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Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Subcommittee
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations and discuss the impact of the TRIO programs on my life. I particularly want to encourage the Subcommittee to invest more in the TRIO programs in Fiscal Year 2016 so that more students can be served. While TRIO served nearly 880,000 students in 2005, only about 785,000 students are served today. We very much hope that the House can move towards restoring necessary funding for additional students. The Administration has proposed \$20 million in additional funding for an innovation fund for TRIO. However, the Council for Opportunity in Education, which represents colleges and agencies that sponsor TRIO programs, wants to emphasize that a higher priority should be placed on restoring students who can no longer be served in TRIO than on this competitive innovation fund.

I grew up in a family that didn’t value education – at all. My home was a severely abusive one. I missed weeks of school at a time because I couldn’t go to school with bruises, cuts, or a busted-up face. When I was in the 6th grade, mom and my grandmother (who lived with us and was the source of most of the abuse) removed my siblings and me from public school under the guise of “home-schooling.” But what that really meant was that they wanted all the questions about us missing so much school to stop. At that time I, as a sixth-grader, became teacher to my six younger siblings and two cousins who lived with us. I taught them everything I knew: how to

read, write, and do math. But there was no one to teach me. Mom did make an effort – she obtained a home study high school course for me, but then she and my grandmother decided that many of the subjects were inappropriate for me so I didn't get to complete them even though I did get a high school diploma from that course.

A few years and an abusive marriage later, I was walking through a county fair in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma when an East Central University recruiter asked me if I wanted to go to college. I had never considered going to college because I literally knew nothing about education. I was a 33-year-old single mother of two boys and I lacked so very much in the education department. And then there was the issue of money – I honestly didn't know there was money available to help people in my situation. I was under the mistaken belief that only “rich kids” could afford to go to college. But this wonderful gentleman convinced me that I could, and should, go to college. The next thing I knew I was sitting in his office discussing the ACT and enrolling in classes to assist me to enroll at East Central.

To say that attending college was a challenge is a severe understatement. I was absolutely terrified, and my self-confidence was non-existent. I had not been in a classroom since the 6th grade so I spent countless hours catching up. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was an imposter; and imposter feelings are extremely difficult to shake. For every person who continually tells a kid they're worthless and will never amount to anything, it takes thousands of rebuttals from caring individuals to push those memories into the background enough to gain some self-confidence. So I was struggling to gather enough courage and confidence to keep going.

And then I discovered science – and science brought TRIO McNair. In the second semester of my

freshman year, I took my first science course, something I had never experienced before in my formal education – and I knew I had found something I could be passionate about. The class was General Zoology and the professor literally kept me on the edge of my seat the entire semester. By the end of that semester I had changed my major to Biology and several professors in the Biology Department began to talk to me about a graduate degree and how the TRIO McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program could help me navigate that process. I had never heard of a PhD – or how to obtain one – but if it would help me learn more about science and be able to teach science, I was interested. The McNair Office became my home base for the remainder of my time at East Central University.

TRIO programs were authorized to enable low-income, first-generation students to address the non-financial obstacles that they encounter in preparing for, applying for, enrolling in and completing college. The lack of family support I describe is certainly not universal among low-income, first-generation students. But the presence of major non-financial obstacles, taken together with real financial obstacles are almost always there. (In college, I was almost always working two or three jobs, while caring for two young children.) The sense of being different, of maybe just not being ready is so often present for low-income, first-generation students, regardless of their aspirations and motivation.

TRIO McNair was established as one of two TRIO undergraduate programs to prepare low-income, first-generation college students for doctoral study. A personal quote from Ronald McNair himself encouraged students to “Dare to Dream” because big things can happen when people dream big and work hard. But sometimes a person doesn’t even know how to dream –

especially if their life has been so crushed by the circumstances they were born into. I didn't know how to dream – because I didn't know what to dream ABOUT. I didn't know anything about opportunities that were available and many of the available opportunities seemed way out of MY reach. But the McNair Program helped with that. They were so much more than just program staff – they became my family and my biggest cheerleaders and they literally changed my life. They opened my eyes to so many more opportunities than I ever knew were available and provided many excellent and caring mentors. The open door policies of these mentors allowed me to keep asking questions until I found satisfactory answers. And by then I was really hungry for answers and knowledge.

One of the biggest impacts of this program was that students in the program were not treated differently because of their less-than-ideal backgrounds; in fact, the opposite was true. For the first time in my life, I started to feel like an equal citizen, capable of accomplishing anything I set my mind to. Instead of being surprised at my success, they made me feel like they had known all along that I could do it – like it was expected of me. They also fostered a community feeling among students in the program so that we became family and we supported each other through classwork as well as personal crises.

Of all the opportunities provided through this TRIO program, it was the research and teaching assistantship opportunities that most influenced the direction my life would take. The funny thing is that without these opportunities I would never have discovered the things that I am so passionate about today. If you had asked me 13 years ago if I wanted to do research or teach college level classes I probably would have said no. But through these research and teaching

opportunities I discovered a passion for teaching and sharing knowledge with others.

The first graduate program I entered was not a good fit for me. Add to that the stress of moving two kids (by myself) to a new state and all of us trying to adjust at the same time – it was extremely difficult. Also, during that first year my mother was diagnosed with a rare brain tumor. We didn't think she was going to make it. During that time the McNair program advisors and mentors maintained close contact with me by email and telephone and continued to support and encourage me. Because of this support, I persevered in my studies and ultimately completed my doctorate at the University of Iowa. I am now engaged in postdoctoral research and am committed to a life of teaching and research.

Certainly one of the major reasons to invest in TRIO is the profound change it is able to make in individual lives – lives like mine. Another is its reach. TRIO touched me through a small college in Oklahoma. TRIO's reach through its 2,800 programs in every U.S. state and several territories makes it an ideal vehicle for introducing effective approaches. But more funds are necessary to expand and intensify existing services.

Closing the achievement and attainment gap will require additional investment in supportive services, such as those provided by TRIO. There are millions of individuals like myself who need the assistance these programs provide. The nation can only benefit from helping all of its citizens meet their full potential and contribute to society.

Thank you for listening to my story and considering my views.