An Analysis of Three Trio Student Support Services Projects at Public Two-Year Institutions in South Carolina

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AN ANALYSIS OF THREE TRIO STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES PROJECTS AT PUBLIC TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Caroline W. Canty
August 2016

Accepted by:
Dr. James W. Satterfield, Committee Chair
Dr. Tony Cawthon
Dr. Cheryl Warner
Dr. Leslie Gonzales
ABSTRACT

In recent years, TRIO Programs have been targeted for budget cuts. The development of more data-based arguments is needed to defend these programs. Arguments against the continuation of TRIO programs stem from concerns about the program’s relevancy and success. Specifically, Student Support Services (SSS) operates at higher education institutions to support the college or university’s efforts with retention and graduation. The purpose of this study is to determine whether the services provided by TRIO SSS lead to successful outcomes for the participants served. A content analysis was conducted on artifacts from three distinct Student Support Services projects located in the state of South Carolina. The major findings of this study conclude that TRIO Student Support Services is successful based the projects meeting or exceeding projects performance indicators; small projects housed at rural community colleges are likely to be more successful than those housed at larger institutions; and due to the complexity of the mission and goals of community colleges, projects housed there provide needed services to assist with those goals.
DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my “village.” I have a profound gratitude to my parents, Reginald and Dorothy Wright whose words of encouragement over the years and strong belief in the freeing power of education gave me the drive to succeed in my chosen profession. My children, Patience and BJ never left my side. We walked this journey together in spite of all of the obstacles placed in front of us.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my two best friends, Enid and Tonya. Mere words cannot express my appreciation to you both. Enid you have been one of my fiercest cheerleaders. You have been encouraging me since we learned to talk. You always had my best interests at heart. Your prayers kept this train moving. Tonya, although you are not here to read this, I am grateful for you “pushing” me (literally and figuratively) to take this journey and filling in for me so I could focus on this work. You were and will always be my “sistah.” I am grateful to you both for the roles you played.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my high school English teacher, Robert W. Bell. Mr. Bell, you have no idea how impactful my experiences in your classes were. The fundamentals you taught me continue to shape my writing to this day. Without my beginnings with you, I know my writing would not be at this level. Thank you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members who were more than generous with their expertise and time. A special thanks to Dr. James W. Satterfield, my committee chairman for his time reading, reflecting, encouraging, and most of all his patience and sticking by me throughout the entire process. Thank you Dr. Tony Cawthon, Dr. Cheryl Warner, and Dr. Leslie Gonzales for agreeing to serve on the committee.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Alecia Watt and Mr. Rodney Adams for their assistance. Also, I would like to thank the TRIO community for being such a wonderful subject to explore. We know TRIO works and it is time for us to present our message to the community.
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CHAPTER 1

NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The responsibility for any organization’s performance rests squarely on the shoulders of its leadership. The leadership of an organization must set policy and procedures to glean the outcomes desired for the success and ultimately the survival of the organization. In every sector, including higher education, the organization is required to produce results. For higher education institutions, desired outcomes include the retention and graduation of its students. Billions of dollars are spent annually to that end. According to Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), over $281 billion were spent for the 2009-10 academic year at public higher education institutions. More than ever, there is a level of accountability regarding whether the money spent is on a worthwhile pursuit.

The federal government funds over 2800 federal projects known as Federal TRIO programs whose sole purpose is to retain, transfer, and or graduate students. These outreach and student services programs identify and provide services to underserved students, helping them progress from one academic level to another. There are eight distinct programs targeted to serve students and program staff. The programs are called TRIO because it started as a group of three programs. TRIO programs are administered, funded, and implemented by the United States Department of Education. Most of these programs are housed and sponsored by higher education institutions across the country and U.S. territories.
TRIO program directors are held accountable for the performance of the individual project. Thus, the project director must produce outcomes for the agreed upon expectations and they are answerable, not only to campus leadership, but to the U.S. Department of Education as described in the legislation. These individuals must be good stewards of federal dollars earmarked for the success of students who have been identified as having barriers to completing their education. The evaluation and performance of TRIO Programs has evolved over their forty-year existence.

TRIO programs and others funded by federal discretionary funds are in jeopardy of being defunded, an action which impacts nearly 872,000 first-generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities, according to the Council on Opportunity in Education (2012). The political climate, driven by this country’s economic crisis, threatens the survival of these programs. Program effectiveness and accountability are being used to determine the viability of these programs; therefore, TRIO programs are being examined to determine how well they perform on the campuses they serve.

**Statement and Purpose of the Problem**

With the unstable condition of the U.S. economy, campuses are once again embroiled in a fight for TRIO. As the Fiscal Cliff loomed over the landscape, Arnold Mitchem, former President of the Council for Educational Opportunity, wrote in a letter dated November 26, 2012:

Over the next several weeks Congress and the President will continue serious negotiations on ways to avoid going over the Fiscal Cliff that we are all reading and hearing about. Many parts of the Federal Budget are on the table including
revenues (taxes), entitlements like Medicare and Social Security, and discretionary spending. Discretionary spending includes TRIO, GEAR UP, and most other education programs. Very well organized interests are aggressively working against higher revenues and for entitlement cuts. This means education programs like TRIO and GEAR UP are especially vulnerable at this time.

Dr. Mitchem requested staff, participants, and other interested parties to rally and advocate for TRIO as negotiations continued...a call to arms. Mitchem was referring to the federal budget sequestration in 2013, which refers to the automatic spending cuts in certain categories (defense and non-defense) which were initially set to begin on January 1, 2013, as a part of an emergency measure. These across-the-board cuts were based on dollar amounts and not percentages. Major programs like Social Security, Medicaid, federal pensions and veteran's benefits were exempt. Federal pay rates (including military) were unaffected but the sequestration did result in involuntary unpaid time off, also known as furloughs.

Because of a steady decrease in federal spending in these programs and recent budget cuts, 3.1% in 2012 and the 5.23% in 2013 from sequestration, the U.S. Department of Education has tried to offset those losses through grant competitions and across-the-board cuts to programs. Grant competitions have become more competitive; and the cut off scores for funded projects were raised significantly. In the last four competitions, the cutoff scores have been 95.6 for Student Support Services in 2009, 100 for Talent Search in 2010, 107 for Educational Opportunity Centers in 2011, and 108 for Upward Bound in 2012 (Council for Educational Opportunity, 2012). During a
competition, grant proposals can receive up to 100 points from the selection criteria of need, objective, plan of operation, institutional commitment, quality of personnel, budget, and evaluation (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). At the discretion of the Program Specialist at the U.S. Department of Education, existing programs can receive up to 15 prior experience points annually, which are averaged over the middle three years within a five-year grant cycle for project performance in the areas of persistence, good academic standing, graduation, and administrative requirements (two-thirds first generation and low-income, obtaining specified number of students funded to serve, etc.), according to the Department’s website. In the last Talent Search (TS) competition, 435 projects were funded, which is 28 less than in the previous competition. Eight of the current TS projects did not compete, which makes 20 less projects nationally. On the surface this may seem insignificant, but when the average TS project has 778 participants, the doors of access are closed to approximately 15,560 low income, first generation students, and students with disabilities.

National evaluations have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of TRIO Programs with mixed results. For the Student Support Services program, findings suggest only moderate success. The TRIO community has been highly critical of these studies for Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services conducted by Mathematica, Westat and the American Institutes for Research because it is their belief the research is flawed and limited. Although the federal government has spent millions of dollars to evaluate TRIO Programs and specifically, Student Support Services, still there is a limited amount of research available. Most of the research are reports that
continue to re-examine old data (Carey, Cahalan, Cunningham, & Agufa, 2004; Zhang, Chan, Hale, & Kirshstein, 2005; Zhag & Chan, 2007; Chaney, 2010); or focus on specific projects at Rutgers, California State University, and other colleges and universities (Mahoney, 1998; Thomas, Vann Farrow, & Martinez, 1998).

While the TRIO community has not been pleased with the results from the case studies of individual programs, the results have provided an opportunity for evolution in evaluation and assessment. Prior to 2003, each individual project could have a varied number of objectives to measure success. Also, subject to which type of institution where an individual project is housed (a two-year or four-year), the objectives are different. The length of time a student receives services is also different; and services participants may receive outside of SSS may vary. Using effectiveness measures may not provide the best information to determine whether to fund or not because it is unable to connect-the-dots between project outcomes and services provided.

U. S. Department of Education devised an efficiency measure and made changes to how SSS projects are administered. During the period since 2003, three standardized objectives were instituted for SSS Programs, categorizing which services provided are required and permissible, and an increase in the length of time a participant can receive services was added. With these changes, this study’s objective is to identify the merits and support the continued existence of this federal program.

**Study Questions**

Authorization and funding for this program and others comes from discretionary funds within the federal budget. Decision makers (legislators) receive many requests for
support. Much of the arguments against keeping TRIO programs in operation have been based on whether the programs are still relevant and successful. Relevance, in this case, refers to whether the program services are considered best practices and provide positive outcomes. Successful refers to whether outcomes when measured meet or exceed specified objectives. Because of that reason, the following questions should be answered:

R₁: Relevance. What strategies are employed toward positive outcomes?

R₂: Successful. Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are successful?

**Definition of terms**

There are several terms key for a working knowledge of the topic of Federal TRIO Programs and the study:

- *First-generation* student is a student whose parent figure (who the student lived with) has not obtained a bachelor’s degree (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).

- *Low income* refers to a student’s family annual taxable income does not exceed 150% of the poverty level based on U.S. Census data (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).

- *Students with disabilities* are students who can verify a physical or intellectual disability (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).

- *Academic need* refers to additional screening criteria for admission to the program that demonstrates need for project services such as low admission tests scores, falling college grades, out of the academic pipeline for an extended period of time, limited English proficiency, etc. (U. S. Department of Education, 2012)
- *Program year* for SSS is September 1st through August 31st (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).

- *Grantee* refers to the institution or entity that is approved to receive funds to operate a federal TRIO program.

- *Grant cycle* refers to the length of the grant period, which could be four or five years (U. S. Department of Education, 2012).

- *Annual Performance Report (APR)* is a quantitative representation of performance indicators that describes projects' accomplishments, determines the number of prior experience points to be awarded to current grantees, assists in compliance monitoring, and reveals program effectiveness.

**Theoretical Construct**

The theoretical lens that best fits this study is open systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy developed this theory between 1930 and 1956 and it has been applied to organizations such as governments, universities, and businesses that use it to understand and maintain sustainability of the organization (Bastedo, 2004). Von Bertalanffy’s theory describes the nature of open systems to be active and adaptive. This refers to the organization influencing change to their external environment, while the environment influences its actions. The leadership of open systems must be attentive to the internal and external environment of the organization and adapt when needed. This flexibility he coins as *equifinality*. This refers to an organization having more than one way to accomplish its goals. In the case of TRIO programs, the fundamental goal is to increase the number of persons who attain a
bachelor’s degree and the possibility of attaining a graduate degree. TRIO Programs use seven distinct programs to accomplish that goal. While TRIO programs have changed the environment and outcomes of many of its participants, the environment and culture has changed TRIO in the way it operates in order to meet the demands of the environment to which it serves. Figure 1.1 describes the basic open system model.


**Significance of the Study**

The TRIO community has not been pleased with the body of research on the programs. Specifically, with SSS, the research is limited to a few research reports that do not give a complete account of the success of the program; or it encompasses a few journal articles during the mid-1990’s. Since significant changes to the structure of the program, better research can be conducted to give a clearer view. The relevance of this
study lies in the possibility that findings may provide supportive arguments for the continued existence of the programs and others like it. Supportive evidence is crucial in defending the program’s merits to legislators and other policymakers. Also, new research, even if it is not favorable, can assist in identifying areas needing improvement, which gives the Department and the TRIO community a chance to modify practices for progress.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in to five chapters. The first chapter included an overview of federal TRIO Programs and a discussion regarding the performance of these programs and the economic and political climate that threaten the existence these programs. In addition, chapter one contained the purpose of the study, the study questions and hypotheses, theoretical framework, and the significance of the study.

