

# Washington GEAR UP

## 2022-2023 Senior Exit Survey

### Background:

Washington GEAR UP (WAGU) conducts exit surveys for high school seniors at the end of each school year. These surveys collect data on students' future plans in addition to past experiences in school and GEAR UP. Results from these surveys allow Washington GEAR UP and their partner schools to continually improve and grow services offered to their students.

The following report explores how GEAR UP seniors responded to the survey. Results center around students' future plans, financial aid, and college prep. Dashboards, providing in-depth breakdowns by school, can be found in the Pi Portal.

### Survey Results:

The 2022-2023 senior survey had 2,820 student responses, representing 31 WAGU schools. This marks a substantial increase from the 2021-2022 survey, which recorded 208 responses. Previous years were only able to target priority schools and a smaller pool of seniors. With the GEAR UP cohort reaching the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in 22-23, WAGU had access to a much larger population of senior high school students. Key areas of the survey are highlighted below, followed by takeaways and recommendations.

### Plans and Aspirations

GEAR UP students were asked about their plans following high school graduation as well as what level of education they expect to attain. Future plans were also examined further by exploring how the beliefs that they can *afford to attend* and that they are *academically prepared* impacted student responses.

Just over two-thirds of seniors (67.6%) are planning to continue their education after high school with a 4-year college being the top choice (37.9%). This represents a 16.6% increase over those planning to continue their education in last year's survey. Both 4-year and 2-year college saw an increase from the 21-22 survey, while employment was reported with the largest decrease. The 2022 graduating class had also posted an increase in the percent of seniors planning to continue their education, over the 2021 graduating class. With back-to-back years of growth, WAGU seniors are showing a positive trend towards postsecondary education.

Students responded similarly when asked, "What is the highest level of education you plan to complete?", with 63.2% choosing some level of postsecondary education. Sixteen percent of seniors were still undecided on the level of education they expect to complete; this could help explain the drop we see when compared to students planning to continue their education. On the other hand, 37.9% of seniors indicated that they plan to attend a 4-year college right after high school, while 45.2% expect to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher at some point.

Not surprisingly, seniors that think they can afford to attend college were more likely to indicate they plan to continue their education beyond high school. Of those surveyed, 78.3% of those

indicated “Yes”, they can afford it, and plan on completing some level of postsecondary education, compared to 62.6% for “Unsure” and 54.2% for “No”. The biggest differences can be seen between the “Yes” and “No” students going to a 4-year college (47.9% vs 29.2%). Those claiming they cannot afford college also were the highest percentage of seniors going straight into the workforce.

Group differences become even more clear when comparing students who feel academically prepared for college to those that do not. Eight out of ten seniors that feel academically prepared indicated they will be continuing their education after high school while just 31.3% of those who do not feel prepared and 51.4% of those who are not sure if they are prepared plan to continue. Nearly half of students who feel prepared plan to go to a 4-year school compared to less than 10% for those who do not feel prepared. Seniors that are not academically prepared showed a disproportionate number to those planning to seek employment and are still undecided about their future plans.

Overall, the majority of GEAR UP seniors plan to attend a postsecondary institution following high school and to complete a degree or accreditation at some level. WAGU seniors have shown a positive trend in pursuing postsecondary education over the last few years, with more and more planning to continue their education immediately following high school graduation. To continue to foster this trend, GEAR UP can work to reach students that do not feel academically prepared or do not believe they can afford college. Both of these groups show much lower rates of belief in high aspirations for their future related to postsecondary education. Both of these groups would benefit the most from continued services, resources, and information provided by Washington GEAR UP.

## Financial Aid

Among the greatest obstacles to pursuing a postsecondary education is being able to afford that education. With growing costs of attaining educational degrees, along with associated living expenses, many students and their families nationally are unsure of their ability to pay for continued education. According to a report published by the National College Attainment Network, the high school class of 2021 left an estimated \$3.75 billion in Pell Grants on the table by not completing the FAFSA.<sup>1</sup> Students with large unmet need are significantly less likely to persist and stay in school.<sup>2</sup> Highlighting the importance of GEAR UP students finding multiple paths to paying for postsecondary education.

