RECIPIENTS (CONT.)



Margaret Cahalan

SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

For Margaret “Maggie” Cahalan, the pursuit of educational opportunity has always been inseparable from the pursuit of truth. Colleagues describe her as tenacious, principled, and possessed of an almost inexhaustible hunger for fairness—a researcher unwilling to accept an easy conclusion when students’ futures and the survival of programs are at stake. Maggie’s relationship with TRIO stretches back decades, including her work studying Student Support Services and helping practitioners use evaluation to strengthen their programs. But perhaps no chapter better captures her character than her years-long effort to ensure that Upward Bound received the honest evaluation it deserved.

When early findings from the federal national evaluation of Upward Bound cast doubt on the program’s effectiveness, Maggie did something extraordinary: she refused to accept them. She spent years pursuing the underlying data, examining the study’s design and implementation, identifying errors, and completing a reanalysis. Even when her concerns met resistance, she persisted, at times spending nights on her own time reanalyzing the evidence. Her work ultimately helped demonstrate that the original conclusions had obscured Upward Bound’s success and enabled independent researchers to conduct a separate reanalysis supporting her findings. One longtime colleague, reflecting on decades in federal policy analysis, placed Maggie among the rare researchers willing to “buck the system” in defense of fairness, equity, and honest social science.

Maggie carried that same conviction to the *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*, where she helped transform research into a powerful instrument for advocacy and program improvement. Through the *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States* report, Maggie and her colleagues created an enduring way to chart whether America is actually expanding college opportunity for low-income and first-generation students and students with disabilities. Yet Maggie has never been an “ivory tower” researcher removed from the people represented in her data. She believes practitioners and students should help shape research, ask questions, and use evidence to strengthen their own programs. That philosophy also animated her leadership of iStronG—Inclusive, Strong, and Green, where she turned to Upward Bound teachers and staff themselves to help build a stronger curriculum for students.

Maggie’s legacy is ultimately larger than any evaluation, publication, or dataset. It is the legacy of a fighter with the highest of ideals, someone who has spent her career insisting that evidence be honest, that opportunity be equitable, and that the voices of practitioners and students matter. Her colleagues credit the totality of her work with helping protect the very programs Walter O. Mason Jr. fought so hard to create. And her commitment to justice reaches beyond higher education to her community and the environment, reflecting a deeply held belief in our responsibility to one another and to the world we share. Maggie has never been satisfied to simply document inequality; she has devoted her life to challenging it. And she will keep asking the difficult questions, following the evidence, and fighting until educational opportunity is truly fair and just.



Corris P.A. Davis

SENIOR DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS

University of Maryland, Baltimore County

TRIO is stronger because Corris P.A. Davis brings people with her. A lifelong Baltimore City resident and alumna of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Corris has devoted her career to creating opportunity in the community and at the institution that helped shape her. Since beginning her work at UMBC in 1999, she has risen to become senior director of the Office of Academic Opportunity Programs, where she leads the university's federally funded TRIO portfolio and related opportunity initiatives spanning secondary through postbaccalaureate education. Under her leadership, UMBC's TRIO presence has grown from three programs to six, and she has written or contributed to successful proposals securing more than \$35 million in federal funding. Yet for all that she has built, Corris's greatest contribution cannot be measured in programs or dollars. It is measured in people.

Colleagues describe Corris as a "gentle giant," a leader whose quiet strength is matched by an extraordinary capacity to listen. She gives people her full attention, makes them feel seen and valued, and creates the kind of space where students and colleagues can believe more deeply in themselves. She has mentored generations of TRIO professionals, particularly throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, while serving the broader movement as president of the Mid-Eastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel (MEAEOPP), a former member of the COE Board of Directors, and longtime faculty for COE's Legislation and Regulations Training grant. Through these and other roles, she has helped strengthen professional practice and develop the people who will carry TRIO forward. Her leadership is steady, compassionate, generous, and rooted in the belief that no one should have to make the journey alone.

In 2025, after years of supporting the educational aspirations of others, she earned her own Ph.D. in public policy from UMBC, studying the relationship between undergraduate research participation and graduate school enrollment. Remarkably, two members of her team also earned their doctorates, a testament to individual achievement and to an environment where people encourage one another to keep learning, growing, and reaching higher. Corris herself was hired under and mentored by TRIO legend Cynthia Hill, and she has honored that investment by becoming a mentor to countless others. The encouragement once extended to Corris now flows through her to another generation of professionals, and from those professionals to the students whose futures they help shape. That is how a legacy travels.