Chapter two of the study will contain a four-part review of relevant literature. The four parts of the chapter include research on: the history and context of federal TRIO programs, case for new research in the area, specific research on program outcomes for Student Support Services (SSS) projects, and the community college and its complex mission.

The third chapter will discuss research methodology and design to be used in the study. The two research questions presented earlier will guide the design utilized. Also, participants, data collection, and data analysis will be outlined.

Chapter four will present the results from the study. The analysis of the findings will be presented and other unearthed data.
Chapter five will include a summary of the significant findings. Among these include conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the vulnerability of federal TRIO programs in the present economic and political climates. In addition, Chapter One focused on how program effectiveness and accountability are being used to determine the viability of these programs. Further, the chapter included an overview of the study and additional information on its theoretical framework, purpose, definition of terms, significance, and organization.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of Federal TRIO Programs

When the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* (1954), it set in motion a profound transformation for the country. The ruling stated the reflective importance of public education and identified public education as a right that all must have on equal terms:

> Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments…It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities…It is the very foundation of good citizenship…In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.

Although this ruling was specific to public education K-12, it created a ripple effect of change that extended to higher education and eventually led to the desegregation of higher education institutions.

One of the effects of *de jure segregation* or racial separation required by law was disparities in access to education and student success. During the time since *Brown*, much was done to correct the disparities of access to education for those underrepresented. The national agenda shifted to finding and implementing strategies to improve student access and outcomes (Balz & Esten, 1998; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). The impact of having little or no access to higher education has affected student success significantly. Gaps in student achievement and college attendance are among the bi-
products of poverty in the United States (Walsh, 2011); as a result, a number of programs and policies have been implemented to address these issues (Bergerson, 2009; Perna & Thomas, 2008). Among these is the creation and development of a group of student-centered college preparation and retention programs designed to address the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds—The Federal TRIO Programs.

The early 1960’s in the United States was a turbulent time. The country was experiencing wars both foreign and domestic. Civil unrest contributed to our participation in the fledgling Vietnam conflict, and the modern civil rights movement unfolded before the American public’s consciousness on the evening news. Particularly, much of the angst was concern over expenditures used to fight in a conflict when there seemed to be more pressing matters at home, such as racial discrimination and poverty. The “War on Poverty” as coined by President Lyndon B. Johnson was a collection of strategies used to right some of our domestic woes (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). President Johnson believed that to reduce poverty, the federal government needed to become more involved in education and medical affairs. The “War on Poverty” and other policies were to create a “Great Society” for the United States.

The Johnson administration recognized the relationship between educational opportunity and economic prosperity. They were convinced the acquisition of education and training beyond high school would reduce poverty in the country. The plan was to provide the impoverished more opportunity for upward mobility and participation in an expanding economy. President Johnson realized the significance of having an opportunity from his time as a teacher of impoverished Hispanic students in a small south
Texas town in the late 1920’s. It was clear from his words what precipitated his actions and the actions of Congress:

I shall never forget the faces of the boys and the girls..., and I remember even yet the pain of realizing and knowing then that college was closed to practically every one of those children because they were too poor. And I think it was then that I made up my mind that this Nation could never rest while the door to knowledge remained closed to any American (Johnson, 1965).

Legislative action was taken in response to the nation’s need to reduce poverty. The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) 1964 created the Office of Economic Opportunity and developed social programs for health, education, and the general welfare of the impoverished, such as local community action agencies Head Start, Job Corps, and Upward Bound (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; U. S. Department of Education, 2008). The Higher Education Act of 1965 was intended to increase the educational resources of colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in higher education. Specifically, it augmented federal money given to universities, created scholarships, provided low-interest loans for students, instituted a teacher training program, and instituted the Talent Search program. Both the EOA 1964 and the Higher Education Act (HEA) 1965 were signed into law to provide more educational opportunity for the impoverished, and specifically, to arrange access to higher education. A subsequent amendment to HEA in 1968 created Student Support Services. The three aforementioned programs were developed to increase access and retention: thus, the name TRIO of programs or TRIO as it is known today.
TRIO Programs are provided for under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and subsequent amendments and reauthorizations in 1968, 1971, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998, and 2008; its provisions will expire in 2013 and will need to be reauthorized (McElroy & Arnesto, 1999; Council for Educational Opportunity, 2012). With each reauthorization, some programs were augmented and the policies of existing programs were modified to address accountability concerns. One of the key changes to TRIO came with the reauthorization in 1980 when the programs expanded to serve first generation college students. The inclusion of first generation students was important because it provided access to and success in postsecondary education with non-financial barriers.

The inclusion of first generation students positively positioned TRIO in the political realm. It enabled TRIO programs to broaden its governmental base coalition in Congress - a coalition, not just of poor people, but a coalition of those who did not have opportunities or whose constituents were not afforded opportunities for postsecondary education. This offsets the notion that these programs were specific for poor ethnic minorities. Again, more White students participate in TRIO programs than any of the minority groups. Today, approximately 37% of TRIO participants are White as opposed to 35% African American. As disparities in postsecondary achievement continue to exist throughout the spectrum of racial and socioeconomic status, the need for these programs will continue (Walsh, 2011). With the inclusion of students with disabilities, TRIO and other programs like it will broaden its legislative base of supporters and advocates.
These modifications were meant to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the programs. In addition, more programs were created to provide additional services not already addressed with current programs and changes in priorities, such as assistance to older adults, support for veterans, and aid to students with promise in STEM subjects. For instance, in 1986, modifications of HEA shifted from moneys to support the construction of facilities and paying for books at institutions, “investing in people” through student aid programs such as Pell grants and the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program (Keppel, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). In 2008, the act was renamed the Higher Education and Opportunity Act (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008).

Although the programs experienced consistent growth in the 1970’s, the programs’ existence was threatened. These threats included complete cuts to the programs suggested during the Reagan administration and later, and, during the second Bush administration, the proposed abolishment of Upward Bound. Now, TRIO Programs and other programs like it are under political scrutiny and public debate as to whether they are still relevant and vital as they once were, especially with equity-based policies being questioned and legally challenged (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Nonetheless, TRIO has continued to grow and develop.

According to Wallace, Ropers-Huilman, and Abel (2004) The Department of Education awards TRIO grants to private and public organizations across the country. The current TRIO programs and a description of their legislative purposes and objectives according to the U. S. Department of Education (2008) are as follows:
• *Upward Bound* helps high school students prepare for college. Participants receive instruction in literature, composition, mathematics, foreign language, and the sciences. This academic assistance takes place on a college/university campus after school, on Saturdays, or during a summer component. Also, these students receive academic, career, and personal counseling. There is also a summer bridge component, which assists students who have graduated from high school to take college-level courses that are transferrable.

• *Talent Search* seeks students from middle and high school level that show potential in completing post-secondary work. These students are provided academic, career, and financial aid counseling. The goal for this program is to graduate their students from high school and have them enroll and complete higher education program. Also, this program seeks to assist high school dropouts to return them to school so they can complete their high school requirement for graduation and enroll in post-secondary education.

• *Student Support Services* aids college students by assisting them from one level to the next in higher education. Students are provided tutoring, academic advising, financial aid counseling, and in some cases direct financial assistance. The goal of this program is to increase college retention and graduation rates.

• *Educational Opportunity Centers* serve the underemployed or displaced workers adults who want to enter or continue a post- secondary program. The goal of an EOC is to assist adults to successfully navigate the college application process and complete degree programs in higher education.
• **Veterans Upward Bound** helps U. S. military veterans’ transition to post-secondary education. All of these programs provide instruction to this specific population in mathematics, the sciences, composition, literature, and foreign language. The program focuses on remediating veterans who delayed their pursuit of post-secondary education and provide counseling to assist in securing other services available to this population.

• **Upward Bound Math and Science** improves the mathematics and science skills of its participants. Program staff identifies students that have the potential to excel in STEM subjects and encourage them to pursue higher education and those career fields. Intensive training and exposure to STEM faculty who do research in the field are provided to students.

• **Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program** prepares its participants to pursue doctoral degrees. Students become involved in mentoring, internships, and research opportunities on the graduate level. Program staff assists participants in successfully completing undergraduate degree requirements in ways that make them competitive from acceptance to, enrollment in, and graduation from advanced degree programs.

• **Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs** provides training to enhance the skills and expertise of project directors and staff of TRIO programs. Training projects use a variety of modalities to educate TRIO staff that includes conferences, seminars, internships, workshops or publications using various media. Training priorities are set by the Secretary of Education and grouped
within five priorities: (1) program management, (2) legislative/regulatory requirements and budget management, (3) assessment and proven retention strategies, (4) financial aid/admissions requirements, and (5) recruiting and serving the hard-to-reach populations.

Case for New Research

As stated earlier, the TRIO community has been disappointed in the research on the programs. Research has been limited to some journal articles that only highlight program services. Other research is from policy research firms like Mathematica, Westat, and the American Institutes for Research. Although those firms provide research for decision making, the research fails to tell a true story about TRIO programs. The following provides a synopsis of the research available on the student-centered programs comprised of TRIO Programs.

Upward Bound (UB)

Upward Bound is the oldest TRIO program and is designed to assist high school students (grades 9-12) graduate from high school, enroll in a college/university and complete a baccalaureate degree (Economic Opportunity Act, 1964; Higher Education Act, 1965; Walsh, 2011). The U.S. Department of Education (2012) reports most UB programs have between 50 and 100 students annually. Participants receive instruction in literature, composition, mathematics, foreign language, and the sciences. This academic assistance takes place on a college/university campus after school, on Saturdays, or during a summer component (McElroy & Arnesto, 1998). These students also receive academic, career, and personal counseling. Participants experience a lower student to
counselor ratio than they would at their local high school. The average ratio of U. S. high school students per guidance counselor is 471 to 1, according to the American School Counselor’s Association (2005). With UB, a small group of 50 to 100 students significantly decreases that ratio, which equates to more intrusive counseling encounters. These students are identified at the target high schools specified in the grantees proposal submitted during competition. UB gives these students an opportunity to receive more individualized attention. A summer bridge component assists students who have graduated from high school to take college-level courses that are transferrable. The bridge component, in some cases (dependent upon the campus), allows students to experience dormitory life at the host institution or a nearby one.

Although UB has experienced success during its fifty-year history, in 1991 a national evaluation of Upward Bound, which included an implementation study and longitudinal impact study to measure postsecondary outcomes, was undertaken by Mathematica Policy Research with mixed results (Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young, & Tuttle, 2004). Initially, the results from that report suggests UB has no real effect on the rate of enrollment to postsecondary institutions, the type of institution selected, the likelihood of applying for financial aid, or the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. However, the study results did show that participation in UB increases the likelihood of earning a certificate or vocational license. Further, the researchers concluded that longer participation in UB was associated with increased rates of enrollment and completion. This is in respect to students who participate for longer periods of time than others, like
those that receive services for more than a year. Again, Seftor, Magmun, and Schrim (2009) with the final report garnered similar outcomes.

With any research project of this magnitude, limitations existed with this research, which included response rates decreasing over time; the sample design was highly stratified; and some students in the control group did not receive services. Although the sample design is very effective for balancing statistical power and focusing on significant subpopulations, it was not as useful because of the presence of non-homogenous groups. Each UB program is different and distinct in the services delivered to students, and based on the personnel hired to implement the services. Also, not until recently, each UB program was not measured based on the same objectives. Each program had on average five to fifteen objectives. Now three objectives are standardized for all UB programs.

