## Improving Equity and Access for Low-Income and Minority Youth Into Institutions of Higher Education


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# IMPROVING EQUITY AND ACCESS FOR LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY YOUTH INTO INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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*This article discusses the educational achievement status of racial and ethnic minorities, specifically African Americans and Latinos as compared to their Caucasian peers. In addition, this article describes several long-standing federal educational initiatives designed to improve educational equity and access on the part of low-income and underrepresented minorities into institutions of higher learning. Finally, the promise of a relatively new educational initiative called GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is illustrated with a detailed description of Connecticut's successful implementation of this approach. Underscored are implications this article has for research, policy, and practice in the educational arena.*

***Keywords:*** *higher education; minority advancement programs; low-income youth; urban youth; minority youth; GEAR UP; TRIO programs; Title I programs*

**Understanding the pervasive** low level of academic achievement on the part of racial and ethnic minorities remains a problem of national concern. Social scientists have argued that the variability of minority school performance is attributable to institutional inequities and structural factors that have historically restricted the

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social and economic mobility of racial and ethnic minorities in this country (McLoyd, 1998; Ogbu, 1987). Others have also maintained that the persistent gap in student achievement between minority adolescents and their nonminority peers is best conceptualized within an ecological-developmental framework that includes culture as a critical dimension (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996).

Critical to our understanding of the achievement gap has been the identification of factors that place adolescents at increased risk for poor achievement outcomes (Bempechat, 1998). For example, among the multiplicity of factors known to affect school achievement, those most ardently debated and commonly cited in the literature include racial bias (Lucus, 2000; Steele, 1997), peer group influence (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2001), parenting practices and parental involvement (Comer, 1980; USDOE, 2000), the paucity of credentialed and experienced teachers (Haycock, 2001; USDOE, 2000), poorer quality instruction and low teacher expectations for minority children and youth (D'Amico, 2001), limited school resources (Kozol, 1991), and less rigorous academic coursework (Bempechat, 1998).

Inextricably linked to each of these factors remains the profound effect of poverty on school achievement outcomes and educational attainment for racial and ethnic minority children and adolescents (Caldas & Bankston, 1997). The literature is replete with studies, articles, books, and commissioned reports that have established the negative effect socioeconomic status has on educational outcomes for low-income minority youth. Information gleaned from national longitudinal data sets such as the National Education Longitudinal Study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and The National Survey of Families and Households have significantly contributed to our knowledge of the impact of socioeconomic status on school performance and educational attainment for racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b). We now know, for exam-

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ple, that the timing and duration of poverty has serious implications for children's cognitive development and that the critical period wherein a child's experience of poverty has the most deleterious effect on long-term school performance is from birth to five (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Research has also established that children who experience poverty, particularly persistent poverty, during their preschool and early school years have lower rates of school completion than children and adolescents who experience poverty only in later years (Aber, Bennett, Conley, & Li, 1997; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997) and that the lives of children most seriously affected by poverty are more often racial and ethnic minorities (McLoyd, 1998).

Growing up under these circumstances has important implications for long-term educational attainment and likelihood for postsecondary education (Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2002). Importantly, however, current research indicates that parent educational attainment is an even more important predictor of educational attainment and college enrollment than family income for low-income and minority students (USDOE, 2001). A recent study conducted by the USDOE (2002) found that students who are non-Caucasian or from low-income families tend to be disproportionately represented among those whose parents have low levels of education. Moreover, after controlling for factors such as family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence, findings revealed parent education remained a significant predictor for access to postsecondary education and attainment of a bachelor's degree at 4-year institutions. This finding suggests a generational effect. That is, increased educational attainment among low-income minority young adults (particularly those who are likely to become parents) and subsequent enrollment into postsecondary education hinges on our ability to reduce the proportion of students disadvantaged by their parents' level of education. Key recommendations highlighted in this report include the development of programs and practices that encourage students to take academically rigorous coursework and provide counseling to students and parents about early college preparation (USDOE, 2001).

