

MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO ATTEND GEAR UP PROGRAMS

About this Exploration Lab

TOPIC Diagnose why students aren't motivated to attend, then share and brainstorm strategies to increase participation in GEAR UP activities.

DATE 2/14/2022 **# OF PARTICIPANTS** 160 **LENGTH** 2 hours **FACILITATOR(S)** Dana Beck
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Exploration Labs are one of [NCCEP's strategies](#) to encourage the GEAR UP community to network, share, learn, and solve problems. Participants contribute ideas to crowdsource promising practices and potential solutions. The collective input of the group is synthesized in this brief Lab Report.

The challenge

Far too often, we spend time and money to design important GEAR UP programming for students—and then no one shows up. It's a discouraging experience for GEAR UP practitioners with the best of intentions.

IT LEADS TO DISAPPOINTMENT AND FRUSTRATION

- "I feel like I have more to give and can't."
- "I feel disheartened, like I failed."
- "I feel like I did all that work for nothing."

BUT ALSO SPARKS A DESIRE TO TRY AGAIN

- "I wonder how to reach them better."
- "What should I try next? What else can we do?"

PARTICIPANTS WOULD RATHER



Meet one-on-one with students than present to a large group of students



Be totally unprepared and have lots of students show up than be super prepared and have no students show up



Have students attend because they want to than have students attend because they have to




It felt good finding out that I was not alone in the challenges I have faced thus far this school year.



Why students don't attend GEAR UP programming

Participants created fictional student personas, adding realistic details to describe a particular student and the reasons they might not attend GEAR UP programming (see examples below). Then, they discussed in small groups, with the most common reasons identified in **bold**.

NAME Sequoia Smith	GRADE 11th
	FAVORITE SUBJECT Science
	FAVORITE PHONE APP Instagram
AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES	Basketball, Track, Student Council, and pet sitting Babysitting and helping care for elderly family in the home
INTERESTS	Sports, fashion, Physical Therapy
GOALS	Earn an athletic scholarship and become a Physical Therapist or an Interior Designer
WHY DOES THIS STUDENT NOT ATTEND?	WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE THIS STUDENT?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busy after school • No transportation • Doesn't want to show up without a parent because she is the adult in the home, and shoulders adult responsibilities such as child care, and elder care 	Sequoia could be motivated by an adult relationship at school who reaches out to her, asks her what she wants, and assists her in making a path forward for success.

NAME Joe Black	GRADE 10th
	FAVORITE SUBJECT P.E.
	FAVORITE PHONE APP Snapchat
AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES	Goes home after school and plays video games
INTERESTS	Enjoys playing video games
GOALS	Graduate from high school and unsure on plans after HS
WHY DOES THIS STUDENT NOT ATTEND?	WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE THIS STUDENT?
Just wants to go home to play video games Now has a part-time job	One on one interaction

OTHER COMMITMENTS

- Scheduling / time conflicts
- **Competing priorities at school** (band, athletics)
- **Family responsibilities**, younger siblings
- Working / jobs
- Prefer socializing and playing online games

LACK OF RELATIONSHIPS

- **Friends not attending**
- Not having positive mentors who are representative of the students
- **Not having a connection with staff**
- Extreme introverts don't like big groups
- **Not having family or adult support**

DISCOURAGED OR APATHETIC

- Extreme senioritis
- **Don't see the benefit; not interested in college**
- Feel insecure about their college knowledge
- Too behind / failing classes
- **Don't like school**

NOT RELEVANT TO THEIR INTERESTS OR GOALS

- **They've already got it all figured out so don't need any extra information**
- Don't see the big picture of how it will help
- **Not relevant to interests or goals**
- GEAR UP may not be seen as "cool"
- Not connected to world of work
- Aren't aware of college and career options

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

- **Transportation / unable to get to programs**
- No internet at home to attend virtual events
- **Not being organized enough to remember**

ISSUES WITH PROGRAM DESIGN

- **Poor marketing – didn't hear about the event**
- Doesn't know what GEAR UP is
- Participation not incentivized (no food!)
- Burned out with virtual events
- Only offers large group programs
- GEAR UP staff can't join class time or advisory

Ways to motivate students to attend GEAR UP programs

Participants discussed solutions that have worked for them to engage students and brainstormed new ideas to try (in blue). Common suggestions are in **bold**.



