The keynote speaker for the February 13, 2014 National TRIO Day banquet is Linda Byrd-Johnson, Ph.D. For nearly 36 years, Byrd-Johnson has been employed by the U.S. Department of Education in several different capacities. She currently serves as the senior director, Student Service Area, Office of Postsecondary Education, where she is responsible for directing, planning and managing the Federal TRIO Programs, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), GEAR UP, College Access Challenge Grant, Jacob Javits, and the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) programs.

The Ezine committee had a chance to catch up with Byrd-Johnson to ask her a few questions.

Q: It has been four years since we last interviewed you for this publication. What, in your opinion, has been the most significant change for the TRIO programs?

Byrd-Johnson: The most significant change for the Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) in recent years is a result of the authorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), which amended the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). The passage of the HEOA was pivotal to changes in the TRIO Programs as it required the negotiation of subsequent changes in the regulations governing the programs, some of which were significant. The HEOA set forth/established outcome criteria specifically for the precollege programs and introduced required activities. Since the promulgation of the regulations in 2010, there has been a new competition under each of the programs, beginning with Student Support Services and culminating with Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math and Science, Veterans Upward Bound and the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Programs. Equally important, the new regulations established a level of achievement, which projects must demonstrate in order to be eligible for points under the Prior Experience (PE) Criteria.

Changes in the program regulations, and requirements established in the Notices Inviting Applications under each of the program competitions necessitated the development of new performance reporting forms to facilitate the collection of data on project outcomes. Also worthy of mentioning here is the fact that the Department achieved a goal of being able to provide grantees with their PE score at the end of the submission of their annual performance reports, which began for the first time with SSS in 2012, the first program competed post HEOA.

Q: You have been with the Department of Education for over 35 years. What have been the most rewarding aspects of your job(s) as you begin to reflect on your career?

Byrd-Johnson: I thoroughly appreciated the opportunity to serve in a number of capacities in the Department as I gained invaluable experience and knowledge from each. My most rewarding positions have been my service as a program specialist in International Education, the Federal TRIO Programs and albeit a short tenure serving as the acting deputy assistant secretary for Higher Education Programs. My tenure with the International Education Programs provided an opportunity for me to apply my graduate education training in managing programs designed to increase the participation of groups underrepresented in international and global studies as well as opportunities to travel overseas to enhance my knowledge. In a number of ways, my tenure with the TRIO Programs under the umbrella of Student Service (SS) has been my most rewarding professional experience. This position provides opportunities to inform policies relating to access to and completion of postsecondary education programs by low-income, potential first generation college students and students with disabilities. Low-income students deserve advocates at all levels of the education pipeline. Having respon-

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sibility for the myriad of student-focused pro-
grams administered by SS (Federal TRIO Pro-
gams, GEAR UP, Child Care Access Means
Parents in School, College programs and the
Access Challenge Grants along with Graduate
Assistance in Areas of National Need) has been
and continues to be my reason for continuing
to work to make a difference for all students.

Serving as the acting deputy assistant secretary
for Higher Education Programs provided a
platform for me to work more collaboratively
with colleagues with responsibility for adminis-
tering Federal programs the support capacity
building for minority servicing institutions;
most of which are also grantees under pro-
grams administered by SS.

Q: What kind of a legacy do you hope to leave
the TRIO community with?

Byrd-Johnson: It is my hope that the TRIO
community understands and appreciates my
commitment to the programs and that I have
been successful in conveying to TRIO profes-
sionals how much we value their work with stu-
dents. That I was successful in many of my
efforts to navigate the bridge between the De-
partment and the TRIO community. That is,
being a voice of support for the community
within the Department when needed and also a
voice of reason and clarification with the TRIO
community when bureaucratic process seemed
out of touch with community needs. And that
the current TRIO leadership has embraced my
constant recommendation that they have a re-
sponsibility to prepare the next generation of
leaders so that the tradition of serving a cause
greater than oneself continues.

Q: How do you view TRIO’s impact on stu-
dents, institutions, and communities?

Byrd-Johnson: It must be understood here that
my view of TRIO’s impact on students, insti-
tutions and communities is based on per-
sonal assessments and not on research findings.
When you listen to the students currently being
served by TRIO and TRIO alumni, you im-
mediately understand the positive impact of
their participation in TRIO, not only in their
lives, but on the lives of their families and peers.
Conversations with institutional representatives
that are TRIO grantees always seem to convey
the impact of TRIO on opening the doors of
access to students that would likely not been able
to successfully pursue programs of postsecond-
ary education. The services offered by the pre-
college programs and the collegiate programs
have been instrumental in retention, graduation
and yes, enrollment in postbaccalaureate pro-
grams. Regarding communities, I would venture
to say that local businesses that provide intern-
ships, research opportunities and other outreach
to local TRIO projects do so because they wit-
ness the commitment of both students and
TRIO professionals to opening doors to them as
future contributors to the well-being of the com-
munies in which they live. I am not surprised at
all when I learn that TRIO alumni return to
their communities to serve in a myriad of public
service-type positions and/or volunteer in local
community efforts to enhance the lives of its low-
income citizenry – I AM PROUD because as
the slogan goes – TRIO WORKS!

Q: Finally, what advice would you offer to
TRIO personnel to make the program more ef-
effective?

Byrd-Johnson: As several of us often say that
have been working in TRIO for some time, I
would encourage TRIO personnel to remain
mindful that expectations are not the same as
those of the early projects. This is to say, TRIO
personnel must own the responsibility of ac-
countability, be flexible and committed to adapt-
ing to ever changing strategies and challenges. To
continue to be successful in achieving outcomes,
project directors must avail themselves to inno-
vations and promising practices to produce out-
comes that will accurately demonstrate the im-
pact of the Federal TRIO Programs on the stu-
dents served. This will require honest assess-
ments and evaluations of the delivery of services
and acceptance of third party validation of out-
comes.