Clearly, schools and communities play a critical role in buffering the effect of poverty on school achievement outcomes for low-income racial and ethnic minorities. Moreover, technological advances today necessitate a diverse, increasingly skilled, and educated workforce (National Alliance of Business, 2000). Understanding and addressing educational disparities has far-reaching implications for the economic viability of our country as our ability to be competitive in the global market becomes increasingly compromised (National Alliance of Business, 2001). Resolving the problem of the achievement gap requires a comprehensive, integrative, and sustained approach to systemic school reform designed to improve educational outcomes among racial and ethnic minorities, many of whom are low-income.

This article briefly discusses the educational achievement status of racial and ethnic minorities, specifically African Americans and Latinos as compared to their Caucasian peers. In addition, this article describes several long-standing federal educational initiatives designed to improve educational equity and access on the part of low-income and underrepresented minorities into institutions of higher learning. Finally, the promise of a relatively new initiative, GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is illustrated with a detailed description of Connecticut's successful implementation of this approach.

## THE PROBLEM OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Despite relative gains made on the part of minority students in areas of academic performance in recent years, glaring distinctions of race and class persist when comparing these students to their Caucasian peers (Center on Education Policy and American Youth Policy Forum, 2000; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001a). The National Assessment of Educational Progress has assessed long-term trends in students' reading and mathematics performance since the early 1970s. Data compiled from National Assessment of Educational Progress (2004a, 2004b) indicates that between 1971 and 1988, the gap in reading and math achievement between African Americans and Caucasians aged 9, 13, and 17 years had substantially decreased. Some people argue that this

finding may be attributable to the proliferation of federally funded programs designed to address the problem of equity and access to quality education for low-income and minority students. Current trend data from the USDOE (2005) indicate that the gap continues to slowly narrow for Caucasian and African American students in reading and mathematics.

More promising are current trend data showing that overall improvement in minority achievement is beginning to translate into gains made in high school completion rates of African American and to a lesser degree, Hispanic students. Eighty-eight percent of all African American students graduated from high school in 2003, compared to 94% of Caucasian and 62% of Hispanic students. Since 1971, the gap in high school completion rates between African American and Caucasian students steadily narrowed from 23% to 6%—a decrease of 17%. Although high school completion rates for Hispanic students increased between 1971 and 2003 (48% to 62%), the gap between Hispanic students and their Caucasian peers continues to persist (USDOE, 2005). In 1971, the gap in high school completion between Caucasian and Hispanic students differed by 34%. In 2003, the gap has narrowed by only 2% from 34% to 32% since 1971.

Rates of undergraduate enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education for minorities have also increased in recent years. Data indicate an overall upward trend of high school graduates enrolling in college immediately after graduation. The percentage of students completing some college, as defined as 1 or more years, has increased for each racial or ethnic group; however, Caucasians and African Americans have shown more progress than their Hispanic peers. For instance, more than half (57%) of all 25- to 29-year-olds had completed some college in 2003. Sixty-six percent of Caucasians as compared to 51% of African Americans were reported to be more likely to complete some college as compared to 31% of Hispanics (USDOE, 2005).

In terms of college completion rates, data show that more students across the aforementioned racial or ethnic groups have completed college during the past three decades; however, the gap between Caucasians and African Americans has widened as well as the gap between Caucasians and Hispanics since 1971. For exam-

ple, during this same time period, 19% of Caucasian students aged 25 to 29, as compared to 7% of African American and 5% of Hispanics earned a bachelor's degree or higher, thus indicating a difference of 12% and 14% for African Americans and Hispanics, respectively, from their Caucasian peers. Data from 2003 show that 34% of Caucasian of students aged 25 to 29 years completed college as compared to 18% of African American students and 10% of Hispanic students. Therefore, during the past 30 years college completion rates for African American and Hispanic students have increased. However, African American students still lag behind their Caucasian counterparts by 16%. The gap is even wider for Hispanic students who trail their Caucasian peers by a difference of 24% (USDOE, 2005). Further examination of college graduation rates show that marked differences exist in the rates at which African American and Hispanic students complete college as compared to their Caucasian counterparts, with African Americans and Hispanics requiring more time to complete an undergraduate degree than their Caucasian counterparts (Johnston & Viadero, 2000).

