

# IMPROVING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

BY LAURA W. PERNA<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This essay first reflects on the differences between researchers and practitioners and then offers suggestions for ways to improve connections between TRIO program research and practice. It concludes by offering additional recommendations for ways that TRIO practitioners and academic researchers can collaborate to accomplish shared goals for first-generation and low-income students.*

## Introduction

Improving college access and success for students from low-income families and students who are the first in their families to attend college requires a multi-faceted, comprehensive approach, and commitment from multiple players (Perna & Jones, 2013). Among the important players are the federally-sponsored TRIO programs. Research demonstrates the positive effects of TRIO programs on students' college-related outcomes (Maynard et al., 2014). Methodologically rigorous research studies conducted by Westat and Mathematica Policy Research show that: Student Support Services promotes persistence in college, college credit accrual, and college grades; Talent Search increases applications for financial aid and postsecondary enrollment; and Upward Bound Math-Science has positive effects on enrollment in selective four-year institutions and completion of a bachelor's degree in a math or science discipline (The Pell Institute, 2009). In a meta-analysis of research that used experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, Maynard et al. (2014) found that, on average, the studied TRIO and other

college access programs increased college enrollment by 12 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> Other research demonstrates the cost-effectiveness of Talent Search, especially relative to other dropout prevention programs, in promoting high school completion (Levin et al., 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws from testimony I presented to the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training, Committee on Education and the Workforce, United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC on April 30, 2015 and from a meeting entitled, *Improving the connection between research and state policy for increased attainment*, I co-convened with the Lumina Foundation in Washington, DC on February 20, 2015. During this meeting, a small group of academic researchers and leaders of "intermediary organizations" discussed strategies for improving connections between academic research and state policymaking. Intermediary organizations can play an important role in connecting academic research and policy/practice, as these organizations tend to conduct and/or sponsor their own research projects and translate research findings to policymakers and practitioners. The Pell Institute may be considered an intermediary organization, as it seeks to help public policymakers and TRIO practitioners identify, understand, and apply research-based evidence to improve TRIO program practice.

Despite this research evidence, there is much that we do not know about “what works” among TRIO programs. To maximize the benefits of college access and success programs to student outcomes, policymakers and practitioners need to know which components and services work, for which groups of students, in which contexts (Perna, 2002). In their comprehensive meta-analysis of research on the effects of college access programs on college readiness and/or college enrollment, Maynard and colleagues (2014) identified only 34 studies that were published between 1990 and 2013 that used experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. Of the 34 studies, 18 provided sufficient information to conduct a cross-study review of effects of targeted interventions on college readiness and/or enrollment (Maynard et al., 2014). This is a remarkably low number, given the large number of TRIO and other college access programs that are operating across the nation. Even fewer studies have attempted to identify the effects on college-related outcomes of particular program components and services (Maynard et al., 2014).

Why are there so few studies that meet these criteria and address the knowledge needs of policymakers and practitioners? Lack of interest would not seem to be the problem: TRIO program leaders and administrators want to use practices that are known to produce meaningful improvements in the college-related outcomes of the students participating in their programs. Academic researchers want to produce high-quality research that effectively demonstrates the effects of particular practices on student outcomes.

Nonetheless, despite overlapping goals and interests of TRIO practitioners and academic researchers, differences in incentives, approaches to objectives, and time horizons between the two groups may limit the extent to which their shared goal is achieved. This essay first reflects on these differences and then offers suggestions for ways to improve connections between TRIO program research and practice.

## *Differences between Academic Researchers and TRIO Program Practitioners*

Academic researchers and TRIO program practitioners differ in many ways. One difference pertains to orientations and motivations. Academic researchers are trained to identify implications for theory, identify the many contextual forces and limitations that influence results, and employ research designs that require extensive time to implement and complete. Academic researchers are incentivized to publish articles in academic journals, a process that may delay the dissemination of research-based findings until months or years after the research has been conducted.

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<sup>1</sup> This meta-analysis includes a controversial study that found that Upward Bound has “no detectable effect” on college enrollment (Seftor, Mamun, & Schirm, 2009). Reevaluations of data from this study show that, when design flaws of the Seftor et al. study are taken into account, Upward Bound has positive effects on college enrollment, college completion, and applications for financial aid (Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014; Harris, Nathan, & Marksteiner, 2014). Including the reevaluation of Upward Bound rather than the original Upward Bound study in the Maynard et al. meta-analysis increases the pooled effect of the studied programs on college enrollment from 11.9 percentage points to 12.2 percentage points.

TRIO program leaders and practitioners are motivated to take immediate action, implementing the practices that they believe to be beneficial to the particular students that they serve. Whereas academic researchers strive for objectivity, TRIO program leaders and practitioners may prefer practices that are relatively easy to implement, familiar to program staff, and perceived to be effective by students and other stakeholders.

