

Trump administration plans to abolish TRIO college access programs; Collins wants to save them

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A 60-year old program that helps disadvantaged and low-income students get access to higher education is on the chopping block along with other proposed cuts to the U.S. Department of Education Sen. Susan Collins and some of her colleagues are fighting to save it.

The Trump administration's proposed budget for 2026 does not include funding for TRIO federal grant programs.

TRIO was created as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's Higher Education Act of 1965 and got its name from the original trio of grant programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. It has expanded over the years to include several additional programs and services.

In Maine, 7,500 students are enrolled in TRIO programs, a number that includes a mix of college and secondary school students. Participating students have access to college preparation tools, academic support, education on financial literacy and more through TRIO programs.



Dori Leadbetter outside the Richard J. Randall Student Center at the University of Maine at Augusta, where she works as a TRIO adviser helping disadvantaged and low-income students go on to higher education. The Turner resident became a first-generation college student thanks to the support she got through the federal TRIO programs. *Anna Chadwick/Staff*

Photographer

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TRIO funding flows through numerous schools and support agencies in the state. It wasn't clear how much total funding flows to the state, but the University of Maine System alone is receiving \$16.2 million this year to support more than 20 TRIO programs.

Collins, a Maine Republican who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee and is a longtime supporter of TRIO, pressed U.S. Education Secretary Linda McMahon about the future of the services during a subcommittee hearing Tuesday.

"I have seen the lives of countless first-generation and low-income students, not only in Maine, but across the country, who often face barriers to accessing a college education, changed by the TRIO program," Collins said. Three members of her staff were TRIO participants, she said.

McMahon said that the administration is committed to responsibly cutting programs to shrink the bureaucracy and save taxpayers money.

"What we found is the (TRIO) programs, while I absolutely agree that there are some effectiveness of the programs, in many circumstances, these programs were negotiated at very tough terms, in that, the Department of Education has no ability to go in and look at the accountability of TRIO programs," McMahon said.

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Collins said she strongly disagreed with the plan to eliminate TRIO.

"Well, as with the Job Corps program in the Department of Labor, I think the answer is to reform and strengthen those programs, fix what's wrong, and increase accountability — not abolish them," she said.

Last month, Collins also publicly criticized certain spending cuts outlined in the budget release, TRIO included.

Other Senators and members of the House of Representatives from both parties have said they oppose the elimination of TRIO.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-New Hampshire, and Collins sent a letter to McMahon in late May urging the Department of Education to release the remaining funding to sustain the Upward Bound program this year.

Collins announced this week that, after a delay, the department had released the remaining TRIO Upward Bound grants for the rest of this year.

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According to Collins, the Upward Bound budget provides \$549,957 to Bowdoin College and \$437,584 to the University of Maine at Farmington to help more than 180 students from various Maine high schools with access to counseling and information about higher education.

The funding for other TRIO programs has yet to be released for this year.

Nearly 880,000 students nationwide were actively served by TRIO programs in 2024, according to the [Congressional Research Service](#).

Data collected by [After School Alliance](#), a nonprofit organization focused on providing children with quality after-school programs, shows the United States currently allocates approximately \$1.57 billion a year to TRIO students. That money will be eliminated at the end of this year under the federal budget pending in Congress.

In response to the Senate hearing, hundreds of [TRIO alumni — including 116 from Maine — sent a letter](#) addressed to the Appropriations Committee urging Congress to reject the proposed budget.

Dori Leadbetter, of Turner, said the support she got through TRIO changed her life, and the lives of her children.

Leadbetter connected with TRIO programs through the [Maine Educational Opportunity Center](#) and the University of Maine at Augusta. She is now a program adviser for other TRIO students.

Without the help of TRIO, Leadbetter said, she would not have been able to attend college. After dropping out of high school her senior year, Leadbetter put education aside to raise her family. Years later, at age 39, Leadbetter got divorced and went to the Maine Career Center looking for a path forward.

The center introduced her to workers at UMA, where she got support through TRIO as a low-income and first generation college student. Her adviser at the educational opportunity center showed her how to apply for financial aid and obtain tuition funding.

“I didn’t know what it was like to go to college. For me, TRIO taught me the skills that I’m now able to help others with,” said Leadbetter.

TRIO also provided Leadbetter with emotional support, she said. “Any time that I felt I couldn’t do it, I had two TRIO advisers at MEOC and UMA who I could reach out to for support.”

Although the Maine Department of Education does not operate or oversee any of the TRIO programs directly, a spokesperson for the department said that it recognizes the importance of supporting access to higher education for students who are at a disadvantage.

Leadbetter said she is concerned about the potential elimination of federal TRIO funding, especially for the sake of future generations.

“I did break the generational poverty. My children have degrees. My grandchildren, the oldest is twelve, they will have degrees because I’ll help them get there. It’s not just me, it’s my entire family,” she said.

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