Upward Bound: Success Spans 50 Years and Beyond

By Sylvia Mendoza

Dr. Rashida Vassell remembers coming from Jamaica at the age of 9, her dream of becoming a doctor already deeply engrained in her heart and mind. Her family – father, mother, seven siblings – settled in the Bronx and into school, dedicated to education. However, they had no idea how to pursue the dream and make it a reality.

“I always did well academically, but lots of people do well academically,” says Vassell. “What happens to many first-generation students is they get to college but then don’t know what to do from there. We get missed and fall through the cracks.”

Her cousin recommended Upward Bound. While in high school Vassell entered the program based at the Bronx Community College. Under the direction of Michelle Danvers-Foust, director of TRIO Precollegiate Programs which includes Upward Bound Classic, Upward Bound Math and Science, and Talent Search, Vassell thrived and received the direction she needed.

“Michelle was like a second mother to us,” says Vassell. “Someone cared about us academically and cared about us as individuals and helped us maneuver the system to get to the right places.”

Vassell made it through college and went on to grad school and med school. Now a general surgeon in New York, Vassell believes she wouldn’t have made it without Upward Bound. “You can have a dream and drive but need to find out how to open doors, find opportunities and access tools to be successful. That’s what Upward Bound does for you.”

That’s what Upward Bound has done for thousands of students in the United States. According to the Council for Opportunity in Education, there are 964 programs serving 80,000 students. The Upward Bound program has been in existence for 50 years and continues to be a vital component of educational success for students from low-income backgrounds.
Bound success stories take students beyond college. The program makes them community leaders and people of influence, from entrepreneurs to educators, inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. Often their success breaks the cycle of poverty.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, Upward Bound is the pre-college federally-funded program created in 1964 as part of the War on Poverty. Designed to help low-income, first-generation college students develop the skills and motivation necessary for success in college postsecondary education, it is the oldest and largest of the first federal TRIO programs, which includes Student Support Services and Talent Search. As mandated by Congress, two-thirds of Upward Bound students served must come from families with incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level and in which neither parent graduated from college.

According to the U.S. Department of Education website, Upward Bound partners colleges with challenged and under-resourced high schools to expose students to college and prepare them for the challenge of higher education. Students receive instruction in college readiness, literature, composition, mathematics, and science while on college campuses. The program runs after school, on Saturdays and in a six-week summer component that gives students an opportunity to live on a college campus and earn credits toward their high school diploma and college degree. This pipeline program often becomes more of a lifeline for students and staff.

**The Program In Action**

Danvers-Foust has worked with the Upward Bound program at Bronx Community College (BCC) in some capacity for 27 years. With a 61 percent Latino student population, her college mirrors the population of their community, she says. Sometimes their environment doesn’t lend itself to academic success.

“In my first year, 1987-1988, there were students that went home every weekend to attend a funeral,” says Danvers-Foust. “Someone they knew had been killed. Life interrupts the learning process here. With Upward Bound, they can be free of their environment for six weeks and focus on themselves and their futures for a change.”

BCC works with four target high schools. They take students on a first come, first serve basis – beginning when student and parent show up for interviews, committed to take on the intense program. “We don’t look for A students. Our goal is to have students graduate college ready so they don’t have to take remedial classes when they get to their college campus.”

Students commit to a six-week summer immersion program and Saturdays throughout the school year. “It’s not always a cool thing,” remembers Vassell. “It’s sacrifice. We gave up summers and worked hard.” It’s a tradeoff that allows them to see their potential and believe there is opportunity to follow their passion. They get acquainted with college life. They visit nearby campuses. They live in dorms. They go to administration offices, to the cafeteria, to the gym.

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Dr. Antonio Flores, executive director, HACU
They work with principals and counselors. They take numerous field trips to see a life beyond their community and campus. They take classes and are counseled on how to keep that momentum going back at their high school campuses.

