



Washington GEAR UP Program Evaluation

2023 Focus Groups



Vela Institute
Illuminating Education



About Vela Institute

Vela Institute is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing access to evaluation, analytics, and data tracking to education partners to improve student and community outcomes. Established in 2017, Vela Institute accomplishes its mission through applied research, data analytics, and the use of evidence-based practices.

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Executive Summary

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Grant Overview:

Provided by the US Department of Education, GEAR UP is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides seven-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services to students, families, and educators in high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees serve priority and cohort students beginning in middle school and follow them through high school into their first year of college. State GEAR UP funds are also used to provide college scholarships to low-income students.

Focus Group Evaluation Introduction:

To evaluate the Washington State GEAR UP (WAGU) program, focus groups of educators and students were conducted to get first-hand accounts of perceptions of GEAR UP, evaluate effectiveness of various components of GEAR UP, and identify gaps in resources, providing considerations for future GEAR UP grant design and implementation.

Key Findings:

Several key findings stuck out from the focus groups as patterns and themes emerged from students and educators:

Relationships are key to successful student outcomes. Educators noticed that students most often came to them for support—almost as a mentor-mentee relationship would operate—and students indicated that this relationship existed when their teacher/coordinator was consistent across their years in GEAR UP.

Rural/Isolated schools found GEAR UP to be a valuable resource especially critical for the smaller schools since resources are lacking. There was a correlation between school size / isolation and resources available to students.

Career path influences students and educators perception of affordability and college as an investment, specifically the return on investment in the career field/industry chosen. Regardless of career path, students have increased academic and career outcomes when they have support and self-efficacy bolstered by other adults believing in them.

Primary barriers for students/families to postsecondary education beyond affordability include documentation of students, family support/expectations, and transportation.

Primary barriers for educators/schools were capacity issues which were seen as a primary barrier to serving students, especially concerning counselors and support staff. This is exacerbated in schools/districts with high staff turnover.

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Methodology

In Oct/Nov 2023, Vela Institute conducted nine focus groups to evaluate the WAGU grant. The focus groups asked educators and students who graduated in June 2023 their perceptions and experiences in WAGU schools. Participating students are currently working, attending college or in the military.

Participants and Procedures

Four focus groups consisted of graduated WAGU students and five focus groups consisted of educators from various schools served by WAGU. The focus groups were held in person with the exception of one virtual student focus group. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour with a couple of minutes at the start reserved for filling out a demographic survey. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The participants received cookies during the focus group session and students received a gift card after their participation.

Informed consent procedures were explained at the beginning of the focus groups including consent to audio recording at in-person focus groups and zoom recording for the virtual focus group (see Appendices 1 and 2).

Facilitators

Focus groups were facilitated by a staff member at Vela Institute, the external evaluator for the WAGU grant. The facilitator has experience working with students, working as an educator, and managing GEAR UP and other federal grants.

Data Analysis

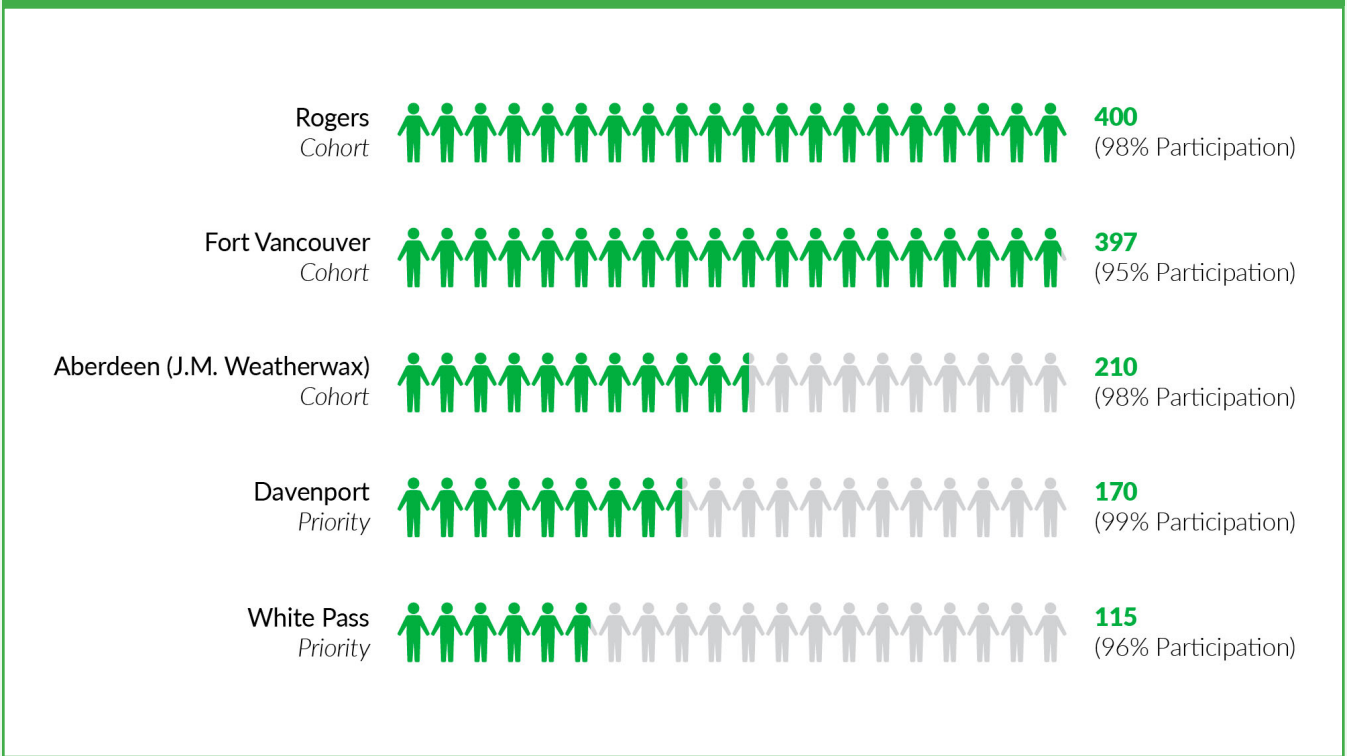
An additional staff member at Vela Institute listened to and transcribed the audio and video recordings for each focus group. Individual focus group themes were noted and considered. The transcriptions were then parsed out by recording answers to each question (see Appendices 1 and 2) in one document and overall themes pulled out. The data was then discussed by both the facilitator and transcriber, discussing themes and trends in the data. This was then compared to previous data collected from surveys, previous school- and program-level quantitative analysis, and Performance Insights (Pi), the software program housing student data and performance indicators.



Context and Demographics

The schools served by WAGU are primarily rural in high-poverty areas. The schools included in the focus group sample reflect this. There were varying sizes of schools with two large, one in the middle, and two small (see figure below). The smaller schools tended to be even more rural, impoverished, and isolated from resources.

Figure 1: School Sizes and Participation in GEAR UP (Students Served in 2021-2022 School Year)



At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked to scan a QR code and fill out a digital survey with demographic information. Of the 23 students that participated, 20 filled out the demographic survey. Of the 29 educators that participated, 24 filled out the demographic survey. The discrepancies are due to late arrivals at the focus groups.



