



Off To College?

An Examination of the Postsecondary Aspirations, Plans, and Preparations of the First Cohort of Philadelphia GEAR UP

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RESEARCH for *ACTION*

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

Research for Action is funded through grants from foundations and contracts for services from a range of organizations, including the School District of Philadelphia. For more information about RFA please go to our website, www.researchforaction.org.

Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

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First Cohort of Philadelphia GEAR UP**

**Prepared by
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Executive Summary

Introduction

Research for Action has evaluated the Philadelphia GEAR UP program since its inception in 1999. GEAR UP is a federally-funded grant program initiated through legislation introduced by one of Philadelphia's own congressmen, Chaka Fattah. In 1999 the School District of Philadelphia was awarded \$28 million over five years to implement the program; the grant was later extended for a sixth and final year. While a previous report by Research for Action discusses the key outcomes of the program's three primary goals (College Awareness, Academic Preparation, and Parent & Community Involvement), this study provides an in-depth look at these goals as experienced by the first cohort of GEAR UP students to graduate from high school, some of whom became involved in the program in seventh grade.

The study draws on both survey and focus group data collected during the spring of 2005. While the survey data identifies major patterns and trends among the students, the focus group interviews provide a closer look at individual experiences. The surveys and focus group discussions examine student involvement with GEAR UP and other college access programs, perceptions of adult support, experiences with the college application process and postsecondary plans. The survey was completed by 1,071 students, 45% of the graduating class, at the ten high schools where GEAR UP operated. Fifty students from four GEAR UP high schools participated in focus group interviews.

The study considered the following research questions:

- What are the aspirations of the students in the GEAR UP class of 2005? What postsecondary institutions are they planning to attend in the fall of 2005?
- What factors predict their college plans? To what extent was GEAR UP a factor in predicting students' college plans?
- Who supports students? What role does GEAR UP play in students' aspirations and college plans?
- What are GEAR UP students' perceived challenges and barriers to college attendance? How prepared do GEAR UP students feel for college?

Key Findings

- Many more students aspire to than are headed for college.
- Boys and students from families that do not speak English at home are most at-risk of dropping out or never entering the college-going process.
- Adult support from family members, school staff, and GEAR UP staff is essential to helping students navigate the college application process.
- Financial aid and academic preparation for college remain major concerns of graduating seniors.

College aspirations, applications, acceptance and plans to attend

A majority (81%) of students surveyed aspired to complete a post-secondary educational program at some point in their lives. Fewer boys (69%) than girls (88%) aspired to complete post-secondary training and fewer students (71%) from homes where a language other than English was spoken aspired to post-secondary school.

Over two-thirds of students (71%) surveyed applied by late spring 2005 to at least one post secondary school including technical schools, community colleges and four-year schools. Girls sent out more applications than boys and were more likely to have applied to a four year college (62% of girls versus 53% of boys). Students from homes where a language other than English was spoken were less likely to apply to post-secondary schools (53%) and four year colleges (43%).

By late spring 2005, 63% of seniors surveyed had plans to attend a post-secondary school. Fewer boys than girls had plans to attend college in the fall (41% versus 60%) and 43% of students from homes where a language other than English was spoken had such plans.

Half of students surveyed (49%) were accepted at one or more post-secondary school by spring of 2005. Thirty percent (30%) were accepted at one or more four-year colleges. Sixty percent (60%) of girls versus 40% of boys were accepted at a post-secondary school as were 36% of students from non-English speaking homes.

The largest group of students (28%) planned to attend Community College of Philadelphia. Other schools included: Temple University, Penn State (many campuses), Kutztown University, Cheney University, Lincoln University, Bloomsburg University, West Chester University, Millersville University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and LaSalle University.

Factors correlated with college aspirations and college-going plans

Gender and language spoken at home are strongly correlated with college aspirations and college-going. Boys had lower aspirations and were less likely than girls to have college-going plans. This was also true of students where English was not spoken at home. Surprisingly, having family members who had completed college did not appear to be related to college aspirations or college-going.

Adult support is the factor most strongly correlated with college-going. Boys reported less adult support overall. This support was from a variety of sources including parents, teachers, other family members, GEAR UP staff, and others. The more adults discussing college with a student, the more likely he or she was to aspire to and have plans for college.

Participation in GEAR UP activities in high school was strongly correlated to girls', but not boys' college aspirations and college-going plans. Participation in GEAR UP in middle school did not appear to be related to students' college-going plans.

Involvement in extra-curricular activities was correlated with college-going for boys. Athletics was the most common extra-curricular activity in which students participated.

The number of perceived barriers to college was related to girls' college aspirations and college-going plans. The more barriers that girls' perceived the less likely they were to aspire to or have college-going plans. Girls most often identified money and academic preparation as barriers to attending college.

Adult support: Its role in students' college aspirations and application process

A majority of students surveyed received support from school staff about college related issues and believed their teachers expected them to attend college (65% respectively). This included discussions about the right courses to take and financial aid. One third of students surveyed reported no such support and no such expectations.