The relative gains that have been made in student achievement outcomes, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates on the part of African American and Hispanic adolescents during the past 30 years are noteworthy. Much of the progress made in these various domains is attributable to key federally funded educational initiatives that have been designed to improve the schooling experience of disenfranchised minority youth who have been historically marginalized from the educational mainstream.

## FEDERAL EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Various educational initiatives have been implemented to address the problem of the achievement gap. The federal government has a long-standing history of supporting programs designed to address issues of educational equity and access to higher education specifically for socioeconomically disadvantaged and underrepresented minority groups.

Title I Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the largest and perhaps most long-standing source of federal finan-

cial assistance aimed at educating children in our country's poorest schools. Since the program's inception in 1965, the focus of Title I is to improve academic achievement outcomes in impoverished urban and rural schools around the country. Currently, approximately 95% of urban schools across the country with poverty rates more than 75% participate in this program. With a budget in excess of $8.0 billion, Title I funding provides opportunities for additional educational instruction and academic support in reading, math, and science to 11 million low-income students nationwide. Students eligible for Title I funds range from preschool to high school, the majority of whom (65%) are in Grades 1 through 6. An additional 12% of students served by Title I are children enrolled in preschool and kindergarten programs that aid in the provision of quality educational experiences, promoting healthy child development across cognitive, social, and emotional domains of functioning (Council of the Great City Schools, 1999).

Since the last reauthorization, Title I has moved its emphasis from supporting remedial education for individual students to supporting school wide initiatives that feature strong parent components and high-quality instruction for teachers. The expectation of this initiative is that low-income students perform at the same academic standard as those from the wealthiest communities (Council of the Great City Schools, 1999; USDOE, 2002).

A report published by the Council of the Great City Schools (1999) reviewed the relative success of Title I in improving student performance and the manner in which urban districts operate since the 1994 to 1995 reauthorization of Title I. Urban school districts participating in the study reported that gains made in student achievement were attributable to effective allocation of Title I dollars to reduce class size, adopt evidence-based school reform strategies, implement professional development programs, and raise academic standards on the part of all students.

*TRIO initiatives*. Complementing the Title I programming effort are long-standing federally funded educational initiatives designed to improve access on the part of low-income (inclusive of Caucasian students) and racial and ethnic minority students into institutions of higher education. The USDOE's Office of Postsecondary

Education houses an array of academic enrichment and support programs designed to increase the rate at which disenfranchised groups enter into postsecondary education. Born out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in the wake of the civil rights movement, the term *TRIO* was used to describe three major federal educational initiatives—Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search (ETS), and Student Support Services (SSS) (USDOE, 2001).

Established more than 35 years ago, Upward Bound was TRIO's first college preparation program designed for low-income and minority high school students, all of whom would be the first of their generation to enter postsecondary institutions of higher learning. Essentially a college bridge program, Upward Bound provides first-generation college students with an opportunity to participate in a 4- to 6-week summer program designed to prepare students for their transition into postsecondary education.

One year later, ETS emerged as the second outreach program designed to support minority and nonminority high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds who had the potential to succeed in college. The purpose of ETS is to provide these students with the necessary academic, career, and financial aid counseling and support that would encourage high school graduation and facilitate entrance into higher education.

Finally, the SSS program, established in 1968, became the third in the series of educational opportunity programs that offered academic development and enrichment services to low-income and minority undergraduates. Unique to the SSS program was direct financial assistance given to college-bound students as a supplement to Federal Pell Grant awards.

Thus, TRIO programs beginning with ETS spanned the high school through college continuum to support first-generation, low-income and minority students who demonstrated academic promise and college potential. Since the inception of TRIO, students participating in these programs have benefited from services provided through them (USDOE, 1996). Evaluative reports of Upward Bound noted significant gains in areas of heightened educational aspirations for students and parents, increased enrollment in more challenging academic coursework, and increased credits earned in core academic subjects. The SSS programs more notably showed

that the employed interventions had positive long-term and statistically significant effects on indicators of student achievement (grades, credits, and retention rates) for students in 2- and 4-year institutions as compared to comparison group students. Critical to the success of SSS programs are peer tutoring, exposure to cultural events, and workshops and instructional courses (USDOE, 1997). No evaluative studies have been published on the effectiveness of ETS to date.