Figure 2: Student Focus Group Participants

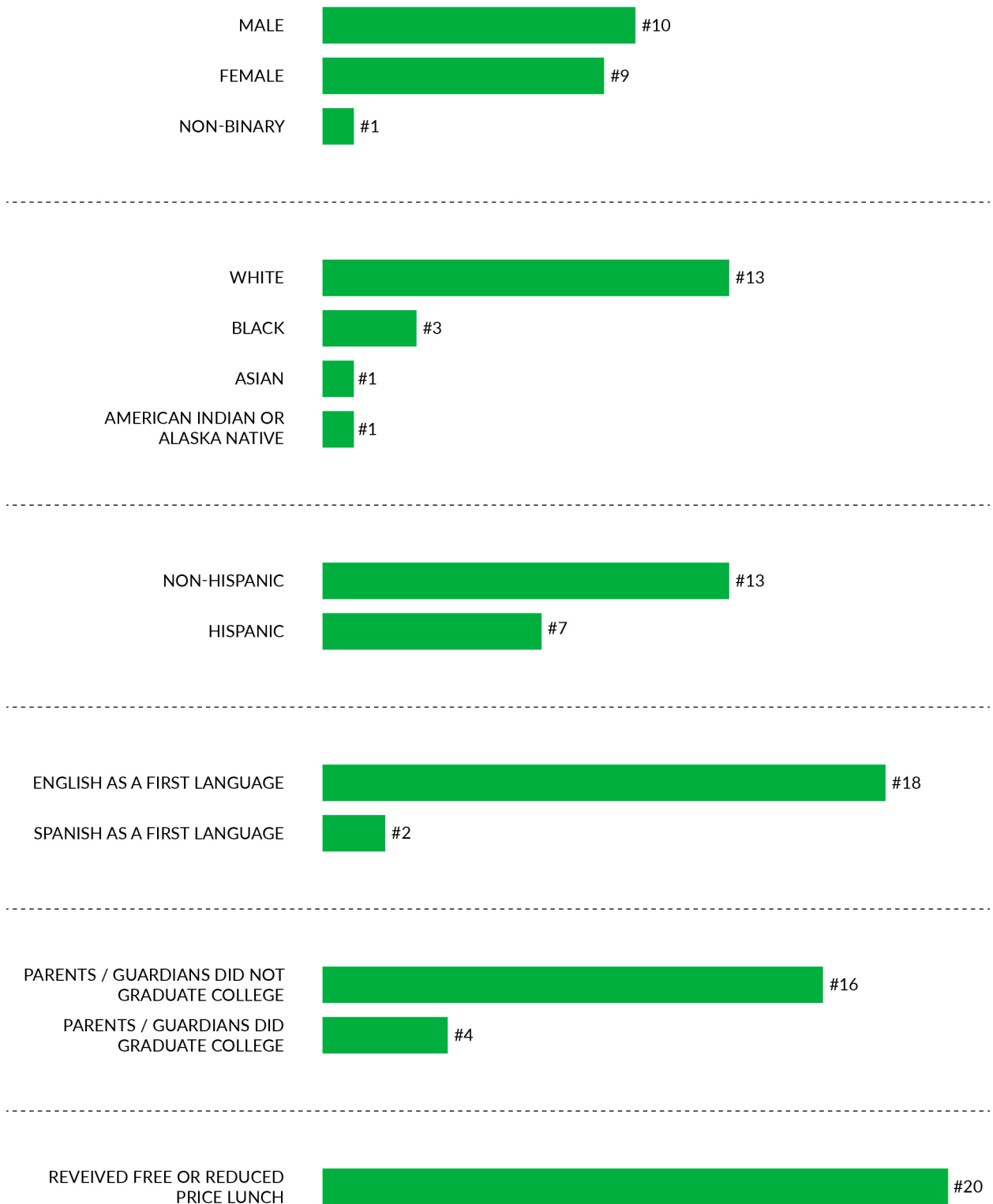
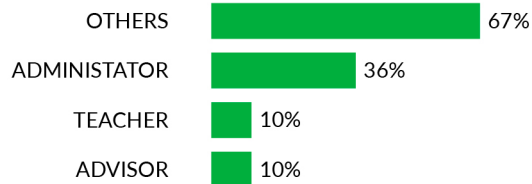
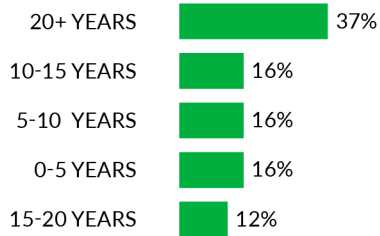




Figure 3: Educator Focus Group Participants





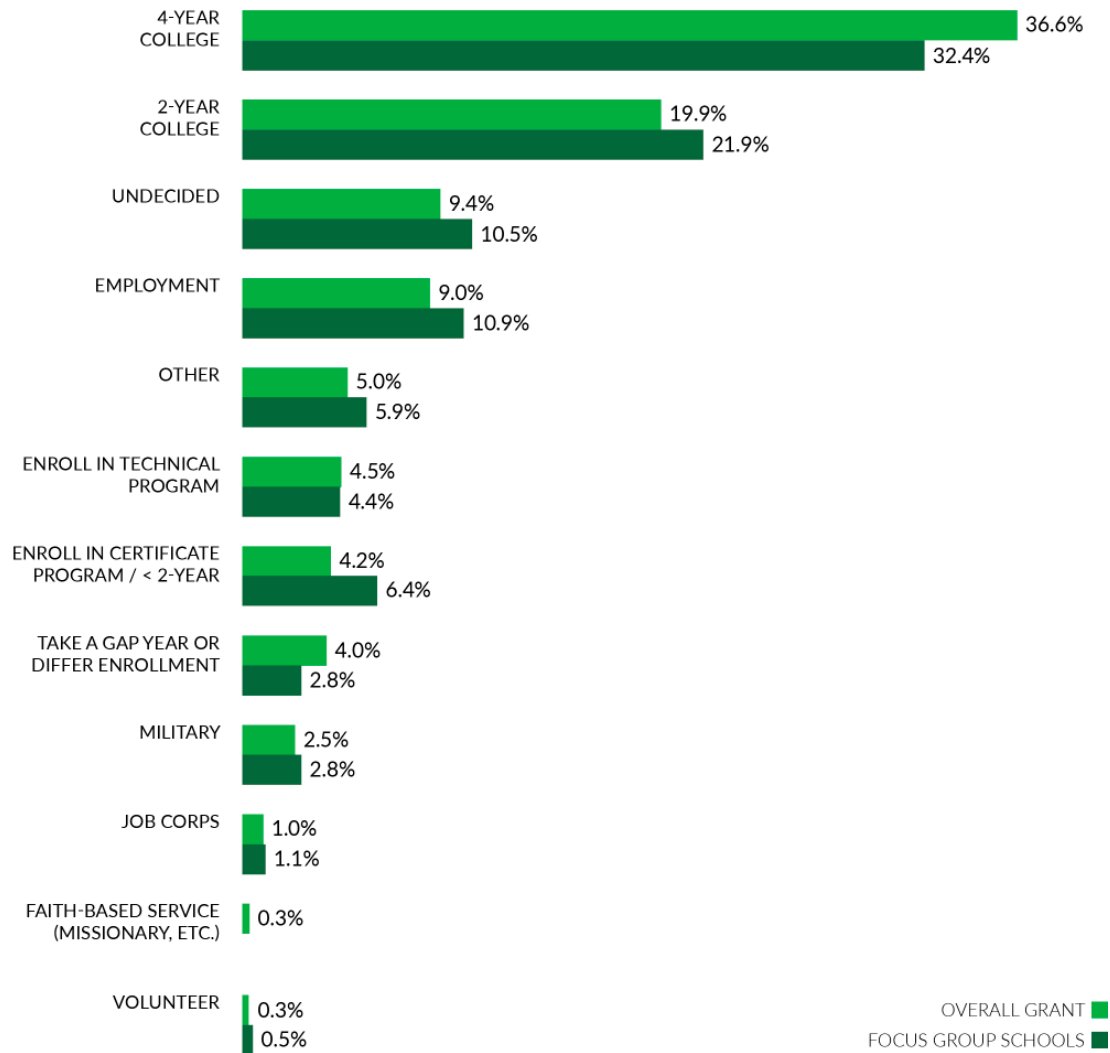
Findings and Discussion

Where Students Are Going:

GEAR UP aims to increase college and career readiness, improving the academic and career outcomes of students. The figures below depict the postsecondary plans of students from the five high schools as derived from a senior exit survey. When looking at responses from individual schools, larger schools with priority models tended to have greater percentages of students attending postsecondary education than smaller schools with cohort models.



Figure 4: Student Plans for 2023-2024



The actual enrollment percentages varied from students' self-reported intentions on the survey. Overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions was 41.2%, less than the self-reported 56.7% planning to at the end of senior year. Focus group school enrollment was 19.0%, less than the self-reported 54.3% planning to attend the end of senior year. Educators cited summer melt and unprecedented situations as impacting whether a student actually goes to the college they enrolled in; often even after setting up a dorm, a student may still choose to not attend higher education.

When educators were asked about where they see students going after high school, the answer included a range of options but with heavy emphasis on seeing students remaining in the community. Some schools even cited percentages based on recent graduates (Class of 2022). One school cited 36% planning to attend 4-year, 17% community college + transfer to 4-year, 19% working full time, 9% attending community college, 4% apprenticeship, and 4% enlisting into the military, as found in the 2022 senior exit survey conducted by Vela Institute.

Another school that is smaller claimed that historically about 20% of students go on to 4-year schools, closer to 50-60% go on to Community College, technical school, [or] something else in that arena, less than 10% enlist in the military, and then the rest are either direct employment, gap year, or lost track of. Several schools had a good idea of where students were going, mostly due to combining perceptions with survey results. Educators noticed a trend of only a small handful of students going to college, most often into lucrative and secure job paths.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“At college, they’re going for dental hygiene, nursing, [and] those other skilled positions like that.”