Over half of students surveyed had talked with family members about college and believed their family had high expectations for them. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of students surveyed said a member of their family had discussed courses and financial aid, but 53% felt their parents expected them to get a four year degree or higher as compared to 67% of their teachers. Most focus group participants described their parents and family members as supportive of their college aspirations. However, there were a few who reported no support at home.

Adult support is important for all students with college aspirations. GEAR UP's adult support was especially important when family, counselor, and teacher support was unavailable. For the overwhelming majority of students in focus groups, GEAR UP staff and other college access program staff provided them with consistent support and encouragement. In addition, they described the Student Success Centers as a vital space and resource.

Students reported that GEAR UP staff support was especially important during the college application process. The majority of focus group students attributed their ability to take steps toward college to GEAR UP support. These steps included learning about financial aid, taking college entrance exams, and completing applications.

Preparing for college: Financial, academic and social issues and concerns

In spite of high levels of attendance and participation in GEAR UP financial aid workshops, survey respondents and focus group participants continue to be concerned about the affordability of college. These concerns included not only the cost of attendance but worries about accruing debt.

The majority (87%) of survey respondents had some awareness of financial aid options but many focus group participants had serious concerns about taking out loans. By the spring of 2005, 65% of survey respondents had applied for at least one form of financial aid, with a third already receiving notification of aid.

While half of the survey respondents felt academically prepared for college, the majority of focus group participants did not. Some focus group students, accustomed to being among the academic elite at their high schools, described disillusionment and disappointment when they received their SAT scores. Students also mentioned poor school climate and inadequate or absent teachers as reasons they felt inadequately prepared.

Highly involved GEAR UP students felt socially prepared for college as a result of GEAR UP. However, many did not anticipate challenges that might be faced in predominately white universities. Students' expressed confidence in being socially prepared was due in part to the experiences made possible through GEAR UP including college visits, observations of college classrooms, conversations with college students, and summer programs housed on college campuses.

Recommendations

- 1 Implement a system to track students' college applications, enrollment and post-secondary activity. In order for school district officials and educators to understand the various educational paths that students take, the District needs to keep accurate numbers and establish well-defined and meaningful categorizations. Without such a system, the District will continue to be at a loss of assessing the effectiveness and impact of the program, let alone the status of its students.
 - 2 Employ more GEAR UP staff. During Year 5 of GEAR UP, the ratio of GEAR UP staff to students was 1 to 800! GEAR UP staff could reach more students and provide greater assistance if there were more people dedicated to the work. GEAR UP staff should be applauded for leveraging their resources in collaborations with other college access programs and staffs. These relationships should be continually cultivated. The need for more GEAR UP staff is at the heart of focus group participants' recommendations.
 - 3 Concentrate more attention on boys and on students whose home language is not English. The factors impeding the college attendance of boys are plentiful and staggering. More attention should be devoted to engaging boys in thinking about college earlier and more intensely. More formal interactions could be structured, such as a college visit that was for boys only. However, more informal interactions should be targeting boys and helping them to connect with other influential adults in their circles, such as a family member, teacher, or coach.
- Survey data also indicated that students whose home language is not English were less likely to have college aspirations or plans to go to college. GEAR UP staff should draw more heavily on District resources to send materials home in the language of students' parents and families, as a way to engage parents and build greater support for students at home. Workshops should be offered in the home language, and these should be made available to parents.
- 4 Address financial concerns upfront and continually. In large part, students' and parents' concerns about college are related to cost. Offer standing financial aid workshops for parents and students, and publicize the workshops widely. Directly address concerns about loans and debt. Include panels of high school alumni who are current college students and/or recent college graduates and their parents, so that attendees can draw on the expertise of people in similar circumstances. Educating the family about available funding sources will help to dispel myths and encourage more support for students' college aspirations at home.
 - 5 Actively involve parents and family members. The majority of participants asserted their families were supportive; however, additional steps can be taken to enhance the involvement of parents. For example, GEAR UP could host a banquet at the end of students' junior year to launch their college application process, invite parents to report card conferences, or invite parents to an open house in the Student Success Center. In addition to inviting parents to the school, offer workshops and other events in the community spaces that are familiar to them, such as places of worship or community centers.

- 6** Actively encourage students' participation in extra-curricular activities. In addition to the benefits of character development and resume-building, the adult support present in these settings can further extend and intensify students' support networks. Given this report's findings and other research, extra-curricular involvement may be particularly important for young men considering college.
- 7** Integrate academics and college awareness efforts as much as possible so that programming can address both goals. For example, all college visits should be "enhanced" (i.e., include visits to classes or conversations with professors); enrichment programs should address both goals; tutoring programs that involve college students provide academic support and opportunities for high schoolers to learn more about college from college student role models; report card conferences can help students identify and develop strategies to address current academic needs, and educate students about courses needed for college.
- 8** Increase emphasis on strengthening students' academic skills; GEAR UP could both align its efforts to build on district academic programming and advocate for change where it is needed. Given that the vast majority of students' academic experience (key to preparing for college) is outside of GEAR UP's purview, GEAR UP must coordinate its efforts to build on and complement the school district's academic curricula and programs. In turn, schools need to be able to integrate GEAR UP staff into academic aspects of school life. Advocate to make sure high schools are offering all the necessary college preparatory courses.