The results from the study do not reflect the sentiment held by UB alumni. Graham (2011) explains her experience with UB allowed her not to be intimidated by the college experience and how she used the opportunity to her advantage. Graham attributes her success in academia to the UB program’s structure that simulated college academic life. Graham’s sentiment is shared by other notable alumni of the programs such as Viola Davis (Emmy award winner and Academy Award nominee), Donna Brazile (national political party leader and commentator), John Quiones (national news reporter) and Oprah Winfrey (media mogul) who attribute their academic success to their participation in UB by providing structured activities and motivation.
**Talent Search (TS)**

Talent Search is a program that seeks students from middle and high school level that show potential in completing post-secondary work. These students are provided academic, career, and financial aid counseling. The goal for this program is to graduate their students from high school and have them enroll and complete a higher education program. Also, this program seeks to assist high school dropouts, returning them to school so they can complete their high school requirement for graduation and enroll in post-secondary education.

The program began operating in 1967. Its average number of project participants served annually is 778, with approximately 471 programs in operation (Department of Education, 2008). Like Upward Bound, Talent Search identifies its students from targeted middle and high schools in the grant proposal submitted. As with most TRIO programs, Talent Search must have at least two-thirds of its participants low-income and/or first generation. The other third do not have to meet the low-income or first generation requirement (Cahalan, Silva, Humphrey, Thomas, & Cunningham, 2004). This program has a wider reach than UB because it serves more students with similar services, like tutoring, seminars, and counseling, but it does limit the amount of time with each student or the level of relationship with project counselors. In order to meet the adult objective, TS staff targets the parents of their participants and those adults identified in their communities who present with the eligibility requirements.

Constatine, Seftor, Martin, Silva, and Myers (2006) prepared a national evaluation of TS to study the effect of the program on secondary and postsecondary
outcomes in Florida, Indiana, and Texas. The study focused on financial aid applications, postsecondary enrollment, and enrollment in two- versus four-year institutions using a quasi-experimental design to create matched comparison groups (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1985). The findings suggested TS participants were more likely to be first-time financial aid applicants, enroll in a public college or university, and enroll in a two-year institution than non-TS participants. The latter was more dependent upon the type of host institution that housed the TS project. Also, the study examined high school completion by state. Indiana had the highest comparative rate for high school completion, but the researchers were not sure they could attribute this specifically to participation in TS. On a smaller scale, Brewer and Landers (2005) conducted a longitudinal study which examined the impact of participation in TS at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. From a systematic sample of TS participants between 1980 and 1989, the study gleaned results of 93% of TS participants enrolled in postsecondary education as opposed to 42.2% of the control group; and TS participants are more likely to enroll in a four-year institution.

**Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC)**

Educational Opportunity Centers predominantly serve the underemployed or displaced workers, adults who want to enter or continue a post-secondary program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Also, EOC programs work with persons who have stopped out of high school to return and complete high school in addition to pursuing postsecondary education. According to the U. S. Department of Education (2012), the goal of an EOC is to assist adults to successfully navigate the college application process and complete degree programs in higher education. Further, EOC’s provide academic
advising, personal counseling, information on postsecondary opportunities, information and assistance on financial aid, tutoring, and mentoring.

Humphrey and Carey (2002) in a report said, the programs’ regulations require at least two-thirds of its participants must be first generation and low income, while the other one-third does not have to meet either criterion; and participants must be at least 19 years of age, unless a Talent Search program is not available. In addition, the researchers revealed that 71% of EOC participants are first generation and low-income; most of the participants are 28 years and older; and are 40% white, 38% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 9% other. Further the researchers explained that the average EOC project has approximately 1,500 participants hosted by both two- and four- year institutions and community organizations with 39% of the projects housed within community based organizations.

Although no national evaluation of EOC’s has been conducted, the U.S. Department of Education (2009) examination of their Annual Performance Report data was conducted from the 2002-03 program year to 2007-08 program year in terms of postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary application and financial aid application rates, and continuing education program enrollment. Over the six academic years, postsecondary enrollment was consistent on average at 56.5% of participants. Over a shorter period, postsecondary application rates increased to 71.1% from the 2006-07 to 2007-08 academic years. Over the same period, percentages in increased for participants’ enrollment in continuing education programs.
**Veterans Upward Bound (VUB)**

Veterans Upward Bound has a special mission to assist U. S. military veterans’ transition to post-secondary education. All of these programs provide instruction to this specific population in mathematics, the sciences, composition, literature, and foreign language (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). The program focuses on remediating veterans who delayed their pursuit of post-secondary education and provide counseling to assist in securing other services available to this population. VUB is expected to provide similar services as classic UB, specifically targeting intensive basic skill development, short-term remediation for deficiencies, and provide liaison for other support services from other resources such as the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other state and local entities.

The average VUB project has approximately 120 students being served by approximately 50 projects nationwide (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Participants must meet military service requirements that deem a person a veteran and be low-income, first generation desirous in attending a postsecondary institution. In addition, at least two-thirds of the participants must be low-income and first generation, with the remaining one-third meeting either of the categories.

Curtin and Cahalan (2005) created a thorough profile of this program in regard to grantees, participants, program services and postsecondary enrollment data. The information in the profile is based on the 2000-01 program year. The researchers said at that time 55% of the grantees (host institutions) are four-year public institutions. Also, 44% of the participants were white, 36% African American, 14% Hispanic or Latino, and
5% Native American. Unlike any other TRIO programs, 83% of the participants are male. The most requested services of VUB participants were non-instructional such as counseling, study skills, tutoring, cultural activities and college admissions information. In regard to postsecondary enrollment, 51% of those participants who received a high school diploma/GED enrolled in a higher education institution; and 54% enrolled at their host institution. Although the goal is for the participants to complete a baccalaureate degree, significant numbers of the participants completed certificates and associate degrees.

Upward Bound Math and Science (UBMS)

Upward Bound Math and Science is a program focused on improving the mathematics and science skills of its participants. Program staff identifies students that have the potential to excel in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and encourage them to pursue higher education and STEM career fields. Intensive training and exposure to STEM faculty mentors who do research in the field are provided to students. Further, UBMS are summer programs, which attempt to give participants additional skills in technology. Some UBMS programs house participants on campus during the summer. This option is dependent upon the type of host institution. Most of these programs have on average about 50 students in about 130 projects across the country.

In a comprehensive profile, Curtin and Cahalan (2004) identified key characteristics of these projects. The first of these is information pertaining to its grantees and target schools. In the profile, the researchers said 81% of UBMS projects
are housed at four-year institutions and have a high representation at minority serving institutions. Also, the projects served target high schools with a significant minority population (47% of total enrollment), as well as a strong percentage who qualified for free or reduced lunch, which was 34%.

Seftor and Calcagno (2010) prepared a report that examined the impact of UBMS on postsecondary outcomes after scheduled high school graduation. Using student surveys, the results suggest that participation in UBMS increased enrollment at four-year institutions, enrollment shifted from two-year to four-year institutions, increased enrollment at more selective institutions, students took more science and math courses at postsecondary institutions, increased degree completion at four-year institutions, and increased likelihood of earning a degree in a science related field. The main limitation is, again, researchers cannot be sure the interventions done by the UBMS directly affect the outcomes of this study.

When compared to classic Upward Bound programs, UBMS projects fared better in postsecondary enrollment. Using fall 2005 and spring 2006 data, Knapp, Heuer, and Mason (2008), says that UBMS participants enrolled in postsecondary institutions at a rate 86.1% as opposed to 77.3% of classic Upward Bound students. From that same study, however, classic Upward Bound participants were more likely to be retained in the program for longer periods of time. This is likely attributed to the design of the UBMS program being summer only and not year-round like class UB is.
Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program (MCN)

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012) website, Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program prepares its participants to pursue doctoral degrees. Students become involved in mentoring, internships, and research opportunities on the graduate level. Program staff assists participants in successfully completing undergraduate degree requirements in ways that make them competitive to become accepted, enrolled and graduate from advanced degree programs. These students must show strong academic potential as they matriculate at baccalaureate institutions. MCN projects have about 30 participants in about 125 projects; and the first projects were funded in 1989 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

U.S. Department of Education (2008) prepared a report describing the education and employment outcomes of MCN alumni. Through survey data, the study purported that 6.1% of former participants had completed doctoral degrees; graduate degrees were awarded in an array of fields (the sciences, medicine, and law); 29% were employed at higher education institutions; the majority are employed; and the majority of MCN former participants’ highest degree attained was a bachelor’s degree. The U. S. Department of Education (2005) used Annual Performance Report data for 2000-01 to 2003-04 academic years to report 52% of MCN graduated on time; and approximately 57% were enrolled in graduate programs.

Student Support Services

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2012), Student Support Services is a program that assists college students’ success and moves them from one level to the
next in higher education. Students are provided tutoring, academic advising, instruction, financial aid counseling, and in some cases direct financial assistance. The goal of this program is to increase college retention and graduation rates. Dependent upon the institution, SSS projects’ objectives are different. If the host is a two-year institution, along with academic standing and persistence, the SSS project’s goal is to graduate and transfer participants to baccalaureate institutions. If the host is a four-year institution, the goal is to graduate its participants and to have them enroll in graduate programs. Also, the time period during which a student can be served is dependent upon the type of institution that hosts the project. At present, two-year institutions have four years to graduate and transfer students, while four-year institutions have six years for their participants to complete their degree program.

Furthermore, SSS participants are first generation undergraduates, low-income students, and students who have a verifiable disability or learning difference. Two-thirds of the project’s participants must be first-generation and low income, while the other third must satisfy other criteria. The average number of participants in an SSS project is 210, and there are more than 900 projects across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In order to be served, participants must be enrolled at the granting institution; exhibit academic need, have a high school diploma or equivalent, and be deemed eligible to receive financial aid, if the student is not a U.S. citizen.

Evaluation of SSS

The U.S. Department of Education and other federal departments must assess all of its programs. In 2005, the Expect More program, in response for more accountability,
assessed the Student Support Program. *Expect More* was an initiative of the George W. Bush Administration to foster more accountability for all federal agencies and programs. It was developed by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and other agencies by administering ratings on how effective tax dollars are being spent. Nearly 98% of all federal programs were assessed. The overall assessment rating received by SSS was moderately effective. The assessment scored SSS in the areas of program purpose and design, strategic planning, program management, and program results/accountability. The assessment included improvement plans of ongoing changes and completed projects. There were five completed plans ranging from communication of performance data to exploring policies that reduce bias for existing programs in grant competitions. In particular, the plan which initiated standardized project objectives with the 2005 competition was significant. Another plan which should be noted was the implementation of a strategy using efficiency measures to increase cost effectiveness. In the sections of purpose and design, planning, and management, SSS scored between 90% and 100%. However, in the area of accountability, SSS scored a mere 58% specifically regarding improved efficiency and received no points for cost effectiveness.

Literature on SSS is limited. Much of the research encompasses reports and articles that provide descriptive data about the students served, host institutions, and program services from program years 1998-99 through 2001-02. A report prepared by Chaney (2010) was a national evaluation of SSS that examined the extent to which these projects are achieving its basic goals of persistence, graduating and transferring students. This longitudinal study yielded a number of favorable findings. The most significant
involved the services provided improved student academic outcomes; services provided continued to have an effect on participants past the first year, and a combination of services improved student outcomes. Specifically, later year services were more predictive of successful outcomes for students. Ultimately, a combination of services and consistency of their use provided great benefits to students. The limitations of this study involved not being able to pinpoint whether participation in SSS was directly responsible for the outcomes because outcomes would be dependent upon student autonomy. Students could decide on what services they participated in. Thus, not all services were given to each student in the study, which made it difficult to measure and determine statistical significance.

