



**Two Roads
Less Traveled**
Rolling the Dice with
Educational Opportunity

**A Discussion of TRIO, GEAR UP, &
The President's FY2006 Budget**

Dr. Watson Scott Swail

June 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Watson Scott Swail is President of the Educational Policy Institute and an internationally recognized researcher in the area of educational opportunity. Dr. Swail's work has been widely published in such education journals as *Change*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *International Management of Higher Education (IMHE)*. Prior to founding EPI, Dr. Swail served as Director of the Pell Institute in Washington, DC, Senior Policy Analyst at SRI International, and Associate Director for Policy Analysis at the College Board. Dr. Swail earned a Doctorate in Educational Policy from The George Washington University, Washington, DC; a Master of Science from Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA; and a Bachelor of Education from the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Suggested Citation:

Swail, Watson Scott (2005). "Two Roads Less Traveled: Rolling the Dice With Educational Opportunity." *Policy Perspectives June 2005*. Washington, DC: Educational Policy Institute.

THE EDUCATIONAL POLICY INSTITUTE

The Educational Policy Institute, Inc. (EPI) is a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-governmental organization dedicated to policy-based research on educational opportunity for all students. With offices in Stafford, Virginia, Toronto, Ontario, and Melbourne, Australia, EPI is a collective association of researchers and policy analysts from around the world dedicated to the mission of enhancing our knowledge of critical barriers facing students and families throughout the educational pipeline.

The mission of EPI is to expand educational opportunity for low-income and other historically-underrepresented students through high-level research and analysis. By providing educational leaders and policymakers with the information required to make prudent programmatic and policy decisions, we believe that the doors of opportunity can be further opened for all students, resulting in an increase in the number of students prepared for, enrolled in, and completing postsecondary education.

For more information about the Educational Policy Institute, please visit our website:

www.educationalpolicy.org

EPI International

25 Ludwell Lane
Stafford, VA 22554
(877) e-POLICY

EPI Canada

77 Bloor Street West, Suite 1701
Toronto, ON M5S 1M2
(416) 848-0215

EPI Australasia

174 Wingrove St, Fairfield, 3078
Melbourne, Australia
61 3 9486 1334

TWO ROADS LESS TRAVELED

ROLLING THE DICE WITH EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Watson Scott Swail, Ed.D.

In their FY2006 budget, the Bush Administration proposed the elimination of three popular educational outreach programs targeted at low-income students: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and GEAR UP. In total, this represents a cut of approximately \$700 million in federal dollars. The Administration says that the money saved from these programs is to be used to support a new High School Initiative under the No Child Left Behind Act, although there are no details at present. This discussion focuses on the implications of these policy shifts on students and families, as well as educators across the United States.

TWO ROADS

When talking about serving needy students—those from low-income backgrounds, physical or cognitive disabilities, or those who are historically underrepresented at the postsecondary levels—there are general two potential paths to follow. The first is to reform schools to better meet the needs of these students such that they receive a level of education that can allow them to meet their educational and career goals. The second is to provide supplementary instruction and support for these students. This second set provides safety nets or stopgaps to help keep students in spite of the ability (or inability) of schools to help all children.

The problem with the school reform model is that schools—even at their best—will never serve all students equally or equitably. This is pro forma in a capitalist environment, especially one funded on property-tax system. Secondly, school “reform” isn’t exactly something that is “done,” or a point at which one “arrives.” It is a never-ending process of continuous improvement, knowing that there are always things to improve and new theories and strategies that we come upon on our quest for excellence.

The challenge with supplementary programming is that it isn’t universal, isn’t uniformly of high quality, and is financially dependent on the wants and wanes of policymakers and philanthropists. Larry Gladieux and I wrote an article back in 1997 called “Financial Aid is Not Enough” in which we suggested that these programs were like “Wheels of Fortune,” where students had to be lucky enough (or unlucky enough, depending on how you look at it) to be in a certain school and sometimes a certain classroom to receive services. Sometimes similarly-needy students in one classroom fail to receive the much-needed academic support through a program that their friends in an adjacent classroom manage to receive.

