GEAR UP for College

It Starts with Believing
What is the best way to improve the future of low-income students who don’t value education, have no role models who graduated from high school, have never ventured far beyond their low-expectations neighborhoods, and rarely plan beyond next week? **Convince them that they belong in college.**

This is the work of GEAR UP — Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs — and it has never been more important.

GEAR UP is a competitive grant program of the U.S. Department of Education (ED). It provides funding to either states or partnerships that typically include a middle school, high school, and postsecondary institution. GEAR UP grantees work directly with students in the nation’s highest-risk communities, so these students, who have had limited opportunities, become motivated and prepared to attend college. And it turns their lives around.

The National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) works with GEAR UP grantees and ED to strengthen the outcomes of the grantees’ programs.

**Cohorts set GEAR UP apart**

GEAR UP isn’t tinkering around the edges. It is raising students’ aspirations, giving them tools and support to succeed, and changing their lives in profound and permanent ways.

GEAR UP focuses its work in communities with high proportions of low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students — the students who are least likely to attend college.

The program is school-based. While some grantees work with a targeted group of students, the majority serve one entire grade level schoolwide. GEAR UP follows that class (cohort) through the duration of the program’s six- or seven-year grant.

GEAR UP begins working with students early in their academic careers — no later than 7th grade. It stays with a

Study after study shows that [if] young people coming from disadvantaged communities ... can graduate from high school, if they can graduate from college, they basically won’t be poor anymore. Not just their lives change, but their children’s lives, and [those of] generations to come. ... **Think about the impact GEAR UP has had.**

*Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education*
cohort through middle school and to the end of high school. In some cases, the program continues through an optional additional year as the students transition to college.

The same counselors and mentors work with the students throughout the grant, following them as they progress and developing deep bonds.

Each day, GEAR UP supports students with rigorous academics, counseling, mentoring, tutoring, college visits and other college awareness programs, and financial education. GEAR UP also works with families of students so they understand why college is critical, that college is accessible, and that their support is irreplaceable. Moreover, state GEAR UP programs include scholarship dollars for students, as do many partnership grants.

Perhaps most important, GEAR UP has a lasting impact because it helps participating schools make systemic changes. GEAR UP introduces new ideas and programming, provides professional development, and effectively engages parents — all changes that benefit each GEAR UP cohort as well as future classes of students.

What Students Say about GEAR UP

“GEAR UP is opportunity.”

“Without GEAR UP, I wouldn’t be where I am now.”

“GEAR UP was like another parent to me ... that person to motivate me and push me to go to college. And once they came in, there was no going back.”

“It meant everything to me.”

“GEAR UP was the defining moment of my life. It changed everything.”

Since its inception in 1998, GEAR UP has served more than 12 million students. This year, close to 700,000 students are benefitting from its programs and services.

GEAR UP currently funds 36 state grants and 95 partnership grants. The average state grant is $3.9 million, and the average partnership grant is $1.7 million.

GEAR UP also requires grantees to raise a dollar-for-dollar match of their federal funds, which ensures that GEAR UP programs form partnerships in their communities and leverage local resources.
Discovering a Leader

Hector Araujo impresses people. He earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Arizona and is on his way to a master’s degree in higher education. He is well spoken, driven, caring, and committed to helping others.

It wasn’t always this way.

“My biological father was in prison when I was in 4th grade. I lived in a neighborhood with gang violence and lots of drug use,” Araujo says. “I got into fights and got suspended. I was only going to school because of sports, and I thought I would drop out like my sister and friends did.”

“I honestly didn’t know what I would do or what I wanted to do,” he adds. And then Arizona GEAR UP entered his life.

It starts with believing

“Our mentors, Ms. Connelly and Ms. Johnson, were a constant force, encouraging and guiding me. They saw potential in us, and now I’m living the life that they envisioned for us.”

Emily Johnson, formerly a site coordinator for Arizona GEAR UP, says that the benefits of GEAR UP begin with believing. “In the beginning, I’m carrying 99 percent of the belief, and the kids are chipping in about 1 percent. Over time, they carry more of it.”

