Letter to the Chronicle of Higher Education: Upward Bound study

Robert D. Reischauer

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Your article on the U.S. Department of Education’s evaluation of the Upward Bound program—which was conducted by Abt Associates, the Urban Institute, and Berkeley Policy Associates—reports that Arnold L. Mitchem, president of the Council for Opportunity in Education, has compared the study to the infamous Tuskegee experiment. This comparison is incendiary and entirely unwarranted.

In the Tuskegee experiment, a low point in the nation’s research history, poor black men with syphilis went untreated even after an effective treatment had been identified and sufficient supplies were available to treat all those afflicted with the disease. The Tuskegee experiment’s breach of research and moral standards prompted federal regulations to protect the rights of human subjects. No reputable research organization today would so flagrantly disregard these rights.

The Upward Bound study will assess whether recent changes in the program, which encourage local providers to serve the most disadvantaged students, have made the program more effective. The study uses an admissions lottery to select students for the program. The lottery does not reduce the number of students Upward Bound serves: It only determines which eligible applicants will be served given current funding. Parents and students are fully informed beforehand about the study, including the lottery. Finally, the study does not restrict students’ access to other programs and services.

While we respect differences of opinion regarding the study, the comment attributed to Mr. Mitchem is unfair to the research organizations involved, and unhelpful in furthering our common interest to identify programs that boost the educational prospects of the most disadvantaged students.

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