

CONNECTING PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS TO STRENGTHEN COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS PROGRAMS BY PAUL BEASLEY

Connecting research and practice in college access and success programs first requires connecting researchers and practitioners. The usefulness of high-quality research to the development of solutions to problems as complex as those that create the need for college access programs is undeniable. But so is the involvement of practitioners who not only understand the objective dimensions of effective interventions but also the importance of acknowledging and preserving the dignity of clients. Research that places concern for its structure above concern for the dignity of participants is inherently flawed regardless of its approach. Working with practitioners who have appropriate sensitivity and respect for clients as well as knowledge of experimental design can help to ensure the development of high-quality studies that are useful to practitioners and fair and ethical to the programs and individuals they are supposed to help.

A connection between quality research and practice in college access and success programs would align the work of college access programs with that of other professions in which clients depend on knowledgeable practitioners to guide them in making critical decisions about their lives. Just as it is reasonable to expect doctors, social workers, and psychologists to have appropriate expertise guided by up-to-date research, it is also reasonable to expect college access professionals to use these components of evidence-based practice in their work with children and young adults. Decisions about attending college can be as consequential as decisions about health, especially for disadvantaged students for whom a college education is not an option but a necessity if they are to achieve an adequate standard of living in the twenty-first century. Wages for poorly educated and less-skilled

Abstract

TRIO programs have had a complex relationship with research which illustrates some of the problems that must be addressed to connect research and practice in college access programs. This paper explores that relationship from the vantage point of over 40 years of experience in TRIO administration. It reviews the impact of federal regulations on program development and the consequences of several national studies that used both experimental and quasi-experimental designs. This paper concludes with ideas for strengthening the link between research and practice in college access that emphasizes practitioners as full partners in the process. It calls on government, professional associations, and higher education to facilitate these partnerships to encourage high quality research studies that focus on identifying effective strategies and that show evident respect for the programs and their participants.

workers are already below the poverty level, and employment projections favor only those with high-level skills. Since most poor and working class students have inadequate academic preparation and high financial need, it is unlikely that they can succeed in college without proper guidance. In fact, uninformed and unsuccessful attempts to earn college degrees can create the additional hardship of wasted financial aid eligibility and loan indebtedness that can last a lifetime. Providing help with these challenges is the important work of college access programs, and this work should be guided by evidence-based practice with expectations for high-level expertise supported by rigorous research and implemented with high regard for students.

The absence of a strong connection between TRIO college access programs and research is not surprising, even though most of these programs are based in higher education where a substantial amount of research takes place. College access did not develop as education theory but as political advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement. As political policy, funding for programs realistically depended on effective work within the halls of Congress and state legislatures that did not necessarily involve research. The influence of successful political advocacy has had a lasting impact on the programs and the people who work in them. TRIO practitioners are organized within a network of organizations led by the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and committed to strengthening program and staff capabilities, building collaborations with public and private interests to improve and expand college access, and, most noticeably, encouraging congressional support for college access and success.

Advocacy during the Civil Rights Movement led to the Higher Education Act of 1965, which also had a tremendous impact on the early development of college access in both meaning and operation. This legislation contained several grant programs, including the TRIO Programs, which made the federal government the largest provider of support for college access services. The size and scope of these programs gave significant influence to the rules and regulations developed by the Department of Education for grant administration. Compliance became an important concern to those interested in continuous funding since the loss of funding eligibility most often resulted from noncompliance.

Concern about compliance with federal rules had a particular impact on the use of research. Within the grant application process, applicants had to certify that grant funds would not be used for research that involved human subjects. This restriction was often explained by federal program officers as a strict prohibition on all research. Eager to avoid violation of rules that determined eligibility for continued funding, program managers excluded all activities and expenditures associated with research activities.

Coupled with this perceived restriction on research were regulations that limited participation in grant activities to the small number of program participants who were often only a fraction of a college's or school's student population. This resulted in most programs operating in isolation from the mainstream of student activity, and being nearly invisible to the majority of faculty and staff who did not interact with them. Although later revisions in the regulations allowed for some integration of programs services with the general administration of campus activities, this early isolation of programs on campus, and their lack of interaction with general student concerns, resulted in limited opportunities for TRIO Programs to develop relationships that might lead to collaborations with practitioners and researchers.