Johnson remembers that when she first met Araujo, he was the leader of a group of tough guys. Over time, he made a conscious choice to channel his leadership ability in other ways.

A defining moment

“I remember his defining moment,” Ann Connelly, another GEAR UP coordinator recalls. “One day we were having a mentoring meeting. The speaker was late, and we didn’t know what to do to fill the time. So I asked Hector to stand up and address his peers. He was surprised, but he collected himself and did it — and he was fantastic. People responded to him. He saw that he was good at motivating people, and he started turning his energy in that direction.”

“Ms. Johnson and Ms. Connelly were huge factors in our lives,” Araujo says. “They provided insight and wisdom about decisions we were making. They opened opportunities and showed us how to see the world in a different way. They continuously mentioned the importance of going to college — not just telling us that it’s important, but articulating it in a way that resonated with us.”
Araujo continues, “They also provided the basic means for us to get to college — through workshops on how to fill out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], different college campus tours, and motivational speakers. This recipe, along with their positive attitudes, helped spark the light within me. When Ms. Johnson said I had potential, I started to believe that she could be right.”

Over time, Araujo began to see that his life could be different. “GEAR UP taught us that even if we came from an environment that wasn’t the best, we didn’t have to become that environment,” he says.

He was elected student body president and became a role model for other students. “I never felt that I was heard when I was little, so I wanted to make sure others got heard. It motivated me to serve my community and work for change.”

Araujo was turning his life around, but his challenges didn’t end there — and neither did his close ties with Johnson and Connelly, who continue to provide support and encouragement.

A cultural divide

“Aafter I graduated from high school, I was ready to go to college, but my dad was mad at me for going,” Araujo says. “He couldn’t understand why I would move away and pay to go to school instead of getting a job, making money, and helping the family. It was me versus my family and culture.”

Araujo had to teach his family to think otherwise, and over time, they began to understand his perspective and recognize how successful he is. But his commitment had to be strong enough to stand up to them and convince them.

Today, Hector is earning his master’s degree, mentoring high school students through the GEAR UP alumni program, and considering a career in politics. “My GEAR UP mentors taught me that you have to take what’s thrown at you and surround yourself with people who care and support you. That’s why I want to give something back.”

“**You have to believe in the belief others have in you before you can believe in yourself.**”

_Hector Araujo_
GEAR UP grants are a catalyst for improving schools and school districts. The Chicago GEAR UP Alliance used GEAR UP funding to introduce interventions on a small scale — and then it applied successful initiatives citywide. The partnership, led by Northeastern Illinois University with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), includes 86 elementary and middle schools, 28 high schools, and seven two- and four-year colleges and universities. They are joined by community-based organizations, museums, and businesses.

“The partnership is about college readiness, access, and success,” explains Wendy Stack. “We want all of the stakeholders working together to strengthen the pipeline to college and provide support systems so our GEAR UP students earn degrees.” Stack is director of the Chicago GEAR UP Alliance and Chicago Teachers’ Center at Northeastern Illinois University.

GEAR UP funding supported the partners in their work together, the development of new interventions, and pilot programs in GEAR UP schools. CPS then took the most successful programs and expanded them. The result: programs that had two levels of benefits. First, they helped the GEAR UP students who participated in them, as demonstrated by higher high school graduation rates, higher FAFSA completion rates, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education. Then, they supported students at all CPS schools when CPS used GEAR UP data to bring the programs to scale.
Remarkable Results

A Snapshot of the Chicago GEAR UP Class of 2011

In 2011, Chicago GEAR UP was serving about 5,217 12th graders in 21 CPS high schools, nearly all of them designated as persistently low-achieving schools.

Graduated from High School

- 84%
- 4,384 of 5,217 Chicago GEAR UP 12th graders graduated from high school.
  
  Source: Chicago Public Schools

Completed FAFSA

- 96%
- The district-wide FAFSA completion rate was 86 percent.
  
  Source: Chicago Public Schools, Office of College and Career Preparation

Enrolled in College

- 66%
- The national average for low-income students is 52 percent.
  
  Sources: National Student Clearinghouse and NCES, Condition of Education, 2013.

