

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The federal Talent Search program, which was created in 1965 and started operating in 1967, was one of the original three federal programs designed to complement and encourage the use of federal financial aid in postsecondary education. The three programs eventually became known as the TRIO programs.¹ As such, Talent Search is one of the oldest of the federal education programs designed to increase college access among low-income youth. On an annual basis, Talent Search reaches out to more students than any of the other TRIO programs. Yet, the current study of Talent Search is the first national study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) since 1975 (Pyecha et al. 1975) and the first to include the possibility of a rigorous study of the program's effects on participants.

This is the first national study of Talent Search sponsored by ED in 25 years.

This report presents the results of the Phase I Implementation Study for the National Evaluation of Talent Search.² We place our description of Talent Search in the historical context in which it has evolved over the 35 years of its existence. We specifically look at Talent Search within the context of the U.S. system of education—a system that is undergoing systemic and widespread reform and technological change.

This implementation report provides an historical overview and a current profile.

THE CONGRESSIONAL AUTHORIZATION FOR THE STUDY

This study, like all TRIO evaluations, is being conducted in response to congressional authorizations. Congress has authorized and requested ED to study and evaluate the TRIO programs. The Higher Education Act of 1998, the authorizing legislation for the TRIO programs, contains the following statement concerning evaluations:

In General—*For the purpose of improving the effectiveness of the programs and projects assisted under this chapter, the Secretary may make grants to or enter*

congressional authorization calls for focused on program improvement.

¹The other two original TRIO programs were Upward Bound and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, which was later renamed Student Support Services. Upward Bound, created in 1964, provides intensive academic services to disadvantaged high school students. Student Support Services, created in 1968, provides services to disadvantaged college students. Today, several other federal programs are also part of TRIO. The Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC) program, created in 1972, focuses on adults. The Training Program for Special Programs Staff and Leadership, later renamed Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs, was created in 1976 and provides staff training grants. The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, created in 1986, provides services to foster preparation for and increased enrollment in graduate school. Upward Bound Math/Science was created in 1990 to address disadvantaged high school students' need for instruction in these subject areas. Finally, the TRIO Dissemination Partnership program was created in 1998 to encourage the replication of successful practices of TRIO programs.

²A second phase of the study, currently in progress, addresses questions of Talent Search's effects on participants in selected states.

into contracts with institutions of higher education and other public and private institutions and organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and projects assisted under this chapter.

Practice—The evaluations described in paragraph (1) shall identify institutional, community, and program or project practices that are particularly effective in enhancing the access of low-income individuals and first-generation college students to postsecondary education, the preparation of the individuals and students for postsecondary education, and the success of the individuals and students in postsecondary education. Such evaluations shall also investigate the effectiveness of alternative and innovative methods within Federal TRIO programs of increasing access to, and retention of, students in postsecondary education (H.R. 6, Sec. 402H).

Evaluations that focus on program improvement are not new to the TRIO programs, but the 1998 reauthorization added language calling for an investigation into the effectiveness of “alternative and innovative methods within TRIO programs.” This language has influenced the approach we have taken to both the implementation study and the impact study.³

TALENT SEARCH PROGRAM BACKGROUND

In the legislation that first authorized the TRIO programs, Congress noted that financial aid alone would not ensure equal educational opportunity for disadvantaged students. Accordingly, Congress sponsored the development of supplemental services to prepare disadvantaged students for college and to help them succeed once there. In addition, Congress called for the development of higher education institutional policies designed to serve a more diverse population. In this regard, the TRIO programs’ role was not only to provide direct services but also to serve as a model and catalyst for the development of other similar services at the state and local levels.

PROJECT GOALS AND SERVICES

The specific goals of the Talent Search program are to identify qualified youths with potential for postsecondary education, encourage them to complete secondary school and to enroll in postsecondary education programs, publicize the availability of student financial aid, and encourage secondary and postsecondary school dropouts to reenter an educational program (U.S. Department of Education 1998).

In 1998, the Office of Federal TRIO Programs awarded new grants, increasing the number of Talent Search projects from 319 to 361.⁴ Talent Search projects are operated by 2- or 4-year colleges, public or private nonprofit agencies or organizations, or

³A copy of the legislation governing the Talent Search program when this evaluation started is available at www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/HEP/trio/index.html.

⁴One project stopped operating after the 1999-2000 program year; throughout this report, depending on the time frame of reference, we may refer to 360 or 361 projects.