“I’m not seeing 20% go to 4-year. Getting them to go to college visits was really hard; they’re just not looking. I think there’s been too much bad publicity about the loans. After talking to kids, I’ve been really shocked how few are heading for the four-year college. Technical College has really picked up; mechanics make more than four-year college graduates, electricians [do too]. I mean, why get the loan?”

The college students in the focus groups tended to be pursuing STEM degrees. Most students in the focus groups were attending 2-year or 4-year colleges since that is where the focus groups were held, though there were a few who chose to go to work, enlist in the marines, or go directly into trades/apprenticeships. In this way, the sample of students was not the most representative of the various career paths they could have taken (though results from student surveys are referenced throughout for additional context). That being said, most students go to local 2-year colleges/programs, into the trades, or right into work, especially for family businesses such as farming or following in their parents’ footsteps such as going to work for a local mill. Those choosing to go to college or into the trades seem to have increased over the years, perhaps due to the services GEAR UP provides in addition to monetary incentives from trade apprenticeships available in some of the communities, with a dip this previous year.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Our skill center enrollment in the hard technical areas—automotive, Health Sciences and our electrical engineering HVAC— [have seen the] highest enrollment we’ve ever had [this past year].”

For many educators, the goal seems to be to encourage students to at least go into the trades, not just stay home without a plan. Many educators and stakeholders in the focus groups expressed sentiments of concern over disparity in teachers believing in their students. Students’ perception of teachers and other adults believing in them and their abilities is a critical aspect of students’ postsecondary plans and outcomes, as self-efficacy is a major predictor of college enrollment and persistence.¹ This is evident, too, in the decision-making process of students as discussed in the student focus groups.

¹Ali, S., & Saunders, J. (2008). The career aspirations of rural Appalachian high school students. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 17(2), 172–88; Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001).

Student Decision-Making:

Students were asked about their decision-making process and who helped them decide on their postsecondary plans, especially in the decision to go to college or into the trades. The influences cited for choosing their postsecondary path included family expectations, financial aid considerations, proximity to home, making money, passion/interest and enjoyment of career path, and advisor and educator encouragement/help.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I think for me it was a mix of GEAR UP staff and my parents just kind of encouraging me to keep exploring and looking. My gear up staff was really supportive of me being undecided for those three years and really helped me look into different career fields."

"It's something I am passionate for and enjoy. When I work, I want to enjoy it."

"If anything, I was arguing with people to have them stop changing my mind. A lot of people look down on arts majors and so instead of it being more of a 'I'm being pushed and encouraged to,' which I was by GEAR UP staff, it was more so me arguing with people, 'this is not a dumb idea, this is what I want to do.' GEAR UP staff are very encouraging."

Students' perception of college affordability was low in high school. In a 2022-2023 student survey of juniors and seniors at these high schools, the majority of students who did not fill out the FAFSA cited reasons of not understanding how to and not being able to attend a financial aid workshop, in addition to those who indicated they did not intend to attend a postsecondary institution. Finances and affordability were indicated in the survey as prevalent obstacles to students pursuing postsecondary education.

Figure 5: 2022-23 juniors who do not plan to continue their education attributing that decision to financial reasons (according to survey)



All students in the focus groups except for one did not think college would be affordable when they were in high school. Through talking through options and gaining a better understanding of financial aid and loans, they were able to make a more informed choice. When asked if they believe college is an investment, most replied with “it depends” and expanded on the idea that what career path and job someone wants will determine if college is a worthwhile investment, specifically related to income.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“If you know what you want to do/be, then [college is an investment].”

“Depends on job path. Obviously, teachers don’t get paid as much, so it really just depends on what career path you take.”

“I’ve met a lot of people through the classes I have had that thought they knew what they wanted to do in college and found out like a year into it [that] they like something else a lot better, so I think for those people it was a really good investment – test the waters in different classes.”

When asked who helped in their decision-making of postsecondary plans, 50% of the students named their GEAR UP coordinators, 25% cited family members including grandparents, parents, and siblings, and about 13% mentioned teachers. Having support is critical in postsecondary persistence and completion of degree programs. Students claimed that having a consistent GEAR UP coordinator throughout the years was invaluable, especially as a familiar face to talk to and ease transitions including from middle school to high school and high school to postsecondary education.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“[GEAR UP coordinators] helped me basically plan what I wanted to do after high school and everything because I feel like a lot of students don’t know what they want to do in high school.”

“Even if you’re not going to college, [GEAR UP coordinators] really help you basically prepare for life after high school in all ways.”

Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child Development*, 72(1), 187–206; Uchida, A., Michael, R., & Mori, K. (2018). An induced successful performance enhances student self-efficacy and boosts academic achievement. *AERA Open* 4(4).

Those involved in helping students go into postsecondary education, made possible by GEAR UP services, field trips, and funds, are instrumental in aiding students in overcoming the many barriers.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“For me, I don’t really have anybody to help me with it. I’ve always been drawn to culinary. When I got to high school, it was definitely GEAR UP and my culinary teachers that helped me really solidify that [career path].”

“Getting to see careers and go on field trips and see a different future is easier than doing own research. Either knowing what you want and getting to explore the options with many different careers [by] actually going to see what people do for construction or going to see the HVAC so they can see kind of what their future could be.”

“I had a lot of support and resources for my gear coordinator. [The coordinator] really helped me change my plan and figure out how I could do what I wanted and gave me a lot of different options.”

Barriers to Postsecondary Education:

Beyond finances and affordability, educators were asked about barriers they see students facing when it comes to pursuing postsecondary education. Transportation was cited as the primary barrier in several educator focus groups.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Transportation is huge; our kids can’t afford drivers ed, so they wait ‘til they’re 18 so they don’t have to pay that. The next thing is: what can I do to earn money to get a car? So in order to get them out of the valley, you know, it’s a tough one. A lot of them have generations born and lived here; there is a lot of pressure from families to stay here.”

Transportation is expensive and many students are not able to go to college, especially if they do not have the support of someone to drive them to college. Some staff at the schools have pitched in and driven students to college at move-in time. Even Running Start (a dual credit program) during high school requires a vehicle to get students to the community college campus for classes. Many students have to go straight to work, if they can get to their job without a personal vehicle, in order to save up for a car. These rural, isolated communities do not have the public transportation infrastructure in place to aid in this.

There is often the expectation from family members to stay home and remain in the community, in part due to the isolation and lack of services. Not only with transportation but also expectations that students will choose to stay home—even after enrolling in college—due to sickness or loss of income of a family member, helping pitch in. For students and their families, fear is another common barrier and one that GEAR UP aims to address. Many students have never left the community where one small, rural focus group was held or gone further than an hour and a half. For many, school field trips and college visits provided by GEAR UP expose students to what is out there and quell some of the fears and concerns around leaving for postsecondary education.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I’ll never forget the trip driving down we went through our nearest town and a student says, ‘I’ve never been past here.’”

“Anytime we can take a trip out of this valley, whether it’s for Seattle over to Yakima and things like that, it helps kids see the broader world. Taking 7th graders to the Museum of Flight is always a kick in the pants because the main thing they want to do is ride on the elevator because many of them have never been on an elevator.”

Educators also pointed out that students who are first-generation receive little to no help or assistance with postsecondary education from their families. There is a reliance on the school and GEAR UP—and other resources at some of the larger schools—to fill in this gap in knowledge. Half of the educators and stakeholders that participated in the focus groups were first-generation college students themselves and therefore understand the associated challenges. One such associated challenge is assistance and support once at college or another postsecondary educational institution/program.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“A piece that I think really is missing across the board in K-12 is having that follow up [after high school graduation]. We can get them going and then they get out there, it’s scary, they don’t know anybody, everyone else seems to know everything, and then we all know the attrition rate after freshman year at 2-year or 4-year universities is really high. I think that’s the missing piece that will really make a difference for that attrition.”

While some students have a solid support system outside of school, many rely on the school and GEAR UP for information and support. Once this support is gone, students sometimes do not know how to ask for help or where to find it, especially at 2-year colleges where assistance services are less robust than 4-year universities. Those that attended postsecondary education closer to home still had some contact with GEAR UP coordinators which they cited as helpful for persisting. Some schools served by WAGU have high populations of immigrant families and students/families who speak English as a second language to Spanish or Arabic. Not only does this pose challenges for navigating understanding of the college enrollment process, but also eligibility for financial aid based on parental income as determined by filing taxes. There is also an issue with having the necessary documentation to apply for college and financial aid. Some students' families simply do not file taxes and receive necessary tax return whether due to family skepticism of the government or immigrant/migrant status.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“We have trouble getting documentation for a lot of our kids; they don’t have access to a birth certificate or social security card, their parents won’t give up their information for their taxes because maybe they haven’t even filed taxes for a number of years, or a variety of other reasons.”