These are the two roads less traveled in serving at-risk youth, named so because we, as a society, have chosen not to adequately travel down either path. While we have dabbled with school reform, mostly with the support of special philanthropically-funded efforts, we have never done justice to implementing reforms that help students learn better and teachers teach better. Similarly, we have dabbled with intervention programs that are few and far between, let alone ill-funded and often unproven.

The Bush Administration, through its FY2006 budget, is making a choice that the first road is worth traveling more than the second. Through the auspices of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Administration is suggesting that money previously earmarked for outreach efforts will now be used to bolster school reform through NCLB. I argue that, while courageous in a political sense, this is a potentially dangerous decision for the following reasons. First, even if we could reform the schools to a level that is both adequate and absolute—which we can't—we must be concerned with what happens to the neediest students in the time between now and the time of reformation. For arguments sake, let's say that by 2025—20 years from now—we could reach this point. We then must ask what will happen to the millions of students who would fall through the cracks each year because of the reduction of safety net programs to catch them? True, we'd still have our College Summits, AVID, MESA, and IHAD programs, but these programs cover a very small percentage of the need at best. Even TRIO estimates it covers only seven percent of eligible students, and it is by far the largest program nationwide. But without Upward Bound and GEAR UP, there would be little hope for these students.

Conversely, if the decision was made to solidly support supplementary programs and rebuke school reform, at least through federal funding, we would run into a similar but different problem. While safety nets would be in place—although not at a number that would even remotely provide coverage for all needy students—we would fail by not working toward a systemic solution to at least curb, if not solve, the problems that create these issues.

Most readers will understand that the obvious answer is that we must do both. The Bush Administration, however, is saying that with their limited budget, even more limited due to ill-timed and ill-needed tax cuts, they need to make choices about how best to leverage educational reform.

HISTORICAL ROLE OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Because education is a state governance issue, the federal government has had to be surgical in its involvement in education issues over the years. According to the US Department of Education, federal contributions account for only 10 percent of total education funding in the US. The US Department of Education accounts for only 6 percent of total education funding, and less than 3 percent of the entire federal budget.¹

Since the mid-1800s, due in greatest part to the limited role of the federal government in education, intervention into education affairs has been focused on issues of importance to both the general population and special groups within that population. The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 created the "land grant" institutions in the northern states; the second Morrill Act in 1890 established similar institutions in the southern states for populations with special needs. These legislative packages allowed for much greater public access to higher education across the country.

The first landmark legislative package in the 20th Century was the Serviceman's Rehabilitation Act, generally known as the "GI Bill" (1944), which allowed thousands of returning soldiers to enter higher education in an affordable manner.

After the launch of Sputnik in 1957, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which provided aid to all levels of education in the US, including the establishment of the National Defense Student Loan Program (NDSL), now known as the Federal Perkins Loan Program.

¹ US Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html>).

During the turbulent 1960s, Congress passed several Congressional Acts that further changed the nature of federal intervention into education issues. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forced the desegregation of public schools across the country. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established the federal Upward Bound programs, providing supplementary support programs for secondary school students. And the Higher Education Act of 1965 established, among other things, Talent Search, another secondary school supplementary program aimed at talented-but-disadvantaged youth. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also passed in 1965, provided resources to school districts serving low-income students through Head Start, bilingual education, and special education programs.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 was reauthorized three years later, resulting in the addition of the Student Support Services Program, which together with Upward Bound and Talent Search became known as the “TRIO” programs. In 1972, Congress again reauthorized the HEA, this time introducing the Basic Educational Opportunity Act (BEOG), a voucher program for postsecondary students later be renamed after its presenter, Senator Claiborne Pell.

Although there were legislative antecedents, Congress authorized the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 to provide legal standing and financial support regarding the treatment of students with disabilities in public schools. This Act was formally changed to the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990.

In 1998, Congress again reauthorized the Higher Education Act, introducing the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, for short. GEAR UP became a district-based supplementary program, although the state component of the program also involves significant policy-related reform efforts. Of course, 2001 brought with it the No Child Left Behind Act. NCLB is known most prominently for mandating accountability for student learning to all states, districts, and schools.