Introduction

GEAR UP is the medium between high school and college. It's a bridge that you definitely need. - Senior¹

[GEAR UP coordinators] made college seem fun. They made you want to go, like trips. They kept you involved. They made sure that your application was on time, and they made sure you [completed a] FAFSA [application]. And, in case you might have slacked – because teens, they tend to slack – they made sure they stayed on you, like second parents, ones like you have at home. - Senior

Although these high school seniors' experiences were not shared by every graduating senior in Philadelphia, their descriptions of the roles that GEAR UP coordinators played in encouraging their college aspirations and easing their college application process resonates with that of many of their classmates. The college trips, assistance with the college application process (including financial aid), and adult support were critical elements in their successful navigation of the terrain between high school and college.

Research shows that the educational pipeline often does not provide a direct connection to college for low-income students of color attending urban public schools. Across the United States, an average of 32% of students stop out, drop out, or are pushed out of high school between ninth and twelfth grade (Barton, 2005). This average rises to over 50% in major cities (Barton, 2005). Studies show that for urban students with college aspirations, socioeconomic class and academic preparation are two of the most significant barriers. Many urban families do not have the financial resources to send their children to college, and are unaware of, or misinformed about, financial aid programs

¹ All student quotes are taken from focus group discussions, and reported anonymously to protect the students' identities and confidentiality.

(Carriuolo, Rodgers, and Stout, 2001; Thomas, 1998). In addition, severe educational inequities put students who attend urban public schools at a clear disadvantage when compared to their counterparts at suburban public schools and private schools (Kozol, 1991).

Designed to address these obstacles to the college participation of low-income students, the Philadelphia GEAR UP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) has served students in eight high schools and their feeder middle schools. GEAR UP is a federally-funded grant program initiated through legislation introduced by one of Philadelphia's own congressmen, Chaka Fattah. In 1999 the School District of Philadelphia was awarded \$28 million over five years to implement the program; the grant was later extended for a sixth and final year.

The program goals included fostering a sense of college awareness among middle and high school students, and preparing them academically for post-secondary success, and involving parents and community groups in the college preparation process. To this end, Philadelphia GEAR UP developed a model, where incoming seventh grade students at each of the GEAR UP middle schools were identified as a cohort. For each year of the grant, GEAR UP added a new cohort of students. Students in GEAR UP schools received a range services and programs, including but not limited to SAT preparation workshops, financial aid workshops, and college trips. The 2004–2005 academic year marked the sixth year of the existence of Philadelphia GEAR UP, and, more importantly, represented the senior year for the first cohort of GEAR UP students. Since its inception in 1999, Research for Action (RFA) has served as an independent evaluator of Philadelphia GEAR UP.

While a previous report by Research for Action discusses the key outcomes of the program's three primary goals this report provides an in-depth look at these goals as experienced by the first cohort of GEAR UP students to graduate from high school. This cohort began in 7th grade in 1999-2000, the first year of GEAR UP. Some of this cohort had the opportunity to be involved in GEAR UP throughout middle and high school because they attended *both* middle schools *and* high schools where GEAR UP operated while others joined the cohort by enrolling in a GEAR UP school sometime between 2000 and 2005. The School District of Philadelphia estimates that between 33-48% of the original GEAR UP cohort was no longer in the system by the end of 11th grade.²

This mixed-method study draws on survey and focus group data collected during the spring of 2005. The survey data identifies major patterns and trends among the respondents. The focus group interviews examine the survey findings as well as provide a closer consideration of individual experiences. Surveys were distributed to seniors at each of the GEAR UP high schools by the GEAR UP coordinators. The surveys were designed to examine students' involvement with GEAR UP and other college access programs, perceptions of adult support, experiences with the college application process, and postsecondary plans. The survey was completed by 1071 students, 45% of the entire class of 2005.³ Many coordinators distributed the surveys at graduation practice, therefore the survey sample is like-

²The wide range of estimated dropouts results from the difficulties in determining who is a dropout. Students may stop attending school for a period of time without formally withdrawing. The percentages reported above come from different analysis of the same data by School District of Philadelphia's office of research and evaluation. These percentages parallel those for other large city school systems.

³This figure is based on January 2005 enrollments.

ly biased toward graduating seniors. *(For a more detailed discussion of the sample and data collection and analysis, see Appendix A.)*

Fifty students at four GEAR UP high schools participated in focus group interviews. These students were selected by GEAR UP coordinators because of their high involvement in GEAR UP programs and activities. These students not only participated actively in GEAR UP and other college access programs, they also reported higher outcomes in terms of college preparation, application, and enrollment. Data from focus groups with this highly involved cadre of GEAR UP students provides another perspective on the survey findings and insights on the strengths and challenges of the "stars" of the GEAR UP program as they embark upon their journeys to college.

