

A Crack in the Glass Ceiling: How TRIO Programs in Maine are Narrowing the Gender Gap

Michelle Richards

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Richards, Michelle, "A Crack in the Glass Ceiling: How TRIO Programs in Maine are Narrowing the Gender Gap" (2022). *Thinking Matters Symposium*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium/2022/poster_presentations/7

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

A Crack in the Glass Ceiling: How TRIO Programs in Maine are Narrowing the Gender Gap

Michelle M. Richards, University of Southern Maine
Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth Goryunova, University of Southern Maine

Abstract

Although women have increased their presence within the workforce, higher education, and politics, they are still underrepresented in top leadership positions. Men outnumber women in the Senate, House of Representatives, Congress, and at the CEO level. Even in the nonprofit sector where women have historically outnumbered men, the top leadership positions are primarily held by men. However, there is a predominance of women directors in Maine's TRIO programs. TRIO programs are federally funded nonprofit organizations designed to encourage access to higher education for economically disadvantaged and first-generation students (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.). There are 23 TRIO programs in Maine and 20 of those are led by women. Existing research has been focused on the barriers women face such as male-dominated leadership, second-generation gender bias, gender stereotypes, lack of support, and cultural or structural norms. Little has been explored regarding how to support and empower women to practice leadership. In this qualitative study, a phenomenological approach is used in interviewing current women directors of Maine TRIO programs to gain insight into their experiences and understand how they have been supported and empowered to practice leadership. Findings reveal that these directors do face barriers, however, they have found and created sources of support and empowerment for themselves. The directors benefit greatly from relationships with other directors in the field providing support and guidance for each other. Having a positive relationship with a female leader as a mentor or role model was also a source of empowerment. Traits described stem from servant to transformational leadership styles.

What is TRIO?

TRIO programs are federally funded non-profit organizations designed to encourage access to higher education for economically disadvantaged and first-generation students (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.). These programs emerged in the 1960s during the war on poverty under the Economic Opportunity and Higher Education Acts (US Department of Education, 2011). In the beginning, there were three programs which is how TRIO got its name (US Department of Education, 2011), however through new legislation and amendments to the Higher Education Act, TRIO now offers nine different educational opportunity programs and has roughly five million alumni (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.).

Research Questions

- What factors contributed to the predominance of female leaders in Maine TRIO programs?
- What organizational factors within Maine TRIO programs have supported and empowered female leaders?
- What leadership style and/or traits are demonstrated by Maine TRIO leaders/organizations?
- What insights can be gained to support and empower women leaders?

Michelle Richards,
MEOA Alumni
Committee Chair
(2013-2019)
presenting at the
2019 NEOA
Conference

Researcher's Perspective

As a TRIO alumna, current employee, and aspiring leader, TRIO programs are very near and dear to my heart. For a long time, I struggled to view myself as a leader, however, I have found a passion for learning about leadership, developing my skills as a leader, and helping others. As a result, I have a vested interest in the facilitation and empowerment of female leadership. As a woman, I have faced some of those transparent barriers and personally know what it is like to be overlooked or undervalued due to my gender. I have been told that I am too emotional and have not been taken seriously when expressing concerns about the workplace. It is for these reasons that I find it so important to understand how to support and empower women to become leaders.



"I definitely feel rooted in servant leadership and transformational leadership. To me, it means passing the mic. It means looking for ways to see the systems that perpetuate inequality and then intentionally using my privilege to address those issues and be really intentional and thoughtful about creating opportunities to be more inclusive about leadership."
-Quote from a TRIO Director-



Methods

- Qualitative, phenomenological study of current women directors in Maine TRIO programs
- The sample size was 8 participants
- Interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of the women directors' experience of practicing leadership in TRIO