By 2000, there were about 360 Talent Search programs, with total funding of about \$100 million and about 300,000 participants served.

combinations of these sponsors. Talent Search participants must be 11 to 27 years of age⁵ and must have completed the fifth grade.

In each Talent Search project, two-thirds of the participants must be low-income students who are potentially first-generation college students. Unlike the case of the other TRIO programs, the other one-third of participants in Talent Search need not meet the low-income or first-generation criteria. As listed on the Office of Federal TRIO Programs Web site, Talent Search services include:

- Academic, financial, career, or personal counseling, including advice on entry and reentry to secondary or postsecondary programs
- Career exploration and aptitude assessment
- Tutorial services
- Information on postsecondary education
- Exposure to college campuses
- Information on student financial assistance
- Assistance in completing college admissions and financial aid applications
- Assistance in preparing for college entrance exams
- Mentoring programs
- Special activities for sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders
- Workshops for the families of participants

In recent years, ED has undertaken two major initiatives to reshape Talent Search. First, it places increased emphasis on project accountability as manifest by new performance reporting requirements while according projects greater flexibility in deciding how to deliver services. Second, ED encourages Talent Search projects to place greater emphasis on increasing the program participation of younger students.

TALENT SEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Given that TRIO programs are designed to work together, it is useful to look at Talent Search in the context of the other TRIO programs. Talent Search and EOCs are the least intensive of the TRIO programs. Talent Search was designed as an outreach program that would cast a wide net to complement other TRIO and non-TRIO services. The

⁵Projects may serve clients age 28 or older if no EOC is available to serve them and if doing so will not dilute the services provided to the main target group.

central features of Talent Search are its emphasis on school and community outreach and its primary reliance on personal, academic, and financial aid counseling. Talent Search serves more students per year—320,000—than any other TRIO program (table 1.1). In the 2000-01 program year, the average Talent Search project was funded to serve 891 students, and the average EOC served 1,961 people. Talent Search funding averaged \$313 per student. In contrast Upward Bound served an average of 73 participants at an average cost of \$4,414 in the same year.

Table 1.1—TRIO funding, number of grants, average award, amount per person served, and number funded to serve: 2000–01

Program	Total funding	Number of grants	Number served	Average award	Average amount per person served	Average number funded to serve per project
Talent Search	\$100,544,841	360	320,854	\$279,291	\$ 313	891
Educational Opportunity Centers	30,504,684	82	160,836	372,008	190	1,961
McNair	34,859,043	156	3,774	223,455	9,237	24
Student Support Services	183,298,415	795	176,614	230,564	1,038	222
Upward Bound	249,650,137	772	56,564	323,381	4,414	73
Upward Bound Math/Science	32,302,902	123	6,093	254,495	5,302	50

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal TRIO Programs, 2001.

It may also be useful to briefly compare Talent Search to another recently created federal precollege program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), which shares the same general objective as Talent Search—getting disadvantaged students into college—but which is not a TRIO program. In the 1999-2000 program year, GEAR UP grantees received, on average, \$261 per participant in federal funds,⁶ although they also provide matching resources of an equal value to the federal funds, resulting in higher total spending per participant. With total federal funding of about \$200 million, GEAR UP served about 766,700 students.

STUDY OBJECTIVES, COMPONENTS, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current national evaluation of Talent Search is organized to accomplish the following overall objectives:

- To provide updated information on the Talent Search program’s context, participants, staff, operations, services, and accomplishments

The overall study has descriptive, strategic, and policy-related objectives.

⁶This is considerably below the maximum that GEAR UP projects can request or receive per student, which is \$800.

- To contribute to the knowledge base that informs thinking on how the federal government and other entities can improve high school graduation rates and access to college for disadvantaged students

STUDY COMPONENTS

To achieve the objectives, the overall study involves three major elements:

- An implementation study (for which this is the final report) of Talent Search that uses information from
 - Descriptive surveys of all Talent Search projects conducted in 1999–2000 and completed with a 93 percent response rate
 - Student-centered case studies of 14 sites conducted in 1999 and 2000
 - Analysis of recent performance reports
 - Analysis of the characteristics of Talent Search target schools by merging information with the Common Core of Data (CCD)
 - Analysis of the characteristics of Talent Search host institutions by merging information with the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
 - Interviews with former project directors from Talent Search sites that are no longer funded
- A study to look at the feasibility of conducting a rigorous assessment of Talent Search using information from the above components (the feasibility report was completed in summer 2000)⁷

*The evaluation has
three major parts
--Implementation
--Feasibility
--Effects*

⁷See Maxfield et al. “Evaluation of the Federal Talent Search Program: Phase II and Phase III Feasibility Report.” Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., October 2000.