Other research on a smaller scale examined specific project participants as compared to like students at the institution. The Thomas and Vann Farrow (1998) study of SSS at Rutgers University examined the graduation rates of students from the 1980 to 1992 first-time freshman cohorts of SSS students at Rutgers University. Results were compared to the performance of non-SSS participants at Rutgers and national data. After utilizing simple statistical measures such as rates, means, and standard deviations to analyze the data, it was concluded that SSS participants graduated at higher rates than other Rutgers students and the national average. The authors discussed the collaborative effort with other campus offices as supporting the efforts of the program. Additionally, Mahoney (1998) examined individual characteristics that set the EXCEL Student Support Services (SSS) Program at California State University apart. SSS programs must be responsive to student needs and should move with changing challenges that students are
facing. EXCEL is synergistic and supportive in regard to its collaborative nature with the college community (faculty, campus committees, etc.); however, its style is rather intrusive with its participants in providing services and walking students through processes.

In the most recent longitudinal study of SSS, two groups were compared: SSS first-time freshmen participants provided by SSS APR data and a national sample of students who were eligible (considered first generation, low income or students with disabilities), but not served by an SSS project with data set provided by National Student Clearinghouse. There were several highlights pertaining to persistence and college completion for two-year institutions. With regard to persistence, SSS first time freshmen persisted at a rate of 86% as compared to 65% of those of the sample group (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In addition, the same group of SSS participants completed at a rate of 41% (after three years) and 50% (after four years) as compared to those of the sample group who completed at a rate of 21% (after three years) and 28% (after four years).

**Best Practices of SSS**

The best practices of the program are based on the legislation and the needs of the students served. Specifically, the legislation (Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 402D of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended) and regulations (34 CFR, part 646) for Student Support Services states that there are required and permissible services. According to those documents SSS projects are required to provide:

- Academic tutoring;
• Academic advising assistance;
• Information on financial aid options and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
• Financial Literacy Education/Counseling; and
• Transfer assistance with applying to and financial aid options at four-year institutions.

In addition, SSS projects are permitted to provide certain optional services such as:

• Individualized counseling (personal, career, and academic)
• Career exploration
• Cultural and academic programming
• Mentoring from peers, staff, faculty, and community persons
• Assistance in securing housing during term breaks for homeless and foster care participants
• Academic assistance to students with limited English proficiency
• Grant Aid (Direct Financial Assistance)

Project staff examine participants’ non-cognitive skills and behaviors such as academic behaviors, academic mindset, perseverance, self-regulation, social and emotional skills, approaches toward learning strategies to facilitate connection to the campus, improve academic prowess, improve esteem, and motivate participants to value their future. SSS programs have to be responsive to student needs and move with changing challenges that students are facing (Mahoney, 1998). To that end, this project will assess students’ non-cognitive skills and integrate information gleaned from
assessments to create and provide services that will combat these challenges for participants.

Although students are ultimately responsible for their success through individual effort, it is important that students are provided with an environment that includes coursework, activities, and relationships that encourage effort (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Confidence and competence are important for growth to occur according to Chickering (1969). Students at community colleges represent a particular population that requires significant attention in building confidence and competencies across vectors such as emotions, autonomy, identity, interpersonal relationships, purpose, and integrity, as described by Chickering.

SSS projects focus on first year student participants’ building and honing of these skills through structured project activities. These structured first-year activities and learning communities are responsive to the specific needs of project participants (Thayer, 2000). Non cognitive skills are not easily measurable by normal means (standardized testing) and they are more likely to be overlooked as part of the normal educational process, but it is noticeable when students do not have these skills. Increasingly employers are demanding these non-cognitive skills be in place prior to placement, according to Thomas and Smoot (1994).

SSS projects teach participants how to negotiate within specific environments such as a college campus and academic settings (Walsh, 2000). Many first generation and low income students have a difficult time negotiating a college/university campus. The institution is a foreign place in comparison to their normal and natural surroundings.
Communication between student and faculty/staff is different than communications used with the friend-group. Language is also unique. Acronyms are used for forms and applications required for participation in college/university processes (completing a FAFSA). Not being able to effectively operate within that environment can negatively impact student performance and ability to complete. Project staff work to reinforce academic mindsets, such as the creation of a sense of belonging, that are significant to a student’s success or failure. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that student belonging and integration is directly related to educating, retaining, and graduating students. Once a student becomes entrenched into the inner workings of an institution they are more likely to be invested in completing coursework. Part of the educational process is creating and developing relationships between students and faculty.

Researchers believe that the implementation of comprehensive advising and counseling models are the necessary for facilitating student success. Several research studies were identified that suggest certain characteristics of a comprehensive counseling advising program would have: assigned counselors/coaches coaching, intrusive counseling and advising, significant career counseling, and continuous monitoring and interventions when needed. A Bettinger and Baker (2014) study on student coaching suggests students who are assigned a specific coach/counselor for an academic year will significantly improve their academic performance. Heisser and Parette (2002) agree with the need for a significant person for the participant to lean on as they first enter the college experience. They also conclude that it is important for students’ academic progress to be monitored at least twice per academic term.
Scrivener and Au (2007) go further and describe a model that brought forth favorable preliminary results of interventions pertaining to counseling students in an intrusive way. This study examined five community colleges and performed a number of interventions which included assigned counselors/coaches, cohort activities for participants, and enhanced orientation activities. In each case these interventions resulted in improved student outcomes.

The Community College

Although two-year community colleges enroll nearly half of the nation’s college students, they are overshadowed by large public and private colleges and universities (Pew Research Center, 2008; Lothian, 2009). Community colleges have a complex mission (Burns, 2010). The mission varies, in the size of their student population, and in their relationship with the community (Robinson, Metoyer, Byrd, Louis, & Bonner, 2012). This sector of higher education has been given an arduous task. These institutions offer students a bridge toward a four-year degree (Boggs, 2010). That bridge includes a developmental (remedial) curriculum, academic support programs, and access to services to increase readiness for college/university academic rigor (Scheutz, 2002). Moreover, the two-year institution is charged with educating and maintaining the workforce for industry in the community; thus, its curriculum is designed to be responsive to trends in the area.

Performance Indicators

A successful outcome for a student at a two-year institution would be graduation and or transfer to a four-year institution dependent upon the career trajectory chosen. In
addition, graduating and transferring, a student must maintain academic standing for either of those to be accomplished. Measuring transfer outcomes have been difficult to measure because researchers are unsure of what reasonably represents its indicators (Scheutz, 2003). According to Townsend (2002), defining and tracking the number of transfers, the transfer rate, and academic performance at the resulting four-year institution may not adequately measure the complexities related.

Researchers suggest it is difficult to analyze community college performance indicator data because of the achievement goals of its students--associate degree or certificate (Burns, 2010). Others suggest performance indicators should be representative of the students its serves (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). They assert indicators should focus on student progression, meeting general education requirements, overcoming deficiencies, among other goals.

Along with having the mission of educating the workforce and providing a bridge to a four-year institution, the two-year institution serves a diverse student population, many of whom are high risk and underprepared (Wattenbuger & McLeod, 1998; Newman, 1994; Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Smittle, 1995). These students create an added layer of complexity to the mission of the community college or two-year institution. Many support programs must be in place to sustain and guide these underprepared students toward successful outcomes. Recognizing that early interventions make more of a difference in student outcomes, a number of two-year institutions have employed early alert programs. In a national study of early alert
programs at two-year institutions, Fletcher (2011) found mixed results with regard to satisfaction with the program, but said they provided a needed service to students.

**Developmental education**

Another program initiated at two-year institutions is developmental education (Robinson, Metoyer, Byrd, Louis, & Bonner, 2012). Developmental education provides remediation to underprepared students. Being underprepared is a barrier to student success. Those students who lack the skills necessary to engage in serious study fall prey to attrition. Tinto (1975) described attrition as “a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person experiences in those systems…continually modify his goals and institutional commitments” may lead to a student dropping out (p. 94). Attrition before completing a degree or certificate program is more prevalent at the community college level. On average, 16% of those first time freshman who enroll at a two-year institution drop out before completing (Pochea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010). Even with this prescribed curriculum, students still struggle and require additional services to meet their goals of graduation and transfer. With a combination of several factors these institutions are poised to shape the value and cost effectiveness of open-access higher education in America for years to come (Scheutz, 2002).

Right now, emphasis is on undergraduate education and how to get students to the bachelor degree; and the two-year institution has been identified as a more convenient bridge to the bachelor’s degree. According to U. S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in remarks at commencement exercises at DeAnza Community College in 2010,
"Community colleges, I continue to believe, have this ability to transform young people’s lives, adults’ lives, older people’s lives in very profound ways," through its broad and varied missions. These missions include providing access to higher education with open admissions; affordable tuition which allows students to attain general education coursework before entering four-year institutions; and meeting service area employers training needs.

**Size and Urbanization Matter**

When measuring performance of community colleges, institutional characteristics play a role. In particular, size and the urbanization of the institution influence performance (Burns, 2010).

**Size.** The Carnegie Classification (2015) categorizes the size of institutions based on FTE (full-time equivalent). FTE is calculated as full-time headcount plus one-third part-time. There are five categories for two-year community colleges: very small, small, medium, large, and very large. The categories are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristic *FTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Small</td>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>500 - 1,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>2,000 - 4,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>5,000 - 9,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Large</td>
<td>10,000 &gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Size & Setting Classification Description. Retrieved from [http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/size_setting.php](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/size_setting.php)*

Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, and Kenzl (2006) conducted a study on institutional characteristics influencing student success. One of their findings suggests that
institutional size is negatively correlated with success student outcomes; thus, the larger the institution the more likely the institutions’ student success rates will be lower. This coincides with the belief that smaller institutions can provide more personalized services, which tend to benefit students more (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terrezini, 2005).

**Urbanization.** It is not new phenomenon to compare rural, suburban, and urban communities. Studies have shown a significant difference between the performance outcomes of community college students attending institutions located in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Martin (2001) in a study comparing rural and urban community college SSS programs in Texas found rural programs were more successful in graduating and transferring its participants. In addition, in a longitudinal study of SSS, the Department of Education (2015) says nearly 53% of rural, 50% of suburban, and 46% of urban participants complete within four years. Although it seems rural projects perform better in regard to completions (attainment of associate degrees, certificates, or transferring), urban and suburban projects perform better with regard to persistence. In this same study, 89.3% of suburban, 88.8% of urban, and 83.3% of rural participants persisted.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine literature on the Federal TRIO Programs. Chapter Two provided information on the history and context of the creation of these student outreach and retention programs. The Johnson Administration and Congress created these programs to minimize the effects of poverty and provide access to higher education to the underrepresented (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). At present, U. S.
Department of Education (2008) funds seven student-focused programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, Veterans, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math and Science, Ronald McNair Post-baccalaureate. In addition, the chapter included an overview of studies that focused on the research and performance of TRIO Programs and specifically, Student Support Services. Further, the chapter explored literature on the complex mission of community colleges and how efficiency, or return on investment and how it can be measured with student services programs.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this research is to add to the body of research for the federal TRIO program, Student Support Services by unearthing the components that contribute to the success of the program and evaluating its merits. Arguments against keeping TRIO programs in operation have been based on whether the programs are still relevant and successful. Relevance, in this case, refers to whether the program services provide positive outcomes. Successful refers to whether outcomes when measured meet or exceed specified objectives. Because of those reasons, the following questions should be answered:

R1: Relevance. What strategies are employed toward positive outcomes?

R2: Successful. Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are successful?

