

CHAPTER 5

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Using information from the project survey, performance reports, and case studies, this chapter takes an in-depth look at Talent Search participants. We describe their characteristics and discuss how they are recruited into the program and how their needs are assessed.

Overview and Selected Highlights

- About 60 percent of Talent Search participants were female. This is similar to the proportion in other TRIO programs.
- Two-thirds of Talent Search participants were members of racial/ethnic minority groups.
- In 2000, almost 70 percent of Talent Search participants were in the traditional age range for high school students—14 to 18 years—and about 30 percent were middle school age. Almost one-fourth of Talent Search participants were in the 12th grade.
- Overall, about 5 percent of Talent Search participants had limited English proficiency.
- About half of all participants each year are new. Thus, recruitment is an important and ongoing activity for Talent Search projects.
- Overall, about 80 percent of individuals targeted apply and about 90 percent of those who apply become participants. Some projects targeted children from immigrant families or minority groups underrepresented in postsecondary education.
- The most common disqualification for participation is enrollment in another pre-college program.
- Staff typically described the target group as students “in the middle” with regard to academic performance. Very low-achieving students were often seen as too difficult to serve with the available resources.
- Key challenging factors facing participants included poverty, school quality, geographic isolation, rising educational achievement standards, and low self-esteem.
- It seemed that many participants at case study sites had some college aspirations prior to applying for Talent Search. Staff encourage students to aim high but also to set realistic, achievable goals. A key strategy for solidifying or raising educational aspirations was to focus on occupations and careers.
- Projects typically do individual needs assessments and develop individual service plans.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY

Talent Search performance reports for 1998–99 indicated that about 60 percent of participants were female, a proportion very consistent across all types of host institutions (figure 5.1). Other studies of TRIO programs (Upward Bound and Student Support Services) in the 1990s likewise found that more females than males participate in the programs (Moore et al. 1997; Cahalan and Muraskin 1994).

Figure 5.1—Distribution of Talent Search participants by gender: 1998–99



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

Two-thirds of Talent Search participants were members of ethnic minority groups (table 5.1). Projects reported large differences in the distribution of participants' race and ethnicity by type of host organization. Almost 40 percent of participants in Talent Search projects hosted by community-based organizations were Hispanic, compared with 12 percent of participants in projects hosted by 2-year colleges and 22 percent of participants in all projects. A larger proportion of participants hosted at private 4-year institutions were black (45 percent) than was the case for all projects (36 percent). This finding may be related to the relatively large number of private Historically Black Colleges and Universities operating Talent Search projects (see chapter 3).

Table 5.1—Participant race/ethnicity: 1998–99

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
American Indian or Alaska Native	4%	4%	1%	6%	4%
Asian	4	4	2	3	5
Black or African American	36	39	45	32	30
Hispanic or Latino	22	20	21	12	39
White	32	32	30	44	19
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	1	0	2	1
More than one race reported	1	1	1	1	1

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

PARTICIPANT AGE

As discussed in chapter 2, Congress twice amended the Talent Search authorizing legislation to lower the minimum age for Talent Search participation—from 14 years of age to the current 11 years of age. At the other end of the age spectrum, the Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC) program, created in 1972, about six years after Talent Search’s inception, focuses on serving adults. The legislation states, however, that if no EOC project is operating in an area, Talent Search may still serve individuals over age 25. At the end of the 1990s, 69 percent of Talent Search participants were in the high school age group of 14 to 18 years, one-quarter were in the middle school age group of 11 to 13 years, and 6 percent in older age range (table 5.2). On average, projects hosted by community-based organizations served a lower percentage of middle school participants and a slightly higher percentage of people over age 18 than did projects hosted by educational institutions. Overall, 1 percent of Talent Search participants were over 27 years of age.

In 2000, about 70 percent of Talent Search participants were in the traditional age range for high school students—14 to 18 years.

Table 5.2—Participant age, by type of host institution: 1998–99

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
11-13 years old	25%	24%	29%	29%	18%
14-18 years old	69	70	69	67	73
19-27 years old	5	5	2	3	7
28 years and older	1	1	0	1	1

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

PARTICIPANT GRADE LEVEL

Consistent with Talent Search's age distribution, almost two-thirds of Talent Search participants were enrolled in grades nine through 12, with just under one-fourth in the 12th grade (table 5.3). Just below one-third were enrolled in middle school. Two percent were high school dropouts, and an additional 2 percent were high school or GED graduates. Postsecondary dropouts accounted for 1 percent of participants. Projects hosted by community-based organizations were less likely to serve middle school students and more likely to serve 12th-graders than were projects hosted by postsecondary institutions.

