

# Dozens of Colleges' Upward Bound Applications Are Denied for Failing to Dot Every I

## 'It's more about format than it is about content'

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By Goldie Blumenstyk APRIL 26, 2017 <http://www.chronicle.com/article/dozens-of-colleges-upward/239895>

For the want of double spacing in a small section of a 65-page grant application, 109 low-income high-school students will be cut off from a program at Wittenberg University that has been providing them with tutoring and counseling to prepare them for college. And they're not alone. Over the past few weeks [at least 40 colleges and organizations](#) with similar [Upward Bound programs](#) have also had their grant applications summarily rejected by the U.S. Department of Education for running afoul of rules on mandatory double-spacing rules, use of the wrong font, or other minor technical glitches.

The affected colleges, whose programs serve at least 2,400 low-income students, and the members of Congress who represent them are furious, especially because their appeals to the department for reconsideration have so far been met with little sympathy or indication of any sort of resolution.

The program director for Upward Bound at Wittenberg, Eddie L. Chambers, said he did have a conversation with Linda Byrd-Johnson, acting deputy assistant secretary for higher-education programs. It was "gracious," said Mr. Chambers, who has overseen the Wittenberg program for 40 of its 50 years. "But in the end, she told me, 'A rule is a rule.' She told me, 'Eddie, I too have to abide by the rules.'"

Wittenberg's error, according to the March 22 letter it received from Ms. Byrd-Johnson: In its section on its budget, it apparently violated the double-spacing rule requiring "no more than three lines per vertical inch," including text in charts and tables.

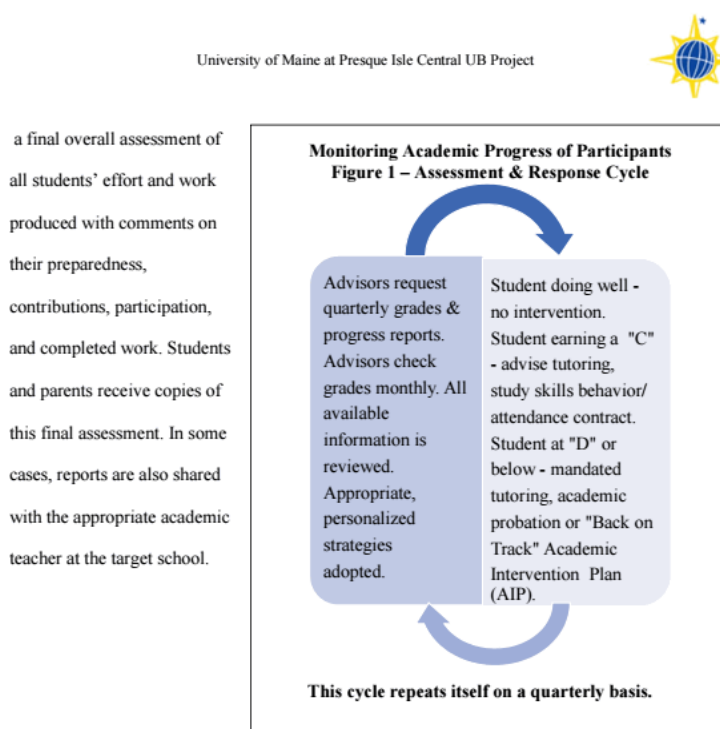
"It's more about format than it is about content," Mr. Chambers said in an interview this week, just a few days after he informed the students that the program was imperiled. Funding for the Wittenberg program runs out May 31. The college, which was seeking \$2.5 million for five years, is exploring other options and hopes to keep alive at least its bridge program this summer, for 10 high-school seniors who are slated to live on campus and take college-level courses in a supportive environment.

## ‘Apply Some Common Sense’

The University of Maine at Presque Isle, which had two of its Upward Bound grant applications for 129 students rejected, has a few more months before its funding expires in September. The program serves students from 16 high schools in Aroostook County, a rural county bigger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. For many of its students, the exposure to college that Upward Bound offers is eye-opening.

The Maine institution’s error: Two infographics inserted in each of its applications included type with one-and-a-half-line spacing, rather than double-spacing.

"I should have seen it," said Darylen Cote, who directs the federal TRIO college-access programs at Presque Isle, of which Upward Bound is one. "Maybe I should have sat there with a ruler."



