

# GEAR UP: Providing Opportunities or Conflict?

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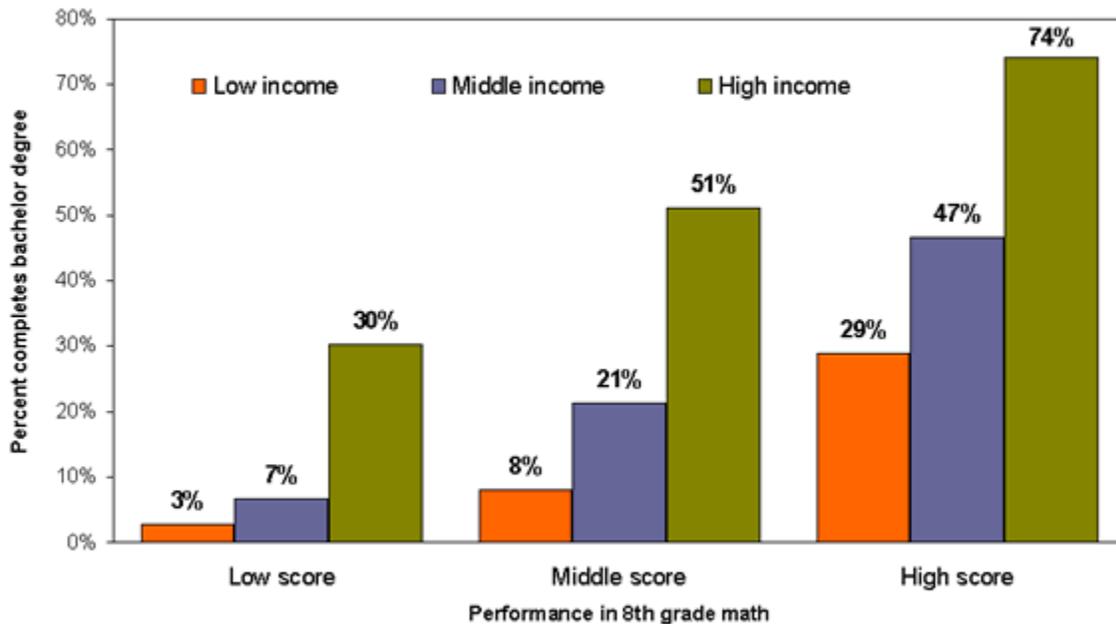
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**Abstract:** Since 1965 the federal government has attempted to provide low socioeconomic status students with equal access to postsecondary education through the Higher Education Act and its multiplicative programmatic efforts. Implemented as one such program in 1998, the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, has been increasing high school graduation and college matriculation rates. Despite demonstrable statistical gains for low SES students, GEAR UP is still plagued by complications like the application process, implementation, scale, sustainability, and program redundancy. However, the creation of an application addendum, increased funding, additional research, inclusion as a Safe Harbor identifier, incorporation into daily activities, making universities stakeholders, and automatic applications for financial aid are recommendations to improve program effectiveness and efficiency that are discussed in greater detail.

## The Problem of Underrepresentation

According to US Census Bureau population statistics, in 2007 the racial gap in college attendance was still present with 68.5% of white high school completers attending, while the rates were 55.5 and 57.9% for black and Hispanic students respectively. When coupled with the 9 point high school completion rate difference between black and white students, and the 32 point difference between white and Hispanic students, these differences widen the gap further (NCES, 2005). In addition to the racial disparity, income disparities also exist. Figure A depicts the differences among socioeconomic standing and the completion of a bachelor's degree. As you can see, the lower one's socioeconomic status, the less likely they are to complete a bachelor's degree program, regardless of their academic ability. As the financial crisis in America begins to take its toll on budgets everywhere, postsecondary institutions are

**Figure A. Educational outcomes and socioeconomic status**



Source: Fox, Connolly, and Snyder 2005

supplementing their loss of federal and state funding with increased tuition (McGuinness, 2005). Increasing tuition rates and decreasing financial aid opportunities means this underrepresentation of minority and low SES students in postsecondary institutions will worsen over time.

