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WV TRIO program, which supports first-gen college students, faces funding cuts

By KATELYN ALUISE kaluise@hdmediallc.com

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Scott Robertson, right, poses with friends in the summer Upward Bound program at Marshall University while he attended Wayne High School between 1997 and 2001. Robertson is now the assistant dean of students at West Virginia University Institute of Technology in Beckley.

Photo courtesy of Scott Robertson

When Scott Robertson was a senior at Wayne High School in 2001, job opportunities in the area were starting to take a downward turn, and as a low-income student whose parents didn't graduate from college, he didn't know what his next step might be.

"If I would have not had Upward Bound, I probably wouldn't have went to school. And I don't know what would have happened or what my future would have looked like," he said.

Between then and now, the coal industry has nearly died out in Wayne, Robertson said.

"I definitely would have struggled if I tried to enroll (in college). More than likely, I would have still enrolled at Marshall. But I doubt I would have ever made it past the first semester when I would hit my first ... roadblocks or lacked confidence or felt like I didn't belong in the classroom."

Robertson's experience is not entirely unique, as West Virginia was one of the top 10 states with the highest percentage of first-generation college students — students who are the first in their immediate family to pursue a college education — in the United States in 2023, according to University Business. In 2024, Marshall University reported nearly half of its students were first-generation.

Robertson attended Upward Bound, one of eight TRIO programs catered to assist first-generation students in applying and adjusting to colleges, in the summers before he started college.

He went to Marshall's campus with a group of students from all over the state and lived in the residence halls, took classes to prepare for his undergraduate years and participated in activities that showed high schoolers "the entire scope of what a college experience would be like," Robertson said.

"Those are my people. We went through that journey together," he said.



Upward Bound, Student Support Services, the Ronald E. McNair post baccalaureate Achievement Program, Educational Opportunity Centers and Veterans Upward Bound all focus on helping students access and complete their education with support they may have not had otherwise. These programs are all under the umbrella of TRIO.

Scott Robertson, left, is pictured with students he attended the Upward Bound summer program at Marshall University with while he attended Wayne High School between 1997 and 2001. Robertson is now the assistant dean of students at West Virginia University Institute of Technology in Beckley.

Photo courtesy Scott Robertson

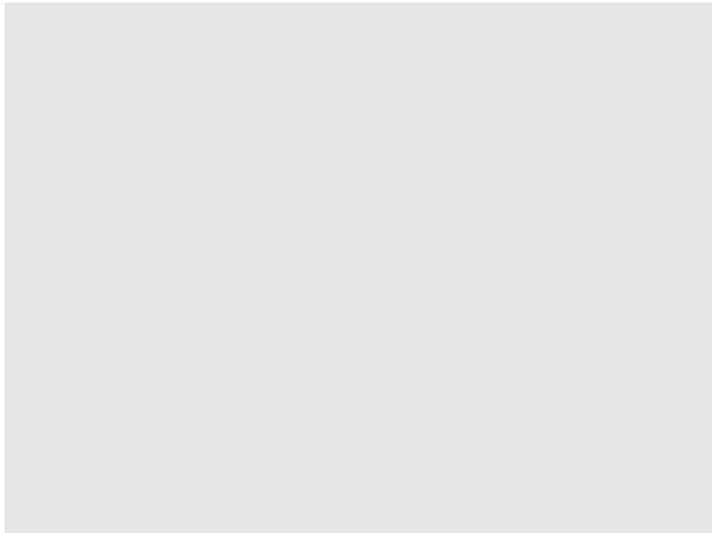
TRIO programs, alongside the GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant program meant to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter secondary education, stand to lose nearly \$1.6 billion in

federal dollars under President Donald Trump's Fiscal Year 2026 Discretionary Budget Request.

The budget request, introduced by Trump's administration earlier this month, includes preliminary recommendations for the budget not yet approved by congress.

Financial aid companion

Within the description of why the program is no longer needed in the budget request, the administration says the programs are a "relic of the past" and "access to college is not the obstacle it was for students of limited means."



Kimberly Jones, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education

Photo courtesy Terrance Hamm

But Kimberly Jones, president of the Council for Opportunity and Education (COE), said data shows that's not true.

"If you compare what's happening to students from the lowest-income families versus students from the highest-income families, students who are from the highest-income families graduate at a rate that is four times that of students from the lowest-income families. That's too far of a gap," Jones said, adding many careers require, at minimum, a bachelor's degree.

"We've got to make sure folks are getting into and graduating from college," Jones said. "We also know that folks who do earn college degrees, they have higher paying jobs, they pay more in taxes, they are less likely to be unemployed. So there are a lot of benefits that would be lost if the TRIO programs were not around."

Overall, Jones said TRIO serves 870,000 students nationwide, including about 4,700 in West Virginia.

Data provided by COE shows the Talent Search programs under TRIO increase the likelihood of students in the bottom income quartile to enroll in college by 33%. Students within the Student Support Services program are 47% more likely to complete a two-year degree or transfer and 18% more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than a matched comparison group, according to the data.

Jones said she considers TRIO the “companion to financial aid.” While students need financial resources to attend college, they receive academic tutoring, mentoring, support, exposure and encouragement from TRIO for when they're thinking about giving up, she said.

