Jami J. Bayles has a photo of her son pin-tacked to a large corkboard surrounded by a sea of faces, letters, graduation announcements and newspaper articles of all her other kids.

One photo is of a younger Kendall Laws, a former Upward Bound student who ended up going to the University of Wyoming College of Law and is now back in Blanding as the new county attorney for San Juan County.

Bayles has an ever-growing collection of stories, like that of Laws’ success that she’s been accumulating over the past 16 years in her administrative duties with the Upward Bound and Educational Talent Search programs on the Blanding campus.

Talent Search is one of eight federally funded college opportunity programs that fall under the umbrella of TRIO (it started with three programs in 1965). Today, three of its programs flourish on the Blanding campus: Upward Bound, Talent Search and Student Support Services.

The thousands of students who have passed through these programs over her 16-year career with TRIO are not forgotten. She keeps careful records. The photos and mementoes of many of them now line her office wall reminding her why she loves coming to work every day.

“It’s my wall of motivation,” she says.

Some are from Monument Valley and Montezuma Creek, others from Moab, Monticello, Blanding and Red Mesa, Ariz. Most photos flash broad smiles that cheer her daily. More motivation mementoes can be found enshrined in other offices spread across campus. While it’s the inherent duty of all faculty and staff to help students with college access, the campus has a core team of 10 specialists working under the steady guidance of Virgil Caldwell.

Over the past 15 years, Caldwell, as institutional development director, has helped to funnel some $22 million in grant awards and state funding to the Blanding campus. Of the 36 competitive grant applications submitted over the past decade, 34 have been awarded to the campus, with an average annual award of more than $2 million.

Bayles said all of the key individuals working to increase college access focus mainly on these two areas: helping young people prepare for and succeed in college, and making it possible for the campus to qualify for and receive private- and government-grant funding to keep the effort going. Both tasks are never-ending and both filled with plenty of ups and downs.

The downs are when some students, despite the effort, don’t make it, or when grant re-funding doesn’t come through such as the case with the TRIO Student Support Services program on the Price campus when its request for grant renewal was turned down five years ago. (Price continues with its TRIO Upward Bound program.)

The ups? Grants totaling $22 million, for starters. And consistent student successes. Students who have gone on to achieve like Laws and Shontol Burkhalter, a 2004 graduate of Monticello High School and former participant in four Utah TRIO programs. She graduated in 2013 with a doctorate in physical therapy from the University of Utah.

Laws and Burkhalter’s steely focus and discipline helped earn their doctoral degrees. Likewise, the same tenacious characteristics seem to apply for earning the right to receive grant funding. The ultimate prize are portals of opportunity that open to the students and to the campus.

On the Blanding campus alone, there are more than two-dozen major college access grants, scholarships and programs in place that not only provide prospective and current students with wide-open doors, but dozens of airy windows too. These programs and grants helped thousands of students attend USU Eastern Blanding over
its 39 years in operation and is the key to its own success as a campus serving the under-served.

The Blanding campus knows its clientele, and its faculty and staff are experts in finding and matching resources to students. With 60 percent of its students being Native American, it’s no surprise that among the long list of grants, scholarships and program offerings, many are geared specifically to this important group, such as the American Indian Services foundation, Chief Manuelito Scholarship and the Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTI) program.

Doors and windows are one way to describe this access. A bicycle wheel is another. In this case, the student is the hub of the wheel with all of the spokes being access points to grants and programs that keep the process—and the students—rolling forward.

It takes a team to accomplish this, which is why a single person doesn’t emerge on the campus as being THE college access enabler.

“No stand-alone heroes here,” Caldwell said. “Just a group of highly dedicated individuals who are in unison in our belief in the mission.”

So who are these quiet champions helping to keep this wheel spinning?

People who wear lots of hats. In addition to Caldwell and Bayles, there is Garth Wilson, Curtis Frazier, Georgiana Simpson, Teresa Frazier, Sheri Montella, Karen Wells, Nathan Jones, Shilo Martinez and Christian Haws.

These are individuals who have come to appreciate how helping the under-served and living year-to-year on grant funding is not for the timid of heart. It requires unbounded optimism and a dash of courage.

Simpson, who has been on the Blanding campus the past three years, is an example of this. She considers herself the Little Dutch Boy or Jane-of-All-Trades for the Blanding college-access effort. Her main job is to keep an eye on all of the spokes and facilitate getting students the information they need, helping them in the process and working like crazy to keep them there.

It means helping to create and maintain dozens of student high school binders tracking progress, attending evening high school presentations, educating prospective students about federal student aid, pitching the Blanding campus College Launch Summer Bridge program and the value of concurrent enrollment.

Much of what she, Bayles and others do?on and off campus?goes unsung. Not to mention midnight-and-beyond-hours spent by individuals such as Wells, Jones, Martinez and Haws with students participating in retention-related programs and activities throughout the year. It amounts to thousands of miles and 12-hour-plus days over the course of a year just for this core group of college-access enablers to cover this little campus’s large service area stretching across three Native American reservations and nearly 70 middle and high schools.

“Our focus is on helping to ensure that students, young and old, have the foundation needed to thrive in a college setting,” Simpson said. “If we can get them past those hurdles and enrolled in college, they are well on their way to success.”

Some of those hurdles may also include helping people get beyond the acronyms of the various grant and program offerings: NASNTI, FAFSA, UB, SSS … really?

Here’s the thing, though. Each is vital. Each serves a specific demographic. Each helps with specific needs, and, collectively, they are making college and vocational access possible for scores of those who are under-served, under-prepared or under-funded. Yes, there are manifold acronym-prone programs and grants to navigate through. Fortunately, there are also individuals who know this stuff inside and out on this campus who want to help.

They are people of action. Like the verbs embedded in many of the names of the programs they direct: launch, endow, rise, bound, search and serve. They are programs that require action, and that when acted upon, ultimately lead to positive forward momentum in the lives of participants.

“By the time I graduated high school, I had a head start on choosing where I wanted to go to school,” Laws said. “I had obtained approximately a year’s worth of credits toward my degree. I had no stress making the transition from high school to college and I attribute a lot of that to my experiences in Talent Search and Upward Bound.”

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