Table 1 compares demographic and background information on the participants in the focus groups and survey respondents. All data was self-reported. There were more females than males in the focus groups and among survey respondents. These samples parallel what we know about GEAR UP participation; girls are slightly more likely than boys to be high participators in GEAR UP. The samples also reflect the greater number of girls in the graduating class of most GEAR UP high schools.

The majority of survey respondents were African American. Eighteen percent of the sample was Latino. Smaller percentages of Asian, White and multi-racial students were also part of the sample. The majority of focus group participants were African American.

Table 1**Comparison of focus group participants and 12th grade survey respondents**

	Focus group participants	Twelfth grade survey respondents
Number of participants	50	1071 (45%)
Number of high schools	4	11
Percentage of male and female participants*	44% men and 56% female	31% men and 53% female
Percentage planning to go to a four-year college in Fall 2005	98% planned to attend a post-secondary institution	63% planned to attend a postsecondary institution
Percentage involved in extra-curricular activities	84% participated in at least one extra-curricular activity. 54% participated in two or more activities.	49% participated in at least one extra-curricular activity. 16% participated in two or more activities.

*Sixteen percent of survey respondents did not indicate their gender.

Together, the survey and focus group data allow for both a broad and targeted exploration of the following research questions:

- What are the aspirations of the students in the GEAR UP class of 2005? What post-secondary institutions are they planning to attend in the fall of 2005?
- What factors predict their college plans? To what extent was GEAR UP a factor in predicting students' college plans?
- Who supports students? What role does GEAR UP play in students' aspirations and college plans?
- What are GEAR UP students' perceived challenges and barriers to college attendance? How prepared do GEAR UP students feel for college?

This report describes the experiences of students in the class of 2005 who participated in the surveys and focus groups — their postsecondary aspirations and plans, their perceptions of barriers and supports, and their experiences with the GEAR UP

program and staff. The key findings that have emerged from our analysis are as follows:

- Many more students aspire to college than appear to be headed to college. At each stage of our analysis (moving from college aspirations to college applications to college-going plans and finally college decisions), fewer and fewer students are left “on-track” to attend college.
- Two groups of youth are most at risk of dropping out or not ever entering the college-going process: boys and youth from families that do not speak English at home. In every category of analysis these two groups lag behind and support services do not adequately address their needs.
- Adult support from family, school staff, and GEAR UP staff was essential in helping many students navigate the college application process.
- Financial and academic preparation for college are major concerns of graduating seniors.

Findings

This two-part section presents major findings from the survey and focus group data. Part I focuses on survey data and presents findings related to college-going, college plans and the factors that predict college-going. Drawing more heavily on the focus group data, Part II examines adult support and college preparedness.

Part I: College aspirations, applications, acceptance, and plans

This section explores the aspirations and anticipated plans of survey respondents in the class of 2005. **Aspirations** refers to students' desire to attend college *at some point* in their lives. We assessed this by asking: What is the highest level of education you expect to obtain? Response options included: a) high school or less; b) some college or other training but less than a four year degree; or c) four year college or higher. **Plans** refers to students' plans to attend college in the *fall of 2005*. We assessed this by asking: In the fall of 2005, I plan to: a) attend college; b) attend a technical or trade school; c) get a job and work; or d) don't know yet.

Students' college-going plans represent the actualization of their aspirations and we assume that the aspirations for college preceded any college-going plans. By distinguishing between aspirations and plans, we can identify how many students have college aspirations but do not realize them. This also helps us to understand some of the reasons this occurs.

While we can report both on students' aspirations for obtaining a college degree and their anticipated plans in the fall of 2005,

⁴ At the time of this report, the School District of Philadelphia is obtaining data to assess this objective. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism in place to ascertain the activities of students who do not enroll in college after high school.

data on college enrollment in the fall of 2005 as well as comparison data from previous years is required to fully evaluate whether GEAR UP met its primary objective—increasing the number of Philadelphia students who attend four year colleges.⁴

A majority (81%) of students surveyed aspired to complete a post-secondary educational program at some point in their lives.

Aspirations of the survey respondents from the GEAR UP class of 2005 were generally high and college-oriented. Fifty-seven percent of students surveyed hoped to attain a college degree or higher while 24% hoped to get some training after college even if less than a four year degree. Seventy-one percent (71%) of students from homes that spoke a language other than English aspired to a post-secondary education. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of boys surveyed aspired to go to post-secondary education compared to 88% of girls.

Over two thirds of students (71%) surveyed applied by late spring 2005 to at least one post-secondary school including technical schools, community colleges, and four year colleges.

A significant number of seniors surveyed applied to a post-secondary educational program. Forty-six percent (46%) of survey respondents applied to more than one post-secondary institution. The average student applied to two different institutions. Over half of students (58%) had applied to a four year college. One third of all students sent an application to the Community College of Philadelphia.

