Talent Search Grantee-Level Performance Results: 2009–10

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education is committed to ongoing improvement in managing its programs so as to improve the educational outcomes of students. In its efforts to strengthen the work of its programs, the Department provides grantees, key stakeholders, and the public with data on programs' performance and with contextual information to encourage reflection, action, and collaboration. The Department uses postsecondary enrollment rates and rates of application for financial aid, discussed in detail below, as its measures of the Talent Search (TS) program's performance.

Performance measures for Talent Search (TS) projects

The two performance measures for TS projects are:

- Enrollment rate: the percentage of college-ready project participants who enroll in a program of postsecondary education during each budget period or during the next fall term.
- Financial aid application rate: the percentage of college-ready participants who apply for financial aid during the budget period.

The grantees' Annual Performance Reports (APRs) are the source of data for calculating these measures. For Talent Search projects, "college-ready" project participants are defined as high school seniors (Section III, item A3 of the APR), their equivalents in alternative education programs (III.A4 and III.B1), high school graduates or their equivalents not already enrolled in a postsecondary school (III.B3), postsecondary dropouts (III.B4), and potential postsecondary transfers (III.B5). Grantees report the number of participants in each subcategory; the sum of these is the number of college-ready participants. Methodology for each calculation can be found in the Appendix.

Selected findings

Table 1 displays the number and percentage of participants who enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions and applied for financial aid, along with the total number of participants served and the number of college-ready participants served. The data are presented at the program level and the individual project level. The calculation methodology for Table 1 can be found in the Appendix.

For 2009–10, the TS program-level postsecondary enrollment rate was 80.2 percent of all college-ready participants. This is slightly lower than the 2008–09 enrollment rate of 80.5 percent, but it exceeds the Department's 2009–10 program-level goal of 79.5 percent.

The 2009–10 program-level financial aid application rate was 89.2 percent of all college-ready participants. This is slightly higher than the 2008–09 financial aid application rate of 88.6 percent, and it exceeds the Department's 2009–10 program-level goal of 87 percent.

Table 2 displays the number and percentage of college-ready participants who enrolled in two-year, four-year, other, and unknown types of postsecondary educational institutions, at the program and project level, as well as aggregated by the type of grantee. The table shows that participants in TS projects administered by four-year institutions had an enrollment rate of 79.8 percent, participants at two-year institutions had an enrollment rate of 78.2 percent, and participants at secondary/non-profit/other institutions had an enrollment rate of 82.7 percent. Participants at two-year and four-year institutions tended to enroll in postsecondary educational institutions of the same type as the grantee institution through which they participated in the TS program. The calculation methodology for Table 2 can be found in the Appendix.

The pattern of enrollment in various types of postsecondary educational institutions was as follows:

- Overall, a somewhat greater proportion of TS participants enrolled in a four-year (52.4 percent) rather than a two-year postsecondary educational institution (43.1 percent).
- A considerably greater proportion of participants served by four-year grantee institutions enrolled in four-year (60.1 percent) rather than two-year institutions (35.1 percent).
- Participants served by two-year grantee institutions exhibited the opposite pattern, with a lesser proportion enrolling in four-year institutions (39.2 percent) compared to those enrolling in two-year institutions (57.2 percent).
- Participants served by secondary schools or non-profit or other organizations enrolled in four-year (53.8 percent) and two-year postsecondary educational institutions (41.5 percent) in a pattern very similar to the overall participant population.

Table 2 also shows at the project level the sector of the individual grantees and the enrollment pattern of their postsecondary enrollees at four-year, two-year, other, and unknown institutions.

Limitations of data and findings

First, it is important to note that the enrollment rate and the financial aid application rate are outcome measures of project performance. The limitations of the data set used for this analysis (the Annual Performance Reports) do not permit us to determine project impacts, such as the extent to which the postsecondary enrollment rate or the financial aid application rate is a result of participation in TS.

Among the 464 projects in Table 1, 31 served fewer than 60 college-ready participants. For these projects, small changes in numbers can cause significant changes in percentages. For example, a grantee that serves five college-ready participants will have an enrollment rate of 100 percent if all enroll in postsecondary education, but a rate of only 80 percent if just one student does not matriculate. In other words, slight changes in the numbers of participants enrolling in

postsecondary education or applying for financial aid would result in large changes in the corresponding rates for those projects.

In addition, one should consider that both performance measures refer exclusively to outcomes of college-ready program participants, who accounted for only 21.2 percent of all program participants in Table 1. While the enrollment and financial aid measures are unquestionably the most important indicators for the Talent Search program, the program is also presumably helping many of the remaining four-fifths of program participants (who are not yet college-ready) make steady progress towards their own eventual postsecondary education.

Because the data set does not permit analysis of the roles of all factors that may affect postsecondary enrollment rates and financial aid application rates in individual projects, **the data should be interpreted with caution; comparing rates between projects could lead to unwarranted conclusions.** For example, a project may have lower than average rates because the project may be serving more students with a high risk of academic failure, who have low educational aspirations, and/or who are in low performing high schools. The full documentation of each grantee's circumstances would require collecting far more data about the 464 grantees and over 368,000 participants served; such a data collection would be burdensome to grantees and would require a disproportionate commitment of the TRIO program's resources.