Table 5.3—Participant grade level, by type of host institution: 1998–99

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
6th–8th grades	30%	30%	34%	35%	24%
9th–11th grades	43	46	45	45	37
12th grade	22	20	17	16	33
Secondary school dropout	2	2	1	2	2
High school (GED) graduate	2	2	2	2	3
Postsecondary dropout	1	1	0	0	2

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

SERVING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

As discussed in chapter 2, Talent Search projects have been strongly encouraged to establish middle school components. There has been an increasing emphasis on early recruitment into the program and retaining students when they progress to high school and through graduation. Table 5.3 showed that nationwide, middle school students account for about 30 percent of all Talent Search participants. Table 5.4 provides more detail; it shows that projects serve varying percentages of middle school students. For example, in 1998–99, at 161 projects (out of 349 in the analysis) middle school students accounted for less than 30 percent of participants, including 27 projects where middle school students accounted for less than 10 percent of participants. Table 5.4 also supports a statement made earlier—that projects typically serve far more high school students than middle school students. At only 19 projects did high school students account for less than 30 percent of participants.

Table 5.4—Number of Talent Search projects serving various percentages of middle school and high school participants: 1998–99

	All projects (n=349)	Host institution			Community org. (n=65)
		Public 4-year (n=118)	Private 4-year (n=46)	2-year (n=120)	
Percentage of participants in middle school (grades 6-8)					
None	3	0	0	1	2
Less than 10 percent	27	6	0	9	12
Less than 20 percent	80	29	8	16	27
Less than 30 percent	161	55	16	49	41
Percentage of participants in high school (grades 9-12)					
None	1	0	1	0	0
Less than 10 percent	7	1	1	4	1
Less than 20 percent	10	2	2	5	1
Less than 30 percent	19	5	4	7	3

SOURCE: Analysis of Talent Search Performance Reports, 1998–99.

NOTE: Grade 9-12 does not include secondary school dropouts. Categories are not mutually exclusive—total number of projects for “fewer than 30 percent” includes projects from the other three categories.

OTHER GROUPS SERVED

The project survey also asked for the number of participants who were veterans, physically or mentally disabled, and former welfare recipients or participants in a welfare to work program. However, there were few participants in these categories—about 1 percent or less nationwide. In contrast, about 60 percent of 1998–99 participants in the Education Opportunity Centers program were former welfare recipients (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal TRIO Programs, 2001).

Very few participants (1 percent or less) were members of special groups such as veterans, mentally or physically disabled, or former welfare recipients.

PARTICIPANTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

APR data for 1998–99 showed that overall about 5 percent of Talent Search participants had limited English proficiency (data not shown).¹ The proportion varied from 3 percent in projects hosted by community-based organizations, to 6 percent in projects hosted by private 4-year institutions. About 5 percent of participants in projects hosted by public 4-year institutions and 2-year colleges had limited English proficiency.

About 5 percent of participants had limited English proficiency.

¹The performance report instructions define a person with limited English proficiency as an individual whose native language is not English and who has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English to prevent that individual from learning successfully in classrooms in which English is the language of instruction.

PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY STATUS

As discussed earlier, Talent Search eligibility requirements differ somewhat from those of the other TRIO programs. As with the other TRIO programs, two-thirds of Talent Search participants must come from low-income households and come from families in which neither parent has a bachelor's degree (first-generation college students). However, unlike the other TRIO programs, the other one-third of Talent Search participants need not meet either of these requirements. For the other TRIO programs, the other one-third must come from low-income households, be first-generation college students, or be disabled.² As seen in table 5.5, Talent Search projects almost meet the more stringent requirements applicable to programs such as Upward Bound and Student Support Services. Almost three-fourths of participants were reported to be both from low-income households and potential first-generation college students, while 7 percent were low-income only and 14 percent were first-generation only. Five percent did not fall into either category.

Table 5.5—Participant distribution by eligibility status and type of host institution: 1998–99

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Low-income and potential first-generation college student	74%	75%	75%	73%	73%
Low-income student only	7	7	8	5	8
Potential first-generation college student only	14	13	13	17	13
Other (none of the above)	5	5	5	5	6