The point in this discussion is that the federal government has traditionally focused its efforts on populations that require special targeting and support, such as students with disabilities and low-income populations. In a “New Deal” manner, the federal government took on the role of overseer for those with little voice or power in political circles.

TWO PROGRAMS

Upward Bound and GEAR UP are two programs that fit the traditional federal education funding pattern. Both programs target low-income students, and both programs attempt to leverage additional reforms or services at state or local levels.

Upward Bound

Over the past 40 years, Upward Bound has helped millions of students identify and achieve their dreams. The program provides a number of resources and assistance for low-income students and veterans, including supplementary academic instruction in reading, science, mathematics, academic and financial counseling, tutoring and mentoring, information about college, completion of federal financial aid forms, and work study programs. In 2002-03, there were 770 Upward Bound projects in operation across the US, plus an additional 123 Upward Bound Math & Science projects. Over 62,000 students were served through Upward Bound in that year at an average cost of approximately \$4,500 per student.

There is much anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of Upward Bound. Each year, the Council for Opportunity in Education, the TRIO membership organization, awards TRIO Achievers Awards to former TRIO students who have made well in the real world. The list includes federal judges, prominent business men, actors, and even current members of Congress.

What is lacking is any appreciable empirical evidence of the program's effectiveness. Over the course of four decades of TRIO programs, less than a handful of federally-supported evaluation studies have been conducted. In fact, only the recent Upward Bound evaluation by Mathematica—one which has been undeservingly lambasted by TRIO proponents—is the only one that has any empirical rigor. And this over a course of four decades. Hard to imagine, but true.

The Mathematica study sparked much of the current episode as seen through the lens of the President's budget, since the Administration has used those findings as a reason to eliminate the program. The study found that the program had limited impact on its students when compared with a comparison group of similar students. The only statistically significant positive impact of the program was on students from very low-income families. As noted, the study has been criticized by many on the grounds of improper random assignments and other factors, but the study is most certainly the best of what has been done.

One major problem associated with the outcomes of the study which has never been raised is the impact of prior experience points on average outcomes across all Upward Bound projects. Prior experience points were instituted in 1980 after heavy lobbying by the Council for Opportunity in Education, then known as the National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations, or NCEOA. These points are awarded to existing programs in new competitions for funding, such that the competition may award up to 15 points out of 100 to a prior program. The result is that it is very difficult, and some would argue impossible, for a new project to come online without the addition of significant federal funds that allow for expansion. Not only do new programs face low odds of success, but the process often keeps programs from considering entering the competition.

To illustrate the reality of this issue, the last Upward Bound competition was held in 2003. Up for grabs was a slice of the \$259 million pot. In total, 811 awards were made. Of those awards, 715 were prior awardees and 96 were new awards. The percentage of successful prior successful programs was 93 percent. If one considers those existing programs that didn't adhere to the competition guidelines (either too many pages or submitted late) or chose not to re-apply, the percent of existing programs re-funded was 97 percent. In comparison, the percentage of successful new programs was 21 percent.

Additionally, the cutoff score for a 2003 Upward Bound grant was 98.67 out of 100 (for the Upward Bound Math/Science program, the cutoff was 99.17). Thus, for Upward Bound, an applicant could error by only 1.33 points on a 100 scale. Considering that existing programs could amass up to 15 points from prior experience, this seems to be awfully tilted against new programs.

The point is that any new competition for awards is a way of separating the wheat from the chaff—the good from the bad. But prior experience points, at least in their current form, have allowed the chaff to remain in the program. In terms of a large-scale evaluation, these lower-achieving programs in turn counteract any positive impact shown by the top-shelf Upward Bound programs, causing a regression

to the mean that limits the outcomes of the program. If many of these underperforming programs had been eliminated, it is possible—although not guaranteed—that the mean results from the study would have shifted up the scale.