In order to answer the research questions concerning program relevance and success. The question regarding relevance was answered by a content analysis being conducted of artifacts of several SSS projects within the community college system within one southern state. A content analysis is a methodical, replicable procedure for condensing many words of text into fewer content categories according to Stemler (2001). Weber (1990) says content analysis is a useful technique for gleaning the focus of different entities such as individuals, groups, and issues of a global nature. The Success question was answered by doing a test of significance quantitative method.
Setting

The southern state chosen was South Carolina. South Carolina is located on the eastern seaboard of the United States bordered by the states of North Carolina and Georgia. As of 2014, the population was estimated at 4.83 million people, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $183.56 billion. The state boasts of having over 60 diverse groups of higher education institutions both private and publicly supported colleges and universities. According to the SC Commission on Higher Education (2012), there are four types of public institutions in the state: three public research institutions, ten public comprehensive teaching institutions, four two-year regional campuses of the flagship research university, and 16 technical and community institutions. Table 3.1 lists the institutions within each category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Institutions</th>
<th>Comprehensive Teaching Institutions</th>
<th>Two-Year Branch Campuses of USC</th>
<th>State Technical Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of South Carolina (USC), Clemson University, and Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC)</td>
<td>College of Charleston, The Citadel, USC Beaufort, Francis Marion, Coastal Carolina University, SC State University, USC Aiken, Lander University, Winthrop University, and USC Upstate</td>
<td>USC Lancaster, USC Sumter, USC Salkehatchie, and USC Union</td>
<td>Aiken, Central Carolina, Denmark, Florence-Darlington, Greenville, Horry-Georgetown, Midlands, Northeastern, Orangeburg-Calhoun, Piedmont, Spartanburg Community College, Technical College of the Lowcountry, Tri-County, Trident, Williamsburg, and York</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: South Carolina Commission on Higher Education. Retrieved from: http://www.che.sc.gov*
Within its higher education system, there is an entity known as the SC Technical College System. According to its website, the SC Tech System is described as the largest higher education system in the state and serves over a quarter of million South Carolinians annually. There are 16 technical colleges intentionally and geographically placed across the state to serve a variety of communities. Figure 3.1 is a map of showing the locations of each of the technical colleges in the state.

![Map of Technical Colleges in South Carolina](http://www.sctechsystem.com/colleges.html)

**Figure 3.1** Map of Technical Colleges in South Carolina. Retrieved from http://www.sctechsystem.com/colleges.html

Within the Technical College System, the colleges are categorized based on enrollment to mirror divisions in the larger higher education community in South
Carolina. Based on headcount enrollment numbers, there are four divisions. Table 3.2 shows the institutions in their respective categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2</th>
<th>South Carolina Technical College Enrollment Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10K &gt;</td>
<td>5K-10K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenville, Midlands, and Trident</td>
<td>Florence-Darlington, Horry-Georgetown, Piedmont, Spartanburg, Tri-County, and York</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The largest division has six institutions, which includes Florence-Darlington, Horry-Georgetown, Piedmont, Spartanburg Community, Tri-County, and York.

There are 59 federal TRIO programs in operation in South Carolina; and twenty-six of them are SSS projects dispersed between public and private institutions (SC TRIO, 2015). Forty-four percent (44%) of all of the TRIO programs in South Carolina are SSS projects; and forty-six percent of those projects are housed at technical/community colleges in the state.

**Sample and Participant Selection**

Participants were selected from the technical/community college sector in the state of South Carolina for several reasons. The first is familiarity and proximity. The researcher directs a TRIO project in the state and is familiar with projects’ staff, which allows for significant access to projects’ artifacts. The second is the number of SSS projects available to study in the state. As stated earlier, forty-six percent of all SSS
projects in South Carolina are located at eleven (11) technical/community colleges (SC TRIO, 2015).

**Sampling Strategy**

The largest division of technical/community institutions was selected for this study. This includes six technical/community colleges that are similar in size, governance, and setting, which includes Florence-Darlington, Horry-Georgetown, Piedmont, Spartanburg Community, Tri-County, and York. Additional parameters were included:

- Must have been awarded an SSS project for the 2010-15 grant cycle;
- Must have maintained an SSS project throughout the grant cycle; and
- Must have reported APR data throughout the grant cycle.

Horry-Georgetown was not awarded an SSS project for the previous grant cycle; it was eliminated from the study. Although Tri-County was awarded an SSS project for the 2010-15 grant cycle, its project was closed after the first year. The remaining institutions were: Florence-Darlington, Piedmont, Spartanburg Community, and York.

However, due to the unwillingness of a number of institutions within that tier to make their grant proposals accessible to the researcher, a new sample had to be selected for examination. The researcher decided to pursue three different institutions using the Carnegie Classification. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2015) has four categories of size and setting for two-year institutions: very small, small, medium, large, and very large. For the purposes of this research, the researcher categorized the institutions in the study according to Table 3.2. Those institutions are
distinct in terms of size (full-time enrollment) and community to which it serves (urban, suburban, or rural). They include projects sponsored by a large, a medium, and a small institution. The large institution is attached to an urban community, the medium-sized is attached to a suburban area, and the small one serves several rural communities.

This actually provides a different lens than was planned to analyze the institution, size of project, and the communities the projects serve and how it might affect the students served, services provided and how that relates to the projects’ success. The researcher decided to use the Carnegie Classification (2015) to determine the size of the institutions. Carnegie Classification which is based on 2013-14 data categorizes the size of institutions based on FTE (full-time equivalent). FTE is calculated as full-time headcount plus one-third part-time. Table 3.3 categorizes each institution in the study according to FTE and Headcount:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College #1</th>
<th>College #2</th>
<th>College #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FTE 9,820</td>
<td>FTE 3,916</td>
<td>FTE 1,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headcount 14,885</td>
<td>Headcount 6,000</td>
<td>Headcount 2,792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category Large</td>
<td>Category Medium</td>
<td>Category Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The data used in the chart above is from Fall 2010 information for each institution. The researcher gathered this information from Accountability Reports from each college for that year. The large institution/large project is in a fast growing urban area, the medium-size institution/average size project is in a suburban area of a major metropolitan area and the small institution/small project is in a rural area of the state.
Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions, a content analysis was performed on the grant proposals and other documents of three SSS projects in South Carolina.

Research Question 1

For R1, data was collected using *a priori* coding. This is conducted using categories already established (Stemler, 2001). In this case, grant proposals were examined using the prescribed evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education and program regulations. Although there are seven categories used to evaluate a grant proposal, those focused on in the study include Need, Objectives, Institutional Commitment, and Plan of Operation. Also, each institution’s grant proposal, grant application, project abstract, profile summary, and program profile are other artifacts examined to determine trends and motifs within each category.

**Need.** According to the U.S. Department of Education and federal regulations, *Need* pertains to the institution having a high number or percentage of students who are eligible for the project and those students experiencing academic and non-academic difficulties considered a hindrance to students’ progress to graduation and further matriculation, and differences between eligible students and their counterparts (non-eligible) with regard to retention, graduation, and academic standing. This speaks to the situation at the institution, whether enough eligible (low-income, first generation, students with a disability) students are available to participate in the program annually on an ongoing basis. Further, this category describes the academic footing (falling grade, low grade point average, low entrance exam scores, etc.) of these students as well as non-
academic barriers (financial, access to information, fears about completing, etc.) that affect these students. For the purposes of this study, each institution’s proposal was examined to give a snapshot as to the problems identified at that particular institution. This is crucial information that directly affects what services are used to address the challenges experienced by project participants.

Specifically, the Student Support Services Request For Proposals (RFP) for FY 2010 as well as the legislation (Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 402D of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended) and regulations (34 CFR, part 646) for Student Support Services states there are three categories in this section for applicants to demonstrate the need for the project at the college:

- High number or percentage of the student population who meet the eligibility requirements for the project;
- Demonstrated academic and other problems or barriers that may inhibit successful progress through the academic pipeline; and
- Differences between eligible SSS students compared to an appropriate group at the institution in regard to their outcome/progress in the areas of retention, GPA, and graduation/transfer rates (two-year institutions).

These three areas will be used as categories for coding information from each proposal.

**Objectives.** The U.S. Department of Education established three standardized objectives dependent upon the institution type for all SSS projects. Two-year institutions objectives are related to persistence, academic standing, and graduation/transfer to a four-year institution; and included in Table 3.4 is a listing of the objectives:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.4</th>
<th>SSS Standardized Objectives for Two-Year Institutions for Grant Cycle 2010-15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1. <strong>Persistence</strong></td>
<td>xx% of all participants served in the reporting year by the SSS project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year or earn an associate’s degree or certificate at the grantee institution and/or transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution by the fall term of the next academic year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2. <strong>Good Academic Standing Rate</strong></td>
<td>xx% of all enrolled SSS participants served will meet the performance level required to stay in good academic standing at the grantee institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 3. <strong>Graduation and Transfer</strong></td>
<td>1.) xx% of new participants served each year will graduate from the grantee institution with an associate’s degree or certificate within four (4) years; and 2.) xx% of new participants served each year will receive an associate’s degree or certificate from the grantee institution and transfer to a four-year institution within four (4) years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Student Support Services Request for Proposals 2009*

The percentages each institution establishes for the objectives are based on metrics at the individual institution, according to the Request for Proposals (2009). The percentage must be *ambitious and attainable*, which refers to setting goals that are a significant improvement from current metrics, but being able to accomplish those goals within the set parameters. Current or timely metrics were identified within the Need section of each grant proposal. For the purposes of this study, each institution’s objectives were examined to determine the metrics established for each institution.
**Institutional Commitment.** This section covers what resources (material, policy or human) were given in support of each project within the study. For instance, facilities, equipment, personnel, and organizational structure are considered part of institutional commitment. In addition, established administrative and academic policies are also considered in this section, as well as, assured collaboration with enrollment management departments (Admissions, Financial Aid, and Records) and the institutional research department are included in this section. Each institution’s Institutional Commitment section was examined to illuminate what combination of collaborations, organizational structure placement, and facilities used toward project goals.

**Plan of Operation.** The Plan of Operation is a pivotal section of the grant proposal because it outlines the strategies used to accomplish project goals and objectives. In this section, the SSS project is described in terms of marketing to prospective participants and stakeholders, recruitment and selection of participants, assessment of participants, and services provided to participants. For each institution examined in this study, the specific services that would be provided to project participants was the main focus.

Specifically, the Request for Proposals (RFP) for FY 2010 as well as the legislation (Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 402D of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended) and regulations (34 CFR, part 646) for Student Support Services states that there are required and permissible services. According to those documents SSS projects are required to provide:

- Academic tutoring;
• Academic advising assistance;
• Information on financial aid options and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
• Financial Literacy Education/Counseling; and
• Transfer assistance with applying to and financial aid options at four-year institutions.

In addition, SSS projects are permitted to provide certain optional services such as:

• Individualized counseling (personal, career, and academic)
• Career exploration
• Cultural and academic programming
• Mentoring
• Assistance in securing housing during term breaks for homeless and foster care participants
• Academic assistance to students with limited English proficiency
• Grant Aid

**Research Question 2**

R₂ asks about the success of the programs…Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are indeed, successful. To determine the success of these projects, Annual Performance Report (APR) data compiled by the U. S. Department of Education were examined for each institution over a three-year period. Outcomes (persistence, and graduation/transfer rates) from the APR data were examined and matched with the agreed upon metrics provided in the grant proposals. Although, the second objective pertaining
to academic standing is submitted within the APR, that information is not included in the data set provided by the U.S. Department of Education. It is believed this has been omitted because each institution determines what is good academic standing; thus, data is focused on what signifies a success for the project. Success is operationalized as persistence and/or completion for SSS projects. The dataset also provides success rates for each institution. Thus, according to the dataset notes, the success rate is the number of participants who received associate’s degrees, transferred to another institution, stayed enrolled at same institution, or completed a program (certificate) in a program year divided by the number of participants served in that year.

Annual Performance Report data is available on the US Department of Education (2016) website. The researcher organized the data available for program years 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14. These three years were used because these are the years used when awarding prior experience points Student Support Services Request for Proposals (2009). The calculation of PE points for the three assessment years is based on a project’s approved number of participants served; the project’s approved objectives; and student-level data a project submits in its annual performance report (APR) for each assessment year (34 CFR 646.20(a)(2)).