Participants

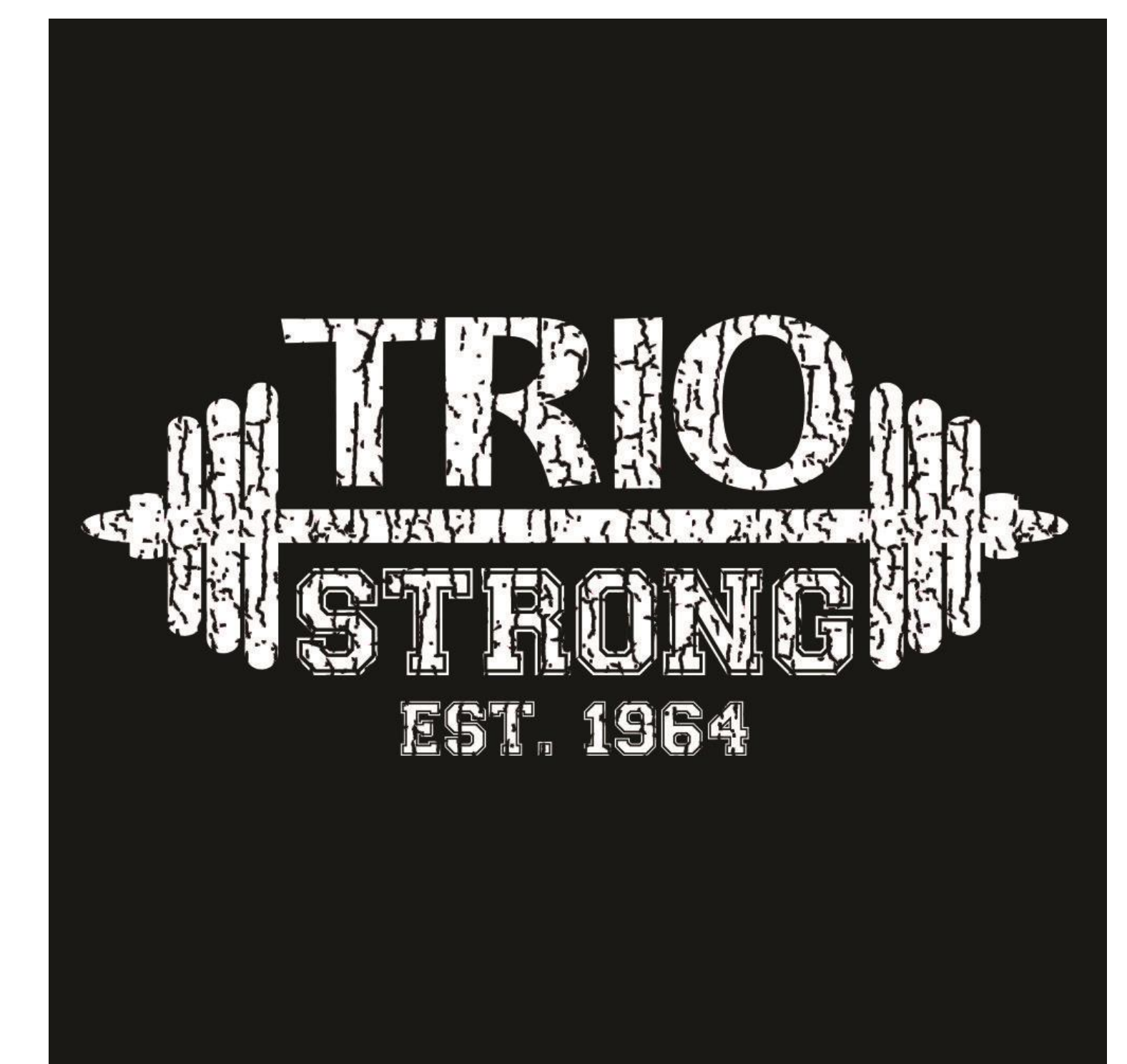
Eight current women directors of Maine TRIO programs were interviewed. The participants' experience working in TRIO spanned from 4 to 38 years with a range of 4 to 23 years being in leadership positions. The participants represented 12 different TRIO programs across Maine including but not limited to Student Support Services, Upward Bound, and Educational Talent Search. These TRIO programs spanned across 8 different institutions within the private, public, and community college systems.

Results

Four understandings emerged from this study:

- 1.) Relationships with other female leaders and mentors acted as a source of support and empowerment for participants.
- 2.) Belief in the organizational mission was vital.
- 3.) Self-described traits indicated that participants demonstrate servant and transformational leadership styles.
- 4.) The culture of TRIO provided a more inclusive environment for women to practice leadership.

Michelle Richards, TRIO alumna and first-generation student, celebrating First Gen Day, 2018



"The female directors in the state of Maine, we're scrappy and we're willing to go head to head with any person." -Quote from a TRIO Director-