Because educational equity has been unachievable without legislative intervention, there have been several educational policies implemented as an attempt to remedy this problem, but they have not yet been completely effective (Fox, Connolly, & Snyder, 2005; IES, 2007; Padroin, 2004; Wolff, 2006). These policies address a variety of factors contributing to the college attendance gaps between white and minority students, as well as the gap that exists between high and low SES students. Today, unlike forty years ago, it is now known that in order to close these gaps policies must increase parental involvement, student achievement and aptitude, awareness, campus environment and support, social and cultural capital, expectations, and aspirations (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Horn, 1998; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Orr, 2003; Perna & Titus, 2005; Wilkins, 2000). Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (hereafter referred to as GEAR UP) is one example of a program under the Higher Education Act addressing these issues.

#### GEAR UP: An overview

During the 1998 State of the Union Address, President Clinton outlined what he called the High Hopes for College initiative. This initiative addressed the difficulties facing low-income students during the late 90s, particularly focusing on research findings indicating these students do not even aspire to graduate high school let alone attend college. The reauthorization of the HEA scheduled for later that year produced a policy window opening for GEAR UP.

Once the window was open, the policy entrepreneur has to be there to push it through, so to speak. A policy entrepreneur is defined as, “advocates who are willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, money—to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits,” (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 179).

Representative Chaka Fattah (D-PA), a liberal democrat representing the Philadelphia district which has been severely wrought with educational failures, served as the policy entrepreneur for GEAR UP (for additional information with respect to Rep. Fattah, see his website <http://fattah.house.gov>). The Philadelphia school district has tried utilizing different types of school reform, including school choice, privatization, vouchers, charters, and tax credit programs in an attempt to rectify the situation (Christman & Rhodes, 2002; Hess, 1999; Maranto, 2005). Using the situation in which his constituents were living, Representative Fattah was able to properly couple the mood of the nation, to his proposed solution, GEAR UP. This policy is extremely important to economically disadvantaged students in that it provides essential elements and initiatives to not only graduating high school, but also attending college.

GEAR UP is a federal grant program aimed at increasing the awareness and readiness of low SES students for success in postsecondary institutions. The federal funding provides Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and State Education Agencies (SEAs) with a six year fund-matching grant enabling these partnerships to aid middle and high school students in poverty areas, though the policy guidelines state that the funds can be used for programs as early in life as preschool if they are attached to “priority students” instead of cohorts (Section 404D, B2A). These funds are attached to cohorts prior to seventh grade.

In order to accomplish this feat, GEAR UP funds are available for early intervention programs and college scholarships. The early intervention component is specifically designed to address the issues surrounding low SES students' low expectations and aspirations, making college less of a dream and more of a reality (Department of Education, 2008). Funding priority is granted to those institutions who, prior to enactment of GEAR UP in 1998, demonstrated early intervention initiatives for low SES students. However, to be eligible for the grant at the school level, the school can receive no other federal program funds for early intervention, which is an innate difficulty for the schools, students, and program participants. Because so many of the federal intervention programs are similar in nature, the federal government limits schools to participation in one program, or programs under the same umbrella, limiting the financial resources to which schools have access (this is discussed further in the evaluation section under the subheading of *Competing Funds and Program Redundancy*).

Though federal guidelines are specific in detailing the categorical use of the funds, the implementation of GEAR UP can be maneuvered within those guidelines, giving each state the ability to structure individual detailed guidelines and program services. In Pennsylvania, for example, the partners include Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), and the Harrisburg and Philadelphia school systems. The program has the following collegiate affiliates: Shippensburg University, West Chester University, Cheyney University, East Stroudsburg University, and Kutztown University, all of which are part of the state system of higher education. The Academy for Educational Development (AED), a non-profit organization, also participates in the partnership. Together this team has outlined Pennsylvania's GEAR UP program to raise academic performance through the following five means (PA State, 2004):

1. Early Intervention Services, including:
  - Needs assessment of school district students
  - Educational action plans for all GEAR UP students
  - Academic monitoring and evaluation
  - Career exploration
  - Academic and cultural experiences on university campuses
  - Tutoring and study skills enhancement
  - Mentoring from university and community volunteers.
2. Professional development, specifically:
  - Training and university courses to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to meet needs of GEAR UP students
  - One-week residential experience for teachers in urban settings to explore and solve teacher/learner challenges unique to urban education
  - Online courses
  - Certification programs.
3. Pre-service teacher education programs that will:
  - Provide Urban field experiences and student teaching in Harrisburg and Philadelphia schools
  - "Grow your own" university-based pre-service teacher programs aimed at encouraging teacher education students to pursue placement in urban settings, specifically the Harrisburg and Philadelphia school districts.
4. Parent programs, to include:
  - Facilitating information meetings for parents to discuss students' goals and providing information about financial services and PHEAA
  - Arranging college visitation for parents and students.
5. Last dollar scholarships to eligible students for postsecondary education.