PROVIDE INCENTIVES

- **Food.** Students love to snack!
- **Giveaways and raffles**, including school supplies, gas cards, gift cards donated from local businesses
- Teachers give extra credit if homework is done with GEAR UP
- Provide incentives if students bring a friend
- Customize GEAR UP t-shirts with students' names



COLLABORATE WITH SCHOOL STAFF

- Get buy-in from administrators
- **Find support from teachers**
- Use school site staff/clubs/organizations to promote GEAR UP and engage students
- **Be a resource for the whole school;** pull programs/departments together to collaborate
- Thank you notes and candy bags for teachers
- Connect with adults who have closer relationships to students
- Educate staff on what GEAR UP does so they are more willing to work with us

“ **Attend student events so they know you have interest in their lives. They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.** ”



DESIGN PROGRAMS FOR SUCCESS

- **Coordinate programs with other school events or athletic events**
- Focus on a small group of students at a time
- Make it a community event; invite families
- **Hold programs during the school day** during advisory, study periods, lunch or classes
- Provide transportation
- Be adaptable! Different schools require different approach
- Have events for students and families after work hours
- Utilize local partnerships to provide career exploration activities during events
- Offer multiple ways to access content



BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

- **Reach out to parents** to encourage students to participate
- Call students by name
- Utilize transportation time during field trips to connect with students
- Have one-on-one check ins and provide assistance with a particular resource
- Take advantage of pipeline-style programs to really build strong relationships
- **Step into the students' worlds**, e.g. eat lunch with them, attend sporting events and clubs
- Walk the hallways to create more GEAR UP visibility so students get to know you
- Get parents more invested in the program



DO OUTREACH STRATEGICALLY

- Reach out to specific students in multiple ways
- **Do personal invitations** via phone calls, personal emails or in-person
- **Use social media:** encourage students to take photos and videos to be featured on Instagram
- Texting (Google Voice number or Remind app)
- Have a physical space for GEAR UP that is open, visible and accessible
- Increase social media presence in order to meet the kids where they are; **start a TikTok**
- Use social media analytics to post/promote events on a student's schedule
- **Table at sporting events, in the cafeteria**
- Stream info through TV in classrooms



UTILIZE AND CELEBRATE STUDENT VOICE

- **Tailor programs to student interests;** make them feel they have a voice
- Allow students to lead GEAR UP meetings
- Empower students to speak with their families about their future and goals
- **Spotlight students,** alumni, and teachers on social media
- **Utilize student leaders** (e.g. Ambassadors program or [Career and College Clubs](#))
- Ask for teacher recommendations of student leaders who can help
- Have students create their own profile to get to know them better



ACTIVITY IDEAS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

- Study tables to help athletes
- Make it fun! (e.g. costumes so they will turn on cameras)
- Brunch and chat
- One-on-one online tutoring
- Have conversations about goals
- Field trips
- Homework club with tutoring available
- Partnerships for education opportunities, specifically research with local undergraduate universities
- SAT workshops
- Connect college field trips with other activities
- Dream Board activity with parents and students together
- College tours with parent involvement
- **Near-peer mentoring** (11th mentor 9th; 12th mentor 10th, or use college students to mentor high school students)
- Hire GEAR UP students as mentors so they can earn income and leadership experience
- Project or competition-based programs
- More student-led events and interactive programming (e.g. scavenger hunts)
- Host summer programs and provide transportation and food

Additional NCCEP resources

[Coordinator Toolkit](#) [free]

Resources and templates for GEAR UP professionals who develop and deliver college awareness programs, including a tool on getting to know your students.

[Study Lab](#) [\$]

Brief online courses for GEAR UP professionals, including courses on student engagement.