Corris's life in TRIO demonstrates that the most enduring form of leadership is building people who will continue the work. She has opened pathways for students, strengthened first-generation student success at UMBC, developed emerging leaders, and remained deeply grounded in the Baltimore community she has always called home. Her impact lives in every student she has championed, every colleague she has encouraged, every professional she has mentored, and every person who stands a little taller because Corris believed they could become more. Her legacy belongs to all the people she brought with her and to all the people they, in turn, will bring along. That is TRIO at its best.



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WALTER O. MASON, JR. AWARD RECIPIENTS (CONT.)

2025

BARRY LOFTON, *Executive Director, Office of TRIO and GEAR UP Programs, University of Central Oklahoma*

SARI BYERLY, *Assistant Vice President, Student Pathways, Weber State University*

MARIA ISABEL RIJOS, *Director, TRIO Upward Bound, Kean University*

2024

RANDOLPH HOLLY, JR., *Executive Director, COPE, Inc., Southern University and A&M College*

LYDIA PEREZ, *Director, TRIO Support Services Programs, Mesa Community College*

RANDALL SCHROEDER, *Former Director and Educational Counselor, TRIO Student Support Services, University of New Hampshire*

2023

DOLORES GOMEZ, *Director, Student Support Services–Teacher Prep, College Access and Outreach, Office of Student Success, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi*

JEFFREY KAHLDEN, *Director, Grant Management Services for Student Success, Dallas College*

ANTONIO C. STEPHENS, *Director, TRIO Center of Excellence, Saint Augustine's University*

2022

TRENT BALL, *Senior Director, Postsecondary Equity and Attainment, Missouri College and Career Attainment Network*

KAREN KEIM, *Director, Educational Opportunity Center and Talent Search, The University of Maine System*

ANGELICA VIALPANDO, *Senior Vice President, Program and Professional Development, Council for Opportunity in Education*

2021

EARNESTINE HARRIS BELL, *Former Director, General Education Development Center, Student Support Services and Upward Bound, Paine College*

THE LATE GABRIEL GALLARDO, *Former Associate Vice President for Student Success, Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity, University of Washington*

AMY L. VERLANIC, *Executive Director, Institute for Educational Opportunities, Montana Technological University*

2020

BETHSAIDA COLÓN DÍAZ, *Director, Puerto Rico Southeast TRIO Upward Bound Program, Academia de Directores Médicos de PR*

LUCY JONES, *Former Coordinator, TRIO Programs, University of Arkansas, Rich Mountain*

EDDIE L. CHAMBERS, *Former Director, Upward Bound Wittenberg University*

2019

MATEO ARTEAGA, *Director, Educational Opportunity Centers, Central Washington University*

PAMELA BOISVERT, *Former CEO, Massachusetts Education and Career Opportunities Inc.*

BERNARD M. CLAY, *Executive Director, Introspect Youth Services, Inc.*

2018

JOY BRITTAIN, *Director, Early Outreach and Support Programs, California State University, Monterey Bay*

GERALDINE GRAHAM, *Director, Upward Bound, Oakland University*

VAUGHN ROBERTSON, *Retired Director, Educational Talent Search, University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

2017

TRACY LYONS, *Executive Director of Undergraduate Student Success and Retention, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL*

MICHELE SCOTT, *Director, Educational Opportunity Center, California State University–Long Beach, Long Beach, CA*

KAREN TEXEIRA, *Director, Upward Bound, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, NY*

2016

CHERRYL F. ARNOLD, *Former Director, Office of Educational Opportunity and TRIO Programs, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA*

MIKE HENRY, *Professor and Director of Student Support Services, Southwest Virginia Community College, Richlands, VA*

THE LATE YOICHI K. RENGIL, *Director, TRIO Programs, University of Guam, Mangilao, Guam*

2015

NGONDI KAMATUKA, *Director, Center for Educational Opportunity Programs, Achievement & Assessment Institute, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS*

EVELYN MARTIN, *Former Director, Educational Opportunity Center, East Central University, Ada, OK*

ALVIN PHILLIPS, *Senior Vice President, Membership and Human Resources, Council for Opportunity in Education, Washington, DC*

2014

RONNIE GROSS, *Executive Director, TRIO Programs, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN*

DAVID MEGQUIER, *Director of Educational Opportunity Center and Talent Search, University of Maine, Orono, ME*

CAMILLE S. ZEIGLER, *Retired TRIO Director, Atlanta Metropolitan College, Atlanta, GA*

2013

ROBERT BELLE, JR., Associate Director, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Atlanta, GA

THE HONORABLE HENRY BONILLA, Partner, The Normandy Group, and Former Member of Congress (1993–2007), Washington, DC

ANDREA G. TAKEMOTO REEVE, Retired Student Support Services Director and Adjunct Faculty Member, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO

2012

JACQUELINE O. DANSBY, Director, Upward Bound, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, TX

JOSÉ MARTINEZ-SALDAÑA, President and Founder, EDvolution, Inc.

