



Vermont Student Assistance Corporation

**Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions:**

**“Strengthening Federal Access Programs to Meet 21st Century Needs: A Look at TRiO and GEAR UP”**

**106 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

**Thursday, January 16, 2014, 10 a.m.**

Good morning. I want to thank the Committee, Chairman Harkin and Senator Alexander for the opportunity to discuss this pressing need for access to postsecondary education for low- and middle-income students.

I also want to thank the Honorable Senator Bernie Sanders, of my home state of Vermont, for his continuing focus and heartfelt dedication to Vermonters as they pursue their educational and training goals after high school. Senator Sanders has been especially helpful and supportive of our mission at the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation. The Senator is a staunch advocate of making sure all Vermonters have equal access to education and other essential services. I am grateful for his leadership and support.

We in Vermont proudly consider ourselves to be the “education state” and take great pride in both our innovations and our national leadership. From Senator Morrill of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Land Grant Acts, to Senator Stafford whose name is attached to Federal student loans, we have elected leaders who have brought our passion for equal access to education to the Nation’s Capital.

Vermont was one of the handful of pioneers of the National Early Intervention Scholarship Program (NEISP) that in 1998 became the GEAR UP program under the leadership of then Chairman Jim Jeffords and Representative Chaka Fattah.

My name is Scott Giles and I am President and CEO of VSAC. Even before joining VSAC in 2003, I spent much of my career in public service, primarily focused on federal finance and higher education policy. I have served as chairman of the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance and currently am on the board of the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, the nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to increase access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students.

Additionally, I have served as Deputy Chief of Staff of the House Committee on Science. In that role I advised the Chairman on education, space and research policy and managed the Subcommittees on Research and Space and Aeronautics.

Here in the Senate, I served on the staff of this Committee -- Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions -- where I was honored to advise the Chairman on budget, education and research policy. It's nice to be back.

Briefly, let me tell you about VSAC. The Vermont Student Assistance Corporation is a public, nonprofit corporation created by the Vermont Legislature in 1965 to help Vermonters plan and pay for education or training beyond high school.

VSAC is unique among state-based agencies because we provide, under one roof, a full range of services aimed at helping Vermonters navigate the complexity of educational choices and how to finance those plans. VSAC has a rich history of providing career and education planning to Vermont students and their families, particularly those who are low-income or the first in their family to continue on to postsecondary education.

In fact, VSAC has been administering the Talent Search program since 1969 and we have the only statewide program in the nation. We began the Educational Opportunity Center program for adults in 1976. Both programs, as you know, are made possible because of TRiO funding.

GEAR UP in Vermont began in 1999 and we're celebrating 15 years in 2014.

As steadfast advocates for Vermont students and families, VSAC is always evolving and adapting to serve Vermonters' needs for education and training after high school. We are proud of the role we play in changing lives during changing times.

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Most of the focus lately about pursuing education beyond high school has been about money. But financial resources are only half the challenge that students and families face.

To try to understand this, think back on your own personal journey. When did you decide you were going to pursue education after high school? Who guided you?

Our research shows that students of parents with education after high school will report that they "always knew." Students of parents without education after high school report phases — some decide before eighth grade. Many, however, don't seriously aspire until their junior year — long after ninth- and tenth-grade course choices have put them in an academic hole.

We know that a high school diploma is necessary but not sufficient to enter and remain in the middle class. Our education system, however, is still structured around an old agrarian model.

I would like to invite you to engage in a thought experiment. What would our policies look like if we truly believed in a PK-16 education model and the transition between high school and post-high school education or training programs had the purpose and certainty of the transition from middle school to high school?

Too many students and families do not know how to select an education or training program, apply for admission, or apply for financial aid.

We are all aware that the United States needs an educated workforce to remain competitive in the global economy. And Vermont students – just like those in the rest of the nation – need to acquire education or training after high school in order to thrive and succeed.

You may be familiar with the research from Anthony Carnevale at Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce. As he succinctly points out, the data is clear.

Having a robust generation of postsecondary-educated workers is the key to reversing and stopping the growth of income inequality.

In Vermont, I believe the evidence is positive: TRiO and GEAR UP programs are working. But I also will share some suggestions for enhancing the delivery of TRiO and GEAR UP services.

So, how are Vermont GEAR UP students doing? Quite well.

- In the last year, we assisted more than 2,500 students in 54 schools. Out of this priority group, the high school graduation rate exceeded the U.S. rate by 20 percent. And, this GEAR UP group also exceeded the statewide graduation rate by 10 percent.
- This same group also went on to postsecondary enrollment at a rate that exceeds the nation by 17 percent and by more than 23 percent in Vermont.

But we didn’t stop there. We have been following GEAR UP’s progress in postsecondary education for the past 7 years with GUIDE, or “Giving Undergraduates Important Direction in their Education” program. GUIDE scholars receive on-campus and online services to help them successfully make the transition.

The program is relatively new, but 75 percent of survey respondents re-enrolled for sophomore year.

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Turning to Talent Search, we reached more than 1,000 middle- and high school students, offering individual and group meetings to address academic skills, course planning, college exploration and planning for future education and financial needs.

Of these Talent Search students, 99 percent graduated from high school and 81 percent enrolled in postsecondary programs.

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To conclude, these efforts make a difference in Vermonters’ lives, but I do believe there ways we can improve.

While the TRiO and GEAR UP programs have unique strengths, they could benefit from enhanced collaboration of programmatic elements. At VSAC, we house the programs with overlapping staff, which improves cooperation.

The goals are similar, the desired outcomes are complimentary but both could benefit from strengthening certain aspects:

- Improved program assessment;
- Provide training to program participants to enable them to use data to drive improvement in their programs;
- Reduce the legal and regulatory obstacles to sharing data between high schools, GEAR UP and Talent Search programs, and postsecondary education and training programs in order to support students and build more effective programs;
- Strengthen the dissemination model so that successful projects and programs can easily be replicated across the country and in both programs;
- Gear Up's cohort model is experimenting with ways to build college-going cultures within middle school and high schools. Embed it in both higher education policy and elementary and secondary education policy.

I want to turn back to the thought experiment I asked you to engage earlier in my testimony. I believe that every student needs education or training after high school. I believe that no student should graduate from high school without a career and education plan that includes a resume, a completed FAFSA, and an application to the education or training program that will enable them to achieve their personal goals.

Thank you for your time today and I welcome your questions.