Persisted in College

- 64%
- Among those who enrolled in college, 64 percent of Chicago GEAR UP students persisted from fall 2011 (freshman year) to fall 2012 (sophomore year).
  
  Source: National Student Clearinghouse

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Start small and scale up

The transition from middle to high school can be intimidating for students, and 9th grade is often a time when struggling students drop out. To minimize this risk, Chicago GEAR UP created Freshman Connection, a four-week summer transition program for rising 9th graders.

The program, held at 21 high schools, included three key components: algebra, literacy, and counseling. Students experienced the rigor of high school courses, became familiar with the high school culture, and earned one-half credit to carry with them to high school.

Students who participated in the transition program performed significantly better according to several key measures. For example, in the 2007–08 GEAR UP high schools, participating students were more likely to be on track to graduate from high school. Seventy-two percent of participating students were on track compared with 66 percent of their non-participating peers.

Chicago GEAR UP achieved these results while working with persistently low-achieving schools that serve predominantly low-income students. After seeing these compelling data, CPS replicated this program at every high school in the city. The program continued after GEAR UP was no longer serving 9th graders.

GEAR UP Chicago and CPS used a similar process for other successful initiatives. For example, GEAR UP has college and career coaches in each of its schools. CPS adopted the concept of the coach and created district positions based on the GEAR UP model.
Building a College-Going Culture

How do GEAR UP programs make such dramatic changes in students’ lives? By carefully, intentionally, and consistently building a college-going culture. Day by day, step by step, conversation by conversation, students begin to see themselves as people who go to college.

GEAR UP Kentucky is serving more than 11,000 students (three cohorts) in 29 middle schools and their corresponding high schools in 21 counties across the state. Most schools are located in rural areas.

“Today, we are pushing harder and asking deeper questions,” says Yvonne Lovell, executive director of GEAR UP Kentucky, “so our teams working in schools better understand data and use data to help students succeed.”

To improve its work, GEAR UP Kentucky worked with colleges to learn why some entering students were not doing well and what additional tools would help them succeed. Through this effort, GEAR UP Kentucky developed a standardized set of services to improve student learning.

Standard, data-driven practices

“It’s about defining what practices are critical, getting everyone on the same page so they understand and value these practices, and then giving our teams strong tools and resources so they can implement successfully,” Lovell explains.

GEAR UP Kentucky identified five attributes that define a college-going culture and requires all five to be present at every school. The elements are:

- Aspiration;
- Rigor and academic support;
- Expectation (setting high standards and giving students the skills to meet them; this also includes expectations and supports for parents);
- Accountability (using data to make good decisions); and
- Sustainability (changing the school’s culture so the benefits outlast GEAR UP’s presence in the school).

GEAR UP student Dominick Jackson, a freshman at Aurora Central High School (CO), poses after meeting with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor during the May 2013 dedication of the Ralph L. Carr Judicial Building in Denver.
GEAR UP Kentucky is changing the way students think about their future. From 2000 to 2010:

- The number of students who plan to attain a postsecondary degree increased 18 percentage points (from 64 percent to 82 percent).
- The number of students advised about college entrance exams increased 35 percentage points (from 25 percent to 60 percent).
- The number of students who say they think they can afford college increased from 59 percent to 67 percent.
- The percentage of students who took Pre-Algebra in 8th grade (a proven indicator of college success) nearly doubled, from 13 percent to 24 percent.
- The college-going rate at Kentucky GEAR UP schools increased from 45 percent in 2004 (before participating in GEAR UP) to 67 percent in 2011 (after participating).

GEAR UP Kentucky developed a number of programs that help build these components of a college-going culture. For example, GEAR UP-2-Success is a comprehensive advising system, which is mandatory for every student in every grade. In some schools, it expands existing advising programs, but in many schools, GEAR UP implemented a new comprehensive advising system because there wasn’t one in place.

Before any student advising occurs, the advisors look at individual student performance data that shows whether a student is on target (meeting benchmarks), near target (one or two points below benchmarks), or off target (three or more points below benchmarks).

Using these data, advisors can look across the school data to identify trends and drill down to individual student data to assess each student’s status. They then advise students individually and in small groups, measuring progress and introducing interventions if students fall off track. At the end of the year, they plan with each student for the next year, so students know what is coming and what is expected of them.