VINCENT TINTO, Distinguished University Professor, School of Education, Syracuse University, and Senior Scholar, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education, Syracuse, NY

2011

JACOB FRAIRE, Vice President for Student and Institutional Success, Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation (TG), Round Rock, TX

SUE B. HUIZINGA, Director, Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound, Boise State University, Boise, ID

PAULA MARTIN, Executive Director, Harlem Center for Education, New York, NY

2010

THOMAS G. MORTENSON, Senior Scholar, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Washington, DC

BOBBY L. OLIVE, Sr., Vice President for Student Affairs, Atlanta Metropolitan College, Atlanta, GA

CYNTHIA DARCHÉ PARK, Professor, College of Education, and TRIO Director, Pre-College Programs, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA

2009

RAY CARLISLE, Director, Student Support Services, University of Montana, Missoula, MT

ROBERT L. CARMOUCHE, Director, Department of Special Services, University of Louisiana–Lafayette, Lafayette, LA

DELTHA Q. COLVIN, Assistant Vice President for Campus Life, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS

2008

RONNIE J. BROOKS, Founding Pastor, "To God Be the Glory Ministries," and former Director, Upward Bound and Student Support Services, Texas A&M University–Commerce, Salem, OR

IRVIN L. COIN, Director of TRIO Programs, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ

J. GUADALUPE VALTIERRA, Chancellor of the Northwest Region, Ivy Tech Community College, Griffith, IN

2007

JONATHAN MCKENZIE, Co-founder and CEO, Family Centered Educational Agency, South Holland, IL

ELAINE METCALFE, Director of TRIO Programs, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND

DEBORAH NORTHCROSS, Executive Director, SAEOPP Center, Memphis, TN

2006

FUJI ADACHI, TRIO and GEAR UP Director, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY

MICHAEL L. JEFFERIES, Associate Dean of Students and Director of the President's Leadership Program, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, Champaign, IL

AL WHITE, Director, Talent Search, Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Durant, OK

2005

RENÉ DUBAY, Director, Educational Talent Search and Partnerships for Access, Montana Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, Helena, MT

AVON HONEY, Director, Educational Talent Search, Southern University, Baton Rouge, LA

THE LATE WILLIAM W. SULLIVAN, Associate Vice President for Retention and Outreach, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Executive Director, Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach, Las Vegas, NV

2004

DAN CONNELL, Associate Vice President for Academic Outreach and Support, Morehead State University, Morehead, KY

WILLIAM MORRIS, Former Director, Upward Bound, University of Delaware, Newark, DE

JULIA TOWER, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Council for Opportunity in Education, Washington, DC

2003

PAUL L. BEASLEY, Director, TRIO Programs, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC

MARIO BORELLI, Associate Professor, Mathematics, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN

SALLY J. BURGE, Director, Student Support Services, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA

2002

JOAN BECKER, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Support Services, University of Massachusetts–Boston, Boston, MA

VANCE SIMELTON, TRIO Director, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, AR

THE LATE DOROTHY C. YARBOROUGH, Director of TRIO Programs, Piedmont Community College, Roxboro, NC



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WALTER O. MASON, JR. AWARD RECIPIENTS (CONT.)

2001

THE LATE ELLEN DOLVEY HOWARD, Director, Educational Opportunity Center, Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., Baltimore, MD

LOTTIE GIBSON, Director, Student Support Services and Upward Bound, Greenville Technical College, Greenville, SC

MARSHALL GRIGSBY, President and CEO, Grigsby and Associates, Inc., Washington, DC

2000

LOUIS BROWLOWE, Assistant Vice President for Community Relations, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH

BEN MCCUNE, Director of TRIO Programs, Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, FL

BRUCE SCHELSKE, Director, Student Support Services, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

SHARYN SCHELSKE, Director, McNair Program, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

1999

BRENDA DANN-MESSIER, Executive Director, Dorcas Place Adult Literacy Agency, Providence, RI

SAMUEL F. HART SR., Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and Director of TRIO Programs, Mercer University, Macon, GA

THE LATE CELERSTINE BRIGGS JOHNSON, Assistant Provost, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO

1998

ANN COLES, Senior Vice President of Educational Information Services, The Educational Resources Institute, Boston, MA

DALLAS MARTIN, President, National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, Washington, DC

ROBERT MCFARLAND, Director, New Orleans Educational Talent Search Program, Inc., New Orleans, LA