- A rigorous study of the program's effects on participants (currently being initiated in four states)

This report presents results from the implementation study. A companion report provides detailed results of the feasibility study. The Talent Search evaluation is cumulative in that the implementation study informs the next phase, which examines the program's effects on participants, focusing generally on short-term outcomes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This implementation report addresses the following questions, derived from the congressional mandate and the study design:

- How has the program grown over time, in terms of funding, grantees, and participants? How have the legislation and regulations governing Talent Search changed since its inception? What assumptions guided the program's creation and development? What issues did previous studies address?
- What types of institutions/organizations have been awarded Talent Search grants? What were the characteristics of the target schools served? What proportion of eligible students were being served by Talent Search?
- How were projects staffed and organized? How did the Talent Search staff members spend their time? What were the relationships between the Talent Search staff and target school staff? How were Talent Search staff perceived in comparison with regular school counselors?
- Who was being served by Talent Search? What was the targeting and recruitment process? To what extent was Talent Search serving the intended population?
- What services were Talent Search projects providing? How much service did participants receive? What issues arose in service provision? To what extent did services vary between and within projects?⁸
- What outcome objectives were projects trying to accomplish? To what extent were projects meeting their goals? What were projects' record keeping and evaluation practices?

⁸Note that we did not set out to evaluate the quality of services being provided.

IMPLEMENTATION STUDY METHODOLOGY

In addressing the above questions, we relied on information obtained from multiple sources: a project survey, case studies, performance reports, and other education data sets. This approach allowed us to make the most use of insights gained from both statistical and qualitative methods concerning topics of interest.

PROJECT SURVEYS

A questionnaire was distributed to each Talent Search project director and collected between spring 1999 and spring 2000. The survey covered all Talent Search projects operating at the time. Respondents had a choice of responding by mail or over the Web. The overall response rate was 93 percent, with 20 percent of respondents choosing to respond via the Web. MPR undertook extensive follow-up to achieve the high response rate. Table 1.2 provides response rates for the project survey by type of grantee.⁹

Project surveys were distributed to each project operating in 2000 and received a 93 percent response rate.

Table 1.2—Response rates to project survey and performance reports, by host type

Host institution	Number of projects in 1999–2000	Percentage of projects	Percent responding to survey	Percent completing performance report 1998–99	Share of participants
Public 4-year	121	34%	91%	98%	34%
Private 4-year	48	13	94	96	12
2-year	124	34	94	97	29
Community org.	68	19	94	98	25
All projects	361	100	93	98	100

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, *A Profile of the Talent Search Program: 1998–99*, Washington, DC: May 2002; National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

NOTE: “Public 4-year” refers to projects hosted by public colleges and universities offering a bachelor’s degree or higher; “private 4-year” refers to projects hosted by private colleges and universities offering a bachelor’s degree or higher; “2-year” refers to projects hosted by public and private postsecondary institutions that do not grant 4-year degrees; and “community org.” encompasses all other types of host institutions, virtually all of which are nonprofit community-based organizations.

The project survey built on previous TRIO surveys and was reviewed by an advisory panel and pretested with a group of nine project directors who provided helpful input. The survey collected information on project organization, target schools, participant characteristics, project services, outcomes, and evaluation and record-keeping. The purpose of the survey was two-fold: first and foremost, to provide a comprehensive, in-depth look at the program and, second, to help provide information for the feasibility study to assess the possibility of conducting a rigorous study of Talent Search’s effects on participants. The survey asked for closed-ended information and also posed open-ended questions; the latter were designed to obtain more detailed information than can be collected from closed-ended questions.

⁹Throughout this report we frequently present data separately by type of host institution because (1) it will enable individual project staff to compare their own programs to others that share this basic characteristic and (2) other publications on Talent Search have also used this analysis strategy.

CASE STUDIES

*studies were
ucted in 14 sites.*

To gain a deeper understanding of the Talent Search program than is possible from a survey of project directors, we also conducted case studies of 14 Talent Search projects organized into two groups. We selected the first eight projects randomly, stratified along two major background characteristics: type of host institution and location. In one case, we chose a back-up project, instead of the first project sampled, to increase the number of large projects—those serving over 1,000 participants. The strata for selecting the first group of case study sites were as follows.

