

## Today's News

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# A Study of the Upward Bound College-Preparation Program Is Becoming as Controversial as the Program Itself

By [KELLY FIELD](#)

Larry Oxendine had been the director of the federal TRIO programs, which serve disadvantaged students, for only a few days when a draft report on the Upward Bound program landed on his desk. The results did not look good.

The 2002 draft report, the third in a series from a longitudinal study, compared Upward Bound participants and a control group approximately three years after each group graduated from high school. It found that most students who participated in Upward Bound, a college-preparation program for low-income and first-generation students that has been around since the mid-1960s, were no more likely to attend college than students who did not. But there was an exception to that trend: Students who had low expectations of attending college at the start of the study were twice as likely to enroll in college if they participated in Upward Bound than they would have been otherwise.

Mr. Oxendine surmised that the reason Upward Bound failed to increase college-going rates for the rest of the participants was because those students would have gone to college anyway. He hypothesized that if Upward Bound were refocused on higher-risk students, its effect on college-going rates would be greater, and its limited budget would be spent more effectively. To test his theory, he proposed a second study comparing high-risk Upward Bound participants with a control group of nonparticipants and with lower-risk Upward Bound participants.

The study, under way in several states, has been harshly criticized by the Council for Opportunity in Education, the program's main lobbying group. The council says it is unethical, even immoral, of the department to require programs to actively recruit students and then deny them services. They have taken their fight to Congress in an attempt to stop the study.

Arnold L. Mitchem, the president of the Council for Opportunity in Education, is bothered by the study's methodology. He likens the study to the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments, in which the government withheld treatment from 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis so scientists could study the ravages of the disease.

"To take a kid who is vulnerable and say, 'You've got a shot at college,' and then take it away," he says. "... What is it that you were so desperate to find out that you had to abuse people?"

Mr. Oxendine, who retired earlier this month, says he was "simply trying to get the program focused on students it's meant to serve." He argues that motivated, high-achieving students don't belong in Upward Bound -- they belong in Talent Search, a less-intensive, less-expensive college-prep program.

"I just don't understand how anyone who is truly interested in helping students would object to what we're

trying to do," he says.

The fight over the evaluation has become a bitter, sometimes personal, war of words, with Mr. Oxendine accusing Mr. Mitchem of playing racial politics and Mr. Mitchem accusing Mr. Oxendine of using flawed social science to advance a political agenda.

It is unclear which side will ultimately win. While the study has already begun, the council has persuaded Congress to include language in a pending higher-education bill that would halt the evaluation.

### **Sixties Origins**

Congress created Upward Bound in 1964 with the goal of preparing more low-income students for college. A few months later, it created a second college-preparation program, Talent Search. The pair of programs formed the foundation of TRIO, which now includes six outreach and support programs for disadvantaged students and veterans.

Upward Bound's and Talent Search's aims are similar, with both offering tutoring, counseling, test preparation, and assistance with college applications. But Upward Bound is much more intensive, providing academic instruction on top of its other services.

It is also much more expensive. The government spends close to \$5,000 annually on each student who participates in Upward Bound, but only \$385 on each Talent Search participant. For students who remain in Upward Bound for four years, costs can approach \$20,000.

Because the Upward Bound program is so costly, the federal government has long sought to gauge its effectiveness, to make sure the money is being well spent. In 1991, the Education Department commissioned Mathematica Policy Research Inc. to conduct a longitudinal study to determine whether students who participate in Upward Bound fare better than students in other precollege programs.

The third follow-up study of that group was published in 2004, two years after Mr. Oxendine, the director, received a draft of it. It found that 74 percent of the Upward Bound participants surveyed attended college, compared with 71 percent of the students in other programs or no programs.

The Council for Opportunity in Education says the study was "contaminated" because students were allowed to participate in other college-preparatory programs, including Talent Search. They argue that differences between the two groups would be more pronounced if researchers compared Upward Bound participants with students who did not take part in a college-preparation program.

"The Mathematica study is a great canard," says Mr. Mitchem.

### **Cherry Picking?**

Mr. Oxendine sees things differently. He says the results show that Upward Bound programs are serving students who would succeed without the program. He believes that many programs set unrealistic college-attendance goals and then are forced to choose high-performing students to meet those targets.

"They feel that if they don't have a high-enough number, they won't get funded," he says.

Mr. Oxendine says he repeatedly urged Upward Bound programs to make their college-attendance goals ambitious but attainable, and adds that he instructed those who review proposals to dock points from the ones that promised unrealistic gains.

Mr. Mitchem concedes that some of the students Upward Bound serves would probably attend college with or without the program. But he argues that Upward Bound helps those students achieve their full potential, and warns that programs would waste money if they were forced to pick students who were unlikely to attend college.

Mr. Oxendine counters that the program is wasting money by serving high-achieving students who don't

really need Upward Bound's academic services.

"For every Upward Bound student we serve, we can serve 12 in Talent Search," he says. "What a hell of a waste."

### **Operation Rolling Thunder**

Things haven't always been so tense between the Department of Education and the Council for Opportunity in Education. In fact, the first year President Bush was in office, he proposed spending more on the Trio programs.

But the relationship became strained the following year, when the president proposed no increase in spending for Upward Bound, declaring the program "ineffective."

Then, in 2005, and again in 2006, the administration proposed killing Upward Bound and Talent Search and using the savings to finance the expanded programs that would be needed if the president's No Child Left Behind law were broadened to include high schools. But each time, Congress restored funds for the programs.

Tensions deepened further still last summer, when the department proposed an evaluation of Upward Bound. The council, already suspicious of the department's motives, saw the latest study as an attempt to build a "scientific" case for abolishing the program.

In May, the council went on the offensive, starting a lobbying effort intended to undo the administration's actions through legislation. The effort, which the group dubbed "Operation Rolling Thunder," focused on members of the Congressional Black Caucus, including Rep. Robert C. Scott, a Virginia Democrat who sits on the U.S. House of Representatives education committee.

The effort bore fruit in June, when the committee adopted an amendment by Representative Scott that would bar the department from proceeding with the study. Lawmakers are expected to vote on a final version of the bill containing the amendment this fall.

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