Fifty-three percent (53%) of survey respondents from homes where English is a second language sent out post-secondary applications. Forty-three percent (43%) sent applications to four year colleges.

Girls were more likely than boys to have

sent out at least one application (79% of girls, 63% of boys) and sent out more applications to different institutions overall (girls averaged three applications while boys averaged two). Girls were also more likely to have applied to a four year college. Sixty-two percent (62%) of girls surveyed applied to a four year college compared to 53% of boys.

We do not know how the numbers of students applying to post-secondary institutions compares with previous years but it is important to note that 25% of students surveyed, who said they aspired to post-secondary education, had not yet applied to a post-secondary institution.

Half of students surveyed (49%) had been accepted at one or more post-secondary institutions by the spring of 2005. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of students surveyed had been accepted at one or more four year colleges.

As Table 2 shows, area colleges and universities accepted between a half and a third of survey respondents who applied to them. Bloomsburg accepted the greatest percentage of GEAR UP applicants while Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) accepted the greatest overall number of GEAR UP students.

Sixty percent (60%) of girls surveyed had been accepted at a post-secondary institution compared to 40% of boys. Similarly, only 36% of students surveyed from homes where a language other than English was spoken had been accepted at a post-secondary institution as compared to 54% of students from English speaking homes.

Of those students who said they aspired to a post-secondary education, only 52% reported that they had applied and received word of acceptance at a college or university in the spring of their senior year of high school.

By late spring 2005, 63% of seniors surveyed had plans to attend a post-secondary institution.

When asked specifically about their plans for the fall of 2005, survey respondents answered as follows:

- 51% planned to attend college⁵
- 12% planned to attend a technical or trade school
- 13% planned to get a job
- 23% either didn't know yet or did not answer the question

At the same time, 31% of survey respondents that aspired to a post-secondary institution had no immediate plans to attend a post-secondary institution at the end of their senior year. Again, many of these students could still have been awaiting notice of their acceptance at a post-secondary institution, or planning to work to save money, then attend college.

Plans for fall 2005 also varied by gender. More boys than girls surveyed either didn't answer the question about plans for fall 2005 (20% of boys, 8% of girls) or said they didn't know what their plans were yet (10% of boys, 9% of girls). Only 41% of boys had specific plans to attend college in fall 2005 while 60% of girls had such plans. Forty-three percent (43%) of students from homes in which a language other than English was spoken had plans to attend college in the fall.⁶

Of those who were planning to attend college, 45% had already decided which college they would attend in the fall of 2005, while 26% still were not sure. Among those who had decided, CCP was the most fre-

⁵ This item did not distinguish between two and four year institutions.

⁶ Surveys in which students did not report their gender were dropped from this and other gender related analyses.

quently identified institution (28%). Twenty-six percent (26%) of survey respondents had decided on a four year college.

By the end of their senior year 50% of students, who reported on the survey that they aspired to college, were not sure which institution they would attend in the fall. While this does not mean they will not attend college in the fall, they were in a less certain position to do so at this point.

Again, there was a marked difference between boys and girls. Thirty-five percent (35%) of boys knew which school they would attend in the fall compared to 53% of girls. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of boys compared to 38% of girls had decided on a four

year college. Only 18% of survey respondents from homes in which a language other than English was spoken knew which institution they would be attending in the fall.

Table 2 lists the top 11 colleges where survey respondents applied, received acceptance, and planned to attend in fall of 2005.⁷

Fifty-five students reported plans to attend a technical school. These schools included Lincoln Tech, Chubb Institute, Cittone Institute, and Thompson Institute.

Twelve percent (12%) of students were planning to attend historically black colleges and universities (HBCU).

⁷ A complete listing of schools can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2

Top 11 colleges where survey respondents reported they applied, received acceptance, and planned to attend in fall of 2005

	Applied	Accepted	Planned to Attend in Fall of 2005
	number of students (% of whole sample)	number of students (% of applicants)	number of students who decided on one institution
Community College of Philadelphia	335 (31%)	161 (48%)	136 students
Temple University	165 (16%)	38 (23%)	26 students
Penn State University (multiple campuses)	166 (16%)	79 (48%)	45 students
Kutztown University	125 (12%)	40 (32%)	7 students
Cheney University	114 (11%)	47 (41%)	12 students
Lincoln University	112 (11%)	47 (42%)	19 students
Bloomsburg University	94 (9%)	47 (50%)	12 students
West Chester University	92 (9%)	27 (29%)	2 students
Millersville University	87 (8%)	34 (39%)	17 students
Indiana University of Pennsylvania	74 (7%)	34 (46%)	11 students
LaSalle University	60 (6%)	23 (38%)	16 students

There were no significant gender differences regarding where boys and girls applied, were accepted and were planning to attend. The majority of students from homes where a language other than English was spoken were planning to attend CCP with LaSalle University and Penn State being the next most likely institutions.