GEAR UP advisors also teach GEAR UP-2-Learn — a mandatory class for every 7th and 8th grader. As its name suggests, this program builds students’ learning skills — the nonacademic skills they need to understand themselves and how they learn, develop socially, and build a range of skills from note taking to critical thinking to conflict resolution.

GEAR UP-2-College & Career, which focuses on these skills plus college awareness, is mandatory for students in grades 9 through 12.

Lovell and her team also are focused on keeping the GEAR UP model alive even after the grant ends. They are training teachers to participate in, and ultimately to teach, this GEAR UP curriculum.
GEAR UP grantees in 15 states are taking significant actions to improve their ability to measure and report outcomes — and use data to improve practice. These states are taking the lead in stronger accountability so they can assess the effectiveness of their own work as well as compare data across grants and states.

The 15 states are part of the College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium, which is conducting a multi-state evaluation of the GEAR UP program and assessing the impact of interventions performed by all grantees. ACT, Inc., which provides the primary assessment tools used by GEAR UP grantees, is providing research support. NCCEP is the managing partner.

**Defining services and outcomes**

“GEAR UP offers grantees great freedom to design services to meet their community’s needs,” explains Chrissy Tillery, NCCEP Director of Evaluation. “That freedom can build great programs, but it creates challenges for cross-program evaluation. Now 15 states are setting voluntary standards for programs so we can be more consistent and enhance evaluation.”

The Consortium began by defining common services that GEAR UP grantees provide to students and parents (e.g., defining what tutoring is). Common definitions allow for consistent data collection so programs can be compared and analyzed nationally.
Consortium Evaluation Questions

GEAR UP is conducting a multi-state evaluation of its program to assess the impact of common interventions. The evaluation will address the following questions.

**ACADEMIC PROGRESS.** How does GEAR UP students’ progress compare with the progress of non-GEAR UP students who have similar demographic characteristics — overall and disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and location? Measures include:
- Academic progress in English, math, reading, and science, as measured by ACT’s College and Career Readiness system.
- Postsecondary enrollment.
- Persistence into subsequent terms in postsecondary education.
- Postsecondary graduation.

**ENENSITY OF GEAR UP ACTIVITIES.** What is the relationship between the level of involvement in GEAR UP activities relative to achievement? Measures include:
- FAFSA completion.
- High school graduation.
- Postsecondary enrollment.
- Persistence in postsecondary education.
- Postsecondary graduation.

**SPECIFIC GEAR UP ACTIVITIES.** What are the relationships of specific GEAR UP activities (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, college visits, parent involvement, financial aid workshops) relative to achievement? Measures include:
- FAFSA completion.
- High school graduation.
- Postsecondary enrollment.
- Persistence in postsecondary education.
- Postsecondary graduation.

Next, the group defined outcomes. Currently, grantees can define outcomes and report data differently. Having consistent definitions for outcomes and parameters for reporting data will further improve evaluation and interstate comparisons.

**Student-level, longitudinal data**

The Consortium currently is developing a new standard of data and reporting. The Consortium states are creating a student-level data repository that will allow participating grantees to see the relationship between specific services and student outcomes. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is developing the data system, which will track data on what services each individual student received as well as that student’s academic indicators, postsecondary enrollment, postsecondary persistence, and whether the student earned a higher education credential within six years of graduating from high school. It also will include demographic information so the data can be disaggregated by gender, race and ethnicity, and other variables.

“We are committed to having longitudinal data and using it to improve,” says Weiya Lang, director of Washington State GEAR UP and the Washington College Access Challenge Grant. “We’re going to use the data to drive programming, and we’re going to share it widely so others can know what interventions are most effective. It’s the surest way to support the students who most need our help.”

The 15 states in the Consortium are: Arizona, Idaho, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.
NCCEP and GEAR UP: Always Evolving

As the trusted partner of both GEAR UP and the U.S. Department of Education (ED), NCCEP works closely with GEAR UP grantees and ED to ensure that each understands how to meet the needs of the other — and both get maximum value for their efforts.