1997

JOSEPH BELL, Director of TRIO Programs, Howard University, Washington, DC

MONTE PEREZ, President, Perez & Associates, Tucson, AZ

PAUL THAYER, Director of Undergraduate Student Retention, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO

1996

KATHRYN FELKER, Director, Educational Opportunity Programs, University of Utah

ALMA MARTINEZ, Director, Upward Bound, Inter American University in Ponce, Mercedita, PR

HAL D. PAYNE, Vice President, Student Affairs, State University College of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY

1995

EARL VANN FARROW, Director, Academic Achievement and Diversity Programs, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ

THE LATE RICHARD SONNERGREN, Director, Division of Student Services, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC

THE LATE PAUL T. SPRAGGINS, Director, Educational Opportunity Programs, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Milwaukee, WI

1994

CLARA HEWITT, Director, Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and Educational Talent Search, Lane College, Jackson, TN

KELLY ESPINOZA, Executive Director, Academic Assessment/Support Center at Metropolitan State College, Denver, CO

THE LATE THOMAS WOLANIN, Assistant Secretary, Legislative and Congressional Affairs, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC

1993

HAROLD G. DICKERSON, Executive Director, North Alabama Center for Educational Excellence, Huntsville, AL

THE LATE WILLIAM A. BLAKEY, Partner, Clohan & Dean, Washington, DC

TOMMY EDWARDS, Director, Upward Bound, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

1992

THE LATE IRMA BURKS, Director, Education and Training, Business and Professional Women's Foundation, Washington, DC

CHARLES DESMOND, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA

JERRY LEWIS, Director of the Academic Achievement Program, University of Maryland, College Park, MD

1991

OSCAR HERNANDEZ, Director, Project Stay, Inc., San Antonio, TX

ROBBIE LYLE, Director, Upward Bound and Student Support Services, Arkansas State University, State University, AR

THE LATE SILAS PURNELL, Director, Talent Search, Ada S. McKinley Community Services, Chicago, IL

1990

JO CONWAY, Director, Talent Search, East Central University, Ada, OK

JAMES HAMILTON, Assistant Provost and Professor of Chemistry, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

RAMOS SANCHEZ, Director, Talent Search, Eight Northern Indian Pueblos, Santa Fe, NM

1989

CLARK E. CHIPMAN,
*Regional Representative,
Higher Education Grants
Programs, U.S. Department
of Education, Chicago, IL*

MATTHEW TAYLOR,
*Regional Representative,
Higher Education Grants
Programs, U.S. Department
of Education, Dallas, TX*

PRINCE O. TEAL, JR.,
*Regional Representative,
Higher Education Grants
Programs, Department of
Education, Atlanta, GA*

1988

MAUREEN HOYLER, *Deputy
Director, National Council
of Educational Opportunity
Associations, Washington,
DC*

ARNOLD L. MITCHEM,
*Executive Director, National
Council of Educational
Opportunity Associations,
Washington, DC*



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ABOUT COE

MISSION

COE's mission is to achieve college access and success for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities.

VISION

We believe every young person and adult should have an equal opportunity to prepare for, attend, and graduate from college. Graduation from any category of postsecondary institution should be achievable and not limited by economic status, family background, or disability.

OUR APPROACH

COE works to improve educational equity for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities by advocating and providing resources and services to support colleges and community agencies around the country. We address this mandate by:

- Implementing evidence-based program improvement and student development services for more than 3,100 college access and success programs nationwide;
- Advocating for federally funded programs critical to college access and success, including TRIO, GEAR UP, Pell Grants, and other college access and success programs that assist low-income and first-generation students;
- Providing professional development for college access and success professionals—through COE's annual conference, seminars, video conferences, online courses, webinars, communities of practice, and other web-based idea exchanges;
- Conducting research and policy analysis through COE's Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education to inform policymakers, educators, and the public on issues impacting educational opportunities and outcomes for low-income, first-generation students, and students with disabilities.

INITIATIVES

- Promote leadership development and global citizenry through student leadership programs such as the National Student Leadership Congress, the Thomas R. Wolanin Congressional Internship, and the Keith Sherin Global Leaders Program;
- Develop partnerships with business and government to introduce low-income and first-generation students to 21st-century careers and to better prepare them for the workforce;
- Strengthen the academic preparation of TRIO pre-college students to ensure they have the mathematics and writing skills necessary to excel in disciplines of their choice—through curriculum development for STEAM Clubs and Book Clubs available for free to over 4,000 college access and success programs nationwide;
- Through the annual First-Generation College Celebration, uplift and expand the visibility of first-generation students on campuses across the country to increase institutional campus-wide engagement in providing comprehensive support to this student population;
- Biennially publish the Pell Institute's *Indicators* Report, which increases public awareness of disparities in college opportunity for low-income, first-generation students and provides data to inform educational policies and programs and help state leaders make evidence-based policy decisions;
- Cultivate college access and success program alumni to serve as mentors and role models for current program participants, act as advocates for the programs, and serve as ambassadors to the broader community;
- Convene leaders of COE-affiliated state associations for executive leadership training to advance college opportunity efforts at the state and national level through partnerships with institutions such as Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, Princeton University, the University of Kansas, and Yale University;
- Connect college access and success programs and community partners to COE's cloud-based data system—empower™—for effective real-time tracking and analysis of student outcomes.