She said she hasn't received any communication from the administration so far, but she believes there is still strong support for the program from both sides of the aisle, and she's hopeful Congress will ensure it remains funded.

On the website for U.S. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., Capito says she is a “staunch advocate” for TRIO programs and even introduced a bill in 2023 to strengthen them. HD Media requested a comment from the offices of Capito and U.S. Sen. Jim Justice, R-W.Va., about the Trump administration's budget recommendations but did not receive a response before press time Monday.

Appalachia and TRIO

Today, Robertson works at the West Virginia University Institute of Technology in Beckley as the assistant dean of students — a job he said he didn't even know he could have as a student. He's also the director for Upward Bound and Student Support Services at WVU Tech, continuing to advocate for first-generation and low-income students anytime he can.

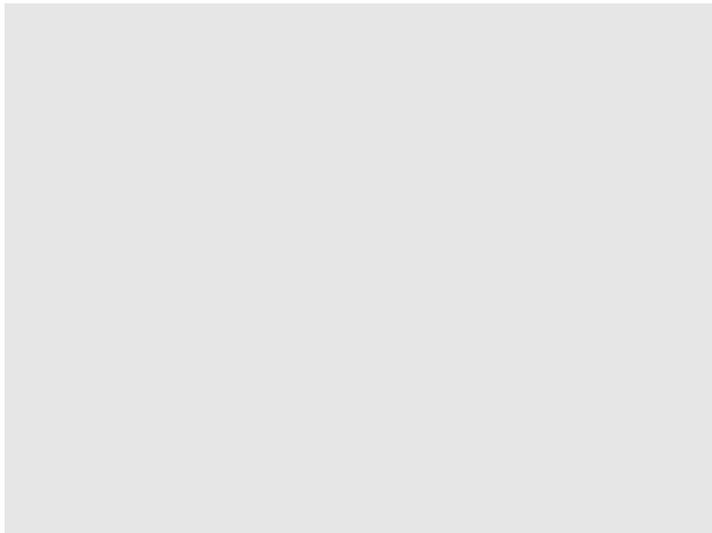
Through his office, he'll host events for all students, including education sessions about homebuying, understanding health benefits, insurance and retirement.

“For a lot of our students, their families may not have that, and so their families can't talk to them about that. So there's more to being a first generation student and a low income student than just ... struggling in your classes,” he said. “You're just not first generation in your class in school, you're first generation, in a lot of ways, for life.”

As someone from Appalachia, Robertson said the area tends to be “written off” because of stereotypes. But he said TRIO isn’t just for students who want to attend a four-year school — it can also be for those wanting to enter a certificate program or other form of higher education.

“It’s just about taking that next step, and a lot of times here in southern West Virginia, and I think most folks would agree, we were impacted with the influx of opioids and other prescription medications that impacted families. A lot of times, with students that I’m working with now, they have been adopted, are being raised by family members. Oftentimes it’s grandparents or even great-grandparents, and those individuals don’t understand the process,” he said.

“For folks in Appalachia who are wanting to continue their education, but they don’t know where to begin, having access to a TRIO program opens up an entire world, not just of college access and completion, but to change trajectories.”



Chelsey Toms, president-elect of MEAEOPP (the Mid-Eastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel) through TRIO

Photo courtesy Chelsey Toms

Chelsey Toms, who works within the Upward Bound program at Davis and Elkins College advising high school students in three counties, graduated from Tygarts Valley High School in Randolph County before going to West Virginia University. She’s a TRIO alum and formerly served as the West Virginia TRIO Association president. She’s now the president-elect for the Mid-Eastern Association of Educational Opportunity Program Personnel, or MEAEOPP, through TRIO.

She covers five states — Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and

Pennsylvania — supporting TRIO personnel through professional development, education and activism.

Toms said she also grew up in a low-income family and was a first-generation student. She said TRIO gave her the tools “just to get there and believe in myself.” She said her high school’s Talent Search program took her on college tours, checked on her grades and broke down the process of applying, while Student Support Services at WVU became her “lifesaver” once she arrived.

“They became my family, my kind of go-to when I felt overwhelmed,” she said, adding that as a first-generation student in college, she sometimes felt like an “imposter.”

“It’s just, you have your community of TRIO support that keeps reassuring you, ‘Yes, you belong here. Here’s the steps. Here’s the processes, and we’re going to help you be successful,’” she said.

Now, Toms works with students in Randolph, Barber and Tucker counties on ACT and SAT prep, college tours, and the summer program Robertson was involved in.

She said what she’s noticed the most working through the program is TRIO doesn’t just help the students, but its impact also ripples out through the family and surrounding community.

Occasionally, parents of her students have been inspired to go to school, or other families in the community have heard their stories and been inspired to send their children to college, she said.

Toms serves a small school in Harmon where she said there are many concerns about job opportunities. But she said she’s seen a passion from her students once they leave and experience education elsewhere to want to return to their hometown after college, make their investment and rebuild the area.

“My program has been around for over 20 years here at D&E, 20 plus years. So we’re well-known in our communities,” she said.

“Everyone knows what we do, and they believe in the value of TRIO.”

Katelyn Aluise is an education and court reporter.

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