

# *Collaboratives: Helping Hispanic Students Succeed*

*By Linda Owlett Baltimore*

**M**inority cultures represent an invaluable human resource within American society. To reap the full benefit of cultural diversity, however, some crucial and pervasive problems within the educational system need to be solved. The lack of support systems that promote academic achievement of minority students and continued ethnic inequality in access to higher education have particularly adverse effects on Hispanic youth.

Hispanics<sup>1</sup> (including Mexican Americans, Colombians, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans) are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, but they are grossly under-represented in higher education. The number of Hispanics in America has increased by 30 percent since 1980. Hispanics now account for 7.9 percent of the American population, and they are expected to account for 11 percent by 2010. In some areas of the Southwest, Hispanics are predicted to become the numerical majority of people under age 30 by the year 2000. Hispanics make up 8.2 percent of the college-age population, but only 4.3 percent of those actually enrolled in colleges.<sup>2</sup>

Many Hispanics do not even enter high school. From 28 to 40 percent of Hispanic children enrolled in grade school are enrolled at a grade level below normal for their age, compared to 20 to 25 percent of non-Hispanic white children. And by the ninth or tenth grade, 43 percent are behind.<sup>3</sup>

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Moreover, 75 percent of Hispanic high school seniors are not enrolled in college preparatory curricula, and 33 percent of those who do graduate earn below-average grades in one or more of their academic courses. Nationally, 38 percent of Hispanics drop out of high school, and over 50 percent of Hispanics who enroll in college fail to graduate.<sup>4</sup>

The differences in achievement rates between Hispanic and non-Hispanic adults are staggering as well. As of 1992, 9.3 percent of Hispanics, age 25 and over, reported having had four or more years of college education. This is an increase from 7.7 percent in 1980 and 6.1 percent in 1970—a total gain of 3.2 percent. However, among non-Hispanic whites, 22 percent in 1992, 17.1 percent in 1980, and 11.3 percent in 1970 had completed four years of college—an increase of 10.7 percent.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the gap in educational attainment between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites has more than doubled since 1970.

This inequality of achievement in American education, and therefore in opportunity in American society, must change. We need to develop and implement strategies to increase opportunity and upward mobility within the educational system.<sup>6</sup> But to develop effective strategies for change, we first need to understand the sources of Hispanic students' lower achievement and attainment.

### **Sources of Inequality of Opportunity**

Hispanics—on average—differ from non-Hispanic whites in family income, place of birth, language proficiency, family support, availability of role models, and orientation toward the dominant culture. Individual and institutional racism and stereotyping also affect opportunity for Hispanic students.

Many Hispanics fit a lower socioeconomic minority profile, especially immigrants of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, 28.7 percent of Hispanics had incomes below the poverty level, nearly three times the rate for non-Hispanic whites.<sup>8</sup> Median Hispanic family income was \$23,895 compared to \$37,783 for non-Hispanic whites.<sup>9</sup>

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Hispanic students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have lower educational aspirations—a built-in barrier to achievement. Low-income students do not achieve as well, persist as long, or complete the programs of study in the same proportion as students from middle- and upper-income groups, who typically have the advantages of greater support at home, better schools, stronger academic preparation, and cultural expectations of college attendance.<sup>10</sup> Lower socioeconomic status Hispanic youth need greater support and impetus to succeed in the often hostile, alien world of academia.

Most minority students, including Hispanics, experience cultural shock in the alien academic world of achievement, with its Anglo customs and traditions. To a greater degree than other students, minority students experience loneliness and isolation, set unrealistic goals, and fear performance evaluation. They feel alienated from the dominant culture and style, and feel little internal control over the events in their lives.<sup>11</sup> They feel weak and incapable of obtaining the results they desire. As a result, they experience inferiority and frustration directly related to the lower status of a minority culture.<sup>12</sup>