Federal grant administration and an emphasis on compliance also meant accepting the particular notion of college access spelled out in funding criteria, which for TRIO Programs have not changed substantially in the past 50 years. This has resulted not only in stagnant program development but also in a uniform approach to college access programming across the broad spectrum of higher education. For example, the grant application for the TRIO Student Support Services Program requires community colleges, regional campuses, research universities, and all other eligible institutions to work from the same parameters for program development with only few exceptions for institutional type. This uniform approach is based in research from the 60s and 70s that most often conceived of college access programs as remedial services. Beyond reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, few opportunities exist to make changes in this process.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the U.S. Department of Education used random assignment and quasi-experimental studies to evaluate the effectiveness of several TRIO programs. These studies were conducted under large contracts with national firms. Mathematica Policy Research Inc. (2009) conducted a longitudinal random assignment study of Upward Bound. It also conducted a quasi-experimental study of Talent Search (2006) that was limited to three states, Texas, Florida, and Indiana, and based on analysis of administrative data files. The National Evaluation of the Student Support Services Program, conducted by Westat (2010), was a longitudinal study that provided statistical comparisons on the academic achievements of program participants to those of a matched group of non-participants. Its quasi-experimental design involved 5,800 freshmen evenly divided into treatment and control groups, tracked for six years and evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The two quasi-experimental studies found areas of effectiveness. For Talent Search it was in first-time applications for financial aid and initial postsecondary enrollment rates. The Student Support Services Program showed moderate but statistically significant effects based on differences in service levels. The more students participated in program services the greater the benefit on grade-point averages, credits earned, retention, and degree completion. The quasi-experimental design of these studies and their modest findings attracted little reaction, especially in comparison to that generated by the Upward Bound study, its use of random assignment, and its finding that the program had no major effects on college enrollment or completion. In spite of glaring weakness (Cahalan, 2009, Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014), its results were used to justify a request to eliminate funding for Upward Bound, Talent Search and GEAR UP, an OMB rating of “ineffective,” and a call for new strategies in the distribution of federal TRIO funds (Haskins & Rouse, 2013).

From the beginning, the Upward Bound study did not go over well in the TRIO community, which voiced objections prior to the start of any work. However, program practitioners were given no opportunities to help define its scope or influence its implementation. The Department of Education required participation as a condition of funding, which made the study come across not as a search for effective practice but as a compliance investigation. This perception by practitioners had a significant and negative impact on the study’s implementation and the level of cooperation from the TRIO community.

Program practitioners further objected to the way researchers sought parental approval for student participation in the study. As with programs, students had to agree to participate in the

study as a condition of acceptance into Upward Bound. The terms of acceptance required providing access to confidential information for a period of years. The contractor for the study explained these terms in letters that used dense language few parents of first-generation college students would understand. For this and other reasons, some universities prohibited their Upward Bound projects from participating in the study without an institutional review board examination for human subject violations.

The study's random assignment procedures required each project to solicit twice the number of applicants it needed to create a control group of program-eligible students. Students in the control group were to be denied services not just from Upward Bound but all college access programs (e.g. Talent Search). Program practitioners adamantly opposed this denial of services and expressed concern about the negative impact of this denial on the reputation of their programs. Since students in the control group were those willing to complete the extensive application process most Upward Bound projects require, they were also willing to look for other opportunities for college access participation once they were denied acceptance by random assignment procedures. Most of these students went on to participate in other college access programs (Upward Bound on other campuses, Talent Search, and GEAR UP) even though they remained in the Mathematica control group. This created statistical bias in favor of the control group.

Cahalan (2009) and Cahalan and Goodwin (2014) issued pointed criticism of the Mathematica study of Upward Bound from the unique position of having been on the inside of the Department of Education as officials responsible for the study. They noted that "the 2009 (final) report was published over the objections of the ED career technical staff assigned to monitor the final contract, and after a 'disapproval to publish' rating in the formal review process from the Office of Postsecondary Education." Their detailed review contained poignant criticism of the study's overly ambitious design, its seriously flawed sample design, the atypical use of a single project to represent the largest stratum of institutional types, and the lack of balance between the treatment and control group. Based on these and other flaws, the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) submitted to the Department of Education a formal Request for Correction of the Mathematica final report. The American Evaluation Association and American Educational Research Association signed a Statement of Concern based on this request. In spite of these criticisms, the Upward Bound evaluation study by Mathematica continues to be the basis for policy proposals and decisions in large part due to its use of random assignment.

This history reveals why current emphasis on the use of rigorous research to validate program practice is disconcerting to TRIO administrators. Deciphering and using high-level research requires being familiar with an esoteric skill set that is very different from the compliance-focused work previously emphasized in federal grant administration. Based on experience with national evaluation studies, working with rigorous research can also be unrewarding and disruptive. Of the three evaluation studies commissioned by the Department of Education, only the Student Support Services evaluation identified effective practices that influenced how programs operate. Its finding that home-based and blended programs were related to improved student outcomes resulted in the increased use of these features in program models. However, the random assignment study of Upward Bound, which involved intrusive procedures that were disruptive to programs, students, and schools, produced no recommendations to improve

practice. With these experiences, it is understandable why TRIO practitioners would be cautious of a requirement to validate program practice with rigorous research.

But these reasons to be cautious should not cause practitioners to overlook what can be gained from effective use of rigorous research. The problems that create the need for college access programs are complex and numerous, and solutions will be no less complicated. Well-structured and high-level research provides the best basis for examining this complexity and creating better outcomes for students. But this should not cause us to think that random assignment is an infallible panacea to be tolerated under all circumstances. As with any other tool, its effectiveness will result from appropriate use that starts with respect for the programs and clients it is intended to help.