Additionally, there is a great deal of informal guardianship in lieu of formal foster care which has the added barrier of lacking access to parental info. Some students do not even know their social security number which can be found/retrieved but requires a fee to do so. Some students get lost in the fold due to a high homeless population, high mobility rate in schools due to migrant workers, and the focus on crisis management in such a high-poverty, high-trauma area.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“We have about 20% not living with biological parents. Some in foster care but it tends to be more informal; just living with whoever can take care of them.”

GEAR UP is instrumental in addressing these barriers, whether formally or not. Postsecondary education and career plans can be hard to navigate and many students do not know what is out there, that college is an option, or how to navigate the process.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“We’re much better [now] at making sure students have a plan after high school or at least trying to help them see options and know that they need a plan. No plan is necessarily better than another; it’s just that you need a plan.”

College-Going Culture:

A college-going culture is critical to exposing students to postsecondary options and their belief in the ability to pursue postsecondary education. The goal of cultivating a college-going culture is promoting an environment that prepares students for a full range of postsecondary education options. Using the research-based definition (McDonough, 2002), a “College-Going Culture” refers to “the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and their families to obtain the information, tools, and perspective to enhance access to and success in postsecondary education.”



Close consideration of the principles outlined in the college-going culture rubric from University of California at Berkeley² can help a school become a place where students understand the full breadth of their options and knowledgeable of different academic and career paths to get to where they want to be. The components are rated on a scale from 1 to 4, with the most recent educator survey—implemented by Vela Institute in the spring of 2023—placing college-going culture at an average of 2.8 among WAGU schools, up from 2.4 the year prior. As part of the focus groups, students and educators were asked questions about some components to gauge the presence of a college-going in the schools and whether it has increased as a result of the GEAR UP grant.

Measuring a college-going culture includes students’ understanding/knowledge of and preparation for postsecondary education. When students were asked if they got the message [from school, family, etc.] that college is important to their future, about half said “yes”, whereas the other half said “no”, at least not until they reached junior or senior year of high school. This likely has to do with developmental milestones of students, especially as the majority of students in the focus groups were first generation, several even citing resistance from parents concerning going to college. This aligns with educators’ perception of a lack of parental support in many cases.

²Berkeley Center for Educational Partnerships. (2021). College-Going Culture. University of California at Berkeley. <https://cep.berkeley.edu/home/about-cep/college-going-culture#:~:text=College-Going%20Culture.%20College-Going%20Culture%20refers%20to%20the%20environment,.enhance%20access%20to%20and%20success%20in%20post-secondary%20education>

Educators were asked if they saw their school's college-going culture shift as a result of GEAR UP, specifically pointed towards educators who had been around since before the implementation of the grant. While they did cite the COVID-19 pandemic as a disruption to the college-going culture, in general there was the perception of an increased college-going culture. This was specifically seen in the support of staff towards students, more parents showing up to programming and services, and even school decorations. One school put up a lot of banners of local colleges and motivation to pursue postsecondary education.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"You'll see dream walls right now and our kids are putting their hopes and dreams there."

GEAR UP funding allowed for taking more students on field trips, especially college visits, which were perceived to be one of the most helpful services for students thinking about career paths. Dual enrollment also seems to be a prominent option for students.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"Educational opportunities come through in district funding with the field trips that you take them on, revamping and bringing them back out so that the students have an annual experience outside of the valley. If we don't have that GEAR UP person who gets things for their students no matter what, it doesn't happen."

"No one had been going on field trips until GEAR UP."

That being said, there were comments made—when asked about whether most faculty and staff know where students are going after high school—that included a concern from GEAR UP staff that **some teachers and other faculty have low belief in their students' ability or expectations of postsecondary education or aspiration.**



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"We've done the surveys before about the college-going culture and 'do you believe that all of your students can [go on to postsecondary education]' and we have gaps in our belief system. That's the best way I can put it. I think the rest of our staff probably does not have as much access to data or the conversations that [coordinators] are having with our students. I don't know that for the most part they would have a good handle on where students are overall."

Perhaps this is simply related to context, as the barriers that students face are tremendous, with poverty and trauma prevalent in these communities. As discussed previously, student self-efficacy is directly correlated to perception of teachers' belief in them and is one of the main predictors of postsecondary persistence and completion. In the educator surveys implemented by Vela Institute, the majority of educators and stakeholders did believe that their students could go on to postsecondary education and many expected quite a few to do so. Educators helped rate the college-going culture which increased year-over-year as seen in the survey results discussed previously.

GEAR UP staff are very aware of the benefits of a coordinator in the school and the way that culture shifts with trusting relationships.



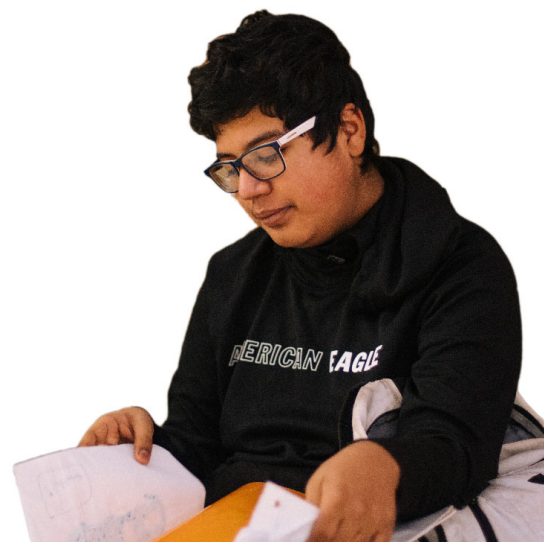
FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"Because there's such a limited understanding of the higher ed process and postsecondary, when there is a trust that is built in the community, in [the coordinator], and if they know [the coordinator] is someone they can call, and if they're hesitant to talk about their financial situation or whatever it is, then they have that trust built in someone who is going to go the extra mile to make sure that the kids have access to what they need. That is really the key."

While creating a college-going culture is integral to increasing the academic and career outcomes of students, preparing students to actually take the leap and enroll, persist, and complete college is crucial.

Preparation:

Enrollment, persistence, and completion of college is more likely when students are prepared and know what to expect and where to seek support when needed. An integral aspect of GEAR UP is not only getting kids to make a plan for after high school and ideally attain some level of postsecondary education, but also to feel and be prepared for what comes afterwards. Participants in both student and educator focus groups were asked questions with the intention of gauging students' preparedness for postsecondary education and career plans. Students were asked if they personally thought college was affordable, thinking back to their perception of it during high school, as that is when postsecondary education decisions were being made. The majority answered that college did not seem affordable.





FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Definitely not until FASFA.”

“The thing is, if [financial aid] wasn’t going to cover everything, I would not go [to college] because I have no money.”

“I was kind of nervous because of how expensive I heard it was. I think that’s what held me back from wanting to go to college. I still do want to go, because [now] I know I’ll have financial aid and things like that”

All of this considered though, the students in college found that they generally received more assistance than they thought they would. The FAFSA gave clear pictures of their financial aid eligibility. However, the students considering transferring from a two-year college to a four-year university—which is a necessary step in their path towards career aspirations—claimed that college suddenly looked a lot more unaffordable and there is uncertainty about financial aid available in the instance of transferring. Some students, those in four-year colleges especially, believe they will be paying back loans for the rest of their life and that college is not actually affordable, yet they attended anyways due to interest and passion for their career.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I’m paying like \$1500 a term [at community college] and then I’m going into paying \$20,000 a term [at a four-year university]. That’s stupid, I’m not going to do that. It’s not that I can’t afford it, it’s that I don’t have any financial aid and it’s just all gonna have to come from out of pocket which isn’t going to happen.”

“The career field that I’m going into isn’t going to make me the most amount of money. I don’t want to give up going to college because I’m going to be stuck with student loans for the rest of my life, but at the same time I’m never going to be able to pay these back.”

Only a couple of students answered that they thought college was affordable. These students were on opposite extremes of socio-economic status. One student knew their parents had saved aside money to go to college and could probably afford it, especially with assistance from scholarships, grants, and loans. Another student was especially low-income and frequently kicked out from home; this person knew enough about financial aid and their own financial situation, which warranted much aid available for college, though only after learning about it through GEAR UP. Family perception heavily shapes perception of college affordability.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“My family at home never wanted me to go to college, but they never wanted me to just because they knew it was gonna be expensive.”

