

**Leadership Initiatives for TRIO Student Support Services Eligible Participants**

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**Author Note**

This is an assignment submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science (M.S.).

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**Abstract**

This paper will examine the best practices for TRIO Student Support Services professionals to deliver and support TRIO Student Support Services participants in their leadership development. TRIO Student Support Services participants come to higher education institutes with barriers that inhibit their academic and leadership development. Through partnerships with TRIO Student Support Services professionals, eligible students can build leadership development resulting in a more marketable job applicant post-graduation. A leadership development toolkit will be provided to guide TRIO Student Support Services professionals in their execution of leadership initiatives.

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## **Leadership Initiatives for TRIO Student Support Services Eligible Participants**

### **TRIO Student Support Services**

President John F. Kennedy first brought light to those living in poverty in the United States and sought to introduce measures to improve the quality of life of the poor. After his untimely and unfortunate death in 1963, many in his administration continued his fight to create programs to empower the poor through community involvement at the neighborhood level (Lefkowitz, 2005, p. 296).

In January 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson first presented his radical “War on Poverty” (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014). President Johnson’s goal was to pass a set of initiatives to “not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it” (1964). One of those initiatives became what is known today as TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) grant program.

The purpose of the grant is to "provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and to motivate students toward the successful completion of their post-secondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The overall goal of TRIO SSS is “to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). To be eligible to participate in TRIO SSS, participants need to be enrolled in a program of post-secondary education and fall into one or more of the following categories; low-income, first-generation college students and/or students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

This study aims to identify how best to deliver leadership initiatives to TRIO SSS eligible students in higher education. While many higher education institutions provide students with leadership initiatives, few tailor their programs to TRIO SSS eligible participants.

This study reflects the importance of not only leadership initiatives for all students of higher education but the specific importance to those belonging to the TRIO SSS eligible categories. Delivery of such leadership initiatives provides TRIO SSS eligible students with skills to set them apart from their non-eligible peers after graduation (Fischer, Wielkiewicz, Stelzner, Overland, & Meuwissen, 2015).

## **Literature Review**

### **Who are TRIO Eligible students?**

The current traditional population of incoming undergraduate college students belongs to Generation Z, the first generation of digital natives born between 1995 and 2010 (Ericksen, 2020). To be eligible for participation in TRIO SSS, students must fall into one or more of the following categories: low-income, first-generation college students or have a documented disability. The achievement gap in educational attainment between TRIO SSS eligible students and their non-eligible peers is significant and the reason for the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The U.S. Department of Education defines a low-income student as an "individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount" (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Effective on January 13, 2001, a family of four is considered low-income in the 48 contiguous states if their income does not exceed \$39,750 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

There is much debate on what constitutes a first-generation college student. The definition used by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid is the definition most used by

TRIO SSS Programs and will be the definition used in this paper. A first-generation college student is:

(1) A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a Bachelor's degree;

OR

(2) A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent and whose supporting parent did not receive a Bachelor's degree; OR

(3) An individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability is defined "as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020).

### **Why do TRIO eligible students need leadership skills?**

A college education is widely believed to lead to economic success, social mobility, and mental wellness (Engle & O'Brien, n.d; Tate, et al., 2015). Most higher education institutions put their focus on the academic opportunities and curriculum as a basis to build a knowledgeable graduate. However, there are opportunities for institutions to develop student's leadership capabilities to increase marketability for future employment.

Flores et al. suggest that the higher education system lacks the ability to teach students how to think (2010). They further suggest that an individual cannot successfully lead without the ability to take knowledge and transform it (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2010). Leadership is built upon knowledge and critical thinking skills. "If critical thinking skills are not

well-developed through the education system, there are ramifications to our ability to make meaning in the workforce” (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2010).

Perceived capability in achieving goals, also known as self-efficacy, has been identified as a barrier to TRIO SSS eligible participants (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). The lack of self-efficacy presents in TRIO SSS eligible participants as a lack of engagement and lack of confidence in performing tasks to produce the desired outcome, such as taking a leading role in a group assignment (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Vuong et al. 1 found that students who doubt their capabilities often become overwhelmed by mental health concerns (2010).

The American Psychological Association reports that Gen Z is more likely to report mental health concerns than other generations (Bethune, 2019). Furthermore, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, "8.7% of people with incomes below the poverty line report severe psychological distress" (2020). The lack of self-efficacy combined with the mental health concerns already plaguing Gen Z identifies a clear need for leadership initiatives for TRIO SSS eligible participants.

### **How to communicate with TRIO SSS eligible students?**

In her book *Organizational Communication*, Julie Zink suggests that organizational communication is the "interaction required to direct a group toward a set of common goals" (n.d). She further suggests that communication can promote motivation, alter an individual's attitudes, and helps in socializing (n.d). It is for these very reasons that communication is so valuable in a TRIO SSS program.

### ***Generation Z***

EAB, an organization focused on helping schools support students from enrollment to graduation and beyond, completed a student communication preferences survey in 2019. They found that

“The first generation of true digital natives, have multifaceted and shifting preferences. They are online almost constantly, yet they still value traditional forms of communication. They are quick to adopt new communication platforms, and quick to leave them. Furthermore, this generation can be difficult to engage: having grown up surrounded by social and digital media, they are masters at filtering out information that they deem irrelevant” (EAB, 2019).

The study found that “social media continues to offer significant opportunities to reach underrepresented and first-generation students” (EAB, 2019). They further found that students have very positive perceptions of website-based chat, finding it “very useful” or “extremely useful” (EAB, 2019).