New immigrants experience even greater culture shock. Their chances for success within American education are limited by their brief time in the United States, culture, gender, financial condition, and their lack of academic preparation.<sup>13</sup> Immigrant minorities often face institutional racism, as well as prejudice. Many Americans, including Hispanics and other minorities, feel that there are already too many immigrants in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Language barriers compound cultural differences, especially for newer immigrants. The majority of Hispanics live in metropolitan areas and use and retain their mother tongue to a greater degree than other ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> The below-average academic performance of Hispanics is often due to not being given enough time to gain adequate English proficiency before being mainstreamed into classes with monolingual peers.<sup>16</sup> The language barrier also prevents effective communication between parents and

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school personnel, which contributes to Hispanic students dropping out.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the differences in language, culture, experiences, and socialization, the success or failure of schools in contributing to student achievement rests on an understanding of Hispanic students by teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff.<sup>18</sup> As immigration increases the population of Hispanics, there must be a stronger emphasis on multicultural education and intercultural sensitivity and awareness. Studying the social, cultural, and political background of minority groups in schools can teach students to respect diversity and appreciate pluralism. These changes can facilitate greater minority participation in the educational system and economy and continuing strength and vitality for the nation.<sup>19</sup>

### **Scaling the American Education Ladder**

Historically, the American educational ladder was designed to link elementary school to high school and give all students a chance to continue with higher education.<sup>20</sup> Our challenges today are to strengthen the linkage at each level and transform schools into multicultural institutions. If these challenges are met, then the educational system will provide greater opportunity for Hispanics, including recent immigrants.

Clearly, success in higher education does not just happen for college students without prior school success. For children to succeed at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels, care and nurturing are needed at the prenatal and early childhood stages. Language minority families require special attention and support to facilitate the development of healthy, competent young children.<sup>21</sup> Support services, continued encouragement, and comprehensive retention programs within elementary and secondary schools are essential if Hispanic children are to proceed to graduation and on to higher education.

Those students who opt to go to college must begin early, at least in the middle school years, to start thinking about college as a realistic option. They must also be given solid academic counsel-

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ing about the courses they will need in preparation for college.

Other imperatives for poor and minority student success include mentor relationships with college students and college graduates—role models for college-bound students—and a quality curriculum that rewards analytical thinking and sustained intellectual effort.<sup>22</sup> The goal of school intervention programs for college-bound Hispanic students ought to be to create a pool of Hispanic students that increases over time as the population itself grows over time.<sup>23</sup>

Most Hispanic students, however, have shown lower achievement rates, higher drop-out rates, and less satisfaction with school than non-Hispanic whites. Not only do low numbers of Hispanics go to college, but retention of Hispanic students continues to be a problem at higher education institutions.<sup>24</sup> As reported earlier, over 50 percent of Hispanic students who enroll in college do not graduate.<sup>25</sup>

Hispanics often experience multiple barriers to entering college: money, fear of the unknown, and lack of role models. To reduce these barriers, it is necessary to establish scholarship and incentive programs for Hispanics, provide Hispanic teachers as role models,<sup>26</sup> and eliminate bias and discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

Hispanics, in addition, are more likely than are members of other school groups to enroll in proprietary, business, or occupational programs, at both community colleges and vocational-technical schools, to acquire work related skills.<sup>28</sup> Due in part to the lower achievement of Hispanics within the secondary school system, many Hispanics do not qualify to enter four-year colleges and universities with selective admissions policies. According to some, these differences in precollegiate preparation naturally lead to differential access and opportunity.<sup>29</sup>

Two-year and vocational institutions—operating with lower resources and offering only certificates or associate degrees—have mixed effects on Hispanic students.<sup>30</sup>

Clark<sup>31</sup> describes this process as a societal “cooling out,” a period when students with “unrealistically” high aspirations are encouraged to be “realistic”—to enroll in terminal vocational pro-

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grams rather than flunk out. Supporters of vocational programs in secondary schools and at open-access colleges see this as beneficial, but others report larger and larger numbers of ethnic minorities, including Hispanics, being pushed into these programs.<sup>32</sup>