If we keep with a more philosophical approach to evaluating Upward Bound, we can consider pros and cons of the program as it currently resides. On the pro argument, Upward Bound provides support to students that many of these needy kids just do not get from their schools or communities. It provides real strategies for advancing learning in specific domains, and introduces students to the idea of college, most for the very first time. Upward Bound programs walk students and their parents through the necessary steps of planning for college, including high school course selection, career guidance, and postsecondary finances. These are important activities that first-generation, low-income students often do not get. Upward Bound, as well as Talent Search, provides an extra set of hands for some of the most challenging-but-promising students in a school. TRIO professionals are value added to a school. And all these strategies are supported by the educational research literature.

On the opposite end, one of the biggest challenges facing Upward Bound is that it is not part of a school reform model. Some like to use that against the program, and it can be argued that Upward Bound could be reformed to work more closely with schools and school reform. But as with my prior argument, we must acknowledge that supplementary programs such as Upward Bound are needed to help fill the gaps where students leak out of the pipeline. Second, it has been argued that the overall talent of Upward Bound professionals, and Upward Bound programs, is not what it could be. Back to the discussion of low-achieving programs and prior experience, there is evidence of too many programs and too many staffers that simply aren't up for the job. Of course, we can point to most public school districts and say the same thing. Still, there needs to be a better job of auditing the performance of programs and staff for excellence.

GEAR UP

GEAR UP, also known by the mouthful “Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs,” entered federal legislation as part of the 1988 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Congress authorized GEAR UP to encourage organizations and educational entities to provide programs targeted at low-income students that would make available financial scholarships, counseling, academic support, outreach, information about postsecondary education, and other strategies to alleviate the burdens facing these youth in the pathway to postsecondary education. The overall purpose of GEAR UP is to increase the college-going rates of low-income students.

GEAR UP is coordinated through two types of grants: state grants and partnership grants. State grants allow state agencies to coordinate their own program with local education agencies (LEAs). Partnership grants are made to collaborations between LEAs, higher education institutions, community groups, and business/industry representatives. Since its initial year in 1999, GEAR UP has funded 288 partnership and 36 state grants, with total funding to date of \$1.2 billion. Today, over a quarter of a million students are served through either a partnership or state GEAR UP grant each year.

Evidence on the effectiveness of GEAR Up is limited and mixed, in part because the original 7th-grade cohort is only now in their high school senior year, but also because of the inability of the Department of Education to effectively utilize the vast data supplied by states and partnerships programs through annual performance reports (APR). The Education Department-sponsored longitudinal study began

with 7th-grade students from the 2000-01 year and has released only one report which provides scant information on students and none on their persistence from middle-to-high school. A recent study by Penn State suggests that the program is meeting its goals, but the impact on students in academics, while positive, is very small.

There are many positive components of the GEAR UP-style of initiative. It does all the right things—tutoring, counseling, providing college information—just as Upward Bound does. GEAR UP goes a few steps further by providing professional development for teachers. GEAR UP also works directly with schools, which is different than many other outreach efforts. The program is designed to leverage institutional change and brings the community and business into the schools, broadening responsibility for learning and educational opportunity.

The challenge in GEAR UP, as with other similar efforts, is for the program to show much impact after all is said and done. Many large-scale grants and programs have attempted to revise schools and school systems with little long-term effect. See Annenberg, for instance. School systems are so entrenched that it is difficult to make true systemic change and more difficult to make the change remain after funding is removed. By 2006 we hope to see how many students from the original cohort graduated, and how many matriculated to postsecondary education, but it is my bet that the findings will be marginal since GEAR UP manages to provide a thin-veil of services to students because it is cast across such a wide swath of students.

DISCUSSION

As presented earlier, the federal government is making a play to put all their marbles into school reform. While this has theoretical merit, it could play out miserably in our nation's school districts. More students may be left out in the cold with undetermined futures.

Given that the federal government has a limited role in public K-12 education, which includes college preparation, the best role for them to play is the bully pulpit and act as a lever for real reform and action. Historical federal legislation contained in the HEA, ESEA, and IDEA have effectively done that, and NCLB is the most recent example of leveraging federal resources for systematic change at the classroom level. Here are my suggestions for dealing with the current budget with regard to TRIO and GEAR UP.

