The TRIO Day Magazine Committee (TDMC) had the opportunity to interview Arnold Mitchem, Ph.D. to better understand the work he has done over the years. The end result was an insightful and unique perspective on educational opportunity leading to the advancement of the poor and disenfranchised groups.

TDMC: What was it like for you growing up? Where did you grow up?

AM: I was born in Chicago to a working class family. We lived in housing projects until I was 12. At that point, my family moved to Pueblo, Co which was a racially integrated steel-mill community. Although I left for the mid-west after high school, I returned to the Pueblo area and earned a bachelor’s degree in history and education in 1965. The Pueblo area was an important part of my maturation. I recall that when I was in high school in Pueblo I was taken as part of a student group, to Loretta Heights College (no longer in existence) and stayed there four days engaging in activities and enjoying the college experience. That opportunity really excited me and made concrete what was only, up to that point, an idea in my head. From that point on, college was real.

I pursued graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow and was a leader in the Black Student Union. I was deeply involved with the civil rights movement and social justice issues. The opportunity to explore those issues in the context of educational opportunity for low-income students was a powerful attraction. So, as a faculty member in the Marquette University history department, where I had intended to become a tenured professor, the offer to become the founding director of the Marquette University Educational Opportunity Program was one I simply could not refuse. From my first experiences with that work, it was clear to me that only a national effort could establish and expand these kinds of programs and supports. I knew enough about history and political science that the way you deal with mistreatment is that you organize.

TDMC: How do you view the recent accomplishments of the FY 2015 Omnibus Appropriations Act?

AM: On December 16, 2014, President Obama signed H.R. 83, the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act into law. This bill included two very important provisions relating to TRIO. First, it instructed the U.S. Department of Education to release the final application for the Student Support Services program by December 18, 2014, and to make all grant awards by August 10, 2015. We know that the Department of Education did, in fact, comply with this directive as the final grant application appeared in the Federal Register.

Second, the legislation provided $839.7 million in TRIO funding, representing a $1.5 million increase. Although not a huge increase in funding, this increase is considerable in light of the fact that the bill cut overall funding for the Department of Education by $166 million and several key programs that support low-income communities — such as Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, and even Pell Grants, received funding cuts.

Overall, this bill represents a triumph of TRIO advocacy and our community is to be commended.

TDMC: Why do you believe that the challenges for first generation and limited income students will change?

AM: As I have said many times to the TRIO community, we must not lose faith or hope in our commitment to low-income and first generation students. In addition to the funding increase that I alluded to earlier, we also won a battle in the 2015 Omnibus Appropriations Act with the Student Support Services (SSS) Application process resulting in the Dept. of Education reducing the Competitive Preference Priority points, to six points. We ensured that the deadline for grant submission gave applicants 45 days from the publication of the final application and successfully advocated for a change in the measurement used in the SSS Objectives on graduation and/or transfer back to four years for two-year institutions and six years for four-year institutions.

These were new challenges faced and met. These victories
are your victories and reaffirm your strength as advocates. Future challenges will continue to take different shapes but what doesn’t change is that you are the proxies for the poor. You identify with the poor. You care and have concern about the aspirations, the welfare and the tears of the poor. TRIO programs take years to build the trust of parents, to grow roots in low-income communities. You maintain and grow these relationships, respond to the specific needs of your students and your cities and regions.

Whatever “change” hands you, you will be prepared to respond with confidence and strength. We’ll get through this storm and the next and the next. There’s no question about that. TRIO is going to exist for a long, long, long time because it is grounded in a need and an imperative that is social, moral and economic. And I don’t see anything out there on the landscape that has changed that makes TRIO less relevant today than it was when I walked onto the stage with TRIO in 1970.

TDMC: How do you rate the importance of having nine TRIO programs at Wichita State?

AM: This is an outstanding accomplishment. We know that a well-educated and diverse workforce energized by opportunity and the American Dream is essential to building a robust and sustainable economy. So for Wichita and, I’m sure, for the state of Kansas, the availability of these TRIO supports for low-income, first generation students has and will continue to have a profound impact on the well-being of students, their families and even the state economy. It is also a credit to the educational leadership at Wichita State, from the top-down and must include, of course the unwavering leadership of the Wichita State TRIO community, which continues to establish, maintain and grow these critically important services.

These are the issues that continue to motivate me and spur me on to action.

TDMC: Where do you get your inspiration and motivation to continue your advocacy work?

AM: I’m very much a 1960s guy. Social justice meant something to me. They weren’t just abstractions or words. I care about the people. What I saw early in my work with low-income students and the funding mechanisms that control them is that politicians and bureaucrats will not protect programs, only practitioners. Bureaucrats look at programs from their point-of-view, their circumstances and their priorities, and politicians look at programs from their point-of-view. This understanding motivated me in my early years of organizing and motivates me still.

In the midst of historically significant anniversaries like last year’s 50th anniversary of Upward Bound and this year’s 50th anniversary of Talent Search and the Higher Education Act it is impossible not to think about the critical importance of our programs and their interconnectedness with the Higher Education Act. The commitment to making a college degree possible and to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges created in the language of the HEA demands more than simply articulating support for the Pell Grant program. Life-changing services for low-income Americans that allow them to navigate the complicated college admissions process and make prudent decisions must also be protected.

I believe that there still has never been a truly robust alignment between financial aid and supportive services or a real recognition of the value and necessity of supportive services in the wider higher education world. What we know with certainty is that in order for financial aid to be used efficiently and effectively, students receiving such aid must have easy access to academic and related supports to help them solve problems, navigate systems, and thrive as college students.

These are the issues that continue to motivate me and spur me on to action.