Cohen and Brawer<sup>33</sup> argue that public two-year institutions or community colleges are viable options for Hispanic students. The two remind critics who claim that community colleges are a dead end for Hispanics that community colleges make it possible for large numbers of Hispanics to matriculate where states are not about to build high-cost senior institutions within easy reach of everyone. Two-year colleges, they maintain, can provide a crucial link to higher level institutions and degrees.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, community college minority students, including Hispanics, who transfer to four-year institutions represent most of the minority students enrolled in many four-year colleges and universities. They also represent the greatest potential growth for minorities within the higher education system in the future.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the transfer rate of minorities from two- to four-year colleges remains extremely small. This particularly hurts minorities, females, and the working class because they depend on community colleges and other two-year institutions for access to higher education.<sup>36</sup> Among the obstacles that impede transfer: the lack of coordinated requirements, the lack of uniformity in course offerings, and inconsistent policies for assessment.<sup>37</sup>

Hispanic students have one definite advantage at two-year institutions in the United States. The majority of the 2.3 percent of Hispanic faculty found in colleges and universities are at two-year institutions.<sup>38</sup> Hispanic faculty in these institutions can serve as role models. They are visible products of educational growth, and they can help guide Hispanic students into graduate or professional study.<sup>39</sup>

These faculty also feel a sense of responsibility to members of their own culture. They are more able to give Hispanic students the support and encouragement they need, dispel mistrust of the surrounding majority culture, and motivate students to attain higher levels of education.

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Local two-year colleges also place considerably more emphasis on establishing a supportive environment for minority students than do their baccalaureate-oriented counterparts. Two-year colleges are able to provide, as well, underprepared students with longer periods of time to remedy deficiencies.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Hispanic students (probably due to finances) usually do not stay on the “fast track”—enrolling in college following high school and completing a college degree without interruption. They often utilize stop-out or part-time options<sup>41</sup> as alternatives to dropping out of the collegiate pipeline.<sup>42</sup> Two-year, open access colleges with multiple missions are more flexible than traditional four-year institutions—providing such students an opportunity for success.<sup>43</sup>

Still, greater occupational opportunities exist for those who graduate with bachelor’s degrees, especially from the prestigious selective universities, with greater institutional resources. Few minority students, including Hispanics, attend these elite institutions,<sup>44</sup> and there has been only minimal improvement in their attendance at these universities within the last few years. Inequality in admission to elite colleges, due to exclusive reliance on traditional entrance exams and test score interpretation for admissions decisions, also means that the admission of Hispanics to selective graduate schools continues to be deplorable.<sup>45</sup>

If there is to be equality within higher education for Hispanics, it is imperative to keep minority students in the pipeline, helping them move up the educational and occupational ladders. Once graduate school is completed, further help is needed to help graduating students move into professional jobs—especially as higher education faculty who can support, encourage, and model diversity. Minority faculty—a small group—often feel isolated and unsupported and encounter discrimination. Being only one, or a few of a kind, increases occupational stress and dissatisfaction.<sup>46</sup> And dissatisfaction leads to dropping out.

In spite of all the barriers that Hispanics in higher education face, they continue to record consistent growth within that system. In 1990, they achieved growth at both the Bachelor’s level and the

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Master's level. Unfortunately, they posted gains in doctoral degrees in only a few disciplines while experiencing declines in others.<sup>47</sup>

Due in part to continuing financial crises, both two-year and four-year colleges are showing a renewed interest in flexibility of services. They are exploring, with greater intensity, decreases in residency requirements for baccalaureate degrees, weekend and evening courses, distance learning, and greater course availability at branch campus locations and employer worksites. Such increased flexibility can help Hispanics in access and, as a result, increase achievement.

There is, however, a growing tendency—due to the need to increase enrollments—for colleges to emphasize the “customer service” approach and stress only needs assessment and marketing techniques. Implicitly, this approach must not replace the setting of fundamental program development goals within academia. Needs assessment is only meaningful as a technique within the context of the human or social purpose that it is meant to serve.<sup>48</sup> Convenience cannot supplant quality. Quality programs with required levels of expertise are essential if students are to be prepared for further study and for the workplace.

### **Collaboratives in Higher Education**

Cooperation and integration of services and interventions at the various stages of life, as well as between the different levels of education, are known in the literature as collaboration or “collaboratives.” Research reports on collaboration efforts appear to offer hope of bridging the gap between the skills needed to be successful in college and the skills of many secondary school graduates. Collaboratives, which often make education of minorities their primary focus,<sup>49</sup> can bridge the gap that exists between the educational access and achievement of Hispanics and the majority population.