With regard to the former, rather than scrapping Upward Bound and Talent Search, I suggest the federal government up the ante and do the following. First, add new safeguards to ensure that Upward Bound and Talent Search projects across the country maintain excellence and provide evidence of project impact. Current annual reporting is used only for basic counting and nothing else. Projects go to much trouble to collect their information. Perhaps the Department could use it better.

Second, revise the prior experience points such that poor projects cannot be renewed and potentially wonderful first-time projects can be. If a program is worthwhile and can illustrate impact, it should be able to do that on a level-playing field. As a colleague of mine suggested, let's revise the system and call these prior effectiveness points. At the same time, we need to revise the competitive grant process. Many programs currently hire professional grant writers to write their grants. The result of this

practice is that poor programs with good grant writers win competitions, while good programs with average grant writers don't. Somehow that process needs to be fixed. Unfortunately, the same criticism can be made for almost all federal competitive programs.

Third, make TRIO program a federal-matching program. This is the best element of GEAR UP, and TRIO programs should be treated the same way. Offer states the opportunity to match dollar-for-dollar federal and state funds. This alone would double the federal investment and also force states to take some ownership over the quantity and quality of programs. Each state could decide whether they wanted to ask for matching funds from institutions—public or private—to stretch the funding even further. All institutions need to be doing this type of work, whether at the pre-college, undergraduate, or graduate levels, so it would be in their interest to provide either in-kind contributions or real money. Leverage funds as far as the eye can see. States that refuse to match the funds will be duly noted—this organization promises to advertise these states nationally.

At the same time, also transfer responsibility for TRIO programs to the states. This is suggested because the Department of Education has never done a decent job of coordinating the program. For those who see this as an attack on the Bush Administration, it isn't. This has crossed every administration for the past 40 years. If anything, the current administration has tried to bring some sense to the process.

And lastly, if not most importantly, I'd like to see the Administration and Congress show some guts and double funding for all TRIO programs, including Student Support Services. A doubling of funding for these programs, in partnership with a dollar-for-dollar match by the states, would quadruple the funding available to help low-income students. Today's current budget of \$836 million, doubled to \$1.7 billion, would then leverage \$3.4 billion in TRIO funding. Federal funding to states would be based on a formula using the number of students on free- or reduced-price lunches in that state, our proxy for low-income students. In exchange for this increase, the feds can impose restrictions and conditions for the use of that money, just as the states can do the same to the institutions. It's about accountability of public money.

Switching to GEAR UP, this program had the right idea when it was established by matching federal funds with states and partnerships and building the program as a lever for systemic reform. It seems that the in-kind contribution of partnerships has been a problem. In several projects I've seen, as in many federal programs, the in-kind piece needs to be further regulated so that fluff is removed from the equation. I say this understanding full well that there are dozens of projects that match cash-for-cash, but my claim is for those programs that aren't quite as considerate. Thus, I don't suggest eliminating in-kind contributions toward the partnership match, but I would suggest putting some limits on the system to ward off the abuse.

Second, eliminate the cohort approach. It seems to cause more problems than it helps. If they want to keep the cohort approach, at least put in some requirements that subsequent cohorts must be served—not just one single cohort year, with the students before or after not receiving these important services. It sounds great for I Have a Dream, but it's cumbersome and complex and has the potential to leave too many kids out. While we're at it, also eliminate the 21st Century Scholar Certificates, which were at first a good idea, but now are meaningless and burdensome since the President doesn't sign them any more.

And finally, provide some decent accountability for the program. The current annual reporting requirements for the program are a start, but there have been many complaints about how the evaluation component of the program has been handled. For a program that started with a thorough look at how data would be collected and used, it rates only average in the data collection and program evaluation category.

IN CONCLUSION

If there are issues with the programs discussed in this piece, the federal government ultimately deserves the blame. It is the Education Department that has designed poor evaluations, provided a lack of efficient safe guards for program outcomes, and not provided the leadership to achieve the goals of these programs. The theories and strategies behind Upward Bound, Talent Search, and GEAR Up are solid. We know these things work. What we need to do is ensure that we are developing the best programs in the field, and that's what the federal government can do differently. But to simply oust these programs is not a prudent move.

