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Washington State GEAR UP - Program Overview

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a federally funded program that partners with high-poverty school districts to increase the number of students who are prepared to attend and succeed in postsecondary education. Established in 1999, Washington State GEAR UP has been operating for 25 years and has served approximately 6,000 students each year since 2011.

On August 28, 2024, the U.S. Department of Education announced that Washington State GEAR UP was the recipient of a \$35 million grant, providing seven years of funding of \$5 million/year. As a GEAR UP grantee, the state of Washington is required to commit \$1 in in-kind or cash match for every \$1 awarded in grant funds. Since 2007, WSAC has committed \$1M per year to the GEAR UP program. This has allowed us to serve additional students beyond what the program could otherwise serve and provides 20% of the total match required. Program partners and school districts provide the remaining match.



Approximately 6,800 students will be supported each year, beginning in 7th grade and continuing through their first year of postsecondary education or training. Eligible students will receive up to \$800 in scholarships.

Washington State GEAR UP will administer the grant in partnership with 12 rural school districts, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Treehouse, Washington State Employees Credit Union, Focus Training, SEEDS, and colleges and universities. The school districts include Aberdeen, Brewster, Elma, Entiat, Lake Chelan, Manson, North Beach, Oakville, Okanogan, Pateros, Rochester, and White Pass.

Program Purpose

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a competitive federal program that provides six- and seven-year grants to education/community partnerships and states to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

GEAR UP's three objectives are:

- Increase academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education.
- Increase high school graduation and postsecondary participation rates.
- Increase students' and their families' knowledge of postsecondary options, preparation, and finances.

Benefits to Students and Families

- To help more students enroll and succeed in a postsecondary education and training pathway, students will receive tutoring, mentoring, academic advising, financial aid counseling, access to dual enrollment courses, and career and college exploration activities.
- School districts will provide 12th Year Campaign activities to assist students with college applications and FAFSA/WASFA completion, and provide access to OtterBot, WSAC's free texting service answering questions about financial aid and postsecondary education.
- Schools will engage families through individualized outreach, workshops, and celebratory events to increase knowledge of postsecondary options, academic preparation and planning, and financial aid and scholarships.
- Students will receive graduate support through the first year of postsecondary enrollment, including summer melt prevention activities, texting and social media campaign outreach, college campus orientations, and peer mentoring with local community college students.
- Family ambassadors will build a support network to engage all families in the career and college planning process.

Benefits to School Districts

- School-based GEAR UP staff will receive ongoing training and technical assistance in career and college planning and preparation-specific content.
- School district leadership and staff will participate in capacity-building professional development to support building a college-going culture that is sustainable beyond the grant cycle.
- School districts will engage in an equity audit and action planning to eliminate the barriers and create a positive, equitable learning environment that supports all students and staff to perform at their highest levels.
- Regional roundtables will engage school district leaders, GEAR UP staff, local employers, and postsecondary representatives to build a community-based approach to supporting students in their postsecondary planning, access, and completion.

Program Results

Results from a six-year study of the Class of 2017:

- 67.8% of GEAR UP students completed the FAFSA, compared to 53.5% of all Washington students.
- 57% of GEAR UP students enrolled in college in their first year after school compared to 48% of all Washington students from low-income backgrounds.
- Of those who enrolled in college, 55.2% graduated within 6 years, with the majority (77.4%) earning a bachelor's degree.

For more information, please contact:

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