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

PARTICIPANT TARGETING AND RECRUITING

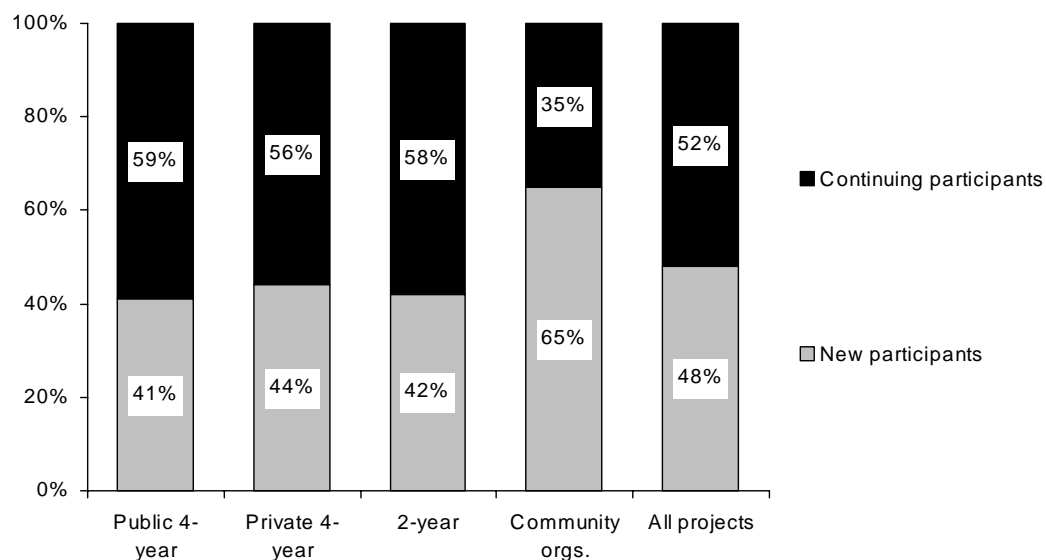
Participant targeting and recruitment is a significant activity that Talent Search projects must undertake every year. A new Talent Search project must establish relationships with target schools and then maintain and develop those relationships over the life of the project. After the establishment of target school relationships, Talent Search projects must recruit new participants on an annual

²In addition, for the Student Support Services program one-third of the disabled students must come from low-income households or be a potential first-generation college student.

basis. To become a participant in the voluntary program, students must submit an application that requires parental or guardian consent. The application also includes disclosure of financial and educational information to determine eligibility.

The performance report data reveal that in 1998–99, just under half of all Talent Search participants (48 percent) were classified as new participants—that is, it was their first year in the program (figure 5.2). Projects hosted at community-based organizations reported the largest percent of new participants (65 percent). This finding is consistent with the fact that in projects hosted by community-based organizations, high school students (especially 12th-graders) account for a higher proportion of participants than in projects hosted by postsecondary institutions.

Figure 5.2—Distribution of Talent Search participants between new and continuing participants: 1998-99



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

PARTICIPANT TARGETING, APPLICATION, AND PARTICIPATION

To understand the Talent Search targeting and recruitment process, the project survey asked questions about the number of individuals in different grade levels targeted for, applying for, and enrolling in the program. Overall, about 80 percent of the targeted number submitted applications and about 90 percent of those became participants (table 5.6). While annually Talent Search projects target more students than they serve, the distributions of the number targeted, applying,

Projects reported that overall about 80 percent of those targeted apply and about 90 percent of those who apply become participants.

and participating are fairly similar across the grade groupings. At the middle school level, however, a slightly lower percentage of applicants (85 percent) became Talent Search participants, and at the 12th-grade level, the program served almost all applicants (98 percent).

Table 5.6—Percent of individuals targeted who apply to Talent Search, and percent of applicants who become participants, by grade level: 1998–99

Grade level	Percent of the number targeted who apply	Percent of applicants who become participants
6th, 7th, and 8th grades	82%	85%
9th, 10th and 11th grade	83	90
12th grade	79	98
Secondary dropouts	86	92
All other	77	98
Total	81	91

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

TYPES OF STUDENTS TARGETED AND DISQUALIFIED

Do Talent Search projects focus on targeting students with specific characteristics other than the formal eligibility criteria? Conversely, do projects report characteristics that would disqualify a student from program participation? Tables 5.7 and 5.8 summarize answers to these questions.

The groups most frequently rated as receiving little or no emphasis in targeting were persons in drug rehabilitation and similar programs, veterans, females, and those with specific subject area interest or strength such as math/science (table 5.7) The groups most frequently rated as receiving much or very much emphasis were middle achievers, low achievers with college ability, all students in specific schools or programs, and racial and ethnic minorities (table 5.8).

