

December 2020

Highlights of [GAO-21-5](#), a report to the Republican Leader, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives

Why This Matters

The Department of Education gives grants to schools and organizations that provide disadvantaged students with services to help them attend college. These eight grant programs are collectively known as “TRIO”, named for the original three programs.

Congress provides over \$1 billion each year to these programs, but Education could do more to understand how well these grants work to help students.

Key Takeaways

Education could improve the information it has about TRIO programs in two areas: (1) grantee performance data, and (2) program assessments.

Schools and organizations report data to Education to show how the TRIO grants they receive have been working. For example, organizations that receive grants to encourage students to complete college report on the numbers and percentages of students who received services and earned degrees.

Education evaluates grantees’ performance using the self-reported data, but has done little to verify the data. Accurate performance data are important because returning grantees can earn points for past performance in the next grant competition—increasing the likelihood that they will receive new grants. Almost 80 percent of recent TRIO grants went to returning grantees.

Therefore, grantees may have an incentive to report a more positive picture than warranted. Officials from an organization representing TRIO grantees told us there is a risk that some grantees may report inaccurate information.

As for assessing the individual TRIO programs, studies of some programs are outdated. In addition, Education has never assessed the effectiveness of three of the seven TRIO programs that serve students, and did not have any new assessments planned as of August 2020.

TRIO PROGRAM GOALS

helping disadvantaged students to:



PROCESS



Program
sends money to grantees.



Grantees
provide services to students.



Students
receive school-related services.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education documents. | GAO-21-5

How GAO Did This Study

We analyzed data from Education about TRIO grantees and applicants. We also reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations and agency documents, and interviewed Education officials and other TRIO stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

Education should take additional steps to ensure the reliability of grantees’ performance data and develop a plan for assessing the effectiveness of the TRIO programs that serve students. Education generally agreed with our recommendations.

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