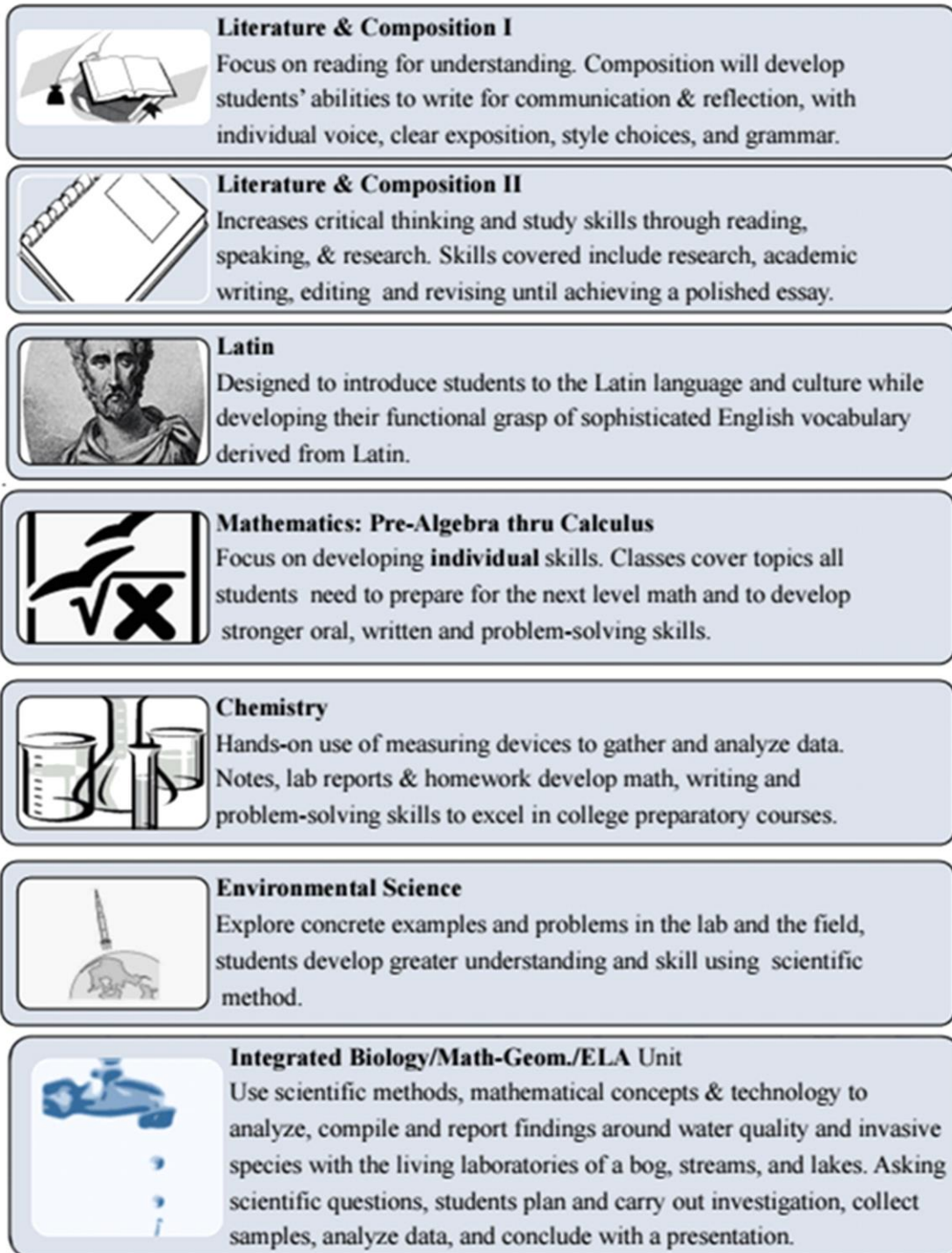
The first of two infographics in a project report that helped cost the University of Maine at Presque Isle the Education Department grants that support its Upward Bound program. The department cited formatting errors in the graphics: The text was not double-spaced.

**Section 645.31 (c) (4) - The plan for locating the project in the applicant's organizational structure.**

In the organizational structure of the University of Maine at Presque Isle, the Upward Bound Project is part of TRIO College Access Services, which includes two Upward Bound projects and an Educational Talent Search project. These TRIO services are under the umbrella of the Student Affairs Division. The Director reports to the Dean of Students and attends monthly directors' meetings convened by the Dean. TRIO College Access Services is well-integrated in the Student Affairs Division, as well as the campus community as a whole, and



**FIGURE 3: Upward Bound Core Courses Aligned with Common Core State Standard**



The second of two infographics in a project report that helped cost the University of Maine at Presque Isle the Education Department grants that support its Upward Bound program. The department cited formatting errors in the graphics: The text was not double-spaced.

Still, Ms. Cote said denying the opportunity for needy students to receive academic advising, go on college visits, and receive advice on how to save for college seems like a harsh punishment for her mistake. The university has run Upward Bound programs since 1980. Even if the department just blacked out the infographics and ignored them as part of the application, she said she thinks the grants would score well under the department's formula.

All four members of the Maine congressional delegation agree. In an April 14 letter to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, they urged the department to "apply some common sense" to the Upward Bound competition and read and score the university's application. The letter also said that the notice for the grant had included formatting criteria that were not mandated by Congress. It criticized the department for using arbitrary rules that were unrelated to the substance of the application and for not giving applicants an opportunity to correct minor, unintentional, nonsubstantive mistakes.