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Table 5.7—Percent of Talent Search projects that emphasize targeting persons with specified characteristics

Characteristic	None or very little emphasis	Moderate emphasis	Much or very much emphasis	Not applicable
Persons in specific service programs such as drug rehabilitation	73%	5%	5%	16%
Veterans	67	8	4	22
Females	59	19	18	4
Specific subject-area interest/strength (e.g., math/science)	58	22	16	4
Non-English speaking or English as a second language	55	19	16	11
Persons with disabilities	52	29	15	4
Males	46	20	30	5
Low achievers	40	38	19	3
Urban	36	12	34	19
Rural	35	11	37	18
High achievers or gifted and talented	31	34	31	4
All students in specific schools or programs	30	18	47	3
At risk due to fragile family situation	30	32	34	6
Racial and ethnic minorities	29	25	40	4
Students who dropped out of school	29	33	34	3
Low achievers with college ability	21	26	50	3
Middle achievers	13	35	50	2

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

Consistent with Talent Search regulations that prohibit duplication of services, projects most frequently indicated “enrollment in another precollege program” as a reason for disqualifying potential participants (table 5.8). The least frequently checked factors for disqualification were “pregnancy or parenthood” and “high achievement or ability test scores” (1 percent each). Just under one-fourth of projects indicated that factors such as low grades, a record of disciplinary actions, emotional problems, or a history of drug or alcohol abuse would disqualify someone from participating.

Enrollment in another precollege program is the most common factor that would disqualify individuals from participating in Talent Search.

Table 5.8—Percentage of Talent Search projects that disqualify individuals from participating in the program for various reasons

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Enrollment in other precollege program	42%	45%	51%	46%	23%
Gang activity	24	24	33	25	18
No specific interest in college	22	26	21	26	10
Family income too high	23	26	26	25	13
Record of disciplinary actions	21	23	23	21	18
History of behavioral or emotional problems	21	25	21	23	12
History of alcohol or drug abuse	21	23	23	21	15
Grade point average below a specified minimum	21	22	18	25	15
Not first generation in family to attend college	19	19	21	25	8
Low achievement or ability test scores	13	12	15	16	10
English language proficiency below a specified minimum	4	4	8	3	3
Grade point average above a specified maximum	2	2	0	3	2
Pregnancy or parenthood	1	0	0	1	2
High achievement or ability test scores	1	1	0	1	0

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

PARTICIPANT TARGETING IN THE CASE STUDY SITES

While all the projects we visited were strongly dedicated to serving disadvantaged students (defined as individuals from low-income households and potential first-generation college students), some projects also focused on serving students with additional other background characteristics such as ethnic background.

- One case study project made a special effort to recruit children from a growing local population of Southeast Asian immigrant families. Although such students were small numeric minorities in their schools, they represented about half the participants in the Talent Search project. Project staff felt that the students' and their families' cultural backgrounds put the students at a higher risk of failure in school compared with other racial and ethnic groups. Staff observed among the immigrant population a relatively high rate of marriage and pregnancy among girls still in high school; a strongly patriarchal family structure; a deeply ingrained hesitancy to speak up in settings such as classrooms; and limited English proficiency—all factors that decreased the chance that students from the subgroup would complete high school and pursue postsecondary education.

projects targeted from low-income families or groups represented in the study.

- Another project targeted students who claimed American Indian heritage.³ Project staff reached the target population by recruiting almost exclusively from within the target schools' Indian education programs. Aware, however, of program guidelines that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity, the project did not turn down applicants from other racial and ethnic groups. Almost 20 percent of participants, in fact, were non-Indians, typically friends of the Indian students or their classmates in Indian studies courses.
- Two of the case study projects were operated by historically black colleges. Both projects worked almost exclusively with African Americans, reflecting the host institutions' missions. Some black students' affinity for the institutions may have helped make their Talent Search programs more appealing. Sources at one of the projects said that many students aspired to attend the host institution and saw Talent Search as a potential pipeline into the college.
- One city-based project took on several schools in a suburban district in order to serve a growing population of Hispanic students, many of them the children of former migrant farmworkers who had settled in the area. The students constituted a disadvantaged minority group in a mainly white and relatively affluent area.

Another background factor of interest to projects was academic performance. Staff typically described their general target group as students “in the middle,” those with academic potential who might not be able to realize their potential without the assistance and encouragement provided by Talent Search. Staff in these projects usually viewed very high-achieving students as likely to gain admission to college without the assistance of Talent Search and already potentially benefiting from other special services or attention in their schools. At several projects, we met or learned about participants who ranked near the top of their high school class, took Advanced Placement courses, and so on. For such students, Talent Search projects hoped to influence outcomes beyond just gaining admission to college—for example, directing students to more prestigious colleges than they might have otherwise considered. One project staff member said that his goals in serving a particular straight-A student included helping her to relax, have fun, and deal better with family pressure to succeed.

Staff typically described the target group as students “in the middle” with regard to academic performance.

