



An American Perspective

Brian Spittle
Assistant Vice President, Enrolment Management,
DePaul University, Chicago

I have just returned from the annual conference of the Council for Opportunity in Education in Washington D.C. The Council is both the professional association and lobbying arm of TRIO* staff and this year's meeting was of special significance. As we all knew, it was to be a "celebration" of the fortieth anniversary of the program, and of the 1965 Higher Education Act which established it. It was this legislation, itself a product of the wider 'War on Poverty,' that launched the two main federal strategies for equalizing opportunity in higher education: need-based financial aid to make college more affordable for low-income Americans, and the TRIO programs designed to improve college access and attainment for low-income and first generation students.

Anniversaries may be occasions for celebration or stocktaking, as the case may be, but there can be little doubt that this one tilted more to the latter. There was plenty to celebrate, of course, for much has been achieved in the past forty years, and TRIO people know how to have a good time.

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But the country is still reeling from Hurricane Katrina; from the scale of the destruction, the disparity of the suffering and the incapacity of an avowedly minimalist government to deal with either. And Katrina cast another kind of shadow on the proceedings. For as the President tells us, if we cannot raise taxes (and apparently we cannot), then we must cut programs. This is not encouraging given that the administration has already tried to cut the TRIO budget by 50% this year. Congress reinstated the funding during the summer budget negotiations, but in the post-Katrina climate the outcome is far from clear.

Still, even without Katrina and the threat of budget cuts, we already knew that this year's conference would be an occasion for sober if not somber reflection and assessment.

You only had to look at the title of Jonathan Kozol's opening keynote address: '40 Years of Educational Opportunity: Unfulfilled Promises.' For what is increasingly clear is that four decades after the passage of the Higher Education Act, the access gap between poor and rich students in the United States is as wide as it was in 1965. True, the percentage of students from low-income families entering college has increased, but so has the percentage from affluent families. At the same time, what we call 'higher education' has become increasingly stratified with students from affluent families disproportionately represented at the most elite institutions and students from low-income families clustered in relatively open-access institutions and two-year community colleges.

Whether intended or not, there was a special symmetry in inviting Kozol to open this year's conference. For it was only a couple of years after the passage of the Higher Education Act that his book 'Death at an Early Age' shocked so many with its inside look at segregation in the Boston public schools. Four decades later, Kozol is writing and speaking with equal passion about the re-segregation of America's schools and what he sees as an emerging "educational apartheid" in the United States. In such a context, the prevailing rhetoric about school and teacher accountability rings particularly hollow.

As, perhaps, does the rhetoric about ensuring that we have the people and skills to meet the needs of today's knowledge economy. This may be a necessary argument for

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widening participation, but is it a sufficient one? What the TRIO conference participants understand almost intuitively is just how political the goal of equalizing educational opportunity has always been. TRIO had its roots in the civil

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rights movement and has never forgotten it. Over 10% of the conference sessions had to do with how to maintain visibility with elected representatives and influence legislation, and the Council has long been considered one of the most effective lobbying organizations on Capitol Hill when it comes to educational issues. Its political savvy has saved TRIO from many a proposed cut in the past and will certainly be critical in weathering the current storm.

It's a point that was not lost on the two Aimhigher coordinators I met at the conference. As we agreed, when it comes to widening participation it's not always good enough to do the job well, to gather the data and to tell the

story. You have to do all of these things, of course. But sometimes you also have to build a constituency.

***EDITORS NOTE: TRIO Briefly Explained**

TRIO is Educational Opportunity for Low-Income and Disabled Americans.

The US asserted a commitment to providing educational opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, ethnic background or economic circumstance. In support of this commitment, a series of programs were established to help low-income Americans enter college, graduate and move on to participate more fully in America's economic and social life. These programs are funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and are referred to as the TRIO Programs. While student financial aid programs help students overcome financial barriers to higher education, TRIO programs help students overcome class, social and cultural barriers to higher education.

Further Information: www.trioprograms.org