

**U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor**  
**Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment**  
**“The Cost of Non-Completion: Improving Student Outcomes in Higher Education”**  
**May 9, 2019**

**Testimony of Kyle Ethelbah**  
**Director of Federal TRIO Programs at the University of Utah**  
**Chair-Elect of the Council for Opportunity in Education**

Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Smucker, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Kyle Ethelbah and I serve as Director of the TRIO Student Support Services and TRIO Upward Bound Programs at the University of Utah. I have served in this capacity since June 2013. Prior to my arrival in Salt Lake City, I worked as the Director of the TRIO Talent Search program and the TRIO Educational Opportunity Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I am also the incoming Chair of the Board of Directors of the Council for Opportunity in Education, which has a particular policy interest in the Federal TRIO Programs and in the college preparation, enrollment, and completion of low-income, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. In total, I have 22 years of professional experience in higher education. My work has encompassed a range of areas, from admissions and financial aid advising to re-entry and retention services.

Questions surrounding college completion for individuals from underrepresented groups are deeply personal for me. I am full-blooded White Mountain Apache from the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Central Eastern Arizona. I was raised, along with my only brother,

by my grandmother who was a product of the Indian boarding school system. Although my grandmother's boarding school experience wasn't something positive for her, she wanted us to be a part of something larger, and she knew that education would be the entry point into that "something larger" that she envisioned. However, neither she nor any of my other family members possessed the social or cultural capital to assist me in the college application process or to sustain me once I enrolled. There were no college graduates in my family. Adding to this lack of knowledge was the trauma of poverty that defined our lives growing up on the reservation.

The reason I was raised by my grandmother is because I had lost my mother to domestic violence when I was a child. My father was absent from my life as he was in prison, and he later passed away from alcoholism. My only brother later committed suicide as a result of his experiences, which were not all too different from mine. The only difference between all of us is that I was given the opportunity of education. Having been raised in that environment, I was unsure of my own academic abilities and intimidated by the ever-present challenges of life on the reservation. However, as a high school student I found my way to the TRIO Upward Bound program at Northern Arizona University. TRIO, with its college talk and academic support, formed the hands that reached out to me; the ones I ultimately took hold of and did not let go.

With the help of Upward Bound, I enrolled in the University of Arizona. With the assistance of the University's TRIO Student Support Services program, I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts Degree in Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology. Through TRIO Student Support Services, I