“I just chose not to [go to college]. It was in my budget and my parents were telling me to go. I even applied, I got accepted. I looked at degrees. I thought about engineering degrees. I had opportunities and it just didn’t seem appealing to me. Why move across the state and stay in the dorm and go to school 8 hours a day like I have been when I obviously wasn’t enjoying it in high school? I can go find something I want to do and get paid for it without grueling through another four years or maybe six or more depending on whatever degree I got and then can only do certain things because of the degree.”

The aspect of transferring makes for yet another period of transition which is where educators claim students need the most support. They see a need for better supports for students during the summer leading up to their first semester of enrollment at a postsecondary institution, as well as during that first year, if not throughout college, and even more so if transferring and going through another period of academic enrollment with little to no family knowledge and/or support. Students certainly echoed still needing help and support past enrollment.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I still need my coordinators in my life. [I’m] wandering lost in this world.”

“It’s the transferring part that’s kind of taking a toll on me right now. I have to decide between two schools right now and it comes down to like the nitty gritty of it. I’m picking through these websites trying to figure out which one has more for me. So that’s the hard part.”

When asked if they felt prepared for what they are doing after graduating high school, students had a variety of answers and insights into the specific areas in which they did or did not feel prepared. In general, students felt somewhat prepared.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I'd say that I was prepared in some aspects more than others."

"Yes and no, because from the business aspect I'm not already but from real life aspect I think I am."

"I don't think I'm really ready for [a] career, but I know I'm really good at academics and I can put myself through college."

Without prompting, students identified several areas of preparedness including academic, emotional, mental, independence/adulting, and financial. Many students initially discussed academic preparedness with almost half feeling prepared and just under half feeling unprepared. The general consensus was that postsecondary education demands more time and effort in academics as opposed to high school. Those that felt prepared attributed it to specific classes that were applicable to the field they went into, math skills needed for trades and STEM degrees, and Running Start dual credit classes. Those that were not prepared attributed it somewhat to their own level of care and attention in high school but also to a mismatch in classes to academic and career path. One criticism included the lack of hands-on lab experience in high school making college STEM courses with labs, such as Biology, significantly more challenging than it seemed to be for other students from different schools.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"Academically, I was prepared because I had done two years of Community College before with the Running Start program."

"I am putting a lot more effort into it. I did not realize the difference in time and effort between high school and college classes."

"I think academically we've been prepared so well, but it's so hard to prepare somebody especially when they're moving away."

"[My major] is biology. I feel like we didn't get enough hands-on labs."

The students who mentioned emotional preparedness tended to feel prepared. Some students in the marines felt fairly prepared and students from Running Start felt mentally prepared for the transition and their day-to-day responsibilities. There was a halfway split in students who felt prepared to move and be in a new living situation, when applicable. This seemed to be primarily related to how much support they had at home versus at school with low-support and high-support homes preparing students more, whereas average students felt less prepared.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Emotional[ly], yes and no but that’s more of a personal thing.”

“I mean, I could talk about certain teachers like on the personal helping me out. [One teacher] would teach us things that wasn’t in his curriculum but was able to help me out.”

“I think I’ll be ready for my career mentally but not physically, because it doesn’t take much of a mental [strain] to do the job I need to do.”

Students tended to be fairly prepared for moving, living in a new place if applicable, and adjusting to more independence, especially if they had prior experiences that cultivated independence and responsibility. Some of the experiences cited included work experience and having a job in high school.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I think that I was more prepared to live alone and be in the circumstances.”

“I feel like [I’m] independent because my last two years of high school I got a job, and I was really independent.”

“It is all on me. I don’t have [my coordinator] telling me anymore what to do. I have to be responsible for my own stuff which was a big change.”

With all of the options available, many students could stay home and attend community college or trade programs, though this was more feasible in the larger communities with a greater variety of options. Those who found the transition difficult cited issues with finding the information they needed and feeling overwhelmed with all of the responsibilities they were juggling after high school.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“It’s almost like I have two lives. I’m going to school and I’m being a student. Every day I have to drive home through traffic. [Then] I’m at home and I’m doing all my other responsibilities; I didn’t drop any of those things when I went to college. It’s like I have this part of my life and then I have the school part of my life.”

Financial preparation was split in half between those feeling prepared and those not. For many, it was understanding the upcoming financial situation that most prepared them, regardless of their socioeconomic status or what their financial situation actually looked like.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I was looking forward to [being on my own] which I guess made it easier, but I wasn’t very prepared expecting what it was going to be like, [such as] pay[ing] for a lot of stuff on my own.”

For others, fear of drowning in debt—especially if transferring from a 2-year college to a more expensive 4-year university—was prevalent, as the financial aid was not as transparent to them from the beginning when the career path involved more schooling than anticipated, indicating a need for even more guidance around postsecondary education and career paths. Having support indicated more preparedness.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

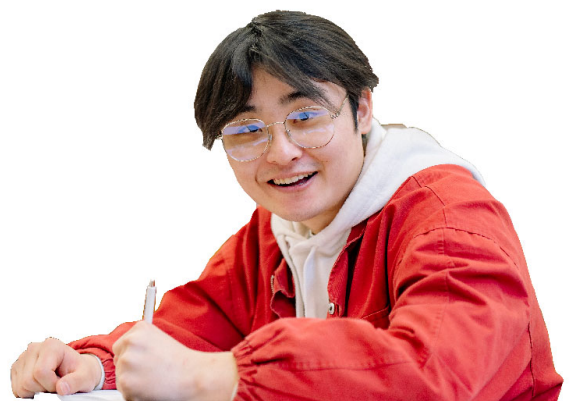
“I am prepared to accomplish my goals. I’ve set up myself a good path financially and I’ve also had a whole bunch of people I can contact if anything does go wrong. Even though I’m heading towards my goal, if it doesn’t work, I’ll also have a second plan.”



Areas of Support

Areas of Support Overview:

Overall, educators seem to find that students need more support in some areas than others during high school to prepare for postsecondary education and careers. Educators were asked where they believed students needed the most help out of aspirations, planning, and action.



Educators saw most students have aspirations—or dreams/ideas of what to do following high school graduation and beyond—although these tend to be limited to what students are exposed to. In some communities, only service jobs are seen and then what is shown on tv, unless students have gone on field trips to be exposed to more options.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I’ve talked to the very few students that didn’t have some level of plan, like some kind of dream. They all have a vague idea, an idea of what they want to do.”

“The aspiration part [we] saw change with Covid. When asked what they want to do after high schools, [students’] answer is IDK.”

While some students were more apathetic or just following a path set up in the community culture or parental expectations—seen more since the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic—the most that was needed when it came to aspirations was prompt students to decide on an aspiration and make backup plans and ideas. **Several educators noticed unrealistic aspirations, especially in early high school, citing the need to guide students towards possibilities within their reach.**



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“When I was in the classroom years ago, half [of] my freshman boys wanted to be NBA or NFL athletes. When we did a career assignment, that was their dream, their aspiration. So they had one [but] realistic[ally] was not [what they would do]. We had to work through those things.”

This just emphasizes the need to expose students to various career paths and realistic expectations of academic and career paths. Creating plans with students is valuable in managing expectations and ensuring students are successful in their desired career outcomes. Former students cited in their advice to current high schoolers (Appendix 3),



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Have a plan.”

“Be flexible with your plan and open to all options.”

“Be smart about career path and financial decisions. Work towards your goals.”

Even planning was fairly prevalent among students when guided by trusted adults who had the resources to help them. While students may need many reminders, information, and help navigating systems, many would plan to and actually fill out a FAFSA and apply to a postsecondary program, especially if their aspirations required such education. That being said, it was after that point that educators saw students not follow through.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“It is the action piece where we lose most of them.”

Primarily, “taking action” seemed to be where educators saw the greatest need for support. Action is following through on the plans made, such as enrolling in and attending postsecondary education. Often, students do not follow through following high school graduation. They may have enrolled in college but were unable to find transportation to the institution of higher education, were convinced by family members to stay back and work, or became scared. Family ties and caretaking seems to be a reason for this also.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Seems like we have a higher number of parents with health issues where kids are caretakers. Losses during covid. Lots of kids who are caretakers.”

Some educators even cited having helped set up dorm rooms for students and yet the student still backs out. Clearly, there is a need for further support, prior preparation, or more realistic career path plans so the student can follow through on their plan.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Summer melt is when you lose them like when they spent the summer at home. Like I said, their dorm room was set up with everything ready to go, mom doesn’t want them to go or a parent lost their job so they need to stay to help pitch in.”

Ultimately, students need support throughout the process and even afterwards to be set up for the most successful academic, career, and life outcomes.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“They just need someone to bounce ideas off of still even though they’re there, they made it, they did the damn paperwork, [and] finally they got the taxes filed right.”

