

**Labor Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

**Public Witnesses Hearing**

**Tuesday, March 25, 2014 Hearing**

**Testimony of Dr. Charles Robinson**

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To Chairman Kingston, Vice Chairman Womack, Ranking Member DeLauro and all of the Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning about the impact and importance of the Federal TRIO Programs at the University of Arkansas and throughout North Arkansas. Specifically, I am here to stand in support of a \$52 million increase in appropriations for the Federal TRIO Programs in FY 2015. As both a scholar of racial integration at the University of Arkansas as well as the chief diversity officer of the University, I know firsthand the many challenges that encumber underrepresented students in search of a higher education, whether they be students of color, students with disabilities, students of meager financial means, or students who are among the first in their families to attend college. These challenges range from poor academic preparation at the elementary and secondary levels to unawareness about the available college and financial aid options to a fundamental lack of family or peer support. Thankfully, there are programs such as TRIO that create a pipeline from middle school all the way through postgraduate study and provide low-income, first-generation students with the necessary tools to overcome these barriers and lift their families out of poverty within a single generation.

We are fortunate to have eight TRIO-funded grants at the University of Arkansas: three Talent Search programs, which work with area students in grades 7-12 to ensure that they take the

proper courses and to prepare them for college admissions testing and assist with college, scholarship, and financial aid applications; two Upward Bound projects, which provide local high school students with intensive Saturday academies and six weeks of academic coursework on our campus in the summer; Upward Bound Math-Science, which provides students with a similar experience, but with more emphasis on lab science and mathematics; Student Support Services, which provides academic tutoring, peer mentoring, financial assistance, and other supports to ensure that our low-income, first-generation University of Arkansas undergraduates persist in their studies and graduate; and Veterans Upward Bound, which works with returning servicemen and –women to help reorient them to the classroom and prepare them to make the best use of their education benefits when they pursue postsecondary education.

Although we are proud to have such a robust complement of TRIO programs on campus, we cannot ignore the fact that these programs respond to a great need in our local area. For instance, in Arkansas, the child poverty rate is 26.8%—significantly higher than the national average of 20.1%.<sup>1</sup> In fact, according to a 24-hour Point-In-Time Survey of Homeless Persons conducted by the University of Arkansas’s Department of Sociology, on any given night, 442 school-aged children are homeless in Washington and Benton Counties. Given the undeniable nexus between poverty and educational outcomes, it is unsurprising, then, that in recent years Arkansas has experienced high school persistence rates as low as 43% and college remediation rates as high as 79%.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these factors result in Arkansas ranking 49<sup>th</sup> among all U.S. States and the District of Columbia in the percentage of adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher credential.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Reeve, 2012 Arkansas Child Poverty Update (Mar. 2012): Little Rock, AR.: Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

<sup>2</sup> School Report Card, Arkansas Department of Education (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (2013).

I share this information, not to create a bleak picture of my beloved Natural State, but rather to demonstrate how, through targeted investments in proven programs like TRIO, we can change the trajectory for many more students and families – just as we have done for years at the University of Arkansas.

As an example, the Talent Search programs sponsored at the University of Arkansas work hard to overcome the geographic isolation of the Ozark foothills to serve more than 1,800 students in 32 public schools throughout the North, Northwest, and River Valley regions of Arkansas. In 2012, these programs sent 89% of their high school seniors to college immediately following high school graduation. Of the participants who completed their first year of college, 83% persisted and are currently sophomores. Even better, those who enrolled at the University of Arkansas retained at a rate of 86%—fifteen percentage points higher than the overall institutional rate.

The success of Talent Search programs is not an aberration. Our Upward Bound and Upward Bound-Math Science programs can boast of equally strong outcomes. Between 2010 and 2012, 74% of our Upward Bound students and 83% of our Upward Bound-Math Science students enrolled in college in the fall semester following high school graduation. This is 22% and 31% higher, respectively, than the college-going rate for students in the State of Arkansas, which is 52%, and 32% and 41% higher than the college-going rate for students from the target high schools served by these programs, which have a college-going rate of just 42%. Like their peers in Talent Search, our Upward Bound and Upward Bound-Math Science alumni also have a strong retention rate, with 81% of these students persisting into their sophomore year of college.

It is important to recognize that pre-college programs alone cannot ensure that our low-income, first-generation students succeed in earning postsecondary degrees. While programs like Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Upward Bound Math-Science get them to our campus, it is programs like Student Support Services that ensures that they persist in their studies, make the best use of their federal financial aid dollars, and depart with a degree in hand and ready to contribute to the broader economy.

The low-income, first-generation students who enroll at the University of Arkansas come with great needs, as evidenced by the fact that they often arrive with less academic preparation and lower admission scores, require greater remediation, and have lower persistence and completion rates.<sup>4</sup> However, as a result of the *intensive* and *intrusive* counseling services provided by the Student Support Services program, hundreds of low-income, first-generation students at the University of Arkansas are outperforming everyone on campus every year. These services include academic tutoring and assistance with study skills, note-taking, and course-selection; financial aid and financial literacy workshops; and career development and graduate school preparation, just to name a few. Last year, 95.7% of the participants in our Student Support Services program either persisted to the next academic year or graduated. Indeed, participants in the Student Support Services program routinely exceed the University's graduation rates. As a result, I often look to this program as a model for the work of my own unit in promoting retention among diverse students on campus.

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<sup>4</sup> UA Data Warehouse 2008-2009.

In discussing the TRIO programs at the University of Arkansas, I would be remiss if I did not highlight the work of Veterans Upward Bound. Since 1993, our Veterans Upward Bound program has provided comprehensive assistance to our local military veterans, including academic assessment and classroom instruction; assistance in navigating the often-confusing portfolio of disability and education benefits provided by various federal agencies; counseling; and assistance in post-military career planning. As 10% of the population within Arkansas includes military veterans, we are proud to host one of the two Veterans Upward Bound programs within the state.

I have been in higher education for more than two decades and I am convinced—our students, our institutions of higher education, our country **needs** TRIO programs. With such a small investment – \$838.2 million in FY 2014 – we have been able to yield tremendous results that have helped families move out of poverty in a single generation. I applaud your Subcommittee’s decision to reverse the harmful cuts to TRIO last year. On behalf of our nation’s neediest students, I hope to see continued growth in this critical set of programs in the future. If we don’t invest more in our lower-cost education programs, such as TRIO, we are not getting the full value out of our higher-cost education programs, like Title I and Pell Grants. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.