During the 1980s, several colleges entered into collaboration agreements with area high schools to identify and solve mutual

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problems. These agreements included high schools and colleges and universities as well as organizations from the business community. Together, the colleges and their partners formed alliances to improve education.

This type of collaboration represents a “win, win, win” situation. It is to the business community’s advantage to support public education because business depends on public school graduates for its work force. It is in the college’s best interest to support public education because high school graduates form their clientele. And public schools benefit from collaborating with both the business community and higher education through increased opportunities for their graduates.<sup>50</sup> These early pilot projects have experienced varying degrees of success, but the lessons learned from these programs can serve as a guide for improving the success rate of collaboration projects.

Although there needs to be cooperation among institutions to accomplish common goals and to share similar societal values, maintaining diversity is also very important. Diversity maintains institutional autonomy and academic freedom—intertwined concepts. Moreover, societal purposes can be served by academic institutions and by their diversity.<sup>51</sup>

One dilemma for higher education that is addressed by collaboration teams is the question of how to increase access and retention while maintaining the quality of education. One solution is to start the intervention process early. Middle schools present the ideal rung on the educational ladder for interjecting remedial interventions, before the time at-risk students drop out of the system. Partnerships between middle schools and colleges or universities offer strong potential for increasing Hispanic access to higher education.

Many collaboratives have evolved through a concerted effort, initiated by either a university or a middle school, to enhance the quality of teacher preparation for middle schools. An added feature that reinforces the viability of these partnerships as a pathway to minority progress up the educational ladder is the involvement of third party interests in the collaborative process.

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For example, in 1987 the College Board, with funding from the Aetna Foundation, proposed a project “to help urban school systems help minority students prepare for college.”<sup>52</sup> The project, now in the implementation stage, has two main objectives: to increase attendance at colleges and universities among populations that have not historically gone to college, and to cultivate superior students capable of high achievement and significant recognition. Having parents involved as partners in their children’s education and creating the expectation that college is a realistic goal are considered essential components of this college-middle school program.<sup>53</sup>

More recently, a national program to increase immigrant education was funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.<sup>54</sup> The program includes both high schools and middle schools. All schools in the project have large numbers of students who do not speak English, and several schools are primarily Hispanic, mostly Mexican-American. The program links educational organizations, school districts, schools of education, postsecondary institutions (including community colleges and vocational training programs), community-based organizations, and businesses. This precollegiate program has three main goals:

- Improve English language and literacy development.
- Improve mastery of academic content and skills.
- Improve access to post secondary opportunities (including preparation for higher education and/or the workforce).<sup>55</sup>

Another project initiated by the American Association for Higher Education, with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts,<sup>56</sup> hopes to demonstrate that careful planning, committed leadership, and a community-wide focus on results can significantly improve the educational achievement of poor and minority students. The project involves programs located in several different communities. Program leaders plan to remain involved from six to eight years, continuously monitoring results. Moreover, Pew and the American Association of Higher Education expect to work with

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the communities over the life of the project to help them succeed and disseminate information about the project to other interested parties. They plan to measure success of the project by tracking how many students successfully complete at least two years of postsecondary education.<sup>57</sup> If, however, as Schwartz<sup>58</sup> asserts the ultimate goal of collaboratives is an "All One System" involving K-16, two years of college will be only a benchmark measurement. Hopefully, evaluation will not end after two or even four years of college, but will follow successful college graduates through graduate school and beyond.

The final verdicts on the projects noted above are yet to come. Intermediate evaluation measures could, nevertheless, produce indicators of serious commitment to institutional change and to a more integrated education system. Some visible indicators of successful collaboration would be:

- Shared use of facilities.
- Significant sharing of faculty.
- Easier movement of students across institutional lines.
- Sharing of administration and professional staff.
- Involvement of community organizations and services apart from the educational community.
- Outside financial support.
- Entrance to and graduation from the next highest level within the educational system.
- Interest shown by potential employers in graduates at each bench mark during the educational process.<sup>59</sup>

If the primary goal or mission of the collaborative project is helping Hispanic students to succeed, then the focus must remain on student outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

Some collaborative projects among institutional systems benefit students who need more support or who have academic deficiencies. These students attend two-year colleges and later, after successful progress, automatically transfer to a four-year campus within the system. This structure eliminates the problem of course

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transfer. Usually collaboration involves formal articulation agreements: a four-year college or university agrees to accept qualified students from a two-year college directly into its upper level programs. More articulation or collaboration agreements are needed between two- and four-year institutions, if the existing inequities between “have-not” Hispanics and the “have’s” or majority culture population are to be eliminated.