### ***First-Generation College Students***

In the study titled “*You're doing great. Keep doing what you're doing*”: *socially supportive communication during first-generation college students' socialization*; the authors identified that uncertainty and stress accompany first-generation college students to their first semester at four-year universities (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). This study suggests that first-generation college students primarily engage in informational and instrumental social support interactions during their first semester. Further, they engage in appraisal and emotional support interactions (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). The study suggests that phased mentorship programs effectively put into practice the pioneering identity that emerges early in

the socialization process with first-generation college student participants (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018).

In a study by Tiffany Wang, the author looked at how student-teacher interactions and relationships facilitated the support and persistence of first-generation college students (2013). Utilizing transition theory, the study was able to identify turning point categories and subcategories that first-generation college students identified through communication with their teachers (Wang, 2013). These turning points dramatically shaped first-generation college student's perception of themselves and their chances of persisting to graduation and future challenges (Wang, 2013). The turning points identified as positively shaping first-generation college student's chances of persisting to graduation were; helped students with course-related problems, engaged students, empowered students, minimized power distance with students, and helped students with personal problems (Wang, 2013).

### ***Low-Income Students***

In a study for the Pell Institute, the authors identified institutional policies and practices among higher education institutions with high retention and graduation rates of low-income students (Engle & O'Brien, n.d). High-performing institutions were noted to have staff members who worked in special programs and/or student support services catering to the low-income population and acting as a "first responder" to the student's needs (Engle & O'Brien, n.d). Increased student involvement in the first year of school was also noted as a practice among institutions of high-performing low-income students (Engle & O'Brien, n.d). Most notably, a first-year-focused experience, mentoring programs, gatekeeping introductory courses, student support services, and special programming for at-risk populations lead to increased retention and graduation rates of low-income students (Engle & O'Brien, n.d).

The study titled *The Effect of Gender, Ethnicity, and Income on College Student's use of Communication Technologies* identified the digital inequalities on a college campus, specifically a digital divide in access to or use of technology and digital inequalities in how technologies are used (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). The study showed that because of increasing amounts of unsolicited emails and the perceived slowness of emails, students do not respond to that type of digital communication (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). The study suggests that utilizing text messaging is a better means of communicating with college students. However, policies and practices should be implemented to ensure that students from underrepresented groups, such as low-income students, have access to the technology needed to receive those text messages (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010).

### ***Students with Disabilities***

Frymier and Wanzer looked at the perception of communication with professors between students with disabilities and those without (2009). They also looked at the willingness to communicate with professors and the appropriateness of those communications (Frymier & Wanzer, 2009). The study found that students with physical and learning disabilities perceived their professors as less competent and felt less understood by their professors (Frymier & Wanzer, 2009).

### **Summary**

TRIO SSS is designed to minimize the achievement gap in educational attainment between TRIO SSS eligible students and their non-eligible peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The research supports leadership initiatives to build critical thinking skills as well as self-efficacy in TRIO SSS students. Creating a strong leadership development program supports the

persistence and graduation of TRIO SSS students and their marketability for future job opportunities.

Social Support interactions have been shown to assist TRIO SSS students in engaging in informational and instrumental interactions (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Leadership initiatives that focus on appraisal and emotional support interactions as well as mentorship effectively put into practice the pioneering identity that engages TRIO SSS participants in critical thinking and builds self-efficacy, creating leadership skills (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018).

### **Framework for Analysis**

The purpose of this study is to provide a toolkit for TRIO SSS professionals to utilize to offer leadership initiatives and development opportunities for TRIO SSS eligible participants. The research supports the initiatives outlined in the toolkit and the need for such a toolkit to support the leadership growth of TRIO SSS eligible participants. Implementation of this toolkit will provide TRIO SSS professionals an essential guide to promote leadership skills in its students.

The sources for this study are peer-reviewed articles found through both the Granite State College and Plymouth State Universities' Libraries. Upon review of the data collected, areas of implementation have been identified and solutions suggested within the toolkit for TRIO SSS professional's use. The toolkit provides leadership initiatives at no cost to the TRIO SSS program.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

There are many limitations to the research, the most pressing being the ever-changing technology and social media platforms and the current global pandemic. The existing studies

show communication recommendations from high-performing institutes in a pre-pandemic environment. While we can assume how to best communicate leadership initiatives to TRIO SSS eligible students based on current research, the global pandemic may alter that dramatically. Individual institutions should perform specific localized studies to create leadership initiative communication plans specific to their TRIO SSS eligible enrolled students.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear from the research that social media and digital communication should be the primary means of communication with TRIO Student Support Services eligible college students. EAB notes in their study that "the potential reach and impact of social media engagement with underrepresented and first-generation students is greater than ever" (2019). However, as Junco, Merson, and Salter pointed out, underrepresented groups, such as low-income students, must have access to the technology needed to receive digital messaging (2010).

To overcome technology barriers TRIO SSS professionals must create social support interactions to engage their students in leadership initiatives (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). Leadership initiatives that focus on appraisal and emotional support interactions as well as mentorship effectively put into practice the pioneering identity that engages TRIO SSS participants in critical thinking and builds self-efficacy, creating leadership skills (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018).

Strong policies and practices to increase student involvement such as first-year focused experience, mentoring programs, technology lending programs, student support services, and communication training for faculty and staff on trigger points and appropriate communication with students with disabilities will lead to high-performing TRIO SSS eligible college students.

Increasing participation in leadership initiatives creates a highly engaged TRIO SSS participant, further minimizing the achievement gap between eligible students and their non-eligible peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Building a strong leadership development program supports the persistence and graduation of TRIO SSS students and their marketability for future job opportunities, economic success, social mobility, and mental wellness (Engle & O'Brien, n.d; Tate, et al., 2015).

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