Alumni and friends of the Maine university's program have also come to its defense. More than 1,100 of them have written letters to Ms. DeVos, urging her to reconsider the department's decision. Program supporters mailed the letters off on Tuesday afternoon following a news conference in Presque Isle.

Salvatore Portera Jr., a 2010 Upward Bound graduate who helped organize the press event (and created an online Google form to facilitate the letter-writing campaign) said his gratitude for Upward Bound inspired him to act. Mr. Portera, who is now 25, said he had little family support when he started Upward Bound as a high-school sophomore. Thanks to the program, including its summer Bridge options, when he started college he had sophomore standing, and he was able to earn his bachelor's by age 20 in 2012 from the University of Maine at Presque Isle. Today he works for a nonprofit organization in Maine that advocates for education, health care, and workers' rights. "I can't imagine where I'd be today without them," he said of the mentors in the program. "It's a matter of having someone in your corner who is your advocate."

## **Bipartisan Support**

Secretary DeVos is aware of the issue, and that a bipartisan coalition in Congress is now organizing to demand a fix, but she has yet to reply to their inquiries, according to aides to U.S. Rep. Warren Davidson, Republican of Ohio. The congressman, whose district includes Wittenberg, has also written to Secretary DeVos that it would be "incredibly unfortunate" for the students to lose out on the program because of minor line-spacing issues. Ohio's two U.S. senators co-signed the letter. "We've been told that the lawyers are the one who are really blocking her," said Ron Hammond, a legislative aide to Representative Davidson.

The Education Department did not respond to a request for comment from *The Chronicle*.

Although the TRIO programs are among those recently targeted for major cuts by President Trump in the "skinny budget" proposal he rolled out a few weeks ago, Mr. Hammond noted that Upward Bound and other TRIO programs have had bipartisan support from Congress for many years. He's helping to coordinate a congressional coalition that plans to press the department to reconsider the rejected grants. Because of the actions, he said, programs that might have scored lower could now be funded, "so now we're allocating federal tax dollars to programs that are less effective." He and others said they expect the department to release information on who did win the Upward Bound grants by May.

Mr. Hammond said members of Congress want to ensure that rejections this year don't further penalize colleges like Wittenberg in future competitions. Upward Bound programs that have been operating consecutively are eligible for up to 15 points toward a total score of 110 under the grant-awarding formula. But grantees knocked out on technicalities could lose that advantage.

Michigan State University, for example, plans to spend \$480,000 of its own money to keep its program going for another year, he noted, "but they'll still miss out on the 15 points next time" without that fix.

According to the Council for Opportunity in Education, which works with some 900 TRIO program grantees and allies around the country, there are currently 810 Upward Bound grants for high-school-to-college programs like the ones at Wittenberg and Presque Isle, totaling \$270 million. The programs serve 61,747 students, and the competition for the grants is steep. The department often receives twice as many applications as it awards.

## **‘Mind-Blowing’ Strictness**

The Upward Bound application rules about formatting include requirements for the size and type of font, and margin width. The double-spacing rule was new this year. Last year, Mr. Hammond said he believed just 15 applications were rejected on such grounds. "This trend needs to be nipped in the bud in a big way," he said.

He added that Representative Davidson's office is tracking the number of colleges and other providers rejected on technical grounds. Its tallies don't include the size of grants for all of the programs, but for the half or so for which it has figures, the total annual value of the rejected grants was in excess of \$10 million.

The Council for Opportunity in Education said the number of applications rejected for minor issues could be even larger.

The council's president, Maureen Hoyler, has also written to Ms. DeVos urging reconsideration of the applications and assistance in resolving the issue. The group was advised that the letter was received but has heard nothing more.

"The level of strictness that the department is imposing is totally mind-blowing," said Kimberly A. Jones, vice president for public policy and communications. "This is why people don't like the government." While the organization is concerned about the proposed cut to the programs under the "skinny budget," Ms. Jones echoed the sentiment that the issue in this case didn't appear to be partisan or political. "This is not the Trump administration picking on TRIO," she said.

Still, the attention the issue has drummed up could carry some political advantage, should TRIO find itself in the cross hairs of a budget fight. "It demonstrates that this is not just a line item in a budget," said Ms. Jones. Programs like Upward Bound change the lives of real people, and "members of Congress are witness to that."

*Goldie Blumenstyk writes about the intersection of business and higher education. Check out [www.goldieblumenstyk.com](http://www.goldieblumenstyk.com) for information on her new book about the higher-education crisis; follow her on Twitter @GoldieStandard; or email her at [goldie@chronicle.com](mailto:goldie@chronicle.com).*

*Correction (4/27/2017, 3:32 p.m.):* This article originally misstated which college conferred a degree on an Upward Bound graduate. It was the University of Maine at Presque Isle, not the University of Maine at Fort Kent. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

*A version of this article appeared in the [May 5, 2017](#) issue.*

Questions or concerns about this article? Email us or submit a letter to the editor.