This program had, and continues to have a substantial impact on high school graduation rates and college attendance rates for low-income students. The percentage of GEAR UP students who graduated from high school in 2006 was 84.4%, while the percentage of GEAR UP students who were enrolled in college in 2006 was 52.2% (HEA, 2008). When compared to the U.S. population, the GEAR UP students are doing very well. The average freshman graduation rate for public schools in 2006-07 was 74.4%, exactly 10% lower than the GEAR UP students (IES, 2007). The nation-wide enrollment rates of 18 to 24-year-olds in degree-granting institutions was 38.9%, which is 13.3% lower than the GEAR UP statistics (IES, 2007). Though GEAR UP has obviously made an impact on the recipients of grant funds, this program still has

several shortcomings and is in need of changes if it is to have the intended effect of minimizing the college attendance gaps between low and high SES students.

### Evaluating GEAR UP

The success of GEAR UP since its inception in 1998 demonstrates the beneficial design of the program; however, if this success is to extend its reach, there are several things that need to be taken into consideration. These include the application process, appropriations, implementation, scale, and sustainability. Additionally, there is the issue of redundancy in the multiplicity of programs with such similar descriptions, causing the federal early intervention programs to lose credibility while serving as fuel for the opposition's fire.

*Application*-One of the benefits to the GEAR UP funding process is that both the regulations and application instructions for GEAR UP are fairly straight-forward. The Department of Education website has a power-point presentation that outlines the application process and provides examples of how to fill out the application forms which are also available on the website (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/applicant.html>). The six selection criteria are clearly listed in the power-point, with each of the six categories outlined in specific detail, as well as the weight assigned to each category. The 90 page application packet is available for replication, with all the necessary contact information easily accessible.

Despite these benefits, there are a few complications. First, the application must be resubmitted for every new cohort. If the school is receiving funding under the "priority student" conditions instead of the cohort design, a new application must be filed in order to add more students. This aspect of the application was not easily accessible. The guidelines and application instructions do not articulate this specifically, and it is basically an inferred concept.

The problem with competing funds and redundancy only complicates matters further for applicants.

*Competing Funds and Program Redundancy-* There are several HEA programs with the goal of aiding low SES students in their postsecondary endeavors. In addition to GEAR UP, the most commonly known programs would fall under the TRIO programs, which began as three programs and is now at eight. Often the underfunding of such programs causes unnecessary tension between their respective supporters as they compete for funding. Since schools cannot receive money from a variety of early intervention programs, the school must choose to which program they will apply. Since individual schools can only receive funding from one intervention program at a time, the problem of deadlines also becomes an issue.

The application deadlines for GEAR UP and two of the TRIO programs are clearly listed on the site. November 6<sup>th</sup> is the deadline for the Upward Bound application, December 20<sup>th</sup> for GEAR UP, and January 6<sup>th</sup> for Talent Search. Though the deadlines listed on the Department of Education's website fall in a sequential order, the website fails to include the turn-around time for applications. It is highly unlikely that the Department of Education will have ample time to review the application during the time lapses between deadlines. As such, it would not be possible for a school who fails to receive a grant for one to apply for another, causing the schools to have to weigh their options in respect to the predictability of being awarded that particular grant and which grant will best fit their needs. Not only are the programs competing for applicants as a result of the inability to overlap, but they are also competing for appropriations.

*Appropriations-* According to the Department of Education, in 2008 the president allotted \$56 billion to education (Department of Education 2008). Of this \$56 billion, 0.5% was appropriated

to GEAR UP. Though the appropriations for such programs have grown since the inception of the HEA, this amount is still a far cry from what is needed for these programs to achieve the goal of equal representation (Gladieux, King, & Corrigan, 2005). The federal government provided 197 awards to 738,968 children, which comes out to \$410 per student receiving aid. Since there are over 13 million children in the United States classified as low SES, you can see that this program is only reaching 5.6% of the population it is intended to serve (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008).

*Policy Tools*-There are several ways in which program design can be evaluated, including the policy tools, implementation efforts, scale, and sustainability. When looking at the tools, there are five categories by which a program can be identified: mandates, inducements, capacity-building, systems-changing, and hortatory (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). GEAR UP would be classified as an inducement with capacity-building incorporated. Given the aforementioned monetary statistics, there is clearly not enough funding available to serve everyone in need. Due to the lack of research, it is difficult to gauge whether or not \$410 per student is a sufficient inducement. The only available analyzed data provides the proportion of GEAR UP students graduating from high school and attending college. While these are great data resources, they fall short of informing the actual impact of the money, and they have not been independently evaluated.

