

Reflections on the Origins and History of WESTOP

Hopes, Images, and Reality

Dr. Charles A. Ratliff

INTRODUCTION

In preparing to reconstruct my memories of the origins of WESTOP, I was initially struck by the fact that the organization, as we have all come to know it, has been in existence for nearly twenty years. This is both remarkable and a testament to the success of those of us who were involved in the creation of WESTOP. It was my goal, and a goal I believe that was shared by all of the original founders of the organization, that we create something that would have a life of its own, an organization that would continue to grow and develop after most of us were long departed to take on new challenges. Lest I receive far more credit than I deserve, I need to mention the names of several individuals who provided the strength of character and energy that sustained me and breathed life into the fledgling organization that came to be known as WESTOP. I'm talking about individuals like Steve Holeman, Bobby Smith, Jack Lima, Arturo Osterveen, Lynn Baranco, Lois Carson, Charlene Folsom, and Bob McCabe. These are the real "old-timers" who served as the spark to move people like Keith Hon, Robert Norris, Mike Dang, Juan Mestas, and me from rhetoric to action. There is much that can be said about our trials, errors, and tribulations before WESTOP became a reality. Let me try to provide a context for understanding the developmental phases of WESTOP.

THE BEGINNING

While WESTOP can trace its creation back twenty years, its beginning really started a decade earlier with Upward Bound directors struggling to reach consensus on what the appropriate role of the federal government should be in preserving and promoting equal opportunity for higher education for all youth, including poor youth and what I prefer to call students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. There are two points that should be noted here because of their significance to the development of WESTOP: (1) the key policy issue being discussed reflected the commitment of project directors to equal education opportunity for all students, particularly poor and underrepresented students, and (2) the project directors involved in these discussions were largely Upward Bound directors.

The focus on the students that our programs serve has been the one constant that exists in every TRIO professional association that has been created throughout the nation, the glue that has held together disparate interests and personalities throughout the years. The focus on students, in my opinion, also represents the hope that will sustain these organizations as we seek to adapt to the challenges and changes in both the educational and political landscapes as the twenty-first century approaches.

The emphasis on Upward Bound directors is in part attributable to the fact that it was the first of the so-called TRIO programs to come into existence, first as a pilot initiative in 1965 and then as a national

program in 1966. Interestingly, the Upward Bound program was not originally perceived to be an educational program. Rather, it was considered to be a component of the so-called "War on Poverty" and was housed under the Office of Economic Opportunity until 1969 when it, along with Educational Talent Search and Student Special Services (later renamed to Student Support Services), was transferred to the U.S. Office of Education.

The federal government was a centralized operation in the late 1960's and provided an opportunity for directors to convene nationally on an annual basis. These national meetings were supplemented with annual regional meetings. I rely on the oral and written history of the old-timers I mentioned earlier here, since I was still a college undergraduate student myself at the time. As I understand it, united by a mutual distrust of the Washington bureaucrats, directors became increasingly convinced of the need for a Directors Association to secure the support they felt they needed for their respective programmatic efforts from Washington and to use that support to leverage change at their host institutions. Among the more substantive issues they debated were the following:

- What was the intent of the Upward Bound legislation; to serve all poor youth or [minority] youth exclusively?
- What was the obligation of host institutions to admit Upward Bound graduates from their own or other projects?
- What concession should a host institution make to retain under prepared Upward Bound students once they have been admitted? Are they concessions or obligations?
- What demands for time, money, and other resources should a director make on a host institution?
- What is the obligation of the Office of Education to insure the proper training of new directors? Should there be a training manual? If so, who should write it, the Office of Education or experienced directors?

Some of these issues remain pertinent today while some have been addressed in whole or in part. However, the "old-timers" also suffered from the tenor of the times. The late 1960's and early 1970's were characterized by a heightened sensitivity to racial/ethnic differences and stratification. These sensitivities often were manifested by unhealthy competition between various racial/ethnic groups and strong nationalistic feelings. National meetings of directors were frequently torn by internal dissension around such emotionally charged issues as:

- What color should the director be?
- Can a project have a joint Directorship, with each director serving students in the project who shared a similar racial/ethnic background?
- Does anyone, college President, the office of Education, or Congress, ever seek advice or listen to the need of directors?

