

THE START POINT:  
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS OF TRIO  
STUDENTS AT THE POINT OF ENTRY INTO A POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT  
OR POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT PROGRAM

A Dissertation  
by  
ALICE BOGGS LENTZ

Submitted to the Graduate School  
at Appalachian State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Reich College of Education

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## **Abstract**

### **THE START POINT: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS OF TRIO STUDENTS AT THE POINT OF ENTRY INTO A POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT OR POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT PROGRAM**

May 2013

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For almost 50 years, federally-funded TRIO programs in the United States have served disadvantaged students to promote their postsecondary enrollment and postsecondary degree attainment. TRIO is the set of federally-funded programs serving first-generation college students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and other students to support and facilitate their postsecondary enrollment or postsecondary degree attainment. The purpose of this study was to examine the aspirations and needs of 94 students at their point of entry into a TRIO program. Students' aspirations and needs were considered against the purposes of the TRIO programs, as stated in U.S. legislation. Employing a grounded theory research methodology, the researcher explored what students envision for their futures at the start point of their TRIO experience and how the students' perspectives support the purposes of TRIO programs. The major finding that emerged from the analysis of the evolution of TRIO programs over their half-century of existence is the broadening and extending of TRIO programs along five dimensions. These dimensions are the definition of

a disadvantaged student, the age ranges of TRIO participants, the levels of education where TRIO programs operate, the targeted populations identified by TRIO programs, and the increased accountability required of TRIO participants and TRIO programs. Four major findings emerged from the analysis of statements that students wrote at the start point of their entry into a TRIO program. The first finding is the focus on the self in the abstract, with over half of students stating specific goals that they want to accomplish by way of their postsecondary enrollment or postsecondary degree attainment. The second finding is the focus on the family in the abstract, with almost one-fourth of students articulating the desire to be role models for other family members or to acknowledge prior or future generations. The third finding is the students' enthusiasm about and pride in being first-generation college students at present or in the future, with over one-fourth of the students referring to the honor of being the first in their families to go to college. The fourth finding is the students' perspectives on their futures that extend beyond the postsecondary enrollment and postsecondary degree attainment purposes of TRIO programs. Differences between the statements written by young students preparing for postsecondary enrollment in the future and those written by older students already in college are uncovered and explored. Implications of the findings and of the resulting theory for TRIO program management and for federal policy are presented in hopes that they might inform TRIO purposes and services to students in the programs' next 50 years. Suggestions for further research are also presented.