While the inducement perspective is difficult to gauge, the capacity-building is not. The program clearly implies the future value of the program. Providing low SES students with early intervention programs is one of the only ways we have to minimize the college attendance gap between low and high SES students. Any teacher involved with low SES children is able to see

the difference once the program has been made available. For those teachers who cannot see the “light at the end of the tunnel”, the statistics can speak for themselves to demonstrate the future value of the program. Not only do early intervention programs get low SES children to college, but they also, in the short-term improve test scores and graduation rates (IES, 2007). Given the NCLB standards movement, all teachers benefit individually from increased test scores.

*Implementation Effort*-In 1987, a list was compiled regarding the evaluation of implementation efforts of policy (McLaughlin, 1987). This list proves useful when evaluating programs like GEAR UP. The first of the five categorical evaluations is will and capacity. It has been estimated that it takes seven years to change the will and capacity of street-level bureaucrats (McLaughlin, 1987). The cohort funding is a six year program, indicating there is a possibility that the will and capacity can be changed with the first cohort, but it will most likely take place during the second cohort. Several aspects of will and capacity are covered in the second category, which is the inability to mandate what matters.

The values behind GEAR UP are what matter in this program, which are social justice and educational equity for all. Under this category, there are subcategories, like the inconsistencies of the program implementation (Shulman, 1983). With any top-down educational initiative there will be at least 50 different implementations due to the 50 different state Departments of Education. As such, one can only expect to see inconsistencies in funding from all levels (not just federal), inconsistencies in program development and availability, and so on. These inconsistencies inhibit the implementation process as does the limited resources of money, time, and energy. This is where the first two categories begin to overlap.

The limited resources are joined by limited teacher expertise and the limitations placed on working conditions. In schools in low SES areas, the laundry list of complications includes all of the aforementioned limitations, not only making it impossible to mandate what matters, but also serving as a roadblock to the development of will and capacity. When using the Pennsylvania example, there are several things that are in place to combat these issues, but just as many that create them. Additional work is made for teachers and administrators through the inclusion of educational action plans for each student, additional monitoring and evaluation, tutoring and skill enhancement, facilitating parent meetings, and arranging college visits. However, it is important to include the benefits at this point as well. Will and capacity are increased through the inclusion of professional development and the pre-service teacher education programs.

The things that build will and capacity are not only included in what matters, but they are also included in the individual incentives and beliefs of the street-level bureaucrats (McLaughlin, 1987). The incentives of professional development and pre-service teacher programs are put into place. NCLB has already increased the pressure placed on teachers and schools to succeed and produce higher test scores. Additional funding and programs like GEAR UP can provide a way for teachers to raise test scores and alleviate some of the pressure by providing them with support. The final category looks at the ability of the policy directed change to affect the smallest unit. Clearly, the GEAR UP program is fulfilling this aspect of the implementation evaluation in that it is permeating down to the student level.

*Scale*-The scale of a policy program can be evaluated using breadth, depth, and a shift in ownership (Coburn, 2003). The breadth to which a program or policy change is accepted is

measured looking at the spread of the beliefs and norms upon which the program is designed. The breadth in the case of GEAR UP is spreading the belief that early intervention is effective, and then turning this belief into a norm. President Clinton and Representative Fattah (D-PA) were able to successfully convince Congress of the belief in early educational intervention thereby passing GEAR UP as an amendment to HEA in 1998. A decade has passed since its inception, yet this still seems to be more of a belief and less of a norm. In Pennsylvania, for example, only 2 out of 500 school districts are participating in GEAR UP. Nationally, grants were awarded to 197 out of 100,627 schools in 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The second evaluation point is the depth of the program implementation. This refers to the imbedded nature of the program. In other words, has this program become more of a second-nature action, and less of an added duty? Until this program is accepted as a norm, it will not be able to become truly imbedded into the everyday life of teachers and students. The program is currently designed such that each grant recipient has the ability to structure and implement the five broad categories previously outlined in Pennsylvania's example at their discretion, making this a difficult characteristic to evaluate. At this point, and given the aspects of the program design that are required to be extra aspects of the regular school day/year, GEAR UP has not been designed or implemented in a way that it can reach the proper depth. Instead, GEAR UP is seen as additional, financially uncompensated work for teachers and administrators.