Resources Across Schools:

To gauge what resources were available in the various schools and the impact of GEAR UP services, educators were asked to weigh in. When asked what other post-secondary career and education planning resources were available aside from GEAR UP, educators responded with a variety of answers. All of the schools expressed sentiments towards GEAR UP and its tremendous impact.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Please don’t leave. We need [GEAR UP].”

Larger schools tended to have other resources available including national programs and local supports. Larger schools cited TRIO, school psychologists, alcohol and drug counselors, College Success Foundations representatives, and local business and postsecondary school involvement. Some even had district-funded employees specific to college and career readiness. The smaller schools had fewer resources outside of GEAR UP. When asked what resources were available to students, one focus group respondent from a small school answered,



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Other than GEAR UP? Other than teachers’ support and guidance, not much. This school has issues finding certificated teachers and faculty, like our school counselor who isn’t doing much guidance lacking that background. If we didn’t have GEAR UP, we wouldn’t have anything to provide the kids other than maybe connecting with a college that comes out for a day.”

Schools try to work in college and career preparation into curriculum and existing supports including helpful information and engagement, but they do not have the capacity to do all of it. This is especially the case for advising and counseling, as the increased capacity to handle college and career preparation and address mental health needs is invaluable, especially as even with extra capacity, much of the work of counselors is dealing with crisis management.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Counselors have a lot on their plate. I think having GEAR UP and their support gives counselors peace of mind. If we get a CPS call or something of that nature, we’re not dropping the ball. College and career readiness [is] an easy [aspect] to push down the road when you have to be responsive to a student who might need a bed to sleep in at night or a family in crisis. I think this grant helps to alleviate some of that pressure.”

Even with support and sacrifice from staff—as is the case with driving students, pitching in money to get documents, meeting emotional and physical needs, and other tasks that go above and beyond typical school employee involvement—**smaller rural schools cannot provide as much to students.**



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“We have about 20% not living with biological parents. Some in foster care but it tends to be more informal; just living with whoever can take care of them. We even have staff members that will house students temporarily. Poverty is the problem.”

Schools that are less isolated and located in more populated towns have better wraparound services and other college/career readiness resources. While GEAR UP clearly fulfilled needs for all schools, it filled a wider gap and made the most impact on smaller schools where there are no other resources.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I don't know how we would be able to provide the advisory that the coordinator] provides: the extra one-on-one, the extra assistance, the field trips, all of it. If that were to fall back to my plate or back on the other staff plate because we lost that position or role, something else would fall off. There is just so much time in the day."

The students from smaller schools tended to be more amazed that they had been able to attend college and cited more specific GEAR UP services when asked about impactful services and programs. Those in the slightly larger schools cited the importance of their GEAR UP coordinator but also seemed more likely to have parental support. Some students even chose not to go to college despite having the means to do so from the larger schools, which was not the case with the more rural, isolated schools.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I just chose not to [go to college]. It was in my budget and my parents were telling me to go. I even applied, I got accepted. I looked at degrees. I thought about engineering degrees. I had opportunities and it just didn't seem appealing to me. Why move across the state and stay in the dorm and go to school 8 hours a day like I have been when I obviously wasn't enjoying it in high school? I can go find something I want to do and get paid for it without grueling through another four years or maybe six or more depending on whatever degree I got and then can only do certain things because of the degree."

GEAR UP Services:

Educators were asked what their schools do to help students complete the FAFSA. The answers varied across schools and included FAFSA nights to get parents in the schools and set up their IDs, FAFSA services tacked onto family nights, catch students in computer labs to sit and fill it out, and a required digital scavenger hunt so students find info, not just hear it from counselors, helping to combat some skepticism (especially those weary of "big brother" and unwilling to give SSN) and lack of financial literacy.





FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Financial literacy in general is lacking in the entire culture, both kids and parents. Just having someone repeatedly saying that they trust explain it again and push student scholarships and grants. Make it a party to get students to apply to scholarships.”

“There are a lot of misnomers around the financial piece. That would be another benefit of the family support center [because] either parents think that it’s going to cost a lot more than it actually is and aren’t aware of a lot of the support services until we get them in and go through all that, or unfortunately we get a lot of kids that feel like they’re putting a financial burden on their family.”

Students were asked what FAFSA events/services were most helpful. They cited FAFSA nights with college/career center staff and GEAR UP coordinators as helpful for gaining information if they did not have prior knowledge of it. Reminders and help from coordinators and school staff, especially teachers, were instrumental in students actually completing the FAFSA, especially if challenge arose.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“It was helpful being yelled at about FAFSA and financial aid all the time and also getting help with filing for financial aid.”

Students were asked what services were most impactful and helped to most prepare them for postsecondary plans. The most common answer included college visits. Several students cited these visits as the primary reason they chose their path to a 2-year trade program or 4-year degree program.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I’m very passionate about this because if I didn’t have this GEAR UP trip specifically, I would not have gone to where I’m going. I go to [where] we took a tour in 2022.”

“Having a lot of like resources and options to get an insight into the schools really helped me kind of come up with the decision [and] know if this is what I wanted to do. I wondered if they had what I wanted to do and it was a really good resource to kind of just get the inside of the school [on a community college tour trip].”

“I feel like going [to visit a bunch of different colleges] kind of made me actually want to go back to school.”

A majority of students also claimed that having consistent GEAR UP advisors through the years aided in their decision-making around postsecondary education and feeling prepared for the path they chose.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I think it was really important that we kind of grew up with our GEAR UP advisors for a good six years. Even before all the college stuff, we had built those relationships up really well and it was so much easier to be so open with like, 'I don't know where I want to go to college or I'm struggling with this'. You didn't feel like you were talking to a teacher and it was more of a peer/friend or someone who would support you and you knew that in your mind."

"Being able to be in their office every day whenever I want really helped because it was really a safe space for me. It helped me as a student because it helped build my character. I can talk to them about anything—school work and then home life and stuff—and them just being there for me actually really helped me and shaped me as a person."

Often, the reminders of deadlines from these trusted adults were useful.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"[It was helpful] just having someone to inherently bully me into doing stuff because I wouldn't remember to do it otherwise."

"Something that was helpful for me was getting information through assemblies that GEAR UP would hold for our school. They just told us about what was happening, what's going on, what we gotta do, and [what to] be prepared for."

Other services briefly referenced in students' answers included school spirit that encouraged postsecondary education, business week that taught practical life skills, community service/volunteering opportunities that opened new perspectives on the world, GEAR UP staff to talk to for emotional support, and teachers, especially those incorporating "real-life" lessons and application of curriculum. Separate from GEAR UP, some students felt that having a job in high school helped prepare them for after high school. Some athletes also felt that was preparatory. These two had less time to attend GEAR UP services due to the time demands of work and extracurriculars, yet echoed sentiments of students that real-life skills gleaned from the school and GEAR UP were most helpful regardless of any path they chose after high school.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

"I had sports and stuff going on so I couldn't go. I did go twice [on college visits] to the STEM days. That was pretty fun. It was pretty interesting to see all the stuff that they do up there."

Educators were asked what services were most impactful and echoed the importance of the “real-life skills” services that sparked student enthusiasm and the demand for meeting social/emotional needs of students through one-on-one time with coordinators. This is evident through the popularity of “adulting days”, parent engagement dinners, and individual and group student meetings with coordinators/advisors about how they are doing and what their future plans are.

The most prominent service in the eyes of educators were field trips, especially college visits. As discussed previously, this has the power to change students’ trajectories after high school through exposure to a world greater than that they know, especially for isolated rural students. This is a critical aspect of a strong college-going culture in these small schools. College access services in general are some of the most influential GEAR UP services in these schools.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“We need field trips so that [students] can start to see something else. See careers that come from a passion for science or that come from art. [We] go see a Shakespeare play so are they going to get something in the arts but they’re also going to eat in a restaurant that can seat more than 10 people and they’re going to see what it is to be in food service when you have more than 2 customers at a time.”

Educators claimed that tutoring was a major service that could not be provided without GEAR UP and is critical for the academic success of students, alongside extra school supplies for more effective teaching and programming. Some educators touched on a popular college and career fair that attracts students and families from surrounding schools and FAFSA nights to help with the actionable aspect of preparing for college application and enrollment. All of that being said, educators emphasized that coordinator access is critical, likely the most important aspect of GEAR UP.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“[Having] a dedicated career and college advisor role is supremely valuable.”

“A lot of other areas lack hope but there’s something even more so about it here. You don’t have that key figure or someone guiding you to say, ‘there’s this all these things out there.’ That’s the one critical piece is having that mentor who can show you the way. Our kids don’t have that [without GEAR UP].”