Current cutbacks in government support to education and the decrease in student financial aid could actually help expand such articulation agreements. The first two years of coursework are less expensive at two-year than four-year institutions. Yet most students hope to obtain bachelor’s degrees. The cost difference is leading to greater interest and a stronger emphasis by state policy makers and colleges on more successful transfer agreements. Ironically, a poorer economy may help turn paper contracts into reality. It is often only when everyone has something to gain that effective contracts are negotiated.

In addition, when enrollments are lower, colleges are more willing to put extra effort into underprepared students. Thus, the current economic crisis could actually help some Hispanic students.

Some collaboration agreements also take place between educational institutions and private sector business or industry. These collaboratives require community organizations and local business leaders to work in concert with both government and education to provide expertise, skills, support, and services. This involves a meshing of two sometimes diametrically opposed viewpoints or systems of ethics. There is a need for acknowledging these different prevailing values—capitalist values in industry versus the traditional academic values of education.<sup>61</sup> The emphasis should be on shared values, improving educational methods to produce more highly trained employees.

Relationships between education and industry will become more frequent as industry continues to demand higher quality employees and education strives to place its graduates. These programs promise to work especially well for students who wish to

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enter the work force directly after high school or after further vocational or technical training. Moreover, with the new advances in technology, colleges can turn lower-level vocational programs into high-level technical programs that offer certification or higher degrees and that usually pay higher salaries. Some two-year colleges are also forming partnerships directly with graduate schools, developing, for example, programs for physician assistants and allied health.<sup>62</sup>

Collaboration requires that organizations share goals, share power, and have similar needs. It also assumes mutual influence, mutual interests, and collective responsibility.<sup>63</sup> One reason collaboratives fail is that the partners refuse to share power and resources and insist on pursuing their own personal agendas. Collaboratives are also doomed to failure if the partners fail to define a common goal, such as the better education of minority students, or the partners fail to formulate specific objectives. The involvement of a third party, which rewards initiatives that promote better education of minorities and supplies funding, encourages a balance of power. In addition, it discourages partners from pursuing other goals or personal interests.

The collaboration process is itself a blending of many different cultures with similar or mutual needs. Therefore, collaboration is also needed within institutions. Academics collaborate because participants use each others' talents to do what either they can not do or could not do alone.<sup>64</sup> Kellogg asserts "that happiness and productivity depend on art as well as science, on emotions as well as intellect, and on human relationships as well as technology."<sup>65</sup> Partners—or teams—must be willing to share power in an effort to accomplish specific goals and objectives. But:

Teams are antithetical to academia; in a system designed to reward individual achievement, the team approach asks highly-trained, extremely independent individuals to come together for shared decision making. How can we do this and how can we ever hope to succeed?<sup>66</sup>

Success *is* possible by developing a culture of collaboration with a shared vision, opportunities for leadership and learning, and an honest confrontation of tensions and unresolved issues.<sup>67</sup>

Collaboration teams within higher education institutions require the involvement of administration, faculty, and staff. While these programs need to emphasize academic retention, they also need to stress the importance of quality graduates. Therefore, it is essential that collaboration teams include faculty members from the academic disciplines, as well as special programs such as ethnic studies, learning laboratories, educational opportunity programs, counseling and/or student service centers, and financial aid and admissions offices. Finally, collaboration requires many diverse community organizations, both public and private, joining together in support of the project. Collaboration not only requires a team effort, it requires commitment! Through a shared vision of improved education in a changing democratic society, and the generation of new ideas, collaboration can help establish “equality” and still maintain quality.