In the end, this discussion may be moot in the short term. It is unlikely that members of Congress will turn their back on these programs. Republicans and Democrats alike have too much self-interest and too many constituents to eliminate small programs that help needy students. Politically, zeroing out these programs is a non-starter, and the Congress is proving that point.

But these shots-off-the-bow from the Administration are clear warning signs that some change has to take place. If TRIO and GEAR UP programs take solace in winning the FY2006 budget war, they should be warned that this is only the first attack. Any program that can't show true impact is walking a short plank off the starboard side.

The Bush Administration is being bold through their proposed budget, and in many instances they will likely lose. But it is ultimately up to the TRIO and GEAR UP staff and leadership to ensure that future projects are held to a high standard. Otherwise, these programs will disappear someday—soon.

* * * * *

Dr. Swail is the President of the Educational Policy Institute, an international think tank on educational opportunity with offices in Stafford, Virginia, Toronto, Canada, and Melbourne, Australia. He is a former Vice President for Research at the Council for Opportunity in Education and the Founding Director of the Pell Institute.

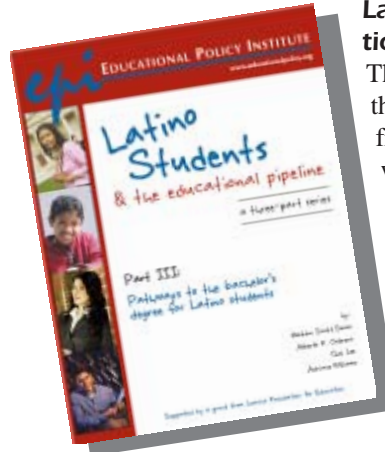


Recent Publications from the Educational Policy Institute



The Affordability of University Education

This report looks at the relative affordability of public university education in the United States and Canada, comparing all 50 US states and 10 Canadian provinces on postsecondary access, student financial aid, tuition and fee charges, and overall net cost of attendance for the years 1999-01.



Latino Youth & the Educational Pipeline

This report series documents the progress of Latino students from eighth grade to the workforce. EPI analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which first surveyed eighth-grade students in 1988 with followup surveys in 1990, 1992, 1994, and a final followup survey in 2000.



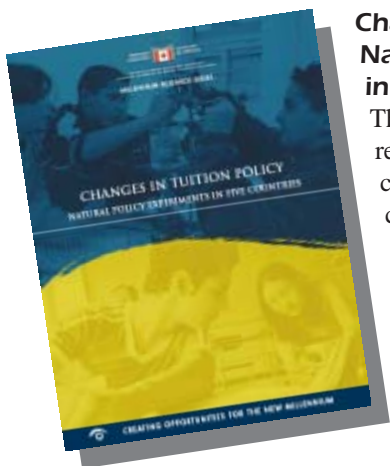
Value Added: The Costs and Benefits of College Preparatory Programs

This report considers issues related to the complex proposition that the cost of early intervention program delivery is directly and positively tied to the ability of programs to successfully enable students to get into college.



Global Higher Education Rankings 2005

The Global Higher Education Rankings 2005 represents the first systematic and rigorous exploration of the affordability and accessibility of higher education within an international comparative context. The rankings gather available, comparable data on student costs, resources, and opportunities in terms of higher education.



Changes in Tuition Policies: Natural Policy Experiments in Five Countries

This international study reviews tuition and fee policy changes and strategies in 5 countries and 9 jurisdictions. Funded by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, this review provides insight into the impact of tuition policies on enrolment.



EPIcenter/EPICentre

EPIcenter is a quarterly report by EPI which provides information on recent research conducted by EPI. A US/international version is distributed out of the DC office, while a Canadian *EPICentre* is distributed out of the Toronto office.

www.educationalpolicy.org

"Improving Educational Policy & Practice Through Research"



www.educationalpolicy.org