In contrast to the 63% of survey respondents who planned to attend a post-secondary institution, nearly 100% of the highly involved GEAR UP focus group students planned to go to a post-secondary institution. Of the 50 focus group participants, two planned to attend vocational schools, 12 planned to attend two year colleges, and 35 planned to attend four year colleges. One student planned to work immediately after high school. The colleges and universities focus group participants planned to attend mirrored the list from the survey displayed in Table 2, with the exception that only two focus group students were planning to attend CCP.

Focus group participants preferred local colleges and universities. Several focus group participants wanted to remain close to home and family. Other students selected local institutions because of financial aid packages, college visits, and familiarity with the school because of the influence of someone in their family who attended. Eight students planned to attend an HBCU, while the majority of the remaining 28 students anticipated college life at Penn State (4) and Temple (3) among other predominantly white institutions.

Factors correlated with college aspirations and college-going plans

The survey included questions that could help explain why some students had college aspirations and plans while others did not and why some students were closer to realiz-

ing their aspirations than others. Our survey analysis looked at the degree to which demographic factors (gender, race, language spoken at home and the number of family members with college degrees) were related to college aspirations or college-going plans. This allowed us to learn whether or not different groups are more likely to pursue a post-secondary education as well as whether or not GEAR UP is meeting the needs of all groups.

The survey analysis also looked at the relationship between aspirations, plans, the supports received through participation in GEAR UP, supports received through participation in other college access programs, support received from adults, and involvement in extra-curricular activities. The support factors are important because they can be influenced by policy makers, parents, and educators. (See Appendix A for an explanation of how these factors were assessed.)

One final set of survey questions explored students' perceptions of the types and number of barriers to attending college. Barriers included affordability of college, family matters, academic preparation, the social challenge of "fitting in" and others. We hypothesized that perceiving many barriers would make students less likely to aspire to and plan for college.

We used a simultaneous regression analysis to determine how important these various factors were to student aspirations and plans. Our analysis showed that some of these factors were strongly related to college aspirations and plans BUT that they could explain only a small amount of the variation in student college-going plans (ranging from 6% to 20%). Therefore many other factors, not included in our analysis, also help explain students' aspirations and college-going plans. In addition, our analysis cannot conclude that any particular type of support,

including GEAR UP, caused the outcomes we found. It could also be true that inherent student qualities such as motivation to go to college or participation in school activities, may lead them to seek out resources and supports that furthered their college-going plans. In other words, it could be true that students who were already college-bound sought out GEAR UP supports but GEAR UP did not cause them to go to college. Tables I-IV in Appendix C provide detailed results for regression analysis.

Gender and language spoken at home are strong correlates of college aspirations and college-going.

As RFA has seen throughout the evaluation of GEAR UP and, as has been documented in other research (Peter, Horn & Carroll, 2005), gender is strongly related to college aspirations and college-going plans. Boys had lower aspirations and were less likely to have college-going plans. Thus even with the supports provided by their school, their family, and GEAR UP, boys were less likely to aspire to and attain post-secondary training.

Philadelphia is home to numerous immigrant communities. The School District of Philadelphia translates all of its materials into eight main languages; Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, French, Khmer, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. In our sample, the majority of second language families spoke Spanish as their primary language. Language spoken at home was a factor strongly correlated with whether boys had college-going plans and college aspirations. Boys whose families spoke a language other than English at home were much less likely to aspire to college or have plans for college-going in the fall of 2005.

The survey sample was predominantly African American but it also included small numbers of Latino, Asian, and white students. There were too few Asian and white

students to conduct a meaningful analysis across these groups but it was possible to compare the outcomes of African American and Latino students. Interestingly, when the language spoken at home was factored into our analysis, there were no differences by ethnic group. This means that Latino students who come from families that speak English at home were as likely as African American students to have college aspirations and plans. However, the Latino students from second language families were less likely to aspire to, and plan for, college.

We also explored the relationship between family members with college degrees and students' aspirations and plans. A large number of students (60%) reported on the survey that they had at least one family member (including a parent, grandparent, sibling, or cousin) who completed college.

- 20% of students surveyed reported that at least one parent had completed college.
- 9% had two parents who completed college.
- 21% had a sibling who had completed college.
- 44% had a cousin who completed college.

However, contrary to previous research (Freeman, 1999; Stage and Hossler, 1989), having family members who completed college did not appear to be related to college-going or college aspirations. Freeman (1999) asserts that African American children receive strong and powerful influences from their families to attend college, even if they are the first person in their families to do so. She cautions that this can feel like a “burden” to some, but serves as a motivating force to others.

Adult support is the factor most strongly correlated with college-going.

Participants identified their teachers, counselors, parents, and family members, as well as GEAR UP coordinators and other college access program staff as being major figures in their navigation of the college application process. Adult support was the most important type of support that boys and girls received. The more adults a student reported talking to about college, the more likely s/he was to aspire to college and have plans to attend college in the fall. Adult support was provided by family and school personnel as well as staff in GEAR UP and other college access programs. GEAR UP provided adult support for students, in the form of one-on-one interactions or small groups. Table 3 shows that 54% of students received counseling or advising from a GEAR UP coordinator while 29% worked individually or in small groups with a GEAR UP coordinator.

