

Testimony of Jessica Sotelo  
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Pocatello, Idaho

on behalf of the Council for Opportunity in Education

Before the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education  
Committee on Appropriations

United States House of Representatives

The Council is Recommending an FY2005 Appropriation of \$833 million  
for the Federal TRIO Programs

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9:00 A.M.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Jessica Sotelo and I am presently the Executive Director for *Partners for Prosperity* in Pocatello, Idaho. I am testifying today on behalf of the Council for Opportunity in Education. But more importantly, as someone who participated in the TRIO Talent Search Program, I am very grateful to be speaking on behalf of the 873,000 students currently participating in the TRIO Programs and the 2 million students that have graduated from college with the support of TRIO.

Chairman Regula, before I proceed with my testimony, I would like to thank you and the other members of this Subcommittee for your strong commitment to the TRIO Programs over the past few years as you have expanded access to these programs -- even when you have been faced with severe fiscal constraints and tough budget decisions. Moreover, I would particularly like to acknowledge Congressman Mike Simpson, my Congressman from the 2nd District in Idaho, who is a very strong supporter of TRIO and to helping to expand educational opportunities for all Americans.

As you know, the TRIO Programs provide a continuum of comprehensive support services (from middle school through college) to help low-income, first-generation college, and disabled students, including adults, prepare for and successfully complete a postsecondary education.

Now I would like to tell you how my life changed dramatically as a result of the TRIO Talent Search Program at Idaho State University (ISU) in 1997. In order to understand the significance of your investment in the TRIO Programs for me personally, I would like to tell you a little about my background.

I come from a blue-collar, working class family and grew up in a small town in Idaho named Blackfoot. You could say that my family has always lived paycheck to paycheck. No one in my family had ever gone to college, and it seemed like an impossible dream when I graduated from high school. At that time, my family did not understand the college admissions process or how to apply for grants, scholarships and student loans.

After high school, I worked in a series of jobs: waitress, housecleaner, cashier, secretary, and travel agent. In 1992, I became a displaced homemaker and a single parent of a 2 year child. The next few years were very difficult as I tried to make ends meet, and I eventually moved in with my parents. I found part time employment at the local office of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare when I went in to apply for benefits. It didn't pay much but at least it was a job.

In 1997, while still working at the Department of Health and Welfare, I attended a training event sponsored by my employer where we heard about the different services offered for low-income people in the community. This event was a turning point in my life. During the training, I heard Diana Guerrero speak about the ISU TRIO Talent Search Program and about the many services this program offers students. While she explained that the Talent Search Program was an outreach program that helped middle school and high school students prepare for college and then transition from high school to college, she also talked about how the program helped adults who wanted to pursue a postsecondary education as well.

At that moment I felt like she was speaking to me. I had always wanted to go to college but didn't understand how to make it happen. After the training, I approached Diana and made an appointment. As Paul Harvey says...and now for the rest of the story.

In the summer of 1997, I began college at Idaho State University. The Talent Search Program helped me “get going” in every possible way. The staff helped me through the financial aid process, admissions process, and provided emotional support when I needed it. They turned into my private cheerleaders during my four years at ISU. I had always thought I was too old, too dumb or too fat to attend college. They saw my potential and helped me capitalize on it.

I don't like to blow my own horn, but I do want to tell you how the investment paid off. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and a 4.0 grade point average. During my junior year, I was selected as a Harry S. Truman scholar, one of the most prestigious scholarships in America. After graduation, I attended the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs where I received a Masters in Public Administration.

After graduate school, I took a giant leap of faith and returned home to Idaho in the hopes of finding a job making a difference for my home state. I was hired as the director of *Partners for Prosperity*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing poverty in Eastern Idaho. The organization was beginning a national competition for long term funding from the Northwest Area Foundation. Over an 18 month period, we gathered and analyzed information about poverty and developed a 10 year strategic plan to reduce it. Finally, in December of 2003, we were notified that our organization was selected for Venture status and would receive an \$11 million dollar grant to reduce poverty in 16 eastern Idaho counties and the Fort Hall Indian Reservation (Shoshone-Bannock Tribes).

One of the biggest bonuses is that my son now talks about college and many other young people in my family talk about college as well. Someone had to be the first, and without the ISU TRIO Talent Search Program to help me take that step, my life would be very different now. I would never have the opportunities that I have now. I wouldn't have a savings account or the money to let my son play the trumpet in the school band. Because of TRIO, I was able to take my son to Disneyland, as I promised him I would do after I finished college, and I'm now in the process of trying to buy my first home.

I believe that the Talent Search Program, as well as the Appropriators on this Subcommittee, made an investment in me 7 years ago, and many other students like me. I firmly believe that the investment pays off whether it's realized in the economic status of the recipient or the recipient's children.

That's why I, on behalf of the Council, am recommending an appropriation of \$883 million for the TRIO Programs in Fiscal Year 2005, an increase of \$50 million. With this increase, up to 54,000 additional students and adults could benefit from TRIO services. Making this investment in TRIO will expand educational opportunities and help more Americans secure jobs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But more importantly, it will help people, like myself, be able to fulfill their dreams of one day going to college.

I am proud to be associated with the TRIO Programs, and I thank them for helping me to change my life, and more than likely, the lives of several people in my family. I thank you for your investment and support of a program that pays such big dividends.

Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about my experiences.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Sotelo is a native of Blackfoot, Idaho and has been the Executive Director for *Partners for Prosperity: New Beginnings for Eastern Idaho, Inc.* since 2002. She recently returned to Eastern Idaho after graduating from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University with a Masters of Public Administration degree in 2002. Jessica received a Bachelor of Arts degree in American Studies from Idaho State University (ISU) in 2001. Her self-designed program focused on social welfare policy and medical anthropology. Since 1997, she has been actively involved in several research projects beginning with the “Healthy Families in Healthy Communities” project at ISU. In 1999, she traveled to Boston University for a semester as a research assistant at the School of Public Health Medicaid Working Group. During this project, she interviewed developmentally disabled adults for quality of life issues related to home care based services and access to community resources. During the 2000 census, she worked as an enumerator, traveling to various Eastern Idaho communities to interview community members. Part of the assignment included the special mission of finding people who are traditionally undercounted during the census. Prior to her academic career, Jessica worked for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare in Blackfoot as a bilingual Client Services Technician. Although her principal responsibility was providing direct client services, she also helped develop office protocol for client/staff interaction and training material for new translators. During her six years with the department, she established a network of community resources for the Spanish speaking community.

Jessica has also been active in community service for Eastern Idaho. In 1999, she was the community service director for Golden Key International Honor Society. During this time she planned and coordinated a service project for National Make a Difference Day called “Little Things Make a Difference in a Child’s Life”. Members of Golden Key and the community collected hats, gloves, socks, school supplies, children’s books and personal hygiene items for low-income children in the greater Pocatello/Idaho Falls area. The project received two grants from Wal-Mart Corporation to purchase additional items and Jessica coordinated with local social service agencies to distribute the donations. In 2000, the project received several awards, including a national award from the Points of Light Foundation and USA Today Newspaper for being one of the best service projects in Idaho for National Make a Difference Day.

In recent years, Jessica has received several prestigious awards. In 2000, she was awarded a Harry S. Truman Scholarship, the first at ISU in 21 years. The Truman Scholarship is a nationally competitive award based on leadership, community service, academic record and commitment to a career in public service. In 2001, she was honored as the Educational Talent Search Student Achiever of the Year for the ISU TRIO Program, and in 2002 she was awarded the Northwest Association of Special Programs Achiever of the year award.