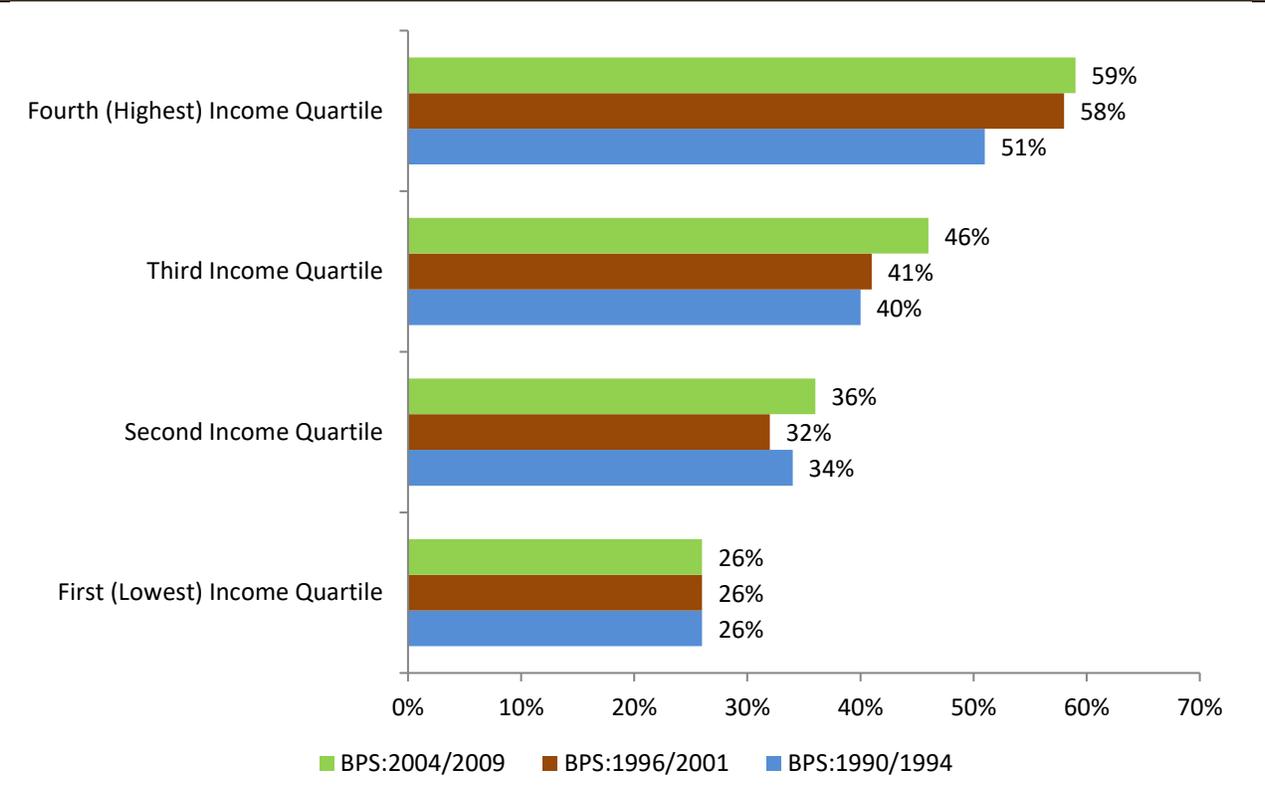
received coaching around many decisions that seemed inconsequential at the time, in addition to academic support. But for me—and low-income, first-generation students like me—such advising made a critical difference. For example, during my freshman year, my TRIO advisor urged me to transition from a job off-campus at the local mall to a campus-based work-study position so that I could stay closer to the TRIO office, the library, and my peers. My new job, in the admissions office, helped solidify my identity and confidence as a student, while also sparking the passion that has fueled my career for the last 22 years.

My experiences as a TRIO student inform how I approach my work today as a TRIO Director. Today, I am the only remaining member of my nuclear family and I believe it is because of the services that I was exposed to and the skills I was encouraged to develop while in TRIO. The emphasis on non-cognitive factors—a sense of belonging, leadership, and self-efficacy—were the very things that kept me connected to and remaining in college. As a result, I work to ensure that the programs I oversee provide comprehensive academic, social, and cultural supportive services and that the outcomes and benefits to students are measurable.

Today, this work takes place at the University of Utah. As a Research I institution that is the oldest and largest in the State, the University of Utah recruits high caliber students. However, low-income, and first-generation students who don't have the benefit of the supportive services provided by TRIO are only about half as likely as their peers to graduate within six years (33% vs. 60%).<sup>i</sup> This is consistent with the national experience. A dependent, first-time freshman from the lowest income families has just a 26% chance of obtaining a bachelor's

degree six years after enrollment. A dependent student from the highest income families has between a 51% and 59% chance of earning the baccalaureate over the same time period.<sup>ii</sup>

**Percentage of dependent first-time students who obtained a bachelor's degree or higher within 5 or 6 years of first enrolling in a 4-year or 2-year-or-less postsecondary education institution by parents' family income quartile.**



**NOTE:** Income quartiles are based on applicable BPS sample parents' income at the start of the study. For example, dependent BPS:2004 parent income levels by quartile were as follows: Lowest, less than \$32,000; Second, \$32,000- \$59,999; Third, \$60,000-\$91,999; Highest, \$92,000 or more. The BPS:2004 quartiles reflect 2002 parent family incomes for the first-time, college-going population entering in 2003-04, whereas the CPS reflects the income distribution of families of 18- to 24-year-olds for the entire nation for the year specified and thus is not directly comparable.

