

Building Students' Academic Identity Through GEAR UP

Research shows that families, near-peer role models, and teachers have the biggest influence on students' self-perception and educational decisions. In addition, academic identity (the combination of attitudes and beliefs students have about themselves in relation to school) can help predict academic performance¹ —and when students experience a strong sense of belonging in school, they're more likely to persist in school.

GEAR UP embeds college advocate mentors (CAMs)—who are all first-generation college students—in middle and high schools. Their goal: bolster core components of academic identity development. Specifically, CAMs help schools nurture students' sense of belonging, promote skill building, provide encouragement, and offer inclusive postsecondary education and career opportunities.



UPSTREAM

GEAR UP provides educators with student-level data and develops collaborative relationships with families and communities most affected by educational inequities.



MIDSTREAM

GEAR UP empowers first-generation college students to bring their lived experience to the classroom to help schools build safe, culturally responsive settings that promote college and career access for all.



DOWNSTREAM

CAMs increase college and career access and engagement opportunities for all students through activities that target students' social and emotional growth.



UPSTREAM

To support systemic change, GEAR UP works with various partners to create responsive services—GEAR UP provides educators with student-level data and develops collaborative relationships with families and communities most affected by educational inequities. This work supports systems-level contextual changes that help combat layers of inequities, as well as prioritize college and career access for all.

Societal/Communal Factors and Values

Student-level data and family engagement resources help educators continuously adapt learning opportunities that respond to the community's needs. Thus, students' and families' experiences guide system reform.

- Understanding of race and culture
- Understanding of self
- Understanding of place in community
- Theories about potential

Example: In response to student data and parent focus groups, a school district eliminates a discipline policy that disproportionately keeps youth and families of color from engaging in college and career exposure events.



MIDSTREAM

GEAR UP empowers first-generation college students to bring their lived experience to the classroom to help schools build safe, culturally responsive settings that promote college and career access for all. The CAMs work with GEAR UP staff members and educators to develop teaching and learning experiences that support all students' belonging and engagement. Expanding on the strategies embedded in downstream services, CAMs use ongoing classroom interactions to shape inclusive learning opportunities.

School and Classroom Culture

Working in partnership with educators, CAMs model and support environmental norms that encourage learning and build students' sense of belonging in school.

- Physically welcoming environment
- Inclusive curriculum
- Experiential, youth-guided activities

Example: A CAM who is studying environmental science partners with a high school biology teacher to update a 10-week life cycle curriculum to include small-group interactions, youth leadership, and planning and reflection strategies in every class.



DOWNSTREAM

CAMs increase college and career access and engagement opportunities for all students through activities such as college visits, lunch talks, and career panels—all of which target students' social and emotional growth in areas tied to college and career success.

Student Academic Identity

During college- and career-readiness events, CAMs use evidence-based practices to support students in the development of:

- Social skills
- Perseverance
- Learning strategies

Example: A CAM who is the chair of a club at her college plans a campus visit for students focused on civic engagement. Students learn how clubs are managed and supported in this setting, and they practice skill building related to student-led participatory democracy.