

Breakout Session Descriptions

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

- Session: Meeting Students Where They Are: AI-Powered Tools That Transform TRIO Support & Engagement
- Presenter: Jonathan Muruako, Founder and CEO, Fitalyst, University Of Pennsylvania
- Audience: College TRIO Programs
- Location: Spotlight
- Description: Join us for a hands-on feedback session introducing Dash, our AI-powered browser homepage that helps First-Gen students stay organized, engaged, and connected to TRIO support, and Advocado, our new advocacy tool that turns TRIO data into personalized, year-round storytelling for state and federal stakeholders. We'll demo both tools, share early insights from pilots, and invite participants to shape upcoming features.
- Presenter Bio: Jonathan Muruako is the Founder & CEO of Fitalyst, Gates Millennium Scholar, and proud TRIO Alum. A First-Gen, Low-Income graduate who earned four degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, Jonathan built Dash and Advocado based on his lived experience navigating college without a roadmap. He has worked with TRIO programs across multiple states, led pilots serving more than 500 students, and specializes in behavioral science, learning analytics, and culturally responsive design for underserved learners.

Breakout Session Descriptions

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Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

- Session: Leading from Within: Discovering Your Authentic Leadership Identity
- Presenter: Kimberly Jones, President, Council for Opportunity in Education
- Audience: All Attendees
- Location: Limelight
- Description: In this reflective and interactive session, participants will explore what true leadership means beyond titles and tasks. Peeling back the curtain, this session will explore the many roles that leaders must fulfill to meet the mission and needs of their organization.
- Throughout the workshop, attendees will: (1) engage in thoughtful discussion and self- reflection to identify the core principles that shape how they lead; (2) examine how experiences-both professional and personal-inform one's leadership style; and (3) explore practical ways to "show up" for others in alignment with one's values.
- Presenter Bio: Kimberly Jones is the President of the Council for Opportunity in Education. As president, she serves as the primary liaison between the Council and the United States Congress, the Executive Branch, and all other postsecondary education associations. Additionally, she oversees the organization's professional development offerings for college access and success educators; scholarly and experiential learning opportunities for low-income, first-generation students; and the research agenda of COE's Pell Institute for the Study of Higher Education. A Harry S. Truman Scholar, Ms. Jones, a graduate of Yale University and the Georgetown University Law Center. In 2016, the National Bar Association recognized Ms. Jones as one of the "40 Under 40 Nation's Best Advocates" and received their Excellence in Activism Award. In 2018, she was selected for the Diversity Executive Leadership Program sponsored by ASAE, the American Society of Association Executives. In 2021, she earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE) credential from ASAE.

Breakout Session Descriptions

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

- Session: Pathway to Professional Growth: Enhancing Micro-Skills for TRIO Administrators
- Presenter: Mieshon Williford, Administrative Assistant, University of Maryland College Park
- Audience: All Attendees
- Location: Feature
- Description: Join us for an empowering workshop designed specifically for TRIO administrative staff aiming to enhance their professional journey within the TRIO community. This session will focus on identifying and developing micro-skills essential for thriving in TRIO roles. Participants will explore a variety of free professional development opportunities available within universities and online platforms like LinkedIn Learning and Coursera, perfect for CV and resume building. Discover how to align your career growth with personal interests through a guided self-assessment, helping you craft a personalized development plan. Engage in interactive activities to network with peers and develop strategies for staying connected within the TRIO community. Leave with actionable insights and resources to continue your professional development and remain an integral part of the TRIO mission. Whether you're looking to refine current skills or explore new areas, this workshop offers the tools and inspiration to support your ongoing growth and contribution to our community.
- Presenter Bio: Mieshon Williford (Mimi) is an Administrative Assistant with the McNair Scholars program within the Department of Academic Achievement Programs (AAP) at the University of Maryland College Park, serving since Spring 2023. Currently pursuing a degree in Psychology at the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC), Mimi brings a strong commitment to organization, communication, and efficiency. Outside of work and studies, Mimi enjoys collecting and studying flowers, combining a love for nature with a curious and observant mindset.