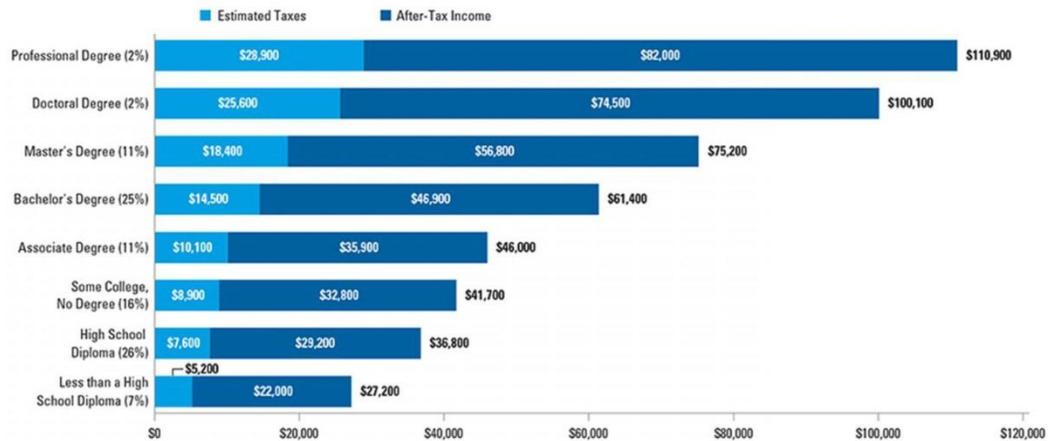
**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS:1989-90/1996; BPS:1996/2001; BPS:2003-2004/2009). Data tabulated using NCES Data Analysis System (DAS). See also Radford, A., Berkner, L., Wheelless, S., & Shepherd, B. (2010). *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

I also want the Subcommittee to understand the very real and personal burdens that many of these students carry when they are forced to drop out. Many attribute the non-completion to their own inadequacies and see themselves as less intelligent and less able to compete based

on their college experience. Many feel that they have been a disappointment to their families and to their broader communities. Some see their whole college experience as one more lie and believe that, somehow, the larger society has “tricked” them—“Just study hard and you can get out of poverty.” But very often they *did* study hard, typically while working one or more jobs and contributing to their families – yet, they are no better off. In fact, often times, they are worse off.

The costs of non-completion are significant. In 2015, a full-time worker (aged 25 or older) with a bachelor’s degree earned 47% more than a peer who had only some college, but no degree (\$61,400 vs. \$41,700).<sup>iii</sup> This is also a loss to our economy as the non-degree-holder paid about one-third less in taxes (\$8,900 vs. \$14,500).<sup>iv</sup>

## Median Earnings and Tax Payments of Full-Time Year-Round Workers Age 25 and Older, by Education Level, 2015



SOURCE: The College Board, *Education Pays 2016*, Figure 2.1

For detailed data, visit [trends.collegeboard.org](https://trends.collegeboard.org).

Education Pays 2016

CollegeBoard

Compounding the burden of earning lower wages, students who fail to complete their undergraduate programs typically find themselves struggling with the very real challenge of paying back student loans for which no economic benefit has been received. During Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016, 3.9 million undergraduates dropped out of college with an average of \$7,174 in educational debt.<sup>v</sup> Considering the trajectory of those who came before them, it is very likely that a significant number of these students will find themselves in default within the next few years. The National Center for Education Statistics found that among first-time college-goers who enrolled in 1995-1996 but never earned a credential, 31% defaulted on their student

loans.<sup>vi</sup> For those who enrolled in 2003-2004, but did not complete, the default rate jumped to 45%.<sup>vii</sup>