Although TRIO programs have demonstrated some success in supporting the educational attainment of minority students, several challenges remain. For example, TRIO programs target those students who have demonstrated the ability to succeed academically as well as meeting specific eligibility criteria (i.e., first generation to go to college). However, this excludes a large contingent of minority students who could benefit from academic support and enrichment programs offered by TRIO but for a variety of reasons may not meet eligibility requirements. Second, these programs are offered at the secondary level when it is often too late to intervene with students in need of academic support or who are at risk of school failure. Third, TRIO programs are limited in their ability to address the plethora of issues that affect student achievement. Finally, these programs often remain on the periphery of educational reform initiatives operating within the school district and the local community that could potentially enhance program efforts and increase the number of students served.

To address the limitations of these long-standing federal initiatives, a comprehensive, multifaceted approach is required to improve achievement outcomes for low-income and minority youth (Silver, 2001). Systemic school reform initiatives that bring together school districts, universities, communities, and families to work collaboratively in support of the academic development of all students is necessary to bring about sustained systems change that translates into improved educational outcomes (Ward, Crusto, & Gordon, 2002). Thoughtful and early integration of academic enrichment and social competence–enhancing programs within the school setting provide an effective means for improving school achievement outcomes, promoting competence, and reducing the onset and incidence of problem behaviors on the part of early ado-

lescents (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001). A relatively new federal initiative is presented that provides the critical missing link—the coupling of systemic school reform with early intervention for middle school students.

## A PROMISING APPROACH TO SYSTEMIC SCHOOL REFORM

In the forefront of promising educational reform initiatives is GEAR UP. In 1998, U.S. Representative Chaka Pattah, D–Pa, introduced GEAR UP under the Clinton administration. This new initiative has joined long-standing TRIO programs as a major player in the Department of Education's multimillion dollar strategic plan to extend support to low-income and minority students.

In contrast to Title I and TRIO programs, GEAR UP provides school, community, and university partnership grants that target cohorts of seventh-grade students through high school and into college. The primary goal of this initiative is to increase the enrollment rate of low-income and minority undergraduates in institutions of higher education by influencing districtwide policies that promote excellence for all students, high standards, and rigorous coursework (Silver, 2001). This includes eliminating policies and procedures known to negatively affect achievement outcomes and encouraging K to 16 curriculum alignment. Specifically, GEAR UP requires collaboration between school districts and university partners to ensure that curriculum standards fully prepare students for college. GEAR UP also encourages the development of innovative training programs that support the professional development and credentialing of teachers to improve the quality of instruction delivered to students in public schools.

Early engagement of parents is another critical component of the initiative. Research suggests that students' high school completion and college enrollment rates are largely influenced by parent educational attainment (USDOE, 2000). Family-focused mathematics programs supported by this initiative create learning opportunities for parents and encourage their children to take higher level math courses. In addition, providing parents with information regarding academic course sequencing, college selection, and financial aid in the form of gap-filling scholarships are all key interventions neces-

sary for increased educational engagement and long-term achievement outcomes.

Leading the GEAR UP movement is the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships that serves as the national technical assistance provider, annual conference convener, and voice in Washington, D.C., for the GEAR UP initiative. It is a nonprofit organization that is charged with creating and sustaining K to 16 education partnerships, increasing academic achievement outcomes on the part of low-income and minority students, and ensuring their access into institutions of higher learning. To date, GEAR UP serves 1.2 million students in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and three territories: Guam, Micronesia, and Puerto Rico. There are only three states where GEAR UP has not been implemented: Idaho, New Hampshire, and North Dakota. The racial and ethnic composition of students served by this initiative is 32% Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 27% African American, 7% Native American or Hawaiian, and 4% Asian.

Since its inception in 1999, the GEAR UP initiative has received $1.8 billion to support 280 partnership grants and 36 state grants. The average funding for students is $399 for local partnerships and $97 for state partnerships. With the overwhelmingly positive response of GEAR UP by educators, parents, and students, the House of Representatives passed the House Labor–HHS Education Appropriation Bill that restores funding for this initiative at $306.4 million for 2006. GEAR UP constituents are currently awaiting Senate appropriations that will ensure the viability of the initiative for the next 5 years.