Educators saw a significant shift in their school when students knew, recognized, and respected the GEAR UP staff, knowing they could come to them with any questions or issues, as well as truly aiding in their postsecondary plans regardless of whether they want to go to college or not, despite perception of 4-year college as what GEAR UP promotes.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I can’t tell you how many kids tell me that they’re going to college and I ask ‘Why?’ and they’re shocked. They think that I’m pushing college. I mean, what field do you want to go into? They don’t have [any idea of a path] in these higher channels but they know to say “hey I’m going to college.””

When asked what services they would keep going forward, the answer tended to be “all of them”. Educators seem to be well aware of the benefits that GEAR UP provides to the students in the schools they serve in. That being said, some educators cited “adulthood day”—how to cook food in a dorm, change a tire, budget, laundry, leave the nest, etc.—as particularly popular among students and helpful. The educators did not claim any of the services to be less impactful when directly asked about it, although they did seem to have varying opinions and disagreements on the professional development offered.

Professional Development:

Educators were asked, “What professional development do you need in your school?” and responses tended to fall into one of four categories: College and Career Path Guidance, Poverty and Cultural Sensitivity Training, Classroom Tools and Skills, and Collective Knowledge.

College and Career Path Guidance was recommended in five instances during the educator focus groups. Educators believed that understanding all career pathways and how to get there would better prepare educators in aiding students with plans for their future. It was recommended to provide PD around job and career pathways from a counselor’s perspective – how to guide kids through the path they want (college, certain trades, etc.) in better detail—so that these can be included in advising and guidance.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Historically, the counselors at the high school level don’t know all the pieces of Running Start (dual credit) and so if a student does choose running start, they aren’t schooled in that math. Kids are taking these wimpy math classes [including math for environmentalists online].”

“The counselors are telling us what you need to get out of high school [but not what is needed for the desired academic and career path].”

Helping counselors, GEAR UP coordinators, and teachers understand basic paths and what is needed for what a student may have questions about or is interested in will help in planning and making decisions.

This also gives educators more knowledge of postsecondary opportunities to expose students to through advisory services, conversations in the classroom, and at GEAR UP programs/events. Suggestions of how to do this included industry shadowing opportunities for educators to better understand trades and have contacts and experience to help students get there.

Poverty and Cultural Sensitivity Training was suggested during three instances in the educator focus groups. With the increased mental health issues and needs of students, several educators pointed out a need to be prepared to deal with the behavioral issues and social-emotional aspects of student development.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“The first group [in GEAR UP] came to [the coordinator] with more academic issues whereas this second group came with more social-emotional needs. The population is changing.”

Poverty training came up often, with some people recommending behavioral issue training and understanding effects of trauma. Namely, this is so teachers can better know the struggles of students and how to engage appropriately and with sensitivity, as well as understand the unique needs of their student population. It sounded as if one educator had been exposed to this PD before and saw its helpfulness in their own previous bias as well as a need for it among educators at high-poverty, high-trauma schools.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Generational trauma information helped [me] a lot for understanding kids’ behaviors a lot better. We have to look at that differently. That’s part of who they are.”

Additionally, educators at schools with high minority populations—such as racial minority groups—suggested cultural sensitivity training to better connect with students and understand them. They expressed a desire to serve students better, which is clearly most successful through the development of trusting relationships between students/families and educators.

That being said, there was a bit of disagreement about this. Several educators believed that the more mental-health oriented and social-emotional aspects of PD should be reserved for those it is most applicable to, namely guidance counselors.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“I don’t care for all of the mental health stuff. I know it is important, but it needs to be left to professionals. We need to deal with graduation. Watching a 2-hour webinar is stuff I take directly to kids. The mental health I don’t qualify for.”

After some conversation and debate in the focus group, some educators conceded and could see the benefit of understanding student behavior. These educators likely would not elect to attend or promote such PD, representing a group of educators, especially teachers, who have too much on their plate to feel particularly concerned about this area of PD. They expressed preference for more of the hands-on, teacher-oriented PD that educates on classroom tools that can be utilized (as teachers) and/or taken back to the school and shared as effective tools (as administrators and coordinators).

Classroom Tools and Skills were requested by a few educators. Without prompting, they touched on the helpfulness of previous professional development centered around educational improvement and effective teaching methods. Educators want PD for teachers that shed knowledge on what’s the “latest and greatest” in terms of effective teaching. Educational speakers can shed light into new developments in teaching methods—especially in a post-pandemic world—and increasing student engagement in the classroom.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Professional development for our teachers to know what’s the latest and greatest having those things that we can talk to kids about. I have an experience sitting through a session just all excited [about] AI in the classroom. We know we have it [so] let’s learn to use it.”

Collective Knowledge was an aspect of professional development that educators seem to think is missing. Not all teachers can access PD since it is hard to take days off with little to no substitute teachers at some schools. Virtual webinars or PD at the school would be helpful, although there would still be the issue of time and classroom monitoring.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“Professional development [on] bringing info back from conferences; more structure to get this to benefit everyone. Have exposure for teachers since they also do not get out of the valley much. Not much is close which is difficult and there aren’t really subs for teachers to get away and take a day off. Maybe webinars or bringing something in.”

Additionally, several educators expressed a desire for a way to disseminate information gleaned from conferences to other educators throughout the school. They recommended a more formal documentation system or synthetization and distribution of information in order for PD to benefit everyone.

Furthermore, educators expressed delight at getting to collaborate with other schools to learn from each other. They would like more opportunities to come together with other GEAR UP schools to discuss what is working or not and develop more collective knowledge.



FOCUS GROUP QUOTES

“The workshops we have, they give us time to talk with others which is crucial. I learn more at lunch and breaks than in education. I get so many ideas from other people.”



Recommendations

Recommendation #1

The next Washington GEAR UP grant should consider implementing a priority model of the grant. Without prompting, all schools who had the cohort model had criticism of it and recommended a priority model instead. This was mostly due to equity concerns among students, as well as broader impact and prioritization of developmental needs.

“There’s nobody else out there [in our community] doing [the work of GEAR UP] so the cohort that gets it, gets it, and we’re not getting that to our other students. As much as we’d like to make that sustainable in that way, we need that support to keep that up.”

“Cohort was not great; one grade got all of the benefits. Only they got to participate.”

Priority schools either did not mention the difference or told of the benefits it had, such as engaging more students through sibling involvement and knowledge passed down as several family members moved through being served by GEAR UP.

“I think they need more help for guidance towards the end here in their high school years.”

Recommendation #2

Prioritize relationship-building across GEAR UP personnel and services. Students and educators perceived the relationship-building and trust to be the foundation of GEAR UP’s success, especially when considering the advising piece of planning for postsecondary plans as well as overcoming many of the prominent barriers that students in rural Washington face. There is great value in and need for having relationships in the transition from middle school to high school and high school to college.

“What if colleges and universities locally had a GEAR-UP-associated person there...so that they know what kids are coming in [and] have been nurtured through GEAR UP. We bring graduates back and we’re we always talking about open door, but I mean year-to-year, you’re on to the next [group of students]. We hand off kids that we love and then it’s like, ‘well now it’s someone else’s turn to help them through it’ and that usually falls on the family. If there isn’t that support at that next step in their life, that’s a gap.”

Recommendation #3

Provide extra support to the smaller, rural schools and 2-year colleges. Sharing staff across middle and high school, as well as having staff pop into local community colleges to check up on previous GEAR UP students, is a way to help support students through transition. This also lends to the benefits of a priority model grant, as more students are served and can be aided at critical times of development and transition.

“What isn’t working maybe is continuing on with first year college students, as more should be done to keep in contact and provide support. Build[ing] more relationships and get[ting] more services through college partnerships would be good.”

Recommendation #4

Address major barriers to postsecondary education by providing transportation support to students. Several focus groups had an educator describe the value of getting a van.

“We have all been asking for years to get our own van! Could even put GEAR UP all over it.”

“Vans are currently shared between schools for athletics. Systems are already developed for use and liability but having a dedicated van just for GEAR UP would be awesome and so useful.”

“You can’t find bus drivers, so we don’t have bus drivers for field trips or college visits. Vans do not require a CDL license like buses do.”

The van was thought to be instrumentally helpful in organizing field trips which educators see as critical for student development and consideration of postsecondary opportunities.

“I’ll never forget the trip driving down we went through our nearest town and a student says “I’ve never been past here”. I’ve never seen a kid [like that] with her face in that window taking pictures of different areas that she’d never been. So important to see around.”