On the other hand, staff often saw very low-achieving students as too difficult to serve within the limits of project resources; staff felt that they could not provide the intensive assistance that would be necessary to get such students to a point where college was a reasonable possibility. At least three of the projects we studied, in fact, imposed minimum GPA standards ranging from 2.0 to 2.5 for both applicants and participants. The rationale behind the GPA policy was that

Very low-achieving students were often seen as too difficult to serve with the available resources.

³This category included not only “full-blooded” Indians but also students who were officially “enrolled” as members of a tribe (those with a minimum of 25 percent Indian blood) or those who were tribally “affiliated” (those with less than 25 percent Indian blood).

students needed to perform at a level that would enable them to meet the minimum admission requirements for college and remain in good academic standing once they enrolled. In addition, the director of a project that had asked target school counselors to refrain from referring students with GPAs under 2.0 said, “The really at-risk students need a five-day-a-week program, which we can’t provide.” Other projects, though, did not use hard-and-fast rules concerning students’ grades; they determined participation on a case-by-case basis, considering whether low-achieving applicants had the ability and dedication to improve their academic performance to a sufficient level. Of course, as described in the chapter 8, some projects provided academic support to make improvement possible.

Most projects did not have reservations about accepting middle school students who did not yet have some aspirations for pursuing a postsecondary education. But some projects hesitated to take on high school seniors who, even if they had exhibited a strong interest in going to college, had not already completed some of the steps necessary to get there, such as enrolling in college preparatory courses.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT METHODS

To recruit their targeted participants, Talent Search projects turned to a variety of recruitment methods (table 5.9). The most frequently used methods included recommendations by a guidance counselor or other school staff (97 percent), presentations in school classrooms (96 percent), recommendations by teachers (96 percent), referrals by current participants (94 percent), and word of mouth or informal networks (94 percent). Incentives, such as cash, movie tickets, or donated prizes, were the choice of fewer projects (28 percent) than any other method of recruitment. Projects’ preferred recruitment methods did not differ notably by host type, except that projects hosted by private 4-year institutions reported the use of incentives more frequently than average.

The majority of Talent Search projects (56 percent) described their recruitment strategy as “reaching as many participants as possible and then screening for those that meet eligibility requirements” (table 5.10). The smallest share (13 percent) of projects described their recruitment strategy as “recruit[ing] a number of eligible participants up to the number of program openings.”

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Table 5.9—Percent of Talent Search projects using selected recruitment methods: 1999–2000

Recruitment method	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Guidance counselor or other school staff recommendation	97%	96%	95%	98%	98%
Classroom presentations in schools	96	94	95	98	97
Teacher recommendation	96	96	95	98	95
Current participants	94	93	97	94	92
Word of mouth, informal network	94	93	90	95	95
Parent recommendation	86	85	90	88	85
Presentations and programs at community-based organizations	79	77	72	79	87
Field trips and campus visits	74	68	82	75	78
Assembly presentations in schools	73	77	69	68	78
Newspaper stories or advertisements	59	60	59	63	48
Radio announcements, programs, or advertisements	47	48	56	47	40
Incentives such as cash, movie tickets, or donated prizes	28	24	41	27	28

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

Table 5.10—Talent Search recruitment strategy with regard to eligibility: 1999–2000

Strategy	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Reach as many potential participants as possible, then screen for those who are eligible	56%	96%	63%	56%	54%
Target recruiting efforts at only those most likely to meet project's eligibility requirements	28	1	26	22	32
Recruit a number of eligible participants up to the number of program openings	13	1	0	21	8
Other	3	3	3	1	5

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

While most projects responding to the survey reported the use of several recruitment methods, the case studies revealed that projects typically emphasized one or two primary methods of recruitment. Some relied primarily on direct appeals to selected students, and others worked primarily through school staff referrals. Others used a combination of the two methods. For example, by using direct appeal, staff members made short presentations in classrooms and distributed brochures and applications to students who expressed an initial interest

Some projects placed emphasis on direct appeals to students; others recruited through school staff referrals.

in Talent Search. Other projects relied primarily or exclusively on referrals from school counselors, teachers, or both. Project staff typically met with key school staff at the beginning of the school year to remind them of the program's objectives, indicate the types of students they were looking for, and perhaps provide a rough estimate of the number of available openings. Staff would then wait for the submission of names or applications. Recruitment duties typically fell to the same staff member(s) who provided services at given target schools; only one project had an in-house recruitment specialist who did not regularly work with participants.