Role of the Researcher and Bias

As the Director of a Student Support Services project at a two-year public institution, I am responsible for providing day-to-day operations coordination, supervision, and leadership of the program funded by the U.S. Department of Education, which provides comprehensive services for low-income, first-generation, and students
with disabilities. Those services include tutoring, academic advising and counseling, financial aid and literacy, transfer services, and other co-curricular support.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent in maintaining and hiring full- and part-time staff to provide required and permissible services. For the last several years, it has been a battle to retain funds to provide those services to project participants because of budget cuts. Old arguments using anecdotal information to support continued funding are met with deaf ears. Legislators and the executive branch want more performance and data driven evidence to continue support. I have worked in higher education for 18 years and specifically with federal TRIO programs for twelve of those years. The last six years I have been working as a director. In the last Student Support Services grant competition, I was instrumental in my institution being awarded two SSS projects in which I oversee. Therefore, it is in my best interest to find other research data to support the relevance and success of programs like Student Support Services.
As stated earlier, arguments against the continued operation of TRIO programs have centered on the relevance and success of the programs. Relevance, in this case, refers to whether the program services provide positive outcomes. Successful refers to whether outcomes when measured meet or exceed specified objectives. Because of those reasons, the following questions should be answered:

R₁: Relevance. What strategies are employed toward positive outcomes?

R₂: Successful. Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are successful?

In order to answer the research questions concerning program relevance and success. The question regarding relevance was answered by a content analysis being conducted of artifacts of SSS projects within the community college system within one southern state. Again, content analysis is a methodical, replicable procedure for condensing many words of text into fewer content categories according to Stemler (2001). According to Weber (1990), content analysis is a useful technique for gleaning the focus of different entities such as individuals, groups, and issues of a global nature.

The Success question was answered by a comparison of quantitative outcomes and agreed upon metrics of individual SSS projects.

Relevance

After examining three distinct institutions in South Carolina, several themes were uncovered. In order to carefully examine the categories, the researcher focused on four areas within the grant proposals for each college: Need, Institutional Commitment,
Objectives, and Plan of Operation. For R₁, data was collected using a priori coding. This is conducted using categories already established prior to the analysis based on a theoretical construct agreed upon by professional colleagues (Stemler, 2001). In this case, the U.S. Department of Education uses these categories to evaluate and score grant proposals during grant competitions.

Need

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016) and federal regulations, need pertains to the institution having a high number or percentage of students who are eligible for the project and those students experiencing academic and non-academic difficulties considered a hindrance to students’ progress to graduation and further matriculation, and differences between eligible students and their counterparts (non-eligible) with regard to retention, graduation, and academic standing. This focuses on the institution, whether enough eligible (low-income, first generation, or students with a disability) students are available to participate in the program annually and on an ongoing basis.

Specifically, the Request For Proposals (RFP) for FY 2010 as well as the legislation (Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 402D of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended) and regulations (34 CFR, part 646) for Student Support Services states there are three categories in this section for applicants to demonstrate the need for the project at the college:

- High number or percentage of the student population who meet the eligibility requirements for the project;
- Demonstrated academic and other problems or barriers that may inhibit successful progress through the academic pipeline; and
- Differences between eligible SSS students compared to an appropriate group at the institution in regard to their outcome/progress in the areas of retention, GPA, and graduation/transfer rates (two-year institutions).

A thorough examination of the grant proposals of a small, medium, and large institution as categorized by Carnegie Classification (2016) has gleaned the following information:

**Large-Sized College.** The large college is funded to serve 350 participants and was awarded $403,671 annually, with $38,930 of grant aid available for distribution. This information was provided by the Project Profile which was within the grant proposal document.

**High number or percentage of students eligible.** The Office of Planning and Grants of the institution provided data indicating 70% of the student population at the institution was eligible to participate in the project, which included low-income, first generation, and students with disabilities.

**Demonstrated academic and other barriers to success.** It was indicated that 18.9% of the institution’s students were matriculating within the developmental studies curriculum. Further, it was stated that at least 51% of students taking MAT 032 (the second in the series of developmental mathematics courses) made a D, F, or W (Failure). Other barriers identified were inadequate study time because 40% of the student body works full-time each week. In addition, a growing number of students with limited
English proficiency, lack of critical thinking skills, and a lack of mentoring opportunities were available for students were acknowledged as concerns.

**Differences between eligible SSS participants compared to an appropriate group.** The large-sized college compared *eligible (not served)* and *eligible (served)* with regard to retention (fall to fall), graduation, transfer, and GPA’s. In each case, the eligible not served students had lower retention, graduation, and transfer rates. Eligible not served also had lower average GPA. For example, the retention for *Eligible (not served)* students was 56.3% as opposed to 67.3% for *Eligible (served)*.

**Medium-Sized College.** The medium-size college is funded to serve 200 participants and was awarded $293,852 annually. This information was provided by the Project Profile which was within the grant proposal document.

**High number or percentage of students eligible.** The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research of the institution provided data indicating 64% of the student population at the institution was eligible to participate in the project, which included low-income, first generation, and students with disabilities.

**Demonstrated academic and other barriers to success.** It was indicated 82% of students taking the COMPASS (a placement test), scored below college-level in mathematics, 43% scored below in writing, and 38% scored below in reading. Moreover, there is a 54% attrition rate to the college. Further, it was stated in the proposal that career counseling, basic financial counseling, and counseling for dislocated workers was needed.
Differences between eligible SSS participants compared to an appropriate group. The medium-sized college compared eligible students (not served) to non-eligible students in the areas of retention, graduation, transfer rates and grade point averages. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research of the institution provided college data, which suggests SSS eligible students are more at risk. The eligible students not served by the project were retained at a rate of 46%, had an average GPA of 1.94, a transfer rate of 11% and a graduation rate of 15%. In summary, the writer created a list of services needed for eligible students that are in line with the required services (academic tutoring, academic advising/counseling, financial aid information, college transfer advising, and fundamental basic financial and economic literacy advising as delineated in SSS program legislation and regulations (34 CFR, part 646).

Small-Sized College. The small-sized college is funded to serve 160 participants and was awarded $291,554 annually. This information was provided by the Project Profile which was within the grant proposal document.

High number or percentage of students eligible. The Office of Information Technology of the institution provided data indicating 80% of the students who applied to the institution self-identified as first-generation, 49% are considered low-income and first-generation, according to the college’s FAFSA data, and 59% are considered low-income only. Less than 1% of incoming students are considered students with disabilities. Because of this, the college proposed not to target that population. However, they would be allowed to participate if they applied.
Demonstrated academic and other barriers to success. At this institution, students enter the college underprepared, with 84% referred to developmental mathematics courses, 46% referred to developmental writings courses, and 69% were referred to developmental reading courses. Also, 12-14% of degree seekers are on academic probation.

Differences between eligible SSS participants compared to an appropriate group. The small-sized college compared eligible students (not served) to non-eligible students in the areas of retention, graduation, transfer rates and grade point averages. According to the Office of Management Information System provided data that indicated low retention, low graduation, and low transfer rates. The eligible students not served by the project were retained at a rate of 42%, a transfer rate of 5.1% and a graduation rate of 11%. Also, SSS eligible students with a GPA below 2.0 on a 4-point scale was more than double than of non-eligible students.

Objectives

The U.S. Department of Education established three standardized objectives dependent upon the institution type for all SSS projects. The percentages each institution establishes for the objectives are based on metrics at the individual institution with regard to persistence, academic standing, and graduation/transfer. The percentage must be ambitious and attainable, which refers to setting goals that are a significant improvement from current metrics, but being able to accomplish those goals within the set parameters. Current or timely metrics were identified within the Need section of each grant proposal.
For the purposes of this study, each institution’s objectives were examined to determine the metrics established for each institution; and they are as follows:

**Large-Sized College.** Table 4.1 lists the objectives for the large college:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Large College SSS Objectives with Thresholds for Grant Cycle 2010-15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 1. Persistence</strong></td>
<td>$70%$ of all participants served in the reporting year by the SSS project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year or earn an associate’s degree or certificate at the grantee institution and/or transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution by the fall term of the next academic year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 2. Good Academic Standing Rate</strong></td>
<td>$75%$ of all enrolled SSS participants served will meet the performance level required to stay in good academic standing at the grantee institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 3. Graduation and Transfer</strong></td>
<td>1.) $30%$ of new participants served each year will graduate from the grantee institution with an associate’s degree or certificate within four (4) years; and 2.) $20%$ of new participants served each year will receive an associate’s degree or certificate from the grantee institution and transfer to a four-year institution within four (4) years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Large College FY2009 Grant Proposal.*

**Medium-Sized College.** The medium-sized college’s objectives are listed in Table 4.2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2</th>
<th>Medium College SSS Objectives with Thresholds for Grant Cycle 2010-15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 1. Persistence</strong></td>
<td>$60%$ of all participants served in the reporting year by the SSS project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year or earn an associate’s degree or certificate at the grantee institution and/or transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution by the fall term of the next academic year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 2.</strong></td>
<td>$70%$ of all enrolled SSS participants served will meet the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Objective 3.

**Graduation and Transfer**
1.) 20% of new participants served each year will graduate from the grantee institution with an associate’s degree or certificate within four (4) years; and 2.) 20% of new participants served each year will receive an associate’s degree or certificate from the grantee institution and transfer to a four-year institution within four (4) years.

**Source:** *Medium College FY2009 Grant Proposal.*

---

**Small-Sized College.** The small-sized college’s objectives are listed in Table 4.3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3</th>
<th>Small College SSS Objectives with Thresholds for Grant Cycle 2010-15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1. <strong>Persistence</strong></td>
<td>60% of all participants served in the reporting year by the SSS project will persist from one academic year to the beginning of the next academic year or earn an associate’s degree or certificate at the grantee institution and/or transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution by the fall term of the next academic year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2. <strong>Good Academic Standing Rate</strong></td>
<td>65% of all enrolled SSS participants served will meet the performance level required to stay in good academic standing at the grantee institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 3. <strong>Graduation and Transfer</strong></td>
<td>1.) 30% of new participants served each year will graduate from the grantee institution with an associate’s degree or certificate within four (4) years; and 2.) 10% of new participants served each year will receive an associate’s degree or certificate from the grantee institution and transfer to a four-year institution within four (4) years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** *Small College FY2009 Grant Proposal.*
**Institutional Commitment**

Institutional commitment within the grant proposal addresses what the host institution will do in support of the grant project. This section covers what resources (material, policy or human) were given in support of each project within the study. For instance, facilities, equipment, personnel, and organizational structure are considered part of institutional commitment. In addition, established administrative and academic policies are also considered in this section, as well as, assured collaboration with enrollment management departments (Admissions, Financial Aid, and Records) and the institutional research department are included in this section. Each institution’s Institutional Commitment section was examined to illuminate what combination of collaborations, organizational structure placement, and facilities/resources used toward project goals.

The commitment of the institutions (small, medium, and large) to the grant projects are described below:

**Large-sized college.** The large-sized college decided to provide a list of resources used to describe the commitment of the host institution.

*Committed resources to supplement and enhance project services.* Several resources are committed in support of the project. The document lists a personal commitment from the president of the college to provide additional resources. The list includes:

- Access to the college’s library and audio-visual equipment
• Additional audio-visual equipment and man hours from Instructional Media Technology department

• The Career Center, Counseling Department, Disability Services, Writing and Math Centers, Testing Center, Developmental Studies Department, College Marketing were student services and academic affairs departments at the disposal of participants and staff of the project

• The police department

• National Coalition Building Institute chapter

Administrative and college policies. In this section of their proposal, a list of policies was listed:

• Open-door admissions policy

• Flexibility in class scheduling

• Receiving the higher grade after repeating a course

• Mandatory exit interview for students withdrawing from the college

• Faculty able to give the grade of “I” for extended time for assignment

• Due process hearing for student infractions

• Withdrawal from a course due to illness

Demonstrated commitment to minimize dependence on student loans. The large-sized institution’s proposal details a plan to have a series of workshops that will focus on: understanding the difference between gift and self-help aid, the impact of accepting the maximum loan amount, advantages of delayed gratification, loan repayment options, and creditworthiness.
Cooperation and support of the admissions, financial aid, and registrar. This institution’s proposal highlights relationships with admissions, financial aid, and the registrar and says these departments vow support to the project. The departments will not only provide services to project participants, but will also provide professional development opportunities. Records will allow access to National Clearinghouse to assist with tracking student progress.