The final evaluation point requires the ownership of the program to be shifted from the federal level to the local level. Again, given the design of the program, federal involvement is required in order to have the appropriate level of funding. There is only so much authority that

can be transferred to the local level, and at this point, it would appear that the local level has obtained the minimal amount of authority it is allotted.

*Sustainability*-This is called into question with respect to programs from the perspectives of fidelity, pre-set outcomes, and longevity (Coburn, 2003). For the past decade the federal government has continued to uphold their end of the program fidelity, which is almost solely funding. Despite continued financial support, it has already been demonstrated that the funds are not sufficient. On a smaller scale, working our way down through the chain, some of the other “deal-breakers” may include the lack of commitment and support from the universities. With the program so heavily reliant on the involvement of postsecondary institutions, there are several ways in which the fidelity of the program can become an issue. In the Pennsylvania program, for example, the universities are needed for four out of the five program aspects, with the fifth being postsecondary scholarships provided by the program. As such, the involvement of the universities and the level at which they are willing to be involved can pose a problem.

Given the statistics provided by the Department of Education, GEAR UP is clearly meeting the pre-set outcomes. Both high school graduation rates and college attendance rates are higher for GEAR UP students than the general population, regardless of income (IES, 2007). The longevity of the program has also been sustained. Though it has only survived one round of reauthorization, GEAR UP has remained funded by every annual appropriations committee as part of the federal budget. This may be attributed to the fact that the GEAR UP program is considered to be an add-on, meaning it does not change or alter current teaching styles, but instead it is merely an addition to what is already established (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As

previously discussed, however, being an add-on program causes it to receive less attention and prohibits full-scale implementation.

### Policy Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned problems, there are several proposed solutions. The first is to create an easier application process. Though on-line help is available and accessible, the length and time commitment of the application process may be dissuading some otherwise qualified applicants from applying. This may not be a necessary program change, but it is necessary to create an application addendum that would minimize the resources required to reapply for the new cohort. As previously discussed, the schools that are eligible to apply for the program are already limited by resource constraints that prohibit otherwise qualified schools from even applying.

In order to address the issue of funding, clearly the recommendation would be to increase it, as with the recommendations included in almost all educational policy analyses. If the Department of Education were to spend \$410 on every low SES student in the country, it would cost \$5.4 billion. While it would be extreme to ask for a funding increase from 0.5% of the education budget to 9% of the education budget, it is not extreme to ask for an increase in funding. Everyone in the nation can feel the effects of the lack of educational equity. Under the guise of pay now or pay later, an increase in taxes could be used to fund this endeavor, though I do not believe it is necessary. There are several programs and policies receiving unnecessary amounts of funding that could be contributing to education. Those thoughts aside, everyone benefits from a reduction in crime rates, the innovation of ideas, a decreased reliance on the

welfare and Medicaid systems, and the additional contributions associated with educational opportunities for low SES students.

The problem of redundancy is not an easy one to fix. Several barriers stand in the way when it comes to the elimination of programs. As such, it may be beneficial to combine some of the programs that have overlapping goals and program specifications. However, even if the funding for GEAR UP and all eight of the TRIO programs were combined, it will still only total \$1.1 billion dollars, which is roughly one-fifth of the required amount needed to help every student living in a low SES environment based on the \$410 per student allotment (IES, 2007). At this point it is necessary to mention that there is no statistical evidence to support \$410 as the actual amount needed to improve educational attainment equity. As such, it is also recommended that the increase in funding for the program/s include grant money for research endeavors.

Not only is there a lack of statistical evidence for the \$410 per student allotment, but there is also a lack of evidence to support the combination of programs and the effectiveness of already enacted programs. We can see from the high school graduation and college attendance rates that GEAR UP works, when evaluated by the Department of Education; however, a deeper and richer assessment is necessary. We can see the increases, which are significant given the students in GEAR UP are all low SES and the general population statistics are all-inclusive, but we do not know if these programs are being effectively implemented or if the money is being put to good use. As such, it is necessary to initiate further research projects that can serve as a better, independent evaluation of the overall program effectiveness and efficiency.

When addressing the problems with the policy tools and implementation efforts, there are several recommendations that would be beneficial for the program. The recommended research

will demonstrate whether or not \$410 is an appropriate inducement. Additionally, it will aid in the identification of ways in which the beliefs involved can be transformed into norms. One way in which this can gain support is to use NCLB. Though this legislation was put into place on the platform that it would create educational equity, at this point it has only served to identify and prove the inequalities that exist. The aggregated data can be used to illustrate that economically disadvantaged populations of students are still failing, and therefore causing schools to fail to make AYP.