Most projects tended to fill their openings for new students at the start of the school year, adding few participants over the course of the year. One project was 100 students short of its approved participant level at the time of our visit in mid-spring, but the director was confident that the project would reach its target by the end of the program year. Mindful of the requirement for a least two-thirds of project participants to be both low-income individuals and potential first-generation college students, project staff took care not to admit students who did not meet both criteria until they were certain that they would meet their two-thirds target number.

In some cases, even though project staff knew roughly how many of a school's students were eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch (and thus stood a fair chance of meeting the Talent Search program's dual eligibility criteria), they had no way of knowing before the submission of student applications which particular students were eligible for program participation. Staff in two projects told us that, for confidentiality reasons, districts would not release the names of students qualified for the school lunch program. In the past, school officials used to permit Talent Search staff from one of the case study projects to look at the lists, although the staff could not keep or copy the lists. Under recently tightened rules in the school, however, Talent Search staff can no longer review the lists. However, the school staff members were able to use the lists to consider which students to refer to the program.

APPLICATION AND PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

Talent Search projects require and consider several factors when formally admitting participants. Eighty-nine percent of all Talent Search projects require a signed agreement from the applicant, and 85 percent require a signed agreement from the applicant's parent or guardian before admitting participants to the program (table 5.11). Although only 5 percent of projects require the recommendation or referral of another adult or agency for admission, 82 percent of Talent Search projects consider recommendations and referrals when admitting participants to the program.

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Table 5.11—Percent of Talent Search projects that require or consider specified items when formally admitting participants: 1999–2000

	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Required					
Signed agreement by applicant	89%	89%	92%	91%	85%
Signed agreement from parent or guardian	85	86	90	84	79
Income level	55	56	63	47	63
Other	50	46	67	42	67
Recommendation of high school teacher or counselor	20	25	26	16	15
Minimum grade point average	14	12	23	16	8
Recommendation or referral of other adult or agency	5	5	10	4	3
Considered					
Recommendation or referral of other adult or agency	82%	84%	77%	87%	76%
Recommendation of high school teacher or counselor	73	71	67	79	69
Minimum grade point average	47	49	44	48	43
Other	41	38	33	50	33
Income level	40	41	32	49	29
Signed agreement from parent or guardian	11	11	8	14	11
Signed agreement by applicant	8	8	5	7	10

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

Once they admitted applicants, projects might identify minimum requirements to be considered for ongoing program participation. The requirement identified most frequently by all Talent Search projects and by each host type is “having a specified number of service contacts.” For example, a project might require that a participant attend at least one or two workshops per year. Seventy percent of all projects reported the service contact item as a minimum requirement for participation (table 5.12). The item listed least frequently was a minimum requirement for program participation is “remaining in the Talent Search program for a specific length of time” (26 percent of all projects).

Table 5.12—Percent of Talent Search projects that reported various requirements as a minimum for ongoing participation

Requirement for being considered a participant	All projects	Host institution			Community org.
		Public 4-year	Private 4-year	2-year	
Having a specified number of service contacts	70%	72%	64%	69%	72%
Attendance at specific events or activities	33	35	35	33	29
Remaining in Talent Search for a specific length of time	26	25	22	28	28
Other	8	7	0	9	12

SOURCE: National Survey of Talent Search Projects, 1999–2000.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR TARGETED STUDENTS

While family income and education define Talent Search’s eligibility requirements and program orientation, the circumstances of students and their schools varied across and within projects. Staff in case study sites mentioned several factors as specifically challenging for projects to address and for students to overcome.

- Poverty.** Schools and families differed in degree of poverty. Some Talent Search students came from very poor families and lived in areas of widespread rural or urban poverty. Under such circumstances, concerns about short-term basic needs (food and shelter) could take precedence over concerns related to college preparation. In some cases, students in poor target communities were exposed to drugs and violence.
- School quality and practices.** Some of the most frequently mentioned background or contextual factors pertained to the students’ schools. Staff described some schools as lacking the funds necessary to provide students with a well-rounded, high-quality education that would prepare them properly for postsecondary studies. A couple of projects worked with schools that either had been taken over by the state because of continuing poor performance or were at serious risk for state takeover in the near future. A source at one project said that the presence in target schools of so many students who were alienated and disengaged from the educational process detracted from the ability of serious students, such as those in Talent Search, to maintain focus on their own studies.