TRIO program practitioners and academic researchers also differ in terms of their access to and perspectives on relevant data. TRIO practitioners control the collection and management of programmatic data. With a primary focus on delivering services, TRIO programs typically have relatively few human or other resources for in-house data collection and analysis. Academic researchers have the methodological training and resources to analyze the data but may not have the connections with TRIO programs that are required to gain access to needed data or understand the logistical challenges of collecting different data.

Creating the potential for uneven power dynamics, TRIO program administrators and academic researchers also tend to differ in terms of institutional resources and other sources of support. TRIO program administrators may have fewer institutional resources on which to draw than academic researchers. Academic researchers also tend to be more highly paid than the TRIO practitioners who are delivering program services.

### ***Improving Connections between TRIO Research and Practice***

Creating meaningful improvements in the connections between TRIO research and practice requires recognition of these and other differences in incentives, motivations, time horizons, and resources. This section suggests strategies for recognizing these differences and, consequently, helping to ensure that TRIO practitioners and academic researchers achieve the shared goal of identifying the most effective use of available resources for improving college access and success for low-income and first-generation students.

Implicit in these suggestions is the assumption that both academic researchers and TRIO practitioners have assets and strengths that should be capitalized upon. While academic researchers possess expertise in the procedures for conducting research, TRIO program practitioners are experts in what the programs seek to accomplish, for whom, under what constraints.

TRIO program practitioners who seek to improve connections between research and practice should:

1. Request resources in funding proposals to support and advance data collection and research;  
and
2. Involve researchers early in the process of conceptualizing data and research efforts.

TRIO program administrators are incentivized to collect data that satisfies government accountability demands. But, academic researchers often find these data alone to be insufficient for conducting methodologically rigorous research studies. By involving researchers early in the process of conceptualizing data and research, and by requesting resources to advance data

collection and research in funding proposals, TRIO programs will help to productively advance connections between research and practice.

Higher education researchers who seek to promote better connections between research and practice should:

1. Conduct research that addresses the knowledge-needs of TRIO practitioners;
2. Empower practitioners to partner in the conduct of research; and
3. Make research results available and accessible to TRIO practitioners and policymakers.

For academic research to have a meaningful impact on TRIO practice, it must be relevant to the knowledge needs of TRIO practitioners. Practitioners often have questions about the practices that produce desired outcomes, the design and implementation of effective practices, and variations in effects of practices across groups of students and contexts. Practitioners also want to know what they think that they don't already know. Academic researchers and TRIO practitioners need to engage with each other to achieve shared understanding of knowledge needs and research goals.

Academic researchers should also work to empower practitioners in the research process. Rather than treating TRIO program practitioners as subjects to be studied, academic researchers should consider opportunities for action research and other research approaches that involve TRIO practitioners as partners in the conduct of the research.

Academic researchers need to not only learn the knowledge needs of TRIO practitioners, but also make the results of their research accessible. TRIO program leaders and administrators – and the policymakers to whom they are accountable – often do not have access to scholarly journals, or the time to read lengthy manuscripts. Academic researchers should consider disseminating results in outlets that are typically read by TRIO practitioners and producing short, easy-to-digest summaries with links to additional information.

## ***Role of Foundations and Scholarly Associations in Promoting Connections between TRIO Research and Practice***

Foundations and academic research associations can also play a role in promoting connections between academic researchers and TRIO practitioners. Typically only academic researchers attend and participate in conversations at academic/scholarly research conferences. Recognizing this structural reality, the William T. Grant Foundation provided a small grant to ASHE to encourage collaborations among ASHE members (researchers) and members of external organizations that are oriented toward serving policymakers and practitioners. As part of this project, Heather Rowan-Kenyon (Associate Professor at Boston College and ASHE member) and Margaret Cahalan (Director of the Pell Institute) have been actively engaged in promoting discussions among ASHE researchers and TRIO practitioners. As then president of ASHE and PI on the William T. Grant Foundation grant, I am excited about the ways in which this collaboration (along with collaborations between ASHE members and representatives of four other intermediary organizations) are helping academic researchers and practitioners develop shared research priorities and other shared goals and outcomes.

More research-based knowledge is needed about best practices for promoting college-related outcomes for low-income and first-generation students along the college-going pipeline, from middle-school into post-graduate study, and for both traditional-age students and adults who aspire to attend and complete college. By recognizing and capitalizing on differences in perspectives and resources, and by intentionally acting to build bridges between research and practice, researchers and practitioners are more likely to accomplish the shared goal of ensuring that available resources are effectively used to improve college-related outcomes for low-income and first-generation students.

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**About the Author:**

Dr. Perna's research uses a range of methodological approaches to identify how social structures, educational practices, and public policies can promote college access and success, particularly for groups that continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Recent books include *The Attainment Agenda: State policy leadership for higher education* (with Joni Finney, 2014, Johns Hopkins University Press).

Contact Information: LAURA PERNA, JAMES S. RIEPE PROFESSOR, University of Pennsylvania, [lperna@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:lperna@gse.upenn.edu)