## A CASE EXAMPLE: THE CONNECTICUT STATE GEAR UP PROJECT

During the first round of funding, the Connecticut Department of Higher Education was one of the first state agencies awarded GEAR UP funding. The Office of Educational Opportunity, a division of the Department of Higher Education, began implementation of their proposed strategic plan in two of the largest and poorest urban metropolitan centers in Connecticut. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau report that the poverty rates for each of these cites is three to four times the statewide rate of 7.9% and double that

for the African American and Hispanic minority youth living in these areas, who are the primary recipients of GEAR UP services.

Connecticut's GEAR UP project has become a welcome addition to a continuum of long-standing minority advancement programs offered by the State's Office of Educational Opportunity. The College Board's EQUITY 2000 model is the principal element of Connecticut's school reform strategy. Research conducted by the College Board has suggested that math is a primary gatekeeper for successful matriculation into college (Harris, 1998; USDOE, 1997). Designed to affect the manner in which mathematics is delivered at the middle school level, Connecticut's GEAR UP project has devised a comprehensive plan that encourages school districts to offer Algebra I to middle school students. The goal is that these students, once in high school, will be on an academic trajectory that provides them with the necessary sequence of math courses that ensures their access into the postsecondary option of their choice. Expanded educational enrichment opportunities extend to all students (e.g., tutoring, college excursions, 6-week summer program, and preparation for college entrance examinations). Professional development workshops for teachers, parent programs, and important gap-filling scholarships are also included in the state's multifaceted approach to school reform.

In addition to the array of academic support and enrichment programs offered to students, GEAR UP has an affective component designed to heighten students' awareness of college as a viable option for their future. Maximizing Adolescent Academic eXcellence (The MAAX) is a culturally relevant, science-based program that is conceptualized within an ecological-developmental framework and is informed by models of racial or ethnic identity development and socialization (Ward et al., 2002) and the school transition literature (Felner & Adan, 1988) to support the academic and affective needs of urban adolescents.

Through the integration of challenging academics and innovative affective programming, this project seeks to improve students' overall school performance by assisting students in the following: (a) developing requisite skills for optimal school performance, (b) increasing self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy in mastering academic tasks, (c) improving educational engagement, (d) strength-

ening bonding to school and peers, (e) increasing knowledge and awareness of college, and (f) heightening educational aspirations. Curriculum workshops feature eight modules and 42 sessions that highlight early college awareness, positive identity development, positive values, commitment to learning, enhancing social competencies, strengthening community connections, and managing important school transitions. Workshop activities and discussions also heighten awareness and affirm students' own cultural heritage as well as the ethnic backgrounds of others served by the project.

Facilitated by trained undergraduate and graduate students from established university partnerships, middle school students receive the added benefit of developing positive relationships with role models who provide consistent messages about their ability to perform academically and share the realities of college life. The program has been fully implemented in each of the districts and is offered as a universal in-school intervention program for all seventh-grade students. Eighth-grade students participate in the MAAX voluntarily as an after-school activity in which university partners work collaboratively with the school districts to create opportunities for college immersion experiences for students. Currently, the program operates in a total of 24 middle schools in Connecticut.

Since the inception of GEAR UP, significant strides have been made in each of the targeted cities. Some districts have instituted policies that have abolished academic tracks. Eliminated from core high school curricula are mathematics courses that do not adequately prepare students for college. Another district has employed a policy mandating that students pass Algebra and Geometry to successfully graduate from high school. This particular policy has further underscored this district's commitment to increased academic expectations of all students by implementing those necessary academic supports (e.g., summer programs, Saturday academies, and after-school mathematics tutorials) that ensure students' successful matriculation out of high school.

In addition, teachers participate in professional development workshops that provide them with state-of-the-art instructional methodologies and resources to engage students in learning Algebra. Guidance counselors have transformed their role from that of gatekeeper to student advocate. They, too, have benefited from

innovative training sessions offered by EQUITY 2000. As a result, counselors have been able to spend less time involved in tedious administrative functions and more time interfacing with students. Moreover, new college career centers house current software and resource materials on colleges and careers and are available to all students, teachers, and parents.

