

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 27, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

We write to bring your attention to an urgent matter regarding the Department of Education's ("Department") recent decision to deny funding for Upward Bound TRIO proposals for Fordham University and Columbia University in New York City. These misguided decisions, which were not based on the merits of either projects' proposal, will adversely affect the very students this program is intended to prepare for success in secondary and higher education.

As you are well aware, the Upward Bound Program—part of the Federal TRIO Program system administered by the Department—provides additional educational services for high school students from low-income families or whose parents do not hold a bachelor's degree. The program also helps vulnerable students graduate from high school in a timely fashion and puts them on a pathway to higher education. The Upward Bound program has been highly effective in helping disadvantaged students achieve educational success and a brighter future since it was created by Congress under the *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*.

Since 1983, Fordham University has provided an Upward Bound Program to students in the Bronx. For the upcoming school year, Fordham proposes to provide additional educational services to 92 students across six high schools, two-thirds of which will be from low-income, first-generation-college backgrounds. Fordham provides tutoring, formal classes, academic advising and counseling, and other educational services to improve student grade point averages and proficiency levels in key subject matter. It also works to reduce dropout rates, and encourage progression and successful completion in secondary education. For 34 years, Fordham's Program has consistently and effectively met these goals. Fordham also supplements federal funding by investing heavily on incidental expenses to ensure students have the resources they need to succeed in the program. A generation of young men and women in the Bronx owe their educational achievement to the opportunities they were given through the Fordham Upward Bound Program.

Unfortunately, Fordham's Renewal Application was summarily rejected, without the benefit of peer review, because Department staff asserted that the request exceeded the allowable amount for the grant. This was the case even though the total amount of grant funding requested on the SF-424 Form did not exceed the amount allowable, nor did the estimated grant amount on the DE-524 Form. In no place where a total amount of the grant request was indicated in Fordham's proposal, did the total amount requested exceed the allowable amount. There was a typographical 'cut and paste' error in a budget breakout within the proposal that indicated an incorrect amount for a

particular budget line that was mistaken, but the total grant amount requested was always within the allowable amount. This minor error should not be the sole reason the application is rejected.

Since July 1965, Columbia University's Upward Bound Program has been integral in expanding access to higher education to low-income and first-generation college bound youth in the University's surrounding urban communities. The longevity and strong, foundational work of its program is a testament to Columbia's commitment to supporting the educational needs of these individuals. Columbia's Upward Bound Program provides services to 190 students per year. Additionally, Columbia has furthered its mission by providing and securing supplementary funding to offer enriched and innovative programming for these students. For over 50 years, Columbia's Upward Bound Program has provided an invaluable service to the community. A loss of funding would jeopardize critical support offered to low-income and first-generation college-bound youth in the districts of highest need in the City. This program has benefitted thousands of students over the course of its life at Columbia, and has led to increased high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and completion of post-secondary education. Denying funding for this critical program will directly and negatively impact the very students it is meant to help.

Columbia's Upward Bound Program application was deemed ineligible for further consideration by the Department due to a spacing issue with text included in its application. While Columbia's application did include sections, such as charts and tables, that were single spaced, its outright rejection without the opportunity for correction of a minor issue is strikingly troublesome. Given the well-established history, reputation, and impact of this program in particular – both within the community and nationally – we respectfully request that the Department grant an additional review of the application based on the merits of the program and the substance of Columbia's application.

A quality education is the most important key to success in life. The direct investment we make in our students today will affect their life outcomes for years to come. However, the Department's unwillingness to consider these applications from the affected universities on their merits runs counter to the Department's mission. Both universities have a strong history of effectively using these funds to meet the needs of low-income students. Our students deserve much better.

We appreciate your immediate attention to this matter and ask that the Department reconsider these harmful rejections, which will only serve to put these vulnerable students at an even greater disadvantage than many of their peers. We ask that the merits of the proposals, and the educational achievements these students will make because of the Upward Bound Program, outweigh other minor, administrative factors that have gone into the decision-making process.

Should your staff need additional information regarding the situation, please do not hesitate to contact our respective offices. We look forward to hearing from you in the very near future.

Sincerely,



Jose E. Serrano
Member of Congress



Adriano Espallat
Member of Congress