Judith M. Gueron (2000), a noted researcher with Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and a proponent of random assignment studies, argues for the judicious use of social experiments and the careful interpretation of their results. She explains that these studies are administrative and ethical burdens and should not be used unless they are carefully developed, address the right question, and meet all ethical and legal standards. She lists other preconditions that require researchers to show that they can convince people that there is no easier way to get the answers, balance research ambition against operational reality, implement a truly random process, follow enough people for an adequate length of time to detect policy-relevant impacts, collect reliable data on an adequate number of outcomes, and assure that people get the right treatment. These difficult preconditions are more easily accomplished with the help of program practitioners.

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) has helpful ideas for involving practitioners in research. As discussed by Smith et al (2002), sustained interactivity among researchers and practitioners leads to greater research utilization. Providing practitioners with research information in an accessible form and arranging venues for exploration, reflection, and implementation encourage this interactivity. NCSALL uses its “Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network,” which is comprised of adult education teachers and administrators, to facilitate interactions between researchers and practitioners. These “practitioner leaders” assist researchers with data collection, review and interpretation of initial findings, and dissemination of results.

All of the different players connected to college access and success programs can have a role in forging this type of cooperation between researchers and practitioners. The Department of Education can sponsor forums that bring together researchers and practitioners to hear each other’s interests and concerns. Through its ability to award grants, the Department can ask questions that encourage researchers and practitioners to work together to uncover answers. It can also encourage collaborations at the campus level by promoting partnerships between faculty researchers and program practitioners through its competitive preference process.

On-campus collaboration can take place even without federal involvement. Demographic projections indicate that all sectors of higher education will see increased enrollment from student groups that are currently underserved. Colleges and universities will want to know more about how better to retain their Pell Grant recipients, improve their campus climate for underrepresented minorities, and create other opportunities for students who require assistance from college access programs. By encouraging cooperation between faculty researchers and

practitioners, existing campus-based college access programs can help individual colleges and universities develop interventions that are custom fitted for their unique situation.

The efforts by professional associations to support and strengthen the connection between research and practice in college access and success program are significant. Noteworthy among these efforts is the 2003 project by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) called "Transitions to College: From Theory to Practice." Sponsored by the Lumina Foundation, this project focuses on postsecondary transition and retention successes and failures for disadvantaged youth. It brought together scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines and methodological backgrounds to clarify what was known about the transition to college, identify gaps in this information, and create links to policy and practice. This work produced several field-based literature reviews of academic work in ten disciplines. It also led to a 2005 publication by the SSRC entitled "Questions that matter: Setting the research agenda on access and success in postsecondary education." Responding to this publication, the Pathways to College Network, Social Science Research Council, and the Institute for Higher Education Policy convened a 2007 "Questions that Matter" conference that involved researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in a discussion of future research on improving college access and success for underserved students.

The collaboration involving the Association for the Study of Higher Education, the Council for Opportunity in Education, and the Pell Institute continues efforts by professional associations to bring researchers and practitioners together. Relatedly, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities recently launched a project in which nearly 500 public colleges and universities committed to increase their numbers of college graduates, especially among underserved student populations. This work very much involves examining the practice of college access programs and creates opportunities for researchers and practitioners to do so through collaborations.

Within K-12 education, the strength of teachers is recognized as the single most important factor in the education of poor and working class children. The same can be said for college access programs, which must address numerous concerns and issues that represent the full scope of consequences resulting from poverty and minority status. Program staff must have the particular knowledge and ability to address these concerns and to work within the various areas (financial aid, academic support, cultural enrichment, diversity training, mentoring, parent programming, faculty training, cross-campus collaborations, secondary school programming, evaluation, etc.) that collectively constitute an effective college access program. The qualification of staff is the primary basis for effective practice. The current emphasis on the use of rigorous research adds to these qualifications the ability to understand the structure of quality research, and the willingness to collaborate with researchers. A very important part of this responsibility is ensuring the highest regard for student concerns and well-being. Practitioners bring that special contribution to the table like no others.

The kind of preparation required to administer effective college access and success programs should be formulated within the academic curriculum and recognized with academic credentials. Such a course of study should necessarily include the development of research and evaluation competencies. The graduate certificate program established by Colorado State University and the Council for Opportunity in Education is noteworthy for providing current college access

professionals with academic courses and meaningful qualifications directly related to their work in college access programs. As other colleges and universities adopt these academic programs, the better able college access practitioners will be to use and define effective research.

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About the Author:

Dr. Paul L. Beasley is a retired TRIO Director with over 45 years of experience with college access and TRIO Programs. He is a former Board Chair of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) and faculty member for the college access graduate certificate program with Colorado State University.

Contact Information: PAUL L. BEASLEY, FORMER DIRECTOR OF TRIO PROGRAMS,
University of South Carolina, paullbeasley@hotmail.com