Parents have also been actively involved in this initiative. Parents are an integral part of one district's curriculum committee that reviews and approves high school curricula across all academic subject areas. Additionally, parents participate in important information sessions that empower parents to be advocates for their children and trains parents on how to successfully negotiate school systems. In addition, workshops provide parents with practical information on appropriate course sequencing for their college-bound child and encourage parent participation in both in-state and out-of-state college trips. Finally, the program offers support to parents in selecting and financing college as well as understanding the college admissions process.

None of this could be accomplished without the commitment of state, district, and university partnerships. As a result of this collaboration, the Connecticut GEAR UP Project has served more than 13,500 seventh- and eighth-grade students since its inception in 2000. A total of 87,000 direct service hours have been delivered to students participating in academic enrichment and support activities during the past 5 years. These enrichment activities are implemented as after-school programs and summer programs that focus on building students' skills in mathematics and literacy. Descriptive data indicate that each year, approximately 25% of the total middle school enrollment in each district participated in these activities. Furthermore, through forging important community partnerships, more than 700 middle school students have the opportunity to take the PSAT each year.

Additionally, the affective component that is extended to all seventh-grade students across districts has delivered a total of 104,129 hours of programming to students during the past 5 years, averaging about 20,826 hours of programming each year. This level of service delivery could only be successfully undertaken with the support of committed guidance staff and teachers. As such,

many more students are establishing meaningful relationships with the district's counselors. For example, more than 1,500 students each year have regular contact with their guidance and or career counselor to receive support on academic planning and school transition concerns. Moreover, guidance and career counselors have also been able to expose middle school students to colleges and universities across Connecticut. Since the inception of GEAR UP, more than 1,000 students each year visit college campuses.

More poignant is qualitative data that has been gleaned from students regarding the impact GEAR UP has had on their schooling experience and future educational aspirations. Students across school districts have shared how GEAR UP programs have helped to debunk myths and misconceptions that many low-income and minority students hold about their ability to attend college. One seventh-grade student shared, "Now I know that just because my parents didn't go to college, doesn't mean I can't." Another GEAR UP student commented, "The MAAX has taught me that I don't have to have to be rich to go to college." GEAR UP also provides students with the support and encouragement needed to persevere through challenges that students often experience during the middle grades as conveyed by this student: "This program kept me from dropping out of school." These are just a few of the sentiments that have been consistently expressed by Connecticut's middle school students during the past 5 years. The early college awareness message that GEAR UP espouses appears to be positively affecting students' engagement in academics as well as their educational aspirations; however, the question of GEAR UP's impact on key indicators of academic achievement (e.g., performance on standardized assessments) and educational attainment (e.g., high school graduation and college enrollment rates) presently remains unanswered.

## THE FUTURE OF EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES FOR LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY YOUTH

The Connecticut GEAR UP project is presently engaged in evaluating the impact GEAR UP has had on achievement outcomes and educational attainment for Connecticut youth. These early district

efforts demonstrate that systemic change is under way. However, even these new developments, though promising, have not occurred without some measure of resistance. Each district has its own distinct history, culture, and style of administrative leadership. Hence, each system varies in terms of the extent to which strategic activities have been implemented. Districts that have invested in the program have identified how GEAR UP can complement existing efforts and are thus further along in the implementation and evaluation phases of the project (Ward, 2003). Nevertheless, systemic school change is occurring. The impact of these districtwide changes in the two districts, it is hoped, will translate into increased academic standards, more rigorous coursework offerings, and academic enrichment and support activities that ensure students' academic success and matriculation in and out of college.

Connecticut's model shows promise in that it offers both a top-down approach and bottom-up approach to addressing the educational inequities that exist for disadvantaged and minority youth—comprehensive systemic school reform coupled with culturally competent programs that empower parents and youth. We await prospective data that will provide some measure of insight as to the program's effectiveness in addressing the school achievement outcomes for poor and minority status adolescents. These findings will have important implications for shaping statewide educational policy in urban school districts across Connecticut.

