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FROM ACCESS TO IMPACT:

Education as the Engine of Economic Mobility

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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COE STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES

CONFIDENCE. EMPATHY. LEADERSHIP. ADVOCACY. SUCCESS.

Every student deserves access to high-quality experiences that augment their classroom learning. The Council for Opportunity in Education's Educational Opportunity Campaign supports transformative programs for low-income, first-generation students. Each year, through the support of donors like you, TRIO students:

- Explore cultures and develop global perspectives through study abroad experiences;
- Gain first-hand experience in public policy and advocacy in the U.S. Congress through Washington, D.C., internships; and
- Collaborate with other high school students on civic engagement and get ready for college at the National Student Leadership Congress.

Your investment in these high-impact programs means more students will have the opportunity to engage in experiential learning that helps them reach their full potential!

Join us and be part of COE's journey to transform lives through education.



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Dean, School of Business, Cyber, and Design, Augusta Technical College

Edgar Corona
Director, Marketing, Visa

Tony Dixon
Customer Management Director, PepsiCo Foods North America, and Founder, Tony Dixon Foundation

Stefanie Santos McLeese
Founder, Santos McLeese LLC

Laura Ashley Thomas
Certified Public Accountant and Global Controller, Bioventus

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2026 NATIONAL TRIO ACHIEVERS

Celebrating the success of TRIO students and the TRIO programs, the Council for Opportunity in Education and members of the college access and success community are proud to honor the 2026 National TRIO Achievers.

These men and women have distinguished themselves in their chosen professions and are making remarkable contributions to their communities. The public recognition of TRIO alumni is an exceptional opportunity to acknowledge the difference TRIO has made in the lives of thousands of individuals whose future success depended on their access to higher education.

We congratulate this year's TRIO Achievers and past award winners who continue to inspire college access and success professionals and current students.

DINNER PROGRAM

Ken Blair

TRIO TALENT SEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Dean, School of Business, Cyber, and Design, Augusta Technical College



For Ken Blair, the journey began with a college campus he had never seen before and a future he had not yet imagined. As a ninth grader at Warren County High School in rural Georgia, Ken joined Educational Talent Search, where college tours, workshops, travel, and the encouragement of his TRIO advisor, Catherine Darlington, opened his eyes to a world beyond his hometown. On that first college tour, walking across campus and talking with professors planted a seed: perhaps those lecture halls could belong to him, too. By the time of high school graduation, the student who had once needed help seeing what was possible had been accepted to more than 20 colleges and universities, an achievement Ken credits directly to TRIO.

Ken turned that early glimpse of possibility into a lifetime devoted to education. A proud first-generation college graduate, he earned a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership from Mercer University, an MBA from Brenau University, and a doctorate in higher education administration and educational leadership from Liberty University. His career eventually brought him full circle when he joined Mercer University's TRIO programs, serving students as an educational specialist, academic coordinator, advisor, and Upward Bound instructor. He later rose through leadership positions at Wesleyan College before becoming dean of the School of Business, Cyber, and Design at Augusta Technical College, where he now leads programs preparing students for opportunities in some of today's fastest-growing fields.

But no matter how far Ken's career has taken him, he has never stopped looking homeward. A native of Warrenton, Georgia, he has invested deeply in the community that raised him, founding the Greeks of Warren County to provide local students with mentorship, scholarships, and school supplies, and helping establish community initiatives celebrating service and achievement. He also co-chairs the Mercer University African American Alumni Network, where he has helped raise funds for scholarships for students of color, including one supporting first-generation Mercer TRIO students. His service has been recognized in deeply personal ways: in 2021, his hometown proclaimed October 10 Dr. Ken Blair Appreciation Day, and in 2024, the mayor of Macon-Bibb County proclaimed May 24 Ken Blair Day.

Ken's story is ultimately about the distance between one young person seeing a college campus for the first time and becoming the leader who helps thousands of others find their own way forward. TRIO helped Ken get to college and gave him a model for what his life could mean. Today, whether he is leading an academic school, mentoring a first-generation student, raising scholarship dollars, or serving his hometown, he is still extending the invitation that TRIO once extended to him: dream bigger. And Ken is not finished dreaming. He hopes one day to serve as a college president, carrying with him the lessons of the program that first taught him to see beyond the boundaries of what he knew.

Edgar Corona

TRIO UPWARD BOUND AT HARVEY MUDD COLLEGE
Director, Marketing, Visa



Both of Edgar's parents left school in Mexico before completing middle school to work as farmworkers and help support their families. Growing up in El Monte, California, Edgar understood that their sacrifices had created an opportunity he could not take for granted. He made himself a promise: he would graduate from a four-year university and inspire his siblings to do the same. But as a first-generation student with limited resources for navigating the path to college, Edgar needed a roadmap. He found one through the Harvey Mudd College Upward Bound Program.