Table 3

Participation in GEAR UP Activities

College visit sometime in high school	63%
General college information session	64%
Counseling or advising from a GEAR UP coordinator	54%
Financial aid workshop	56%
Test prep provided by GEAR UP	52%
Tutoring	26%
In-school writing center	20%
After-school program	20%
Worked individually or in small groups with a GEAR UP coordinator	29%
GEAR UP summer program	18%
Leaders of the New School speaker series	11%
Other programs of the Office of College and Career Awareness	
AP course	22%
Dual Enrollment courses at community college	16%

It is also important to note that boys and students from homes where a language other than English was spoken reported less adult support for college-going overall. Adult support will be discussed in more detail later in this report.

Participation in GEAR UP activities was strongly related to girls' college aspirations and college-going plans. Students' participation in a range of other college access programs was correlated with college aspirations but was not strongly related to plans for fall 2005.

Adult support, as well as informational workshops, college visits and other programs were provided by GEAR UP. We assessed whether the degree to which students took advantage of GEAR UP services was related to their college-going aspirations or plans. For girls, involvement in GEAR UP was the only other important factor (after adult support) related to girls' college-going aspirations and plans. However, involvement in GEAR UP was not significantly related to boys' aspirations or plans.

In addition to GEAR UP, most neighborhood high schools housed other college readiness programs. These programs are located in the Student Success Center (SSC), thereby allowing students to access all the services provided by these programs at one time.⁸ While each college readiness program helped students to navigate the college application process, each program emphasized different aspects of the process. For example, GEAR UP offered SAT preparation workshops, but did not provide assistance with homework. GEAR UP offered financial aid workshops, but did not provide scholarships for students. By participating in a

⁸ Student Success Centers (SSCs) are informal settings within GEAR UP high schools that house representatives from a range of college access programs. The SSCs offer information, counseling, and resources to assist students with consideration and pursuit of their postsecondary options.

range of college readiness programs, students received a wider and more comprehensive range of support. GEAR UP coordinators and staff from other programs, particularly those housed in the Student Success Centers, encouraged students' participation in other programs. This is illustrated in the next section on adult support.

While 86% of survey respondents participated in the GEAR UP program, 45% had participated in at least one other college readiness program in addition to GEAR UP. Table 4 shows the range of involvement in other college readiness programs.⁹

Table 4

Involvement in other college readiness programs

College access	32%
White Williams	12%
Ellis Trust	3%
Philadelphia Futures	4%
Talent Search	9%
Upward Bound	4%
Prime	1%
Other	13%

Not surprisingly, participating in multiple college readiness programs was related to high educational aspirations and taking many of the necessary steps to get to college; taking a college entrance test, learning about and applying for financial aid, and applying to colleges. It may be that students with college aspirations sought out a range of college readiness programs to help them achieve their goals. However, involvement

⁹ Similarly, 45 of the 50 focus group students had participated in another college access program besides GEAR UP. The majority of focus group students were involved in College Access, but six students were White Williams Scholars as well. Students at Overbrook High School described their involvement with Talent Search.

in these programs was not strongly related to whether or not students had college plans for Fall 2005.

Our analysis also looked at whether or not having attended a GEAR UP middle school was related to students' aspirations or plans for college since students who attended a GEAR UP middle school would have the greatest amount of exposure to GEAR UP. In previous years, survey data has shown that students who attended a GEAR UP middle school were more likely to be highly involved in GEAR UP when they got to high school. However, we did not find that pattern in this year's analysis. Similarly, attending a GEAR UP middle school was related to slightly lower aspirations.¹⁰ Attending a GEAR UP middle school did not appear to be related to students' college-going plans.

Involvement in extra-curricular activities is correlated with college-going for boys.

Involvement in extra-curricular activities was another factor related to both college-going aspirations and plans for fall 2005 for boys. GEAR UP and other college access and preparatory programs did not seek to influence students' participation in extra-curricular activities. These experiences are likely, nonetheless, to build college readiness in the sense that they expose youth to new experiences and activities as well as bring them into contact with other adults who might provide support. In addition, a high level of participation in extra-curricular activities might also signify that these students are "engagers" (Hartmann, Reumann-Moore & Kutzik, 2005) and therefore have some personal qualities that lead them to

¹⁰ The relationship between attendance at a GEAR UP middle school and lower aspirations does not imply GEAR UP caused these lower aspirations. It is possible that GEAR UP middle school students had lower aspirations than other students from the start and these were raised through their involvement in GEAR UP but are still lower than those of other students. However, there is not enough data available to fully understand this finding.

seek out programs and activities in their school including college readiness programs, like GEAR UP.

This was partly confirmed by focus group students, who were not only highly involved in GEAR UP but many other activities in their schools. Many were athletes and others were involved with student government, academic clubs, and written publications (i.e., the yearbook committee). In general, they could be described as leaders in their schools.

