April 11, 2019, Virginia, MN: The Mesabi Range College TRIO Student Support Services program celebrated its 30th Anniversary on Thursday, April 11, 2019 by holding a Spring Leadership Day on the Virginia Campus. As part of the celebration, college students from across the Northeast Higher Education District came for a day of celebration and personal growth. Beginning the day was nationally known speaker, Craig Hillier, who spoke about Finding Your Passion to a packed theater; a mid-day lunch presentation to recognize Mesabi Range; and an afternoon closing by Mr. Hillier on Staying On Course – Motivating Yourself to Meet Your Goals.

Over the last thirty academic years, the Mesabi Range SSS program has provided support and guidance to more than 200 participants each year; and overall since the program’s inception, has brought well over $6.1 million dollars of direct services to students. Services like academic tutoring and instruction, academic advising and course selection, career exploration and choosing a major, completing transfer their pathway, FAFSA completion and financial aid assistance, personal counseling, and activities leading to students’ academic, cultural, and personal development.

The legislative intent of Federal TRIO Programs is to help students to overcome class, social, academic, and cultural barriers to higher education. TRIO began as a social justice movement back in the 1960’s and continues today because of the vast educational attainment gap which remains between the rich and poor in the United States. Under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, the first three programs enacted by Congress were Upward Bound in 1965, Educational Talent Search in 1966, and Student Support Services in 1968. The term ‘trio’ was coined by Congress for these first three original college access and success programs. Now there are eight TRIO programs - seven serving students and one training TRIO professionals. While the Higher Education Act defines what TRIO programs can do, the Federal budget appropriations fund TRIO programs. Every five years, very competitive, grant competitions are held (SSS completion is slated for 2020) and proposals must score high enough on the funding slate in order to be approved.

At the start of the 1988-89 academic year, Mesabi Range began their first TRIO SSS program as a Federal two-year, mini grant from the U.S. Department of Education. A year later, the three other separate SSS programs located at Itasca, Rainy River, and Vermilion merged with Mesabi Range and then added Hibbing to create our five-college SSS program that still exists today to serve 1,000 eligible students annually. This Northeast Higher Education District TRIO Student Support Services grant, currently 100% funded by the U.S. Department of Education at $1,526,836, will be celebrating their 30th year next fall.

Nationally, SSS is the largest and most expansive program promoting college persistence and completion for low-income, first generation students and students with disabilities. Projects work to empower eligible students to stay in college until they earn their baccalaureate degrees. More than 202,000 students are now being served by 1,069 Student Support Service programs at colleges and universities nationwide. Recent studies by the U.S Department of
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Education found that participation in a Student Support Services program resulted in statistically significant higher rates of student retention and transfer, improved grade point averages, and credit accumulation. SSS program participants also bested their similarly situated peers in degree completion at both two-year colleges (41% vs. 28%) and four-year colleges (48% vs. 40%). For Mesabi Range SSS, in looking at the first three years of this grant cycle, their averages on participants include 46% graduated within four-years, 70% persisted from one year to the next, and 78% remained in good academic standing. Mesabi Range SSS degree completion is 5% higher than the national average of all SSS two-year programs and 18% higher than similar students not served by SSS. TRIO Works!

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