Added to these divisive issues was the growing concern about changes in the structure and leadership of the Office of Education. Should USOE programs and activities remain centralized or be decentralized on a

regional basis? This was more than simply a rhetorical question as it generated regional concerns about relative political clout California directors were particularly concerned, given the time differences and geographical distance of the region from Washington. Their concern about the potential disadvantages of decentralization eventually led to consensus around three important areas which provided the impetus for the creation of a professional association:

1. The key issues to be addressed were primarily political
2. It was important to establish and maintain a working communication system with all directors
3. If we did not hang together, we would all hang separately.

THE TRANSITION

The decade of the 1970's marked what I call the transition period. It is the time that those of us credited with the actual founding of WESTOP became familiar with TRIO programs and embraced both the potential and the limitations of these programs. Many of us started as staff in Upward Bound programs and gradually worked our way to positions of increasing responsibility, including the position of Directors. We benefited from the retelling of old "war stories" by the veteran directors who took us under their wing but who clearly had lost much of their will to create a professional association. We had the temerity to believe that we could succeed where they had not and bristled at the suggestion that we were too green or too arrogant to do much more than talk. These challenges awakened the competitive spirit in us. I know it spurred me into action and I largely have Lynn Baranco and Steve Holeman to thank for that. Lynn helped me secure my first position as an Upward Bound Director at Long Beach State University and suggested I get in contact with Steve if I wanted to learn how to run a good program. When I dutifully contacted Steve Holeman, I was shocked by his first comments to me: "I don't like talking to new directors because you guys think you know everything. But if you're willing to listen, I will meet with you if you show up on time."

The next year, 1975, I agreed to coordinate regular meetings of Upward bound Directors in southern California as proof of my willingness to do more than talk. Many of the southern California Upward Bound directors were veteran directors - Steve Holeman, Bobby Smith, Art Osterveen, Bob McCabe, Octavin Boubion - and our meetings almost always included conversation about the need for a professional association and the lessons that had been learned from earlier errors. We were aware that pretty good communication existed among Upward Bound directors in the greater San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area and they also communicated with their Talent Search and Special Services counterparts. In spring of 1976, a small group of TRIO project directors convened in Long Beach to begin the process of writing a constitution and bylaws for what was originally called the Association of TRIO Project Directors of Region IX. Recognizing the implied limitation on membership of the name, and the fact that it was not easily convertible to a neat acronym, the name was later changed to the Western Association of Educational Opportunity Programs and, finally, to the Western Association of Educational Opportunity Personnel, or WESTOP.

Two other events occurred in 1976 that played significant roles in the evolution and development of WESTOP. The first of these was an effort to establish a national association to represent the interest of

underrepresented students that was to be called the National Association for Educational Opportunity (or NAFO), that was occurring concurrently with the effort to establish WESTOP. The NAFO effort, led by Monte Perez, had identified Washington as the focal point for efforts to establish equal opportunities for underrepresented students, believed a national organization would generate greater political clout, and viewed the emergence of Hispanic serving higher education institutions in the southwest as an impetus to give greater visibility to the west coast. This contrasted with a belief among the original WESTOP founders that we would be better served by ensuring a strong regional association before aligning ourselves with national organizing efforts. This fundamental difference ultimately resulted in a division of human resources between the two organizations and competition regarding which should be the official representative of low-income and underrepresented youth in national arenas. It also drove home the salience of the advice from veteran directors: it is important to hang together as an organization, or at least preserve the image of cohesiveness.