NCCEP is uniquely positioned to support ED in gathering information about how GEAR UP programs look when they are implemented in the real world. NCCEP helps ED think through new ideas so they can be executed smoothly, collects information from programs in progress so it can inform ED’s efforts, and works to ensure ED attains the results it expects.

NCCEP serves GEAR UP grantees as the program’s national training and technical assistance provider, as well as its voice in Washington, D.C. Key initiatives related to supporting practitioners are described below.

**Conferences and training.** Twice a year, NCCEP’s conferences bring together GEAR UP and other college access professionals; local, state, and federal policymakers; foundations; and corporate partners to share information and learn about best practices. Each conference focuses on creating and sustaining community partnerships that improve public education and promote student success. The summer Annual Conference also includes the **Youth Congress**, a youth leadership program, and an **Evaluator Institute** for evaluators with all levels of expertise.

**Superintendent Leadership Institute.** Superintendents are in a unique position to leverage federal GEAR UP dollars to create systemic change. During the 10-month program, superintendents work in small groups, participate in training sessions, and receive one-on-one coaching, all focused on creating and sustaining a district-wide college-going culture. This new program was developed through a collaboration between NCCEP, Texas Region One ESC GEAR UP, and Quantum Learning Network, with expertise and materials shared by the Broad Foundation Superintendents Academy.

**GEAR UP Alumni Leadership Academy.** GEAR UP alumni are the organization’s most powerful advocates. This one-year program recruits, trains, and engages alumni in advocacy and leadership. This new initiative was launched in May 2013 with 30 GEAR UP alumni leaders and will grow over time to include one alumni leader per state. It was created with funding from The Kresge Foundation.

“The GEAR UP community is serious about professional development. Each year, NCCEP hosts two conferences for the GEAR UP community that are probably the best organized, focused, and deliberate trainings I’ve experienced at the federal level.”

Greg Darnieder, Senior Advisor on the College Access Initiative, U.S. Department of Education
New Innovations to Help More Students

GEAR UP was innovative when it was launched, and it continues to lead the way in providing early intervention to improve college readiness and enrollment.

In its January 2013 report, *Rebalancing Resources and Incentives in Federal Student Aid*, the New America Foundation calls for **tripling funding for GEAR UP** so grantees can work with schools for longer periods of time and serve a greater number of consecutive cohorts in each school. The report notes that “federal policymakers have supported multiple programs aimed at raising the college aspirations and improving the academic preparation of disadvantaged students,” and it calls GEAR UP **the most promising of these programs** because of its cohort approach.

**Moving forward with evidence**

GEAR UP is continuing to learn and evolve in response to new information and new needs. GEAR UP and NCCEP are voluntarily taking the lead in being accountable at every level and reporting national data about what works best to serve students. No other federal program is taking this kind of voluntary action. (See page 10 for details of the evaluation consortium.)

Right now, the federal investment in each GEAR UP student is about $500 per year, for a total of $3,000 over six years. This investment is returned to the community (with interest) throughout the student’s lifetime as she or he leaves the program more able to earn a livable wage, pay higher taxes, and be an engaged citizen.

Next steps for NCCEP and GEAR UP are:

- Making sure GEAR UP is implementing its services (mentoring, counseling, parental engagement, and so on) effectively so students have the best possible outcomes.

- Identifying which services have the greatest impact. The complete suite of GEAR UP activities produces results, and an advanced evaluation system will help GEAR UP drill down into the effectiveness of individual services so resources can be invested wisely.

- Helping grantees tell their stories — and using data to both improve their practice and illustrate their successes.

- Leveraging GEAR UP results to educate the federal government about the impact and value of investing more in GEAR UP, particularly in the services that are most effective. The current investment is highly successful, but federal funds are not adequate to serve all the students — low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students — who need help. We need to move from pockets of success to a comprehensive system that meets the current need.

> Although GEAR UP has had remarkable success — implemented in 49 states and the U.S. territories, receiving $4 billion in federal funding since 1999, and serving 12 million students nationwide — the **greatest testament to GEAR UP’s success is that students who never thought they could [do so] are achieving their dreams.** They’re realizing their academic potential, and they understand that no challenge is too great, no achievement is too small.

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