Collaboration between, and within, educational institutions can be considered a journey toward equality. It can help reduce overall dropout rates, as well as be the catalyst that pushes Hispanic youth up the pipeline into higher education and beyond. The colleges and universities of the United States impart knowledge and skills to the country’s young, train its leaders, and contribute to the quality of American life. It is imperative that all the members of American society have equal access to, and equal opportunity within, the higher education system. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 Hispanic is also referred to as Latino. The largest percentages of the total U.S. Hispanic population include Chicano (Mexican American), 62 percent, and Puerto Rican, 12 percent. See Keller *et al.*, 1991.
- 2 Fields, 1988.
- 3 Astin, 1982.
- 4 Valencia and Aburto, 1991.
- 5 Statistical Abstract, 1993, 153.
- 6 Muskal and Chairez, 1990.
- 7 Velez, 1989.
- 8 Statistical Abstract, 1993, 469.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 462.
- 10 Richardson and Bender, 1985.
- 11 Rendon, 1980.
- 12 Schutte, 1993.

- 13 Astone and Nunez, 1991.
- 14 Chavez, 1993.
- 15 de los Santos, 1980.
- 16 Mestre and Royer, 1991.
- 17 Velez, 1989.
- 18 Rendon, 1980.
- 19 American Council on Education, 1988.
- 20 Ornstein and Levine, 1993.
- 21 Nissani, 1990.
- 22 Schwartz, 1992.
- 23 Aguirre and Martinez, 1993.
- 24 National Education Association, 1987.
- 25 Valencia and Aburto, 1991.
- 26 The number of Hispanic teachers affects the number of Hispanic principals and superintendents. Low numbers of Hispanics in these administrative positions causes fewer Hispanic teachers to be hired. The cycle is perpetuated. See Valencia and Aburto, 1991.
- 27 Report of the Task Force on Hispanic Education, 1991.
- 28 Fields, 1988.
- 29 Richardson and Bender, 1985.
- 30 De La Rosa, 1990.
- 31 Clark, 1960.
- 32 Pincus, 1980.
- 33 Cohen and Brawer, 1982.
- 34 Cohen and Brawer, 1987.
- 35 Richardson and Bender, 1985.
- 36 Dougherty, 1994.
- 37 Olivas 1979; Dougherty 1994.
- 38 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1993.
- 39 Aguirre and Martinez, 1993.
- 40 Richardson and Bender, 1985.
- 41 Open access colleges dominated by part-time students need to emphasize sound advising and program coherence. See Richardson *et al.*, 1983. Because of the abolition of mandatory retirement, older students, who have exercised the stop out option, are now able to enjoy longer more productive careers.
- 42 Valencia and Aburto, 1991.
- 43 Cohen and Brawer, 1987.
- 44 Astin, 1982.
- 45 Keller, 1991.
- 46 Baltimore, 1991.
- 47 American Council on Education, 1993.
- 48 Brookfield, 1988.
- 49 Ascher and Schwartz, 1989.

- 50 Mocker, 1988.
- 51 Birnbaum, 1983.
- 52 Equity 2000, a six year national districtwide (K-12) education-reform model, was implemented in 1990, with sites in six cities, affecting 500,000 students in 700 schools. Funding agencies have invested \$20 million to date. See Christian, 1995; *Fact Sheet: Equity 2000*, 1994.
- 53 Kiley, 1989.
- 54 The publication by Christian in 1994 was written during the planning stages. Some individual sites now have some preliminary data which looks promising. Summary data is not yet available. See Christian, 1995 for update information.
- 55 Christian, 1994.
- 56 The Pew-AAHE Initiative began in 1991 and has six sites. Its major focus is on grades 7-14. It has now completed one year of full funding implementation. The project is focusing on how the education system operates in an attempt to make major national educational reforms. See Brown, 1994.
- 57 Schwartz, 1992.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Not all student outcomes from education are visible. Consider the enrichment from truth, beauty, and happiness.
- 61 Tasker and Packham, 1993.
- 62 Musto, 1995.
- 63 Lasley, 1991-92.
- 64 Austin and Baldwin, 1991.
- 65 Kellogg, 1995.
- 66 Bergquist, 1994.
- 67 Lieberman, 1992.

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