- Two public 4-year colleges in urban areas
- One public 4-year college in a rural area
- One private 4-year college in a rural area
- One public 2-year college in an urban area
- One public 2-year college in a rural area
- One nonprofit community-based organization in an urban area
- One nonprofit community-based organization in a rural area

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Projects in the first group were neither intended to be individually representative of the stratum from which they were selected nor collectively representative of all Talent Search projects in the nation. They are, however, useful for providing examples of a wide range of project characteristics, structures, and service approaches and complement the information gained from all projects in the surveys and performance reports.

The six case study projects in the second group were selected because of their emphasis on particular services. Together with ED's Planning and Evaluation Service, we decided to highlight ways in which projects are serving students in three areas of particular interest to project staff around the country: providing academic assistance, using technology in serving students, and working with middle school students. (Appendix A focuses specifically on the three types of services.) These projects also reflected a mix in terms of locations served and grantee types.

For both groups of case study projects, we considered only mature projects that had been funded during the preceding grant period, 1994–98. The reason is that we wanted to study projects with a track record, not grantees that might be dealing with the challenges of implementing the Talent Search program for the first time. In addition, to increase respondents’ comfort and candor in interviews, we promised confidentiality to all projects selected for case studies. Thus, in describing the sites we visited, we do not identify them by name and do not provide public information, such as the size of their most recent grant, which could be used to identify individual projects.

Sites included in the case studies had all been in existence since at least 1994.

Site visits typically lasted three or four days, during which time we observed program activities and conducted one-on-one or small-group interviews with a variety of individuals, including project staff, target school staff, students, parents, alumni, and host institution staff. We also collected and reviewed documents that could shed light on project context and operations, such as recruitment brochures, activity schedules, past performance reports, and each project’s most recent grant application. We visited half of the projects in spring 1999 and the remaining half in winter 2000.

At all 14 sites, we collected information on several major topics, including program goals and philosophy; the context of program operations, such as key characteristics of target schools and communities; participants’ backgrounds and postsecondary aspirations; participant recruitment and selection; alternative service availability; program data and record-keeping; parent involvement; the service delivery plan; the extent and duration of participation in program services; organizational structure and staffing issues; relations between major players inside and outside the program; challenges or obstacles to program operations; and program outcomes. We also collected information on options for conducting a rigorous study of program impacts, which helped shape the direction we proposed to take in the next phase of the national evaluation.¹⁰

PERFORMANCE REPORTS

We also include and highlight information collected from the Talent Search performance reports covering the year 1998–99, which was the first year that the revised performance report was used. Overall, 98 percent of the 361 projects operating that year completed the report (table 1.2), which addresses participant characteristics, project services, and outcomes information.

We include data from Talent Search performance reports, completed by 98 percent of projects.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DATA SETS

To develop a better understanding of the Talent Search program, we also merged data on project hosts and target schools with two National Center for Education Statistics databases: the CCD and IPEDS. The former includes demographic information on schools and school districts across the United States. The latter includes information on postsecondary institutions and collects information on institutional characteristics, enrollments, finance, and completions.

¹⁰See Maxfield et al. “Evaluation of the Federal Talent Search Program: Phase II and Phase III Feasibility Report.” Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., October 2000.

STRUCTURE OF THE REMAINDER OF THE REPORT

To address study questions, we present the report in nine chapters and four appendices. The structure of the report is as follows

- Chapter 2: A historical overview of the program, 1965-2000
- Chapter 3: Project hosts and target schools
- Chapter 4: Project staff and organization
- Chapter 5: Program participants
- Chapter 6: Talent search services and activities
- Chapter 7: Project objectives, outcomes, and data
- References
- Appendix A: A focused look at three types of services: providing academic assistance, using technology, and serving middle school students
- Appendix B: What happens when Talent Search projects shut down?
- Appendix C: Additional information on Talent Search services and activities
- Appendix D: Results from the survey of Educational Opportunity Centers¹¹

The report is descriptive, providing an historical summary and a comprehensive profile of the Talent Search program at the end of the 20th century. Phase II of the evaluation, now in its early stages, will address the question of Talent Search's effects on student educational outcomes.

¹¹Although the major focus of our research was on the Talent Search program, we also conducted a survey of all EOCs operating in 1999–2000. Appendix D contains selected results from key items on the survey, similar to the items reported in the body of this report for Talent Search.