Danvers-Foust has on average four teachers, 106 students, and offers four hands-on academic classes – foreign language (Spanish or French), math (all levels), English language arts and the sciences per session. It also takes a special teacher to be part of this program.

“We have to take it beyond the academics. The teachers are invested in the students. We have to take a holistic approach in caring for these students. We pay attention to their individual needs, their lives."

Even after students get to college, the Upward Bound doors never close on them. Reality hits and some students start flailing. “You have a few who mess up when they get to a college campus and all that goes with finding their independence,” says Danvers-Foust. "Most come back for help to get back on track – and we help them.”

Same Mission, Same Vision

The Upward Bound anniversary was celebrated at the 33rd annual conference of the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), which has more than 1,100 colleges, universities and community-based organizations as members. Committed to expanding college opportunity, it is the only organization with affiliates in all 50 states, focused on assuring that low-income and first-generation students have a realistic chance to prepare for, enter, and graduate from college. It provides much needed advocacy for Upward Bound and the other TRIO programs.

Oscar Felix, associate vice president for access and diversity and executive director of the Access Center at Colorado State University, is serving as current chair for the COE board. The Upward Bound success story can be told over and over again and there is a need to ensure it continues, says Felix.

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The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) is the only national educational association that represents Hispanic-Serving Institutions,
INNOVATIONS & PROGRAMS

representing more than 480 colleges. Its goal, like TRIO’s, is to increase opportunity and open new doors for historically underserved populations, says Dr. Antonio Flores, HACU executive director and a former director of the Upward Bound Program at Hope College. Flores, HACU works on funding for HSIs and TRIO programs to get students to and through college.

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The Ripple Effect: Beyond Students

Flores came to the U.S. as an adult, with an undergraduate degree but limited English speaking skills. Hired by the Upward Bound program, he helped place students and so had to learn a lot in a short time, he says. “Working with the program opened new horizons. I learned from the students and their success. I wouldn’t have aspired to higher education and a PhD without it.” His affinity for the program drove him. Years later, he became director of the Upward Bound Program at Hope College.

Because of Danvers-Foust’s work with Upward Bound at her campus, she went back to school for her master’s degree and then on to law school. “My own kids who are now 16 and 21 have had the privilege of growing up in this environment and they know the ropes, too.”

At Colorado State’s Upward Bound program, Felix works with a full-time associate director, three project coordinators, an academic specialist and a core group of dedicated teachers, who seem invested for far more than one Upward Bound session. “Manny Valdez was my math teacher when I was in the program,” says Felix, “and he is amazing with the students now.”

It is as if once introduced to the power of Upward Bound outreach, individual connection and commitment can last a lifetime.

Future: The Need To Grow Upward Bound

Upward Bound has been a model for success for 50 years. However, more money from Congress is needed to grow the program, says Felix. “We’re only serving 10 percent of the population that can benefit from the Upward Bound program.”

To keep getting funding, he keeps better data on his graduates, tracking them and their success after college. In addition, he works with university administrators, board of regents and faculty, who can give feedback as to what incoming freshmen are lacking. All are apprised of the program’s mission and vision and there is full buy-in, which makes getting funding more likely, he says.

“Funders want to see data, not just hear about success stories and showcasing students. This effort lends to university advancements with grants.”

Flores agrees. HACU advocacy encourages financial commitment from Congress, state and local governments. “We need to persuade those who make decisions with public funds to invest in this community, which will be the salvation of this nation. Non-Latinos have not grasped that vision.”

Given the dramatic demographic shift of Latinos in mainstream America, if every college and university bridges to K-12 schools, many millions more young people from underserved and underrepresented areas would be better equipped to succeed once they enter, Flores says.

“Very few programs can transform lives like Upward Bound,” says Flores. “It’s a whole new ballgame, the pipeline connection. It needs to be made a national enterprise. We need to massively replicate its mission.”

Dr. Antonio Flores