OUR OUTCOMES

College access and retention services are essential to providing true educational opportunities for all Americans, including low-income and first-generation students and students with disabilities. At present, college access and success programs reach only a small fraction of the students and families who could benefit from them. For more than 40 years, COE has worked to make the following outcomes a reality:

- More than 6 million students have graduated from college with the special assistance of TRIO programs.
- More than 3,000 access and success professionals receive professional development and technical assistance annually, either in person, virtually, or both.
- COE has helped secure **\$1.2 billion** in annual federal appropriations to support TRIO programs (up from \$156.6 million in 1981, the year the Council for Opportunity in Education was founded).
- Nearly 817,000 low-income students and students with disabilities receive college access and retention services annually through our member colleges and agencies.



The Pell Institute

For the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

RESEARCH.
EVIDENCE.
OPPORTUNITY.
A MORE EQUITABLE
TOMORROW.



*“Evidence matters
because people’s lives
and opportunities matter.”*

— MARGARET CAHALAN

Congratulations

Margaret Cahalan

RECIPIENT OF THE
2026 WALTER O. MASON, JR. AWARD

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education proudly congratulates our colleague and friend, Margaret “Maggie” Cahalan, on receiving the 2026 Walter O. Mason, Jr. Award.

Maggie’s unwavering commitment to truth, equity, and educational opportunity has strengthened TRIO programs, informed national policy, and helped ensure that research serves the students and practitioners who make opportunity real.

Her work exemplifies the power of evidence to advance justice—challenging assumptions, elevating voices, and championing a more equitable future for all students.

Thank you, Maggie,

*for your extraordinary contributions to the field
and for being a tireless advocate for opportunity.*

Research for a More Equitable Tomorrow

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— CONGRATULATES —

Corris Davis

ON HER WELL-DESERVED AWARD

For more than two decades, Corris has been a steadfast leader, mentor, and champion for students and professionals in the TRIO community. Her dedication, compassion, and belief in the power of people have strengthened TRIO and expanded opportunity for so many.

*TRIO is stronger
because you bring
people with you.*

Thank you, Corris, for your extraordinary leadership, your unwavering commitment to students and colleagues, and the lasting impact you make every day.

“When you invest in people,
you create a legacy that
reaches far beyond
your own journey.”



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**OPPORTUNITY MATTERS
BOOK CLUB**

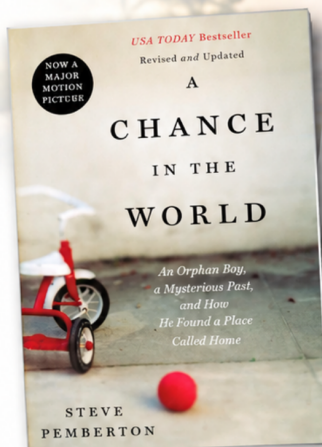
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**2027
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A Chance in the World

*An Orphan Boy, a Mysterious Past,
and How He Found a Place Called Home*

by Steve Pemberton



*Stories
Inspire
Opportunity.*

PEOPLE.
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Steve Pemberton
Author | Business Leader
Advocate | Change Maker

Join TRIO professionals from across the country for the 2027 Opportunity Matters Book Club as we read and discuss Steve Pemberton's powerful memoir, *A Chance in the World*. His remarkable story of resilience, hope, and the "human lighthouses" who changed his life reminds us why opportunity matters—and why our work in TRIO is so important.

*"This is a story about what's possible
when someone believes in you."*

— Steve Pemberton

From an abusive foster care system to a nationally respected business leader, Steve's journey shows the transformative power of compassion, education, and opportunity.

Pemberton's remarkable journey takes readers from the trauma and instability of an abusive foster care system to a life of leadership, advocacy, and purpose. Along the way, he encounters the "human lighthouses"—people whose compassion, encouragement, and belief helped illuminate a path forward. Come for the book. Stay for the conversation. Leave inspired to become an even brighter lighthouse for your students.



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