Breakout Session Descriptions

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Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

Session: Dialogue as Practice: Empowering Dreams and Transforming Lives Through Holistic Critical Mentoring in TRIO

Presenter: Dr. Michael Hunt, Director, UMBC McNair Scholars

Audience: All Attendees

Location: Act 1 & 2

Description: This interactive workshop reframes from dialogue as a transformative practice that shapes how students experience belonging, possibility, and support within TRIO programs. Grounded in Holistic Critical Mentoring (HCM), a research-based framework developed through work with McNair and other access-oriented initiatives, this session explores how intentional dialogue can affirm student aspirations while transforming mentoring, advising, and program design. Participants will engage in facilitated dialogic tools, including community agreements, reflective dialogue, and coaching circles, to examine how dialogue currently functions in their TRIO contexts.

Presenter Bio: Rev. Dr. Michael A. Hunt is an advocate, educator, and administrator from Baltimore dedicated to promoting inclusive, equity-centered practices in higher education. He holds a bachelor's degree in applied mathematics from UMBC and a Master of Divinity from Emory University. Michael serves as Director of the UMBC McNair Scholars Program, expanding pathways to doctoral education for underrepresented students. A proud McNair alum, he earned his Ph.D. in Language, Literacy, and Culture from UMBC. His research emphasizes Holistic Critical Mentoring, a framework he advocates to help students and institutions reimagine how mentorship can affirm identity, foster self-efficacy, and create equitable academic cultures. His work encourages institutions, rather than just students, to transform through equity-focused practices, institutional accountability, and co-conspiratorial leadership. A nationally recognized expert in educational access and mentoring, Michael co-founded A&M Hunt Consulting, LLC with his wife, Ariel. They are proud parents of Imani Brielle.

Breakout Session Descriptions

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Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

- Session: Bridging Two Worlds: Applying Social Work Practice in TRIO Programs
- Presenter: Sarah DiBacco, Assistant Director Davis & Elkins College Upward Bound
- Audience: All Attendees
- Location: Act 3 & 4
- Description: Drawing from 12 years of social work experience and a recent transition into higher education, the presenter will highlight practical strategies TRIO staff can adopt immediately to strengthen holistic student support. Participants will leave with tools, frameworks, and real-world examples that bridge the gap between social work and educational practice.
- Presenter Bio: Sarah DiBacco, B.S., PLSW (master's level), 12 years' experience in different social work settings, 1 year in higher education/TRIO

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Tuesday, February 17, 2026

Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

Presenter: Dr. Daphne Snowden Wilks, Maryland EOC Program Director, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated

Audience: All Attendees, Director

Location: Encore

Description: This training focuses on preparing emerging TRIO leaders to sustain and advance the TRIO legacy. Participants will examine the historical foundations of successful TRIO programs and the leadership practices that have supported long-term program impact.

The session emphasizes succession planning as a critical strategy in response to the anticipated retirement of experienced TRIO leaders and the need to prepare current staff for leadership transitions. Through discussion and practical application, participants will learn how to assess leadership readiness, identify talent, and develop intentional succession plans aligned with staff credentials, competencies, and professional development opportunities. Attendees will gain tools to ensure continuity, stability, and sustainability within TRIO programs.

Presenter Bio: She is the author of *Dance Ministry 101: Genesis to Revelation* and the CEO of Shapely Fitness LLC, a faith-based fitness dance platform. She is also a certified Zumba and Yoga instructor. A United States Army veteran, Dr. Snowden Wilks is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. She holds a Doctor of Education from Morgan State University and master's and bachelor's degrees from Coppin State University.

Breakout Session Descriptions

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Time: 9:00 AM - 9:50 AM

Session: The Magic of Connection

Presenter: Cole Blalock

Audience: All Attendees

Location: Ovation/Headliner

Description: In this session professional magician and motivational speaker, Cole Blalock, will do what he does best- connect. Cole works with TRIO programs across the country engaging and connecting to students using magic, comedy, and storytelling. You'll experience the same thing your students will when he works with them and then you will have the opportunity to ask questions about how you can apply more of this connection in your programs. Come ready to experience something magical, memorable, but most importantly, meaningful.

Presenter Bio: Cole Blalock is a professional magician and motivational speaker. He got his start in entertainment at just 7 years old. Through years of growing and developing his sleight of hand and misdirection, he realized something important. He realized that he didn't love magic. He was good at magic, but he didn't love it. What he truly loved was connecting to others and delivering messages of peace, hope, joy, and love. This realization started him on a journey from successful corporate magician to keynote speaker.

During this time of transition and searching for purpose, Cole was introduced to TRIO, and his entire world changed. Now, working exclusively with TRIO programs across the country, Cole inspires students and professionals with his unique blend of magic, comedy, and storytelling.