The second major event occurring in 1976, was the early organizational efforts to establish what was then called the National Coordinating Council of Educational Opportunity Associations (NCCEOA), an organization made up of the six regional TRIO-based associations existing at the time. Largely due to the national efforts of NAEO, they were originally invited to join other TRIO association representatives from around the country to plan the formation of NCCEOA. WESTOP was ignored at the time. I suspect that it was largely because the existence of WESTOP was scarcely known outside of Region IX, but it also spurred a decision by Robert Norris and myself to attend the annual conference of the Mid America Association of Educational Opportunity Personnel (MAEOPP) at a Lake Geneva resort in November of 1977. Attendance at this conference awakened us to the real potential for WESTOP to serve as an organizational representative of professional educators throughout the region and as the champion of educational development for all low-income and underrepresented youth. The critical elements to our future success were evident to us at that time: commitment, communication, and inclusion. As I think now about the lesson we learned in Wisconsin, I am again reminded of the counsel we received from the "old-timers" in California: develop and maintain good communication with your members and hang together.

THE DAWNING OF REALITY

As excited as Robert Norris and I were about our experiences at the MAEOPP conference, we were not totally naive. We knew it would take a lot of work and effort to come close to achieving the organizational structure and momentum we had witnessed. But we grossly underestimated the amount of effort - and money - necessary to sustain a fledgling organization. I owe a debt of gratitude to Alan Nishio, who graciously ignored a huge increase in long distance phone calls during my tenure at Long Beach State University, and my wife Dorothy, who tolerated generous diversions of our family resources to finance my travel throughout the region and the nation on behalf of the association. It was a difficult period of time.

It took just over a year of our active membership-about 6 to 8 people as I recall-to conclude that we needed to find a mechanism for generating income to finance the activities of WESTOP. Keith Hon was instrumental in convincing us that the easiest way would be to emulate the example of other TRIO-based associations

and sponsor a regional conference. Since he was one of the few, if not only, active members who was not already an officer of the association, Keith volunteered to serve as conference coordinator. Lake Tahoe was selected as the site and the first annual conference of WESTOP was held in February, 1979.

We reasoned that gambling and bright lights would serve two useful purposes: it would attract people to the conference (necessary to cover expenses and generate a profit) and it would obviate the need to plan social activities to entertain those in attendance. We were right on both counts and scheduled our second annual conference in the same city. Events that occurred at the 1980 conference again drove home two lessons for us: (1) important issues professional associations are called upon to address are largely political; and (2) we must hang together or we will surely hang separately. In the first instance, we were reminded by one of the newer WESTOP members, Janet Felker, that Nevada was one of few states that had failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). As such, a professional association which purports to advocate equal opportunity for all placed itself in an ethical conflict by holding its primary revenue generating activity-its annual conference-in such a state. Opinions varied considerably but the soundness of her argument, and political expediency, won the day and the Board decided to relocate future conferences in those states that had ratified the ERA.

The second event that occurred during the 1980 conference was scarcely noticed by most in attendance. A small contingent of newer association members had concluded that there was great potential clout and influence in WESTOP and that there did not appear to be much opportunity for them or other new members to break into the small enclave of leaders. As such, WESTOP was not, and could not, effectively represent their interests. They planned to confront the officers in a public forum and demand immediate inclusion, an action that would have been disruptive at best and threatened to generate deep racial/ethnic divisions in the organization. I thank Juan Mestas for his courage and humanity in providing me an early alert about the feeling of disenfranchisement of these members, thereby affording me an opportunity to informally discuss options for resolving their concerns and incorporating them into the leadership of

WE STOP.

I like to think that we managed to overcome the many obstacles that confronted WESTOP in its early years because of the wisdom we had acquired early in our lives-by listening to the veteran directors-and by our shared commitment to help low-income and underrepresented youth prepare themselves for a successful college experience and a fuller range of life choices. Each of us, after all, are in the positions we are in because we successfully completed collegiate education at successively higher levels. We should expect no less from the students we serve through TRIO and other educational opportunity programs.

There was yet one more lesson to be learned, one not readily discerned from our many conversations with veteran directors nor from our interactions with our organizational counterparts in other regions of the country. Know when to let go. At the time, I couldn't get my mind around this simple concept. I had come to embrace the philosophy that to be successful, you had to clearly focus on a goal, and not let anyone or anything stop you. Some of you may be familiar with the 80/20 business principle which suggests that 20

percent of the people will do 80 percent of the work. I had unknowingly come to accept his principle and didn't worry about the other 80 percent as long as the 20 percent continued to get most of the work done. What a mistake. The averted 1980 crises helped open my eyes to the folly of this reasoning. If we didn't consciously seek to develop the talents of the idle 80 percent of association membership and provide them with opportunities to assume positions of leadership, WESTOP would forever be constrained by a cult of personality. Retrospectively, it was no accident that no veteran director sought office as WESTOP developed. They were content to fire us up and then retreat to cover our flanks and encourage our continued development.