Medium-sized college. The offices are housed in the Student Services Building where other student services offices are. An office suite provides private offices for the project director, two counselors, and tutor coordinator. Also, other space is provided for tutoring rooms.

Committed resources to supplement and enhance project services. Several resources are committed in support of the project. A laundry list of items is included from software and computers to telephones and desks. They also list personnel from various campus offices such as financial aid, Office of Development, and Institutional Research.

Administrative and college policies. In this section of their proposal, a list of administrative and college that support the success of participants and students are listed:

- Open-door admissions policy
- Creation of a two-part orientation course for incoming students
- Receiving the higher grade after repeating a course
- Exit counseling session for students withdrawing from the college
• Automatic referral to a counselor for students placed on academic
probation

_Demonstrated commitment to minimize dependence on student loans._ In order
to minimize students’ dependency on educational loans, the Office of Financial Aid
employs a number of strategies. They develop financial aid packages that include state
supported grants, scholarships, as well as scholarships from the College’s foundation.

_Cooperation and support of the admissions, financial aid, and registrar._
Collaborations with the Admissions department, Financial Aid, Registrar, Management
Information Systems, and Institutional Research assist with the purpose, goals, and
objectives of the project. Admissions counselors promote the project with incoming
students. Financial Aid works with SSS staff with providing updated information and
specifically handling SSS participants with additional financial need. The Registrar
assists with data collection, student records and informing project staff with participant
 statuses. Both Management Information Systems and Institutional Research provide
reports on participants for reporting.

_Small-sized college._ The offices are situated in “Building 2” with other TRIO
programs, Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound.

_Committed resources to supplement and enhance project services._ Several
resources are committed in support of the project. Office supplies, reference materials,
and assessment and testing supplies, postage, telephones, computers, and other office
equipment would be provided. Other student services staff and faculty are committed to
assisting the project with its goals and objectives.
Administrative and college policies. In this section, this college states their institution observes all policies the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education which governs the technical colleges in the state. In addition, the College administers a comprehensive process for academic progress; and convenient registration options (early, regular, and late). This list of other policies includes open-door admissions, flexibility in class scheduling, and higher grade assignment after a course is repeated.

Demonstrated commitment to minimize dependence on student loans. This institution utilizes its foundation (fund-raising arm) to provide additional financial resources for financial aid packages for students as well as state-supported grants.

Cooperation and support of the admissions, financial aid, and registrar. This proposal lists admissions, financial/veterans’ assistance, the registrar, and institutional research as participating in regular collaborations.

Plan of Operation

The Plan of Operation is the largest section written in a TRIO programs’ proposal. The Plan of Operation is a pivotal section of the grant proposal because it outlines the strategies used to accomplish project goals and objectives. In this section, the SSS project is described in terms of marketing to prospective participants and stakeholders, recruitment and selection of participants, assessment of participants, and services provided to participants. For each institution examined in this study, this section was examined to determine what specific services would be provided to project participants.
Specifically, the Request for Proposals (RFP) for FY 2010 as well as the legislation (Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 402D of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended) and regulations (34 CFR, part 646) for Student Support Services states that there are required and permissible services. According to those documents SSS projects are required to provide:

- Academic tutoring;
- Academic advising assistance;
- Information on financial aid options and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA);
- Financial Literacy Education/Counseling; and
- Transfer assistance with applying to and financial aid options at four-year institutions.

In addition, SSS projects are permitted to provide certain optional services such as:

- Individualized counseling (personal, career, and academic)
- Career exploration
- Cultural and academic programming
- Mentoring from peers, staff, faculty, and community persons
- Assistance in securing housing during term breaks for homeless and foster care participants
- Academic assistance to students with limited English proficiency
- Grant Aid
Because of the standardization of services required and permissible to be performed, the researcher decided to focus on the variances in implementation. For example, academic tutoring must be provided (34 CFR, part 646); however, there are multiple ways to execute this, i.e. the project hires a tutoring staff or allows students to participate with established academic support efforts at the host institution.

**Large-Sized College.** The large-sized college listed their services in paragraph form. The proposal describes the *academic tutoring* as being administered at least two hours per week and up to a maximum of four hours per week per subject. The individualized (one-on-one or small group) tutoring is provided by 15-20 professional and peer tutors hired by the project. *Counseling* sessions are provided at least twice during a semester, the first as an assessment session and the other for academic advising assistance. This service is to be performed by the project director, tutor coordinator (academic counselor), and college transfer coordinator. *Information on financial aid and assistance in completing the application* is offered to project participants on a one-on-one basis; and *financial literacy* education was provided by using an online tool. *Transfer assistance* was to be conducted by a full-time college transfer coordinator. These services included awareness of four-year programs, initial contacts with four-year institutions, identifying sources of financial aid, conducting and facilitating workshops and seminars, and coordinating college fairs and campus tours. *Career exploration* component was unique because the project would be coordinating a “power lunch” event called Mentoring at Mealtime. This event is described as a social/dining setting away from the mentor’s site and the campus. Students have the opportunity to converse with
mentors from the college and community about facets of careers. Workshops and seminars are offered on the following topics: time management, note taking, study skills, organization, effective writing, test anxiety, conflict resolution, business etiquette, and other topics. *Other supportive services* provided included referrals for emergency food, clothing, and shelter. In addition, referrals to mental health counseling and assistance with the college’s grievance process are offered.

**Medium-Sized College**. This college categorized their services as required and permissible services as aligned with Student Support Services regulations (34 CFR, part 646) in and as it relates to program objectives. A listing of this is shown in Table 4.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.4</th>
<th>Required and Permissible Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Required Services</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relates to Objective(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Tutoring</td>
<td>Objective 2 (Good Academic Standing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Academic advising and assistance in postsecondary course selection | Objective 2 (Good Academic Standing)  
Objective 3 (Graduation and Transfer) |
| Information on both the full range of Federal student aid programs and resources for locating scholarships | Objective 1 (Persistence)  
Objective 3 (Graduation and Transfer) |
| Assistance in completing financial aid applications | Objective 1 (Persistence) |
| Activities designed to assist students in applying for admission to and obtaining financial assistance for enrollment and transfer to a four-year university | Objective 3 (Graduation and Transfer) |
| Counseling services designed to improve the financial and economic literacy of SSS participants | Objective 1 (Persistence) |
| **Permissible Services** | **Relates to Objective** |
| Individualized personal and academic counseling | Objectives 1-3 |
| Activities to assist students with career options | Objectives 1-3 |

*Source: Medium-Sized College SSS Program Proposal, SSS Regulations*
This project provides all required services: academic tutoring, academic advising assistance, information on financial aid and completing the FAFSA, transfer assistance, and financial literacy information and counseling as outlined in the program regulations. The institution chose to provide two permissible services: counseling (personal and academic) and career exploration.

In addition, a more detailed description of services is explained relative to objective, activity, personnel/resources and timeline in another chart. In this chart, Objective 1 is written exactly as required, as a heading, then three columns are below it with the headings Activity, Resources/Personnel and Date Implemented. The activities for Objective 1 are student academic assessment, financial aid/literacy assistance. Under this activity, student selection based on program criteria, examining and analyzing test scores, grades, etc., completing an education plan, maintaining documentation of services, reviewing student’s FAFSA information, providing counseling related to financial aid, providing career counseling and administering a career assessment, and having the student complete a financial literacy assessment are listed as strategies toward meeting the program’s first objective.

For Objective 2, the activity listed is Academic Advising and Tutoring. Subsequent strategies include: providing academic counseling and tutoring and documenting services, selecting tutors based on faculty recommendation and success in the field of study, reviewing tutoring needs of participants and scheduling appointment times, reviewing weekly notes from tutors and tracking participant progress, monitoring course load and providing assistance with course selection, reviewing and maintaining
participant files, providing study skills and test-taking seminars each term, and distributing referral forms to faculty at mid-term to monitor academic progress. The activities for Objective 3 are graduation/transfer. The strategies employed include: providing intensive academic advising, maintaining degree audit with the participant file to determine if the student is on course, providing assistance with admission applications and financial aid information to the college/university of choice for the participant, organize transfer day activities, visit colleges and universities, and maintaining documentation.

**Small-Sized College.** The Small-sized college organized this section differently by describing its services in relation to the three standardized objectives and activities provided to accomplish program goals (Small-Sized College, 2009). In general activities are categorized in three component areas: Academic, Career, and Educational (ACE) services (p.23). For Objective 1, there are eight activities: mentoring services, personal counseling, academic advising, career counseling, career mentoring, cultural and social enrichment, provide alternative sources of funding, and financial and economic literacy. Objective 2 has four activities: tutoring, student success seminars, conduct early alert and mid-term progress interviews, and host instructional/tutoring seminar. Tutoring is held six days per week, Monday through Friday and Sunday afternoons and conducted by professional and peer tutors. The service is provided by the SSS project. In addition, a more intense focus is placed on language arts and mathematics in the instructional/tutoring seminars. Students who have been identified as being on academic probation must attend the success seminars. Within the first six weeks of each academic
term, an early alert interview is completed by project program coordinators and again at mid-term to insure the academic success of the student. Each time and assessment of the student’s progress is conducted and a plan is created to meet the needs of this student. For Objective 3, there are three activities: identifying transfer eligible students, organizing transfer plans, and counseling/advising transfer students on transfer opportunities. Also, this project provides student grant aid to its participants. The federal contribution will be $34,105 and the college matched up to $7,018 annually to aid in non-dependence on student loans, which has been identified as a barrier from success.

Success

Once examining the need, objectives, institutional commitment, and plan of operation sections of the three grant proposals, the researcher sought to learn the outcomes from the strategies employed by all three projects; thus attempting to answer Research Question 2 which asks about the success of the programs…Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are indeed, successful. To determine the success of these projects, Annual Performance Report (APR) data compiled by the U. S. Department of Education were examined for each institution over a three-year period. Outcomes (persistence, and graduation/transfer rates) from the APR data were examined and matched with the agreed upon metrics provided in the grant proposals. Although, the second objective pertaining to academic standing is submitted within the APR, that information is not included in the data set provided by the U.S. Department of Education. It is believed this has been omitted because each institution determines what is good academic standing; thus, data is focused on what signifies a success for the project.
Success is operationalized as persistence and/or completion for SSS projects. The dataset also provides success rates for each institution. Thus, according to the dataset notes, the success rate is the number of participants who received associate’s degrees, transferred to another institution, stayed enrolled at same institution, or completed a program (certificate) in a program year divided by the number of participants served in that year.

Annual Performance Report data is available on the US Department of Education (2016) website. The researcher organized the data available for program years 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14. These three years were used because these are the years used when awarding prior experience points. The calculation of PE points for the three assessment years is based on a project’s approved number of participants served; the project’s approved objectives; and student-level data a project submits in its annual performance report (APR) for each assessment year (34 CFR 646.20(a)(2)).

**Persistence**

According to Noel-Levitz (2007), *persistence* is “the enrollment headcount of any cohort compared to its headcount on its initial official census date and a measure of the number of students who persist term to term and to completion.” Arnold (1999) suggests it is “a student’s postsecondary education continuation behavior that leads to graduation.” Objective 1 for Student Support Services two-year institutions concerns the persistence of first generation, low-income, and students with disabilities. Over a three-year period, the information Table 4.5 is their outcomes in persistence for first-time freshmen:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.5</th>
<th>Persistence – First Time Freshmen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>2011-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The agreed upon rates for persistence of all three institutions are 70% (Large), 60% (Medium), and 60% (Small). The Large institution met expectations two-thirds of the time. Both the medium and small institutions met and exceeded expectations throughout the three-year period.