Upward Bound did more than show Edgar how to get to college; it taught him how to refuse the limitations others might place in his way. When he realized his high school math sequence could prevent him from competing for admission to selective universities, Edgar advocated for the chance to teach himself trigonometry during Upward Bound's rigorous summer residential program. He spent his few free hours studying independently, eventually advancing through Calculus BC. That determination carried him to Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, where he earned a bachelor's degree in marketing, and later to New York University's Stern School of Business, where he earned an MBA in marketing and finance. Along the way, TRIO mentors helped Edgar translate abstract mathematics into something he could master, find internships, build a résumé, develop a professional network, and ultimately believe that he belonged in rooms he had once viewed from a distance.

Today, Edgar operates on some of the world's largest stages. After spending six years in marketing with the National Football League, he built a career spanning sports, consumer brands, and global sponsorships. At Visa, Edgar has helped lead major partnerships involving the NFL, FIFA, the Olympic Games, and other global platforms. His work has taken him from boardrooms to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where he led a $10 million consumer campaign and an on-site activation reaching more than 150,000 fans. Yet one moment from Qatar says more about Edgar than any campaign or corporate achievement: while managing the enormous demands of the World Cup, he joined a Zoom panel for Harvey Mudd Upward Bound students—at 3 a.m. local time—because he understood how important it was for those young people to see someone who once sat where they were sitting.

That 3 a.m. conversation captures the heart of Edgar Corona's story. He has traveled far beyond the community where his journey began, but he has never become too busy, too successful, or too far away to reach back. The first in his family to graduate from college, Edgar helped blaze a trail for his siblings, has mentored Upward Bound students, serves on Golden West College's Business Advisory Committee, and continues mentoring emerging professionals. His life connects the sacrifices of one generation to the possibilities of the next: from his parents leaving school to support their families, to their son earning degrees from Georgetown and NYU and leading campaigns seen around the world. TRIO helped Edgar transform his parents' sacrifice into opportunity.

DINNER PROGRAM

Tony Dixon

TRIO UPWARD BOUND AT STILLMAN COLLEGE

Customer Management Director, PepsiCo Foods North America (PFNA), and Founder, Tony Dixon Foundation



For Tony Dixon, opportunity began with a change in perspective. Growing up in a small, rural Alabama community as a first-generation college student, Tony had ambition and ability but little exposure to the possibilities beyond the world he knew. College was, in his words, "a question mark." That changed when he joined the Stillman College Upward Bound Program. TRIO surrounded him with mentorship, structure, accountability, and a belief that his circumstances did not determine how far he could go. It helped him see himself differently—and imagine a future he had not yet known was possible.

Tony carried that belief to the University of Alabama, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Commerce while competing as a collegiate athlete. In 2001, the Dallas Cowboys selected him with the 56th overall pick in the second round of the NFL Draft, fulfilling a lifelong dream and beginning a professional football career that lasted through 2006. But Tony's story did not end when he left the football field. He built a successful corporate career at PepsiCo, delivering measurable business results before becoming Customer Management Director at PepsiCo Foods North America, where his work now helps mobilize more than 250,000 employees worldwide in volunteerism, giving, and community impact.

Yet Tony measures success by more than titles, statistics, or professional milestones. He believes the opportunity he received created a responsibility to extend opportunity to others. Through the Tony Dixon Foundation, which he founded in 2018, he provides mentorship, leadership development, scholarships, and support to underserved young people, particularly those growing up without inherited access or advantage. The foundation has raised more than $100,000 to support youth advancement initiatives across West Alabama and beyond. As an author, speaker, leadership coach, and podcast host, Tony continues to challenge young people to "break mental glass ceilings" and recognize possibilities within themselves that their circumstances may make difficult to see.

Tony Dixon's journey is a powerful reminder of what can happen when talent meets opportunity and when those who have been given an opportunity choose to give it back. His nominator describes a life marked by "determination, humility, and excellence," and an unwavering commitment to lifting others as he rises. For Tony, the thread connecting everything he has accomplished, from rural Alabama to the University of Alabama, the NFL, corporate leadership, and philanthropy, is access. TRIO opened a door for him. He has spent his life holding doors open for others, creating pathways, and helping young people believe they, too, belong in places they may not yet be able to imagine.

Stefanie Santos McLeese

TRIO UPWARD BOUND AT TARLETON STATE UNIVERSITY
Founder, Santos McLeese LLC



Long before Stefanie De Los Santos McLeese became an accomplished communications strategist, entrepreneur, and national leader, she was a first-generation, low-income student growing up in Huckabay, Texas, a rural community of fewer than 400 people. The eldest of four children raised by Mexican immigrant parents, Stefanie faced geographic, economic, and family barriers that could have placed college beyond her reach. Instead, Tarleton State University's Upward Bound Program helped her turn possibility into a plan. Through TRIO, she gained the academic preparation, confidence, and self-advocacy skills to become the first in her family to navigate higher education, ultimately earning her bachelor's degree in journalism and communications from Tarleton State.