This realization led to a very painful period for me. Like it or not, I had contributed to the development of a strong cult of personality, a concentration of power, among a segment of the original founders of WESTOP. Keith, Robert, and I had colluded, planned, and spent so much time together generating an image of a strong, cohesive organization in the formative years of WESTOP that in the minds of many, we were WESTOP. Even though Keith and Robert succeeded me as president to WESTOP, we had worked so closely together that we thought alike and, in many ways, were interchangeable. By 1983, I had resolved that I could no longer hold elective office in WESTOP. Moreover, I had concluded that it would not be wise for Keith or Robert to hold elective office either, a decision that was both presumptuous on my part and poorly received. Rather than engage in sustained debate with them over my position, I chose to redirect my energies into different arenas. I don't regret this decision and am pleased to see that you and your predecessors, as we did before them, have risen to the challenge of assuring that WESTOP continues to grow and sustain itself.

Though I have left out substantial details chronicling the activities of WESTOP's members and its early attempts to establish a national presence and assure equitable representation of its constituents within the structure of the National Council Educational Associations, I have attempted to provide you with a flavor of its evolution. It was a struggle to successfully meet the challenges of birth and maturation. It was difficult to overcome our collective proclivities toward racial and ethnic stratification. But we did it, if for no other reason than the young people we are all committed to serve.

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my current capacity as Deputy Director for the California Postsecondary Education Commission, I am constantly reminded of the importance of planning. While none of us can predict the future with certainty, we can fashion a fairly solid set of possible scenarios to guide current decision making. For instance, we have a fairly consistent pattern of policy trends associated with periods of economic constraint. Simply put, when insufficient public resources are available to support all desired programs and activities, policy makers and taxpayers want to know if the money is being used effectively; are publicly-supported programs cost effective, are they effective in carrying out their respective missions? The significance of understanding these kinds of relationships and trends allows you to predict that as the Congress and the President attempt to reduce the federal deficit, tough questions about the effectiveness of TRIO programs and federal financial aid programs will be raised. Educational opportunity programs and associations would be well advised to

intensify efforts to assure that all publicly-supported programs can provide empirical evidence of program effectiveness and success.

Similarly, Congress and the Administration are again debating the advisability of transferring responsibility for large numbers of programs directly to the states via block grants. WESTOP, and its regional counterparts, would be well advised to devise new strategies to incorporate personnel of state-funded programs with similar goals into the activities and leadership of WESTOP. This will be no small undertaking. WESTOP, and its sister associations, suffer from a federal fixation and has much to learn about state politics and priorities. In addition, state-based educational opportunity associations are often quite parochial and concerned with self preservation. They will be reluctant to lose their own identity in an effort to collaborate more closely with WESTOP. Perseverance and continuous professional development will be critical to success in this area.

The time is also ripe for all of us to seek a new definition of quality. I submit that any definition of quality in an educational setting that does not consider student outcomes, or more specifically student learning, is suspect on its face. TRIO and other educational opportunity program personnel can make a substantial contribution to the effectiveness of educational institutions by helping faculty and administrative leadership to embrace the lessons learned over the 30-year history of educational opportunity programs. Effective teaching can, and does, result in measurable improvement in student learning. Those teaching/learning strategies that have proven successful with low-income students served in TRIO programs will also be effective with their more advantaged counterparts.

My vision of the future is shaped in part by the lessons I have learned from the past. I have learned to be guided by the past while steadfastly refusing to be governed by it. I envision a world where my children will not have to face some of the challenges I did and where future leaders of WESTOP will not have to repeat mistakes of the past. Learn to share what you have learned freely. Learn to listen carefully. And learn to recognize when it is time to move over and support the leadership of others. Our future lies in the hands of the students we currently serve. Make every effort to assure that they are good stewards.