Recommendation #5

Expand counselor capacity and professional development to support students' social-emotional and career and college informational needs. With the perceived increase of social-emotional needs of students and mental health crises, as well as lack of knowledge of college and career options, educators cited the need for investing in counselors. They desire greater capacity and PD around mental health and career planning that goes beyond just crisis management which is seen as the primary issue taking up all of the existing counselors' time.

"We used to do [individual counseling]. We had two times a year every student will outline [a plan] and things like that. Post-COVID, that hasn't happened. [Our counselors] are all new. Two of them come from a more mental health side background which is actually really nice but what happens is they do a lot of crisis counseling. It is crisis counseling almost every day."

"We have a lot of mental health needs and not enough services for that."

"I definitely know that historically too, the counselors at the high school level don't know all the pieces of the Running Start [dual credit program] part and so if a student does choose running start, they aren't schooled in that math [needed for 4-year degrees]."

Recommendation #6

Use communication strategies to continuously deliver college and career information to students so that it is not dropped when in "crisis mode." One of the greatest barriers to college and lack of information among students and families is related to the perceived cost and affordability of college. In a 2021-2022 student survey, over half of students did not know there was a WAGU website and even more did not access it. We recommend developing a robust communication campaign around financial aid and the affordability of college, targeting both students and their families. Finances and affordability were indicated in the survey as prevalent obstacles to students pursuing postsecondary education. When students have a greater understanding of available aid, they are encouraged to engage in other college-going behaviors, including increased academic performance.³ Across all WAGU seniors, those who believe that they can afford college show 44.5% more seniors planning to continue their education, compared to those who do not think they can afford college.

³ Perna, L. W., & Steele, P. (2011). The role of context in understanding the contributions of financial aid to college opportunity. *Teachers College Record*, 113(5), 895-933.

Recommendation #7

Implement capacity-driven solutions, especially with staffing. Capacity is a critical aspect of implementing programming, relieving some work from counselors to more effectively serve students, and build the relationships that create the foundation of successful student outcomes. This is especially pertinent in the smaller, more isolated schools, as they have fewer services/opportunities/resources which GEAR UP filled a larger gap at compared to larger schools. Consideration for schools to serve may include looking at what resources are available outside of GEAR UP and the means to implement services that are not available from other local partners and national organizations already in the school(s).

Recommendation #8

Use college-going culture information. Planning GEAR UP programming and services around these components will help to improve student postsecondary outcomes, as research shows that the greatest predictor of college success is teachers' and students' indications of a college-going culture in their school.⁴

⁴ Corwin, Z., Maruco, T., Bernstein, S., Galan, C. & Rocha, C. (2018). *College-going Culture in a Digital Era: Strategies for Schools*. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Pullias Center for Higher Education.

Appendix 1 - Focus Group Protocol: Former GEAR UP Students

October/November 2023

Background:

Page, L.C., & Scott-Clayton, J.E. (2016). Improving College Access in the United States: Barriers and Policy Responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.02.009>

Redden, E. (2022, January 11). Perceptions of Affordability. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/12/study-high-schoolers-perceptions-affordability-matter>

Interviewer:

1. Thank everyone for participation. Introduce yourself and explain your role in Vela Institute, “Thank you for your participation in this focus group. My name is _____. I work with Vela Institute and we have been asked to perform an overall evaluation of the GEAR UP grant. Today I hope to hear from you all about the success and challenges of implementing the GEAR UP grant in your high school so the GEAR UP staff can learn new and better ways to implement the grant and serve students in the future.
2. Confidentiality, “Participation in this focus group is voluntary and you may leave at any time. Our Confidentiality policy at Vela states that everything you share today is confidential. If anything you say here is shared in a report, it will be anonymous- meaning we will not include the school or your name.”
3. I will be recording this so I can go back and listen to themes, common responses, and highlights.
4. Does everyone understand the purpose of this Focus Group? Do you all give consent? Do you all give consent to be recorded?

Questions:

1. Thinking back to when you were in high school, what plans and goals did you have after high school and why was this goal important to you?
 - a. Probing for plans: Unsure, Workforce, Military, College (2-year or 4-year), Career, Life Circumstances (e.g., having a family, being healthy, playing sports, etc.)
2. How did you make that decision?
 - a. Probing for info on decision-making process

3. How did you make the decision on where to go to college? Who or what helped (or didn't help) you? If you were unsure about going to college what convinced you? What types of characteristics appealed to you in a college?
 - a. Probing for variables in the decision-making process
4. Do you feel you were prepared for college?
 - a. Probing for student's perception of their preparedness for college, both academic and socially
5. What helped most to prepare you?
 - a. Probing for services or activities students connected with in HS for prep in college
6. Did you get the message that college is important to your future? How?
 - a. Probing for communication or strategies teachers/advisors/mentors use that work to convey the importance of college
7. What GEAR UP services were helpful? Financial aid application assistance, college application assistance, career path identification/exploration and scholarships....
 - a. Other experiences that helped prepare you for college?
8. What would you recommend for incoming college students?
 - a. Probing for confirmation of services that helped prepare for college
9. When you were applying to college, did you think you could afford the cost of college? Were you aware of how much college costs per year for a 2- or 4-year college? Do you consider college affordable for you now that you are enrolled? Why or why not?
 - a. Probing for student's knowledge of actual cost of college and perception of college affordability
10. A financial investment is taking action to invest money for future profit. Do you consider going to college to be a financial investment? Why or why not? What type of financial return do you think you will get after going to college?
 - a. Probing for student's ability to think about college as an investment with a return on investment
11. What is your confidence of completing this year or your degree?

Appendix 2 - Focus Group Protocol: Educators, School Personnel, and Stakeholders

October/November 2023

Background:

Page, L.C., & Scott-Clayton, J.E. (2016). Improving College Access in the United States: Barriers and Policy Responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.02.009>

Redden, E. (2022, January 11). Perceptions of Affordability. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/12/study-high-schoolers-perceptions-affordability-matter>

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Questions:

Aspirations

1. What plans and goals do your students have after high school?
 - a. Probing for perceptions of students and their goals
 - b. What percentage of students do you think will go on to some type of postsecondary ed (2 or 4 year)?
 - i. Probing for school personnel expectations

Providing support

2. What barriers do you know or perceive students' face in achieving their postsecondary plans?
 - a. Probing for possible barriers: Economic/Financial, Academic, Situational/Informational, Social/cultural
3. Where do students need the most help? Why?
 - a. Aspirations/intent
 - b. Planning
 - c. Taking action
4. How do you help students as they face these barriers? Who is doing this work? Who will do this work after GEAR UP?
 - a. Probing for school personnel responsible for supporting students to go to college
5. Do you have the training necessary to provide the support students need?
 - a. Probing for perceptions of school personnel role and if they feel prepared
6. Do you have time to support students to achieve their plans after high school? Are there other resources available to students i.e. TRiO, GEAR UP, College Advising Corps...
 - a. Probing for adequate allocation of resources in schools
7. What does your school do to help students complete the FAFSA? Any direct assistance for parents? Do you access the WSAC 12th Year resources or training? Do you have WSAC 12th Year staff help with your events?
 - a. Probing for knowledge of FAFSA, supports in place to help students and parents

GEAR UP

8. Do you know what GEAR UP is and it's purpose?
 - a. Probing for perception and understanding of GEAR UP
9. Did your school's college going culture shift as a result of GEAR UP? Give me some examples.
 - a. Probing for what it means to have a college going culture
 - b. Probing for communication or strategies to be used in the future
10. What services or programs were most effective? What makes you say that? How do you know?
 - a. Probing for services or activities that made an impact
11. Are there any strategies or services you will continue as a result of GEAR UP?
 - a. Probing for sustainable services

Recommendations

12. What resources do you wish you had to better help students in achieving their postsecondary goals?
13. What recommendations do you have for fellow counselors, school and district leaders, and/or policy makers to help increase the number of students who achieve their postsecondary plans?
14. What professional development do you need in your school?

Appendix 3 – Student responses to the question, “What would you recommend for incoming college students [or high school seniors]?”

“Don’t just take easy classes and electives senior year, as you lose skills in harder classes.”

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

“Apply for FAFSA.”

“Don’t be afraid of taking out loans.”

“Consider leaving home. Explore further options.”

“Focus on what YOU want [and] what makes you or will make you happy.”

“Take care of yourself and your mental health.”

“Have a plan.”

“Be flexible with your plan and open to all options.”

“Be smart about career path and financial decisions; work towards goals.”

“Take initiative.”

“Relax. Take it easy. Don’t stress. Think smartly and don’t make stupid financial decisions.”

“Be smart and confident in what you want to do. It’s an investment.”