Efficiency measure for Talent Search (TS) projects

For TS, the efficiency measure is the difference between the annual cost per participant and the annual cost per participant who had a "successful outcome." For the purposes of this measure, on a yearly basis a participant is considered to have experienced a successful outcome if he or she enrolled in postsecondary education during the budget period or the next fall term or if the participant was promoted to the next grade in middle or high school. Participants who experienced successful outcomes thus constituted a subset of all participants.

Postsecondary education enrollment is measured by 2009–10 Annual Performance Report (APR) Section IV item E1: enrolled in postsecondary education (first-time enrollment or reentry). Promotion to the next grade is measured by Section IV.A1: promoted to next grade in middle or high school. The total number of participants who experienced successful outcomes is the sum of these two mutually exclusive variables.

The calculation methodology for Table 3 can be found in the Appendix.

Selected findings

Table 3 shows the efficiency measure calculations at the individual project level and the program level, as well as aggregated by the type of grantee. The program-level efficiency measure was the $28.17 gap between the annual cost per participant and the annual cost per participant who was successful. Among grantees, smaller gaps tend to be an indication of higher efficiency. Four-year grantee institutions had the smallest gap ($25.40; lower than the program-level measure), followed by the two-year grantee institutions ($26.37), while other types of grantees (secondary schools, and non-profit or other organizations) had the largest gap ($37.14). The

relatively large gap for the last-mentioned group could be due in part to these grantees' having served a higher percentage of college-ready participants (30.2 percent) than did the four-year and two-year institutions (19.5 and 18.3 percent, respectively). A college-ready participant is counted as "successful" only if he or she enrolls in postsecondary education (PSE), while a non-college-ready student is counted as a success if he or she is promoted to the next grade in middle or high school—an accomplishment often less daunting than PSE enrollment.

Limitations of data and findings

The efficiency measure varies among individual projects. These figures should be viewed with caution, and in some cases may be misleading. Individual projects may be serving many more or far fewer participants than they were funded to serve, which would skew the resulting efficiency measures. Given the possibility of such misinterpretation, it is important to consider the efficiency measure in the context of the other columns in the table; in particular, the percentage of participants who were successful (which ranges from 21.7 percent to 100 percent) should be noted since lower success rates generally are associated with larger gaps. There may be valid reasons for some projects to have relatively low percentages of successful participants, however, so even these measures should not be used to compare individual projects in the absence of knowledge about project goals and target populations. For example, a project might be serving a high percentage of students with low levels of preparedness for enrollment in postsecondary education, resulting in a lower percentage of successful participants. In sum, all the data in Table 3 should be considered, not just one column, and data should be interpreted with caution; comparing rates among projects could lead to flawed conclusions.

APPENDIX

Calculation methodology for enrollment and financial aid application rates (Tables 1 and 2) and efficiency measure (Table 3)

College-ready calculation

The total number of college-ready participants for each project was calculated by summing the total number of project participants reported for each of the following educational statuses (at time of first service in the budget period):

- High school senior (APR Section III, item A3),
- 18 or younger enrolled in an alternative education equivalent to high school senior (III.A4),
- 19 or older, reentered school as senior or alternative education equivalent (III.B1),
- 19 or older, high school or high school equivalency graduate not already enrolled in a postsecondary school (III.B3),
- 19 or older, postsecondary dropout (III.B4), and
- 19 or older, potential postsecondary transfer (III.B5).

Enrollment rate calculation

Each project's postsecondary enrollment rate was calculated by dividing the number of program participants who enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions during the 2009–10 budget period or in the fall 2010 term by the number of college-ready participants served by that grantee, and multiplying by 100. Each project reported the number of program participants who enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions during the 2009–10 budget period or in the fall 2010 term in APR Section IV, item E1.

Financial aid application rate calculation

Each project's financial aid application rate was calculated by dividing the number of program participants who applied for postsecondary financial aid during the 2009–10 budget period by the number of college-ready participants served by that grantee, and multiplying by 100. Each project reported the number of program participants who applied for postsecondary financial aid during the 2009–10 budget period in APR Section IV, item C.

Efficiency measure

The total number of participants who were successful was calculated by adding the number of participants who enrolled in postsecondary education (APR Section IV, item E1) and the number of participants who were promoted to the next grade in middle or high school

(IV.A1). The percentage of participants who were successful was calculated by dividing the number of successful participants by the total number of participants served (II.A3).

The annual cost per participant was calculated by dividing the project's 2009–10 funding by the total number of participants served, and the annual cost per participant who was successful was calculated by dividing the project's 2009–10 funding by the total number of successful participants. Finally, the efficiency measure (that is, the "gap") was calculated by subtracting the annual cost per participant from the annual cost per participant who was successful.