I know that TRIO Student Support Services makes a major difference in college completion; and it impacts students across the spectrum. Nationally, Student Support Services participants represent every racial and ethnic group, with African-American students comprising about a third of all participants at both four- and two-year institutions.<sup>viii</sup> Hispanic students comprise 25% and 21% of SSS students at four- and two-year institutions, respectively.<sup>ix</sup> White students account for 34% and 43% of participants at four- and two-year institutions.<sup>x</sup> Meanwhile, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander participants constitute 10% and 5% and these respective institutions.<sup>xi</sup> Native American students, along with Alaskan Native students, represent 2% of participants at four-year institutions and 4% of participants at two-year institutions.<sup>xii</sup> In accordance with federal law, two-thirds of all Student Support Services participants are both low-income and first-generation students, with the remaining participants qualifying as either low-income, first-generation, or a student with a disability.<sup>xiii</sup> These figures mirror the demographics at the University of Utah, though our programs serve about 10% who are from refugee backgrounds.

At the University of Utah, TRIO Student Support Services raises graduation rates for low-income, first-generation students by 42%. Nationally, it raises six-year graduation rates at four-year institutions by 20% and the four-year graduation rates at two-year institutions by 46%.<sup>xiv</sup> At the University of Utah, we have seen increased success rates among low-income, first-

generation students by instituting a number of practices that are grounded not only in research, but also in our experiences and observations of what helps the most vulnerable students succeed. For example, our TRIO Student Support Services program partners with the Office of Continuing Education and the Math Department to offer preparatory courses each semester to help students meet their curricular requirements. Otherwise, students would have to venture off-campus to take a similar course at a local community college. Additionally, as the University of Utah is primarily a commuter campus with 87% of students living outside of the dorms, we maintain both one-on-one, in-person, and online tutoring options in order to fully meet students' needs. This is just a mere sample of the work we do. Ultimately, though, this work is much more than checking off boxes to make sure your program is in compliance with federal law and regulations. It's about knowing your students and fostering their academic, social, and cultural growth. As stewards of federal dollars, my TRIO colleagues and I take this charge seriously and understand that we have a duty of care to ensure that the programs we deliver are robust, replicable, and impactful.

TRIO is not merely a collection of programs; it is a pathway for communities that, until recently, have been overlooked and underserved. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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<sup>i</sup> University of Utah Office of Budgets & Institutional Analysis (OBIA), January 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS:1989-90/1996; BPS:1996/2001; BPS:2003-2004/2009). Data tabulated using NCES Data Analysis System (DAS). See also Radford, A., Berkner, L., Wheelless, S., & Shepherd, B. (2010). *Persistence and Attainment of 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: After 6 Years*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>iii</sup> The College Board, *Education Pays 2016*, Figure 2.1, <https://trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays>.

<sup>iv</sup> *Id.*

<sup>v</sup> Barshay, Jill. (2017), *Federal data shows 3.9 million students dropped out of college with debt in 2015 and 2016*, The Hechinger Report, <https://hechingerreport.org/federal-data-shows-3-9-million-students-dropped-college-debt-2015-2016>.

<sup>vi</sup> Woo, J., Bentz, A., Lew, S., Smith, N., and Velez, E.D. (2017). *Repayment of Student Loans as of 2015 Among 1995–96 and 2003–04 First-Time Beginning Students: First Look* (NCES 2018-410). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved May 3, 2019 from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

<sup>vii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>viii</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Fact Facts Report for the Student Support Services Program, Washington, D.C., 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/sss-fastfacts2016.pdf>.

<sup>ix</sup> *Id.*

<sup>x</sup> *Id.*

<sup>xi</sup> *Id.*

<sup>xii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>xiii</sup> 20 U.S.C. §1070a-14(e)(2019).

<sup>xiv</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Persistence and Completion in Postsecondary Education of Participants in the TRIO Student Support Services Program*, Washington, D.C., 2015, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/sss-heoa-report-2015.pdf>.