

**Testimony of Dr. Maria D. Martinez, Director
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Storrs, Connecticut**

**Before the House Committee on Education and Labor,
Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness:
*“The Higher Education Act: Approaches to College Preparation”***

March 22, 2007

Chairman Hinojosa, Representative Courtney and Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to testify before you today on the topic of The Higher Education Act: Approaches to College Preparation. I am Dr. Maria D. Martinez, Director of the Center for Academic Programs at the University of Connecticut. My office oversees an array of programs that expand and improve college access and retention for disadvantaged students.

Connecticut may be the most affluent state in the Union and its citizens are definitely among the best educated. Yet there are also pockets of poverty in our state, which leads to serious inequities in college access and completion. More than 300,000 of Connecticut's school children are eligible for free or reduced lunches, and 12 percent of families have incomes of less than \$15,000 a year.

In 1983 the University established our Center. Annually, through federal, state, institutional and private funds, our Center works with more than 2,500 college and pre-college students. Yet we, together with other college-access efforts in Connecticut, are just scratching the surface of the students who could be served.

Our pre-college programs include GEAR UP, Talent Search, and Upward Bound. Pleased by the success of Talent Search and Upward Bound, the state of Connecticut has established the Conn-CAP program, built on the TRIO model. I will concentrate my remarks on our highly-effective TRIO Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services programs.

The University has sponsored TRIO programs since 1967 because we know and can prove that they work. Over the past 40 years thousands of area middle, high school, and college students have been able to overcome the academic, social and cultural barriers to entering and completing college by participating in TRIO. As you know, TRIO programs serve students who are low-

income and/or first generation, which means that neither parent earned a college degree. Most of our students fall into both categories.

Talent Search is a low-cost early intervention program serving young people in grades six through twelve in New Haven and Windham. Participants receive counseling, mentoring, and other appropriate services. Professional staff serve as role models and influential adults who help participants after the regular school day. I am proud to report that our Talent Search high school graduation rate is 94 percent, and that 91 percent of these students go on to post-secondary education. Those numbers are truly remarkable when you consider that our state's overall high school graduation rate is 84 percent but only 60 percent of students graduate from districts with high percentages of low-income students. **(Swanson, C.B., 2004).**

Upward Bound targets students who have completed eighth grade and serves high schoolers in New Haven, Waterbury, Hartford and Windham. A smaller and more intensive program than Talent Search, Upward Bound includes a six- week residential program on campus. Ninety four percent of the Upward Bound students enroll in college, and 85 % graduate. That is an extraordinary record of accomplishment for disadvantaged students. Nationally only about 26 percent of students from families earning less than \$25,000 a year graduate from college in six years or less. This number jumps to 79% for students with family incomes between \$25,000 and \$75,000. **(Vincent Tinto, 2004)**

Student Support Services (SSS) at the University serves students who are academically at-risk, typically because of inadequate high school preparation. SSS helps students successfully enter and stay in college. They also participate in a six-week summer program prior to entering the University.

Despite financial and other pressures common to students from working poor families, 100 percent of the SSS students are retained between the freshman and sophomore years. This compares very well with a 93 % rate for the general population at the University and 75% at the Connecticut State University System (which includes 4 year state institutions).

About 60 percent of SSS students graduate in six years or less. To put this in context, the Connecticut State University System has an overall six-year graduation rate of 40 percent. Graduating 60 percent of at-risk students in six years is truly an achievement, and clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the SSS program.

We strictly document all of our services and maintain databases to record students' progress. We file Annual Performance Reports as required by the U.S. Department of Education and, at the college level, we work closely with the University's Office of Institutional Research to track the retention and graduation rates of our students.

I think you will agree that I am understandably satisfied with the results of our TRIO programs. But what I need you to appreciate is that our success (record of achievement) confirms the success of TRIO and its impact nationwide. TRIO is a pipeline of powerful programs that help nearly 900,000 students per year to prepare for, enter and complete college.

I would like to briefly share the story of one of the many distinguished University of Connecticut TRIO alumni.

Dr. Franklin R. Chang-Diaz was America's first Hispanic astronaut. Long before he stepped onto the space shuttle, he was a student, making progress toward his undergraduate degree with the help and support of the TRIO-SSS program at the University of Connecticut.

As a teenager Dr. Chang- Diaz did not speak English very well. But he dreamed of studying physics and engineering. Through hard work and the assistance of the SSS program, he

graduated from the University, earned a doctorate in plasma physics at MIT, and ultimately was recruited by NASA.

Dr. Chang-Diaz, who flew seven space missions (which is the current world record), vividly remembers the challenges of his early years, and credits TRIO with helping change his life. When asked about TRIO's impact, Dr. Chang-Diaz, said it best: "TRIO is one of the ways this country really becomes the Land of Opportunity."

TRIO programs have been changing lives for generations. I urge you to consider the information I have shared with you today in making decisions about; not only keeping TRIO but also expanding our reach.

I thank Congressman Courtney for his interest in our programs, and I thank the committee for allowing me this chance to address you.