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- **Poor academic achievement.** Some students who joined Talent Search were performing below the level they were capable of and were not earning the grades that they would need for college admission. At some schools, poorly performing students came from low-income families, were members of racial/ethnic minority groups, and were sometimes not considered “college material.” As a result, they were directed toward vocational classes or the basic high school curriculum; they were not encouraged to take college preparatory courses.
 - **Rising educational requirements.** Some of the case study projects were located in states that had adopted high-stakes testing and required students to pass the tests as a condition of advancing to the next grade or graduating from high school. Some Talent Search staff expressed concern that some Talent Search students might have trouble with the examinations. At one project, the local state university was beginning to toughen its open admission policy, potentially making it more difficult for some students to gain admission.
 - **Immigrants, language, and cultural traditions.** A few projects served several students from recent immigrant families, particularly Asians and Hispanics. Limited English proficiency was sometimes an issue for these students and their parents, but cultural values and traditions were also an issue. Some students had to deal with parents whose ideas about what their children should do after high school did not include enrollment in college.
 - Culture was also an issue with one nonimmigrant minority group—American Indians. The director of a project that served American Indians described a kind of cultural ambivalence toward education that stems from a concern over youth losing touch with their cultural heritage—“the more education you have, the less Indian you become.” In addition, the director described many American Indian parents as more permissive than those from other backgrounds, allowing their children to explore different paths in life and not actively directing them toward a college education.
 - **Geographic isolation and limited postsecondary options.** In projects that served large rural areas, Talent Search staff often mentioned that students were isolated and had little direct exposure to things that urban dwellers probably took for granted, including a diverse economy that supported people employed in a wide variety of occupations; cultural institutions, such as museums and theaters; and college campuses. Students living in these circumstances reportedly had a relatively narrow frame of reference about what was possible for them to accomplish in life.

- **Lack of role models.** Beyond an absence of college-educated parents or other college-educated family members, some students had few local role models to inspire them toward educational achievements. They rarely saw others like themselves who had gone to college, earned a degree, and taken up a profession for which postsecondary education was a requirement.
- **Low self-esteem or self-confidence.** Some students reportedly did not see themselves as capable of academic achievement and doing what was necessary to gain admission to college.
- **Minority status and racial prejudice.** Staff at some case study projects noted that when students belonging to racial and ethnic minorities looked ahead to college, they sometimes saw campuses as dominated by whites and thus worried that they would not fit in. The occasional derogatory or stereotyping comments would further compound their discomfort. A former staff member at one project said that overt racism is less common now than in the 1960s but nonetheless still exists.

PARTICIPANTS' EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Pursuing a postsecondary education can be seen as a potentially lengthy process that starts long before enrollment. Early on, students need to develop an interest in going on to college and to see college as a potentially useful, interesting, and fulfilling experience. They need to form a desire and intention to attend college and to make higher education a personal goal. They need to know what it takes to get to college, such as admissions requirements. And they need to take actions that will get them where they want to go, such as performing well in high school and completing college applications. Helping students through this process is the role of Talent Search.

All the case study projects dealt with students at various points in the process of working toward college admission. We developed the impression that many students had some aspirations to go to college even before joining Talent Search.⁴ The strength of those aspirations varied, of course; some new participants were firmly intent on pursuing a college degree, and others were less seriously committed to that goal. Talent Search staff, however, generally did not face the potentially difficult challenge of persuading students that they *should* go to college; rather, they took on the task of convincing or reassuring students that they *could* go to college. (Indeed, helping students to achieve their pre-existing college aspirations has always been a focus of Talent Search.) The students in question were motivated and typically joined the program so that they could have

⁴Our impression is consistent with the national survey findings from NEELS:88-94 and other recent surveys indicating that most middle school students state that they hope to obtain a college degree.

access to information on what college was like and receive advice on how to get there—assistance that would help them achieve their preexisting goals.

Students' educational aspirations, before and after joining Talent Search, also varied in terms of the types of postsecondary institutions they wanted to attend and the academic degree they ultimately wanted to pursue. Some students interviewed during the case studies, for example, said that they had initially assumed they would attend only a community college after high school. They figured that a 4-year college would be too expensive or too academically difficult. In such cases, Talent Search staff aimed to broaden students' horizons and raise their aspirations for postsecondary education. This does not mean that projects steered participants away from 2-year colleges. (Indeed, staff in some projects said that, for some participants, a community college was probably the best place to begin their postsecondary education.) Rather, they encouraged students to aspire to a 4-year degree and, if they first attended a 2-year college, to set a goal of later transferring to a 4-year institution. Finally, project staff occasionally had to deal with students whose educational aspirations were unrealistically high—for example, a high school junior who wanted to attend a fairly selective university but had not taken or done well enough in the right classes to meet the entrance requirements. In these cases, Talent Search staff worked with students to help them set realistic, achievable goals.

Talent Search projects encourage students to aim high but also to set realistic, achievable goals.