Under NCLB, graduation rates are only applicable when identifying Safe Harbor schools. This provision of NCLB allows schools who did not actually make AYP to be labeled as a “Safe Harbor” school instead of “Needs Improvement” school. In addition to the 10% increase of proficient students in the failing sub-group, and the attendance and graduation rates that are included in the Safe Harbor provision, it is recommended that the school participation in GEAR UP be included as well. With rudimentary statistics demonstrating that GEAR UP is effectively raising graduation rates already, it is likely that the inclusion of GEAR UP would already classify the school as a Safe Harbor. However, the addition of this provision in the reauthorization of NCLB legislation, which is predicted to occur sometime next year, would create another inducement for schools, states, and partnering agencies to apply.

The next two recommendations go hand-in-hand; incorporate the activities into everyday school life and make postsecondary institutions stakeholders. Using the Pennsylvania program as an example, there are five parts of the program that demonstrate this connection. The academic and cultural experiences on university campuses could be made into a fieldtrip so it did not require out-of-school supervision time and planning. Instead of holding the tutoring sessions

after school, initiate a period during the normal school day that can serve as a study hall during which time the students in the GEAR UP program are congregated together for the special tutoring sessions. This period could be led by a university or community volunteer, as could the informative meetings held for parents to discuss students' goals and provide financial aid information. The college visitation for parents and students could also be done by this university volunteer; however, in order to make the universities stakeholders, there is another recommendation.

Graduate assistantships should be provided for graduate students to get involved in the program. If these assistantships were funded by the GEAR UP program, the university would have a vested interest in the program. Not only could the graduate assistant take the place of the university volunteer, but the assistantship would also provide tuition dollars to the university. In addition to the scholarship funds provided by GEAR UP, this would provide graduate school funding for GEAR UP students upon completion of their undergraduate degrees, which would also increase the college graduation rates. Due to the lack of resources in the school, the graduate assistant would also be responsible for aiding in the formation of the grant proposal for funding, which would remove the burden from the already under-resourced schools. Though the principle investigator on the grant would have to remain the school superintendent, having a graduate student available to alleviate some of the writing workload would aid in increasing the will and capacity of the superintendent. The number of assistantships required would be dependent upon the number of students involved in the program at the high school level. Again, drawing on the Pennsylvania example, and specifically Shippensburg University (the school with the highest tuition rate), the cost per graduate assistantship would be \$14,057 annually, a small sum in comparison to some of the other program activities.

The final recommendation concerns financial aid. The difficulty with financial aid forms has not gone unnoticed. The Spellings Commission outlined this as one of the major problems with the higher education system in the U.S. (*A Test of Leadership*, 2007). Not only is the application process difficult, time consuming, redundant, and ineffective—typically failing to provide aid to the students who need it most—it is also largely a waste of time since financial aid is failing to meet the needs of ever-rising postsecondary institution rates. Though GEAR UP cannot solve this problem for all students, it can solve the problem for the students enrolled in the program. If students are qualifying for assistance through the GEAR UP program, clearly they are considered to be needs-based students. As such, enrollment in the program should be synonymous with an application for financial aid. This would eliminate the portion of the program that focuses on teaching parents and students how to fill out the complicated forms, enabling the program funds to be put to better use in some of the other categories, like the proposed graduate assistantships. This recommendation clearly does not entail all that would be needed to accomplish such a feat; it is simply a suggestion that be taken into consideration if and when the financial aid system is changed.

### Conclusion

The access and achievement gaps disproportionately affect low SES students, which is not only reflected in the previously mentioned statistics, but also in the college completion rates. Only 36% of qualified low SES students complete a bachelor's degree, compared to 81% of their high SES counterparts (*A Test of Leadership*, 2007). These gaps lead to the presence of an income gap, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Programs like GEAR UP are put in place as a means to reduce the gaps. Effective as they may be, the gaps still persist, which is why several recommendations were proposed. The creation of an application addendum, increased funding,

additional research, inclusion as a Safe Harbor identifier, incorporation into daily activities, making universities stakeholders, and automatic applications for financial aid are in-depth recommendations that will grow GEAR UP to its full potential, which is to aid all low SES students in achieving their full potential, rather than ignoring 95% of them.

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