The uncertainty over being able to pay for a postsecondary education is evident in WAGU survey responses. As discussed, 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. Even GEAR UP 11<sup>th</sup> graders show unease around the costs of going to college with 45.5% of juniors who do not plan to continue their education attributing that decision to

<sup>1</sup> AlQaisi, R., Breen, S., & DeBaun, B. (January, 2022). *\$3.75 Billion in Pell Grants Goes Unclaimed for High School Class of 2021*. NCAN

<sup>2</sup> Cornett, A., Knaff, C., & Fletcher, C. (2022). *Perception is reality: Attitudes and experiences of student loan borrowers*. Trellis Company.

financial reasons. One of the first steps in helping students see that they can afford college is increasing FAFSA awareness and completion. FAFSA completion shows a positive relationship to postsecondary enrollment, with even stronger impacts for low-income students.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all WAGU seniors report being aware of the FAFSA or WASFA (92.9%) with 58.8% of seniors indicating they have submitted either the FAFSA or WASFA. These results are nearly identical to those reported by 2022 graduates and 2021 graduates. With nearly 6 in 10 GEAR UP seniors saying they have completed the FAFSA, WAGU 2023 graduates have outperformed the state of Washington as a whole (42.9%) and come in just ahead of the national completion rate (55.0%).<sup>4</sup>

For those seniors that said they did not complete the FAFSA, the top reason given was that they are not going to attend college (27.4%). However, a significant portion of those not completing the FAFSA said it was because they did not understand the financial aid process (14.5%) or they were not able to attend a financial aid workshop (8.5%). Needing help navigating the FAFSA accounts for nearly a quarter of those seniors not completing one, showing the importance of continued services and support from GEAR UP.

WAGU seniors that completed a FAFSA were more likely to say that they can afford college compared to those not completing. Seniors completing a FAFSA also showed much higher rates of planning to continue their education – 84.5% versus 42.6%. Knowledge surrounding the accessibility of financial aid has benefits beyond just paying for 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.<sup>5</sup>

## College Prep

All along the pathway from college consideration to matriculation and program completion, students face complicated choices and may lack sufficient support and structures to navigate burdensome or confusing processes and institutional bureaucracy. Even once a student has made the decision to attend a postsecondary institution and graduated high school, GEAR UP still plays a critical role in helping to navigate and support students through those confusing processes and complicated choices.

WAGU seniors that plan to continue their education were asked what tasks they still need to complete before the fall. Completing scholarship applications was the top need for the class of 2023 (33.9%). As highlighted above, seniors believing they can afford college were more likely to say they are continuing their education. “Financial aid application” (18.2%) and “Help understanding my financial aid award letter” (12.7%) also show a continued need for assistance around the financial process.

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<sup>3</sup> DeBaun, B. (2019, April 4). *Survey Data Strengthen Association between FAFSA completion and ...* - NCAN. National College Attainment Network. <https://www.ncan.org/news/456025/Survey-Data-Strengthen-Association-Between-FAFSA-Completion-and-Enrollment.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://national.fafsatracker.com/schoolView/47>

<sup>5</sup> 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

WAGU uses a number of different methods in sharing information with students, in an effort to reach as many as possible. One such method is through text message campaigns that share tips, deadlines, and information around the college & financial aid process. GEAR UP seniors were given the option to sign up to receive these messages, to help them as they navigate life after high school. Over 1,500 seniors indicated that they would like to receive these messages, showing a desire to continue receiving the help and support from GEAR UP that they have had over the last several years.

Just one quarter of seniors said they have accessed the GEAR UP website to get information about planning for their future. Nearly a third of students did not even know that there was a website. With such a valuable resource at their fingertips, students need to be aware of the help and information available on the website. This virtual resource is even more important for graduating seniors continuing their education, as they no longer have the daily support of their GEAR UP school and family.

Even after graduation, many seniors are still working to prepare for and navigate the process of postsecondary education. As they move out of the comfort of home and support of a GEAR UP school, continuing to provide help to these students is vitally important. Seniors show a desire to receive that help as seen by the large number of students opting into text message alerts. By continuing to be a trusted resource for these students, WAGU can have a lasting impact on students' postsecondary success.

## Takeaways

### Plans & Aspirations:

- A majority of seniors are planning to continue their education after high school
  - The percentage of seniors planning to continue their education increased for the second year in a row
- Nearly two-thirds of seniors expect to complete some level of postsecondary education
- Seniors that believe they can afford college and those that are academically prepared for college, were more likely to plan to continue their education beyond high school

### Financial Aid:

- Virtually all seniors are aware of the FAFSA/WASFA, but a large percentage still did not complete either (41.2%)
- WAGU seniors are outperforming both the state and the country in FAFSA completion percentage
- With college affordability being an ever growing issue, continue to work to increase the number of students completing the FAFSA or WASFA

### College Prep:

- WAGU services and support are still very much needed following high school graduation.
- One-third of seniors indicated they still need to complete scholarship applications
  - Again, showing the importance of addressing the financial piece of the college process
- A text message service appears to be highly requested, with over half of respondents showing interest
- Continue to find ways to support graduating seniors, as they move out of GEAR UP's direct reach