At all the projects we studied, a key strategy for solidifying or raising students' educational aspirations was to focus on occupations and careers. By encouraging students to express interest in a profession, project staff could tell participants what types of college degrees would be necessary or useful for pursuing that line of work. When students expressed interest in a job that does not require a college degree, staff would try to point them toward another job that does require a college degree. For example, if a student expressed a goal of becoming a professional baseball player, he or she would be encouraged to consider a back-up career in case baseball did not work out; the student and the counselor could then discuss the educational requirements of the second-choice job.

A key strategy for solidifying or raising educational aspirations was to focus on occupations and careers.

INDIVIDUAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND SERVICE PLANS

Consistent with the fact that Talent Search now emphasizes serving students over several years from middle school to high school graduation, project grant applications must describe the plan to assess each participant's needs for services provided by the project. The case study projects used a variety of methods, and went to varying extents, to determine the needs of Talent Search applicants and participants. In an apparently very common practice, individual students described their own needs by using checklists. Table 5.13 presents two examples of self-assessments that reflect the wide variety of projects' self-assessment items. Some projects did relatively little beside review these checklists. At one project we visited, for example, staff also reviewed students' school transcripts. Staff there and at one other project explained that they could not afford to provide

Projects do individual needs assessments and develop individual service plans.

individualized services; thus, detailed needs assessments would have been a wasted effort. They had developed fairly specific curricula for different grade levels, basing their service plans on an understanding of what students generally need at different ages.

At some projects that did attempt to provide some individualized services, such as tutoring, the needs assessment process tended to be more extensive. One project that emphasized academic assistance described interviewing referred students, talking with their teachers and counselors, and looking at tests or portfolios for possible patterns revealing particular weaknesses. Thereafter, students filled out a form annually to reflect on their general level of accomplishment during the past year, to identify general areas of academic need for the coming year, and to establish individual education goals. Another project administered a standardized achievement test to new participants to assess their academic strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, one project relied on student self-assessment forms and discussions with program liaisons at the target schools for gauging individual students' needs for Talent Search services in general. But when it came to deciding on a service plan for particular schools each year, staff gave substantial weight to the judgments and requests of their school liaisons. For example, the liaison at one school might say that the eighth-graders there needed to work primarily on self-esteem, whereas a different school's liaison might say that the eighth-graders there needed to work mostly on study skills. Thus, needs assessment was more individualized than at the projects that implemented fairly standardized curricula across target schools but less person-specific than at the projects that provided more one-on-one services.

Table 5.13—Examples of the forms that two Talent Search projects used to assess students' needs	
<p>Example 1: Following is a sample of the 35 items that appeared on one project's separate needs assessment form.</p>	<p>Example 2: The items below constituted one section of a different project's basic application form.</p>
<p>Middle School Assessment Questions</p> <p>For each statement, circle A for agree, B for disagree, or C for don't know.</p> <p>Values A B C - Staying in school is important to me. A B C - I know what values are, such as honesty, integrity, loyalty, love. A B C - I know how to use my values to make choices.</p> <p>Goal Setting A B C - I know how to set goals. A B C - I have already set many goals for myself. A B C - One of my goals is to go to college.</p> <p>Study Skills A B C - My teachers say I am doing well in all of my classes. A B C - I can take a good set of notes. A B C - When I read, I can understand and remember what I read. A B C - I write down my assignments daily. A B C - I know how to prepare for tests. A B C - I ask questions when I don't understand something. A B C - I know how to create a good study environment. A B C - There are often times I need help with my school work.</p> <p>Career Awareness A B C - I know what I want to be when I grow up. A B C - I would like to learn more about different careers. A B C - I am unsure how to pick a career that I would like.</p> <p>College Knowledge A B C - I think college sounds fun, but I don't know much about it. A B C - I understand the purpose of financial aid. A B C - I know what words like tuition, bachelor's degree, etc., mean.</p>	<p>Academic and Career Needs</p> <p>Please check which of the following services you would like to receive from Talent Search:</p> <p>Academic Needs—assistance with: <input type="checkbox"/> Study Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Computer Skills <input type="checkbox"/> Test Taking Skills (SAT, PSAT) <input type="checkbox"/> Time Management <input type="checkbox"/> Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Math <input type="checkbox"/> Writing</p> <p>Career Exploration <input type="checkbox"/> Explore Different Careers (Career Survey) <input type="checkbox"/> Hear Speakers on Different Opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Attend a Career Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Participate in Job Shadowing/Internships</p> <p>College Information <input type="checkbox"/> College Admissions Counseling <input type="checkbox"/> Financial Aid Counseling <input type="checkbox"/> College Visitations and Fairs <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)</p>

SOURCE: Talent Search project officials.