Completions are graduating from a two-year institution with a certificate or an associate degree or transferring to a four-year institution. The agreed upon completion rates for all three institutions are 30%, 20%, and 30%. Below are the actual completion rates for the respective programs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The large institution’s project did not meet completions rates two-thirds of the time, while both the medium and small institution projects met or exceeded expectations.
Success rates for the projects in the study were examined from the U. S. Department of Education TRIO Programs Student Support Services Dataset (2016). As stated earlier success rate is the number of participants who received associate’s degrees, transferred to another institution, stayed enrolled at same institution, or completed a program (certificate) in a program year divided by the number of participants served in that year. The chart below gives the success rates over a three period:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.7 Success Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Department of Education Student Support Services Performance Dataset (2016)*

The large institution’s project had a success rate slightly over 80% for two years and decreased to 73.5%. The medium size institution’s project had a success rate of 76.5% for two years and then increased to 81.6%. The small institution’s project success rate consistently performed at above 80% and increased to over 90% in the third year of accountability.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings

This study was undertaken for the purpose of determining whether the services provided to program participants lead to positive outcomes. Authorization and funding for this program and others comes from discretionary funds within the federal budget. Decision makers (legislators) receive many requests for support. Much of the arguments against TRIO programs remaining in operation have been based on program relevance and success. Relevance, in this case, refers to whether the program services are considered best practices and provide positive outcomes. Successful refers to whether outcomes when measured meet or exceed approved objective thresholds. Two research questions guided data collection and analysis:

R1: *Relevance*. What strategies employed toward positive outcomes?

R2: *Successful*. Does APR data suggest that SSS projects are successful?

**Analysis of Research Question 1**

A content analysis was conducted on the artifacts of three SSS projects at three distinct South Carolina community colleges. The three institutions varied in size and by the communities in which they served. Data was collected using *a priori* coding. This is conducted using categories already established (Stemler, 2001). Each institution’s grant proposal, grant application, project abstract, profile summary, and program profile are other artifacts examined to determine trends and motifs within each category. The
researcher focused on the following categories: Need, Objectives, Institutional Commitment, and Plan of Operation.

**Need.** All three institutions’ proposals demonstrated a high percentage of the student population who met eligibility requirements, revealed the academic and other barriers that inhibit successful progress through the academic pipeline, and differences between eligible students concerning persistence, GPA, and graduation/transfer rates. At least 70% of the population at each of these institutions is first generation, low-income, and or students with disabilities. The academic barriers identified are a large percentage of students taking developmental studies, a high attrition rate, and a percentage on academic probation. Another cited barrier was students who were working full-time while pursuing their education. In addition, when comparing similar cohorts of students’ persistence and graduation/transfer rates were problematic. The large institution compared for Eligible (not served) students to eligible (served). For the medium and small institutions, they compared eligible (not served) and non-eligible students. At both institutions, the eligible (not served) students persisted on average at 44%; and graduation and transfer rates were well below 20%.

**Objectives.** The U.S. Department of Education established three standardized objectives dependent upon the institution type for all SSS projects. Two-year institutions objectives are related to persistence, academic standing, and graduation/transfer to a four-year institution. According to the Student Support Services Request for Proposals (2009), the percentage must be *ambitious and attainable*, which refers to setting goals that are a significant improvement from current metrics, but being able to accomplish
those goals within the set parameters. Each of the proposals provided thresholds for each objective. The thresholds submitted in the proposals, if approved are the expectations for the project throughout the grant cycle. The projects must succeed at that level or better in order to qualify for prior year experience points (Request for Proposals, 2009).

The selection of thresholds is critical to the survival of any SSS project. This is what will determine the success or failure of the project and fundamentally drive the intensity of the strategies employed. For example, Objective 2 which relates to participants’ “good academic standing” determines how much of the projects resources (human and monetary) are earmarked toward tutorial services, academic advising, and career exploration once the grant is awarded.

**Institutional Commitment.** Institutional Commitment within a grant proposal discusses what the sponsoring institution will do in support of the grant project. More importantly, this section focuses on resources that will be provided, collaborations with various college departments, and administrative and academic policies in support of the project’s participant population. With regard to committed resources, both the medium and small institution proposals listed the locations where their projects would be housed and lists of equipment (desks, computers, etc.) as part of the tangible resources the institution would provide. Also, the medium college proposal mentioned $5,000 would be made available by the institution’s foundation annually to the project to distribute a “training” stipend for a number of program participants to receive. The large institution focused on relationship building between various campus departments that would provide services to the project and its participants.
For administrative and college policies, both the large and medium institution proposals focused on a list of policies like open-door admissions to grading policies that allow students to receive the higher grade after repeating a course. The small institution’s proposal focused on state-wide policies that all community colleges in the state must abide by and did not focus specifically on policies of the college. Each institution listed a variety of options in financial aid to minimize dependence on student loans, including state and federal grants and institutional/community scholarships. Projects pledged to inform participants of these possibilities. Collaborations with admissions, financial aid, and records offices are essential for projects and should be natural based on function. A relationship with admissions provides the project with needed information on prospective participants; collaboration with financial aid would facilitate seamless services for options in financing college; and the records office would be able to provide educational information on academic progress and tools to assist with academic advising.

**Plan of Operation.** The Plan of Operation is the largest section written in a TRIO programs’ proposal. The Plan of Operation is a pivotal section of the grant proposal because it outlines the plans to accomplish project goals and objectives. In this section, the SSS project is described in terms of marketing to prospective participants and stakeholders, recruitment and selection of participants, assessment of participants, services provided to participants, and efficient administration of the project (financial management, record keeping, etc.). For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the services provided. As stated earlier, the services are related to specific objective(s). For
example, academic advising assistance, information on financial aid (public and private),
and transfer assistance directly relate to Objective 3 (graduation and transfer). Objective
2’s related activities include academic tutoring, academic advising assistance and their
outcomes relate to Objective 1 (persistence) and Objective 3 (graduation and transfer). In
essence, good grades can produce persistence; and it can also lead to graduation and
transfer. Academic tutoring is the most requested service at all of the institutions
examined for this study.

**Analysis of Research Question 2**

To determine the success of these projects, Annual Performance Report (APR)
data compiled by the U. S. Department of Education were examined for each institution
over a three-year period. Outcomes (persistence, and graduation/transfer rates) from the
APR data were examined and matched with the agreed upon metrics provided in the grant
proposals. Although the second objective pertaining to academic standing is submitted
within the APR, that information is not included in the data set provided by the U.S.
Department of Education. Data is focused on what signifies a *success* for the project.
Success is operationalized as persistence and/or completion for SSS projects. The dataset
also provides success rates for each institution. Thus, according to the dataset notes, the
success rate is the number of participants who received associate’s degrees, transferred to
another institution, stayed enrolled at same institution, or completed a program
(certificate) in a program year divided by the number of participants served in that year
(U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The success rate is an overall performance metric
for the projects.
In terms of persistence, it appears the small institution’s SSS project and the medium institution’s SSS project performed better than the large institution’s project. Each year, the small and the medium institution SSS projects met and exceeded their thresholds for persistence. These outcomes are consistent with research that states smaller institutions can provide more personalized services, which tend to benefit students more (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terrezini, 2005). Although both the small and medium institutions’ projects, consistently met their thresholds for completions during the three-year period, they both struggled to exceed their threshold at the level they exceeded with persistence. The large institution’s project did not meet expectations with regard to completions, but had one boom year.

The success metric speaks to the overall performance of the SSS project. Overall, the small institution’s project performed better than the other two projects with an average success rate of 84.6% over the accountability years. Although in the disaggregated outcomes with persistence and completions, the small and medium institutions’ projects consistently out-performed the large institution, in this category, the large institution’s project was nearly as successful as the small institution’s project. The large institution’s project performed at slightly over 80% for two of the accountability years. There was very little difference between the success rates on average for both the medium and large projects which were 78.2% and 78.1% respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Student Support Services is a successful program because its projects consistently meets and exceeds its thresholds and provides services that are based on the legislation
and best practices of the larger higher education community and specific to the special populations that they are funded to serve…first generation, low-income and students with disabilities. Small projects housed at rural community colleges are more likely to be successful than those housed at larger institutions; and findings from the three projects studied are consistent with that supposition. Because of the complex mission of community colleges, the projects housed there provide services to assist those institutions with meeting college performance indicators.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The present study examined three TRIO Student Support Services projects housed at three distinct institutions in South Carolina. The purpose of this research is to add to the body of research for the federal TRIO program, Student Support Services by unearthing the components that contribute to the success of the program and evaluating its merits.

The following recommendations are presented for consideration for further research on TRIO Student Support Services in general and specific to outcomes of the program:

1. Investigate the specific services provided by TRIO Student Support Services projects based on location (rural, suburban, and urban). Determine which services are the most impactful.

2. Investigate TRIO Student Support Services funding to determine the cost effectiveness of projects (aggregate).
3. Investigate TRIO Student Support Services cost per student to determine the efficiency of the projects by location (rural, suburban, and urban).

4. Investigate the staffing needs of TRIO Student Support Services to determine the most appropriate model for staffing the projects.

5. Design a study to examine the funding formula for the program to determine whether funding should be based on geographical area.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings presented from this study have policy and practice implications for federal TRIO programs in general and for Student Support Services in particular. Those of particular interest include reasons for enhanced outcomes for projects housed at rural institutions and the need to adjust current funding allocations.

As a practitioner working within a Student Support Services project more impact is experienced by students at more rural institutions is most likely attributed to the project being “the only game in town.” The SSS project in that setting provides most if not all support for the student served. A level of trust is developed between the staff and participants. This in no way says that urban projects are not successful or they do not develop meaningful relationships, quite the contrary. This speaks to projects housed in rural areas not having to compete with as many “opportunities” as would be available in more urban settings. The rural project is not competing with public transportation, entertainment options, etc. that are available in most urban areas. Most likely the more rural project is the entity providing opportunities for trips, entertainment, and other alternatives. Staff employed in a SSS project in a rural area provide profound moments
for their participants. With a limited understanding of the world, the more rural project is the bridge between their present existence and the future. College tours and cultural enrichment trips provide the participant with an eye-opening experience that motivates the participant to strive for more, which again may explain increased graduation/transfer rates.

The allocation of funds to projects may need to be revisited. Currently, a project’s allocation (award) is based on a minimum number of students and the longevity of the project. New SSS projects only receive $220,000 annually during their first grant cycle. This may not be sufficient to initiate a new project fully and provide comprehensive services. This is challenging to the implementation of a project based on the two S’s…salaries and services. Both salaries and services are interconnected and require a balancing act for an SSS project director. Required and permissible services used in the projects require human resources to implement. Acquiring the right talent within the field of college access and support is challenging. Best practices suggest highly skilled and credentialed individuals should work in the programs. Those persons come at a premium price; and because of such a project director has to decide what will take precedence. In most cases, services take priority, but in order to provide quality services like tutoring and counseling, highly skilled individuals must be hired.

With tight budgets, projects are asked to do more with less. More of a focus on academic supportive services has lent itself to decreased emphasis on other permissible services that have significant impact and expand the horizons of students. Recognizing the need to expose participants to co-curricular activities to hone and increase non-
cognitive skills or “soft skills” is perplexing. New projects have difficulty implementing these activities because they are given smaller resources to accomplish these efforts. Policy makers need to recognize that non-cognitive skills are not just enhanced by only counseling/coaching students. In addition to counseling/coaching those skills can be improved by intentional experiences. The participant improves through the guided experiences that a counselor/coach creates and natural opportunities. Encountering students who have never traveled outside of a 20-mile radius of their homes; students who have never ventured to eat anything other than canned or boxed food; or students who have never experienced dining at a restaurant where they have to request a table from a host or hostess, makes you want to provide meaningful experiences. It is known that much of their academic preparation will go to waste if they are unable to comfortably navigate social settings, travel, expand their palates, and acquire social graces. It may be time to look at increasing the amount allocated to new projects so they have a chance to thrive.
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