



**CREATIVE INITIATIVES, COMPROMISED INTERVENTIONS:  
ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF A COLLEGE PREPARATORY PROGRAM  
IN ONE LARGE URBAN DISTRICT**

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**Kristine S. Lewis  
Tracey Hartmann**

**Research for Action  
3701 Chestnut Street, Sixth Floor West  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
Ph 215.823.2500  
Fx 215.823.2510**

**[klewis@researchforaction.org](mailto:klewis@researchforaction.org)  
[thartmann@researchforaction.org](mailto:thartmann@researchforaction.org)**

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federally-funded grant program with three explicit goals: (1) enhancing college awareness; (2) enhancing academic support; and (3) enhancing family and community involvement. In this urban school district, schools served by GEAR UP include eight high schools and their affiliated middle schools. GEAR UP serves cohorts of students designated by grade level, with a new cohort added each year. In 2004-2005, GEAR UP served over 19,500 students in grades seven through twelve. Research for Action has served as an independent evaluator of GEAR UP for this district since the program's inception in 1999.

In this handout, we offer an overview of findings from a mixed-method, longitudinal evaluation of one large urban school district's GEAR UP program. The implementation and delivery of GEAR UP in this district was impeded by numerous contextual and structural barriers. These barriers served to diffuse the program's impact. In the face of these challenges, GEAR UP was successful at developing students' college awareness and supporting students during their college search and application process. However,

GEAR UP did not achieve its goal of preparing students academically for college. This handout provides brief summaries of findings for the following areas: 1) barriers to the implementation and delivery of the GEAR UP program, 2) college awareness and information, 3) adult support, 4) college preparation and 5) college-going.

### *Barriers to the implementation and delivery of GEAR UP*

The GEAR UP grant encountered significant obstacles at the district level. Throughout the six years of the GEAR UP grant, turmoil at the district meant that GEAR UP lacked consistency and continuity from year to year. Obstacles similar to those present at the District-level also confronted GEAR UP at the school-level.

- Constant changes in the leadership structure and personnel within the District, schools, and GEAR UP effectively undermined the success of the grant.
- Problems with the timely approval of contracts and disbursement of funds damaged relationships with lead partners, as well as community-based organizations and institutions of higher education.
- The design of the grant was seriously flawed, namely a new cohort of students was added each year, while staffing and funding remained constant (and in some cases, funding diminished).
- The limited involvement of some principals obstructed GEAR UP's attempts to deliver programs at individual schools.
- Miscommunication and misperceptions about the roles and responsibilities of GEAR UP coordinators and guidance counselors unnecessarily complicated what could have been strong working relationships between the two positions.

### *College awareness and information*

Increasing students' college awareness and changing students' post-secondary goals was GEAR UP's most frequently mentioned successes in relation to students. In discussing GEAR UP's impact on students, both stakeholders and students mentioned college visits and exposure, students' increased expectations for themselves in terms of post-secondary plans, and students' increased knowledge about college. GEAR UP's college visits and its programs to promote and pay for more students to take the PSAT and SAT were its most frequently-mentioned successes in helping to develop the culture of college awareness in schools.

### *Adult support*

In both survey and focus group data, the majority of students described their parents and teachers as supportive during their college application process. However, some participants explained that their parents and teachers were not supportive.

Focus group participants consistently described their GEAR UP coordinators as helpful and supportive during their college application process. This support was especially important for students who did not receive support from their parents and/or their teachers.

*Preparation for college*

While high school seniors who planned to attend college in the fall of 2005 expressed excitement about their future prospects, they were also concerned about being adequately prepared for college. Finances loomed large for students as they contemplated expenses to be incurred during their college education. Many felt confident that their first year was covered, but were apprehensive about the remaining three years. Similar concerns were expressed about academic preparation. Students who felt that their urban schools were not adequately preparing them for college received confirmation of this fear in the form of poor scores on the SAT. While their confidence was shaken, students credited GEAR UP with making them aware of student support services and other resources on college campuses.

*College-going*

Almost two thirds of students (71%) had applied to at least one post-secondary institution including technical schools, community colleges and four year colleges. Forty-six percent applied to more than one school. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the types of schools where students applied and received acceptance.

<b>Table 1. Class of 2005 self-reported application and acceptance rates (n=1071 students)</b>		
<b>Type of post secondary school</b>	<b>Applied*</b>	<b>Accepted* (by time of survey)</b>
<b>Technical School</b>	<b>12.8%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Community College</b>	<b>33.7%</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Four Year College</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>38.5%</b>

*\*The percentages do not add up to 100% because students applied to and received admission to more than one type of institution.*

Forty-five percent of students identified one post-secondary school that they would attend in the fall of 2005, while 26% still were not sure where they would enroll. Twenty-six percent had decided on a four year college.