But Stefanie did not cross that threshold alone. Her journey became a roadmap for her family: all three of her younger siblings followed her path through TRIO and went on to graduate from college, building careers in education, public service, and national workforce development. Stefanie went on to build a career that has taken her far beyond the small Texas community where her story began. As founder of Santos McLeese LLC, she has advised corporations, universities, executives, and organizations on brand strategy and communications, with work spanning Fortune 500 companies, international projects, and the NFL. Her career has included everything from leading bilingual national campaigns and international media efforts to facilitating brand identity conversations with NFL Legends at Super Bowl LIX.

Yet the measure of Stefanie's success is not simply how far she has traveled, but how deliberately she has reached back. Throughout her life, she has returned to TRIO as a mentor, speaker, panelist, and summer resident assistant, helping students find their voices and imagine themselves as leaders. While working with the DFW TRIO Alliance, she helped secure a $10,000 Nissan Neighbors grant that supported TRIO Day programming, reaching more than 1,000 students and staff. Today, she brings the same expertise she uses to shape major brands to a mission that is deeply personal: helping first-generation students tell their own stories with confidence and recruiting successful, highly visible TRIO alumni to use their platforms to tell the world what educational opportunity made possible in their lives.

Stefanie understands that being first is about more than arriving somewhere no one in your family has gone before. It is about making the journey easier for the people who come next. She has written movingly about the students who wait with "hopeful anticipation" for the day they become the first in their families to hang a college diploma on the wall. She knows that feeling because she lived it and then watched the opportunity ripple through her own family. From rural Texas to college graduate, entrepreneur, mentor, and advocate, Stefanie's life demonstrates how a single investment in a first-generation student can reverberate across siblings, families, communities, and generations. That is the promise of TRIO.

DINNER PROGRAM

Laura Ashley Thomas

TRIO STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA-COLUMBIA
Certified Public Accountant and Global Controller, Bioventus



For Laura "Ashley" Thomas, being first meant carrying both hope and uncertainty. Growing up in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Ashley rarely traveled or vacationed, and when she arrived at the University of South Carolina as a first-generation college student, she was entering a world no one in her family had navigated before. There, the TRIO Opportunity Scholars Program (Student Support Services) became her bridge. TRIO gave Ashley more than academic assistance; it gave her a sense of belonging, mentors who saw her potential, and the confidence to imagine a future larger than the one she could see when she began. Along the way, TRIO even helped her discover unexpected parts of herself, from a love of English to an appreciation for the performing arts that she now shares with her own children.

Ashley transformed that opportunity into an extraordinary achievement. She earned a bachelor's degree in accounting and a Master of Accountancy from the University of South Carolina, graduating with GPAs of 3.85 and 3.9, respectively. Over a 19-year career spanning public accounting, healthcare, and life sciences, she rose into global financial leadership, managing international teams and complex operations at organizations including PwC and Thermo Fisher Scientific. Today, she serves as Senior Director, Global Controller at Bioventus, bringing to corporate leadership the resilience, discipline, and appreciation for different lived experiences that she first developed as a TRIO scholar. She has also returned to the classroom as an adjunct accounting professor, mentoring students preparing to build their own careers.

But Ashley's most consequential contribution may be the opportunity she created for thousands of students following in her footsteps. While at Thermo Fisher Scientific, she reconnected with her former TRIO mentor, Althea Counts, with a simple desire: to give back to the program that had given her so much. That conversation grew into the TRIO–Thermo Fisher Career Opportunities Initiative, connecting first-generation students with financial literacy education, mentorship, internships, work-based learning, and pathways into careers in finance and accounting. What began as one alumna reaching back to her alma mater ultimately became a national model for corporate engagement with TRIO.

Today, Ashley is a wife, mother, executive, educator, mentor, and still, proudly, a TRIO alumna. When she looks at her children, Annabelle and Avett, she can give them experiences she once only dreamed about, a quiet reminder of how dramatically educational opportunity can alter the trajectory of a family. Yet Ashley has never forgotten the student she was when TRIO believed in her before she fully believed in herself. Her message to the first-generation students coming behind her: "Your beginnings do not determine your boundaries. You belong, you are capable, and your future is bigger than anything you've imagined." Ashley has spent her career proving those words true and ensuring that thousands of others have the opportunity to prove them true, too.

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 nationwide. 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; and
- 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;

ABOUT COE

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 and provides data that policymakers and state leaders can use to inform educational policy;
- 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 in person and virtually.
- Annual federal appropriations now total $1.2 billion in support of 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.



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COE

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MERCER UNIVERSITY

Congratulations, Dr. Ken Blair!



As Mercer University celebrates six decades of partnership with TRIO programs, we are proud to recognize Dr. Ken Blair for his well-deserved recognition as a 2026 National Trio Achiever Recipient.

As a Mercer alumnus and former participant in the Upward Bound and Student Support Services programs, Dr. Blair's incredible achievements showcase the true power of opportunity.

At Mercer, everyone majors in changing the world.

mercer.edu

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