## CHALLENGES TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF GEAR UP

The challenge to institutionalizing educational reform initiatives such as GEAR UP, however, is understanding that within the embroiled debate of improved curriculum standards and increased assessment are heightened measures of accountability for achievement (Ravitch, 2002). Far less attention is paid to the organizational restructuring and systems overhaul needed to successfully implement and sustain long-term comprehensive initiatives (Adelman & Taylor, 2000). Superintendents whose average tenure is 3 years or fewer are under undue pressure to demonstrate marked district-wide improvements in school performance in unrealistic and limited time frames (Hess, 1998). School reform initiatives

such as GEAR UP, though promising and lucrative, can often compete with the district's established comprehensive plan or vision. Hawkins (2002) cautions school administrators and educators to be wary of trendy educational programs that purport impressive educational outcomes for students, many of which often lack the methodological rigor to substantiate such claims. The converse may also be true. A district may be committed to an initiative and reluctant to invest in something new. In short, school districts have choices. Negotiating how a school district will benefit from a new initiative and the manner in which it is integrated into its strategic plan requires considerable skill and political acumen. If poorly negotiated, efforts to implement can be stalled (McMahon, Ward, Pruett, Davidson, & Griffith, 2000).

Hess (1998) writes that an essential element of effective systemic school reform is that of successful implementation. A primary factor that often impedes successful program implementation is that of buy-in on the part of all those involved in the process. Partnerships established between school districts and state, community, and university entities must involve all stakeholders at the initial planning phases of the project (Pruett, Davidson, McMahon, Ward, & Griffith, 2000). Ongoing dialogue and formal documentation of district needs by key stakeholders helps to clarify expectations, delineate roles and responsibilities, and ensure buy-in and collaboration of all parties (Crowson & Boyd, 1993). Adelman and Taylor (1997) contend that program collaboration is advanced when all members feel that they are involved in a process that is equitable and productive, that each contribution is valued, and that commitment to the long-term vision is shared by all.

Developing a method that continually monitors the process of systemic school reform and key performance indicators is yet another essential and often neglected aspect of systems development in schools. It is through collaboration with stakeholders that theory-driven models linking program components to realistic, measurable outcomes-based evaluation are designed (Connell & Klem, 2000). Equally salient is the need to chronicle how school reform initiatives become institutionalized. Regrettably, this critical component is often the most underfunded aspect of the work.

## CONCLUSION

Although high school completion and college enrollment rates have increased in recent years for minority students, the gap between African American and Hispanic students and their Caucasian and Asian American peers persists. Despite this gap, minority students have made significant progress during the past 30 years in academic achievement outcomes. The decrease in the achievement gap during the 1970s and 1980s so often referenced (USDOE, 2001), in part, is related to the proliferation and positive impact of TRIO programs during a time when unprecedented gains were made championing the rights and educational needs of low-income minority children.

Today, comprehensive strategies are critical in addressing the problem of the achievement gap for low-income minority students. GEAR UP offers a promising approach to effect positive achievement outcomes for disadvantaged and minority students through a model of systemic school reform. Various studies conducted by the USDOE (2001, 2002), as well as evaluative reports documented by the USDOE (2001, 2002), have identified effective strategies that have been found to be important in reducing the effect of poverty on school achievement outcomes for minority youth. These strategies include the following: (a) effective and sustained leadership, (b) small class sizes, (c) high expectations for all students, (d) increased academic standards, (e) rigorous academic coursework, (f) academic enrichment and support activities, (g) high-quality professional development, (h) parent programs that empower, and (i) student scholarships. Implementing these strategies effectively and evaluating its impact on school achievement outcomes remains our primary challenge. Districtwide organizational restructuring is often necessary for coordinated management of key program components. When combined with a sound evaluation strategy that includes process and outcome indicators of performance, key components of successful school reform activities will be identified.

Sustaining these types of educational initiatives requires commitment and long-term partnerships between state departments,

school districts, universities, and community organizations. Financial assistance provided through a continuum of federally funded initiatives such as Title I, TRIO, and GEAR UP will remain critical elements in our endeavor to improve achievement outcomes and reduce educational disparities that exist for low-income and minority students.

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