Athletics was the most common extra-curricular activity in which students participated. Involvement in extra-curricular activities had a strong relationship to boys' college-going plans. It is possible that the greater role that athletics plays for boys in obtaining college scholarships may be one explanation for this factor being strongly related to boys' college-going plans. Another explanation is that athletic boys are already college bound for other reasons including increased self-confidence.

The number of perceived barriers to college was related to girls' college aspirations and college-going plans.

Finally, we explored the relationship between the number of barriers students' perceived to aspiring to, attending, and planning for college. For girls, this was significant. The more barriers that girls perceived to attending college, the less likely they were to aspire to college and to have college-going plans in the fall. The barriers that girls most commonly identified included not having the money for college, not being academically prepared by their high school for college, and not being able to get into college.

The findings reported above come largely from survey data and provide a broad

overview of the GEAR UP Class of 2005. Some of the themes that emerged in the survey data will now be explored in more depth through our focus group discussions with students.

Part II: A more in-depth look at adult support and college preparedness

Now, the report will take a closer look at adult support and students' perceptions of challenges and barriers to their college participation and completion. In doing so, we rely more heavily on focus group data. We chose to look more closely at the experiences, particularly the challenges, faced by the "star students" of GEAR UP. These are students one would expect to succeed. (With one exception, all of the focus group participants had plans to attend a post-secondary institution in the fall of 2005.) Focus group participants were largely African American, highly engaged, and high-achieving young women who were more likely to have plans to attend college than survey participants as a whole. The focus group data does not more deeply explore the barriers posed by gender or language.¹¹ Part II findings are organized into two major areas — Adult Support and Preparing for College.

Adult support: Its role in students' college aspirations and application process

GEAR UP staff provided a variety of types of support for college-going, including academic, informational, mental, and emotional support. In addition, GEAR UP staff endeavor to develop support for students' college-going plans within the school staff and their families.

¹¹The limitations of the focus group data do not allow for additional analysis of gender and language.

Over sixty percent (67%) of students were able to talk to their teachers and believed their teachers expected them to go to college. But some students did not feel supported by their teachers. These patterns were consistent across both survey and focus group data.

The majority of survey respondents and focus group participants had talked to school staff at some point about college related issues and believed their teachers expected them to go to college. Support from adults in school (including GEAR UP and other college access staff) appeared to reach a significant number of students:

- 62% of seniors surveyed said that someone from GEAR UP or their school had talked to them about the courses they needed to graduate from high school and get into college.¹¹
- 69% of survey respondents said that someone from their school or GEAR UP had talked to them about the availability of financial aid.
- 67% of survey respondents also felt that their teachers expected them to get a four year degree or higher.

However, about a third of students (31-38%) did not report getting support from adults in their school for college, and about a third (33%) did not think their teachers expected them to go to college.

The highly involved GEAR UP students who participated in focus groups also described inconsistencies in teachers' expectations and support. Most focus group participants explained that their teachers and counselors provided them with emotional support and encouragement, as well as telling them about opportunities, serving as references, and assisting them with their

applications. However, other participants shared encounters with teachers and counselors that they found to be discouraging. One student explained:

Besides GEAR UP, all you have is teachers telling you, "You're not going to do this, because you're that." And when you come to GEAR UP, we have an opportunity, instead of just "you're going to be a failure."

Over half of students were able to talk to family members about college and believed their parents expected them to go to college. But, some students did not feel supported by their families. These patterns were consistent across both survey and focus group data.

Many students had talked to family members about college. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the students surveyed said that someone from their family had talked to them about the classes they needed to graduate from high school and get into college and had talked to them about financial aid. However, only 53% of students surveyed felt that their parents expected them to get a four year degree or higher. This is lower than the 67% of students who felt their teachers expected them to get a four year degree or higher.

Focus group data also provided some mixed data regarding levels of parental support for college going. Again, the majority of focus group participants described their parents and family members as being sources of emotional support and encouragement particularly as many were the first in their family to attend college. Two students repeated inspirational words voiced by their parents:

My parents are basically telling me, 'School is good for you. You should go. You can get something out of it.'

¹¹The survey item asked about school and GEAR UP support in the same question.

My family says you have to go to college. My dad said you don't just go to college and fail classes. You've got to be out there, and take responsibility. My dad didn't have the privilege to go to college. He said you have to get your college degree and do what you want to do.

Unfortunately, this was not the case for every focus group participant. Some participants' families did not support their college aspirations. Two students confided:

Out of all the people in my family, out of all my siblings, no one went to college. And, I was attempting to go, but nobody wanted to help me.

No one [in my family] was doing anything for me. I didn't know anything about [applying to college]. I didn't get any type of help from home.

Support is important for all students with college aspirations. For the highly-involved focus group participants, GEAR UP coordinators and the SSCs played an important role in providing such support. Students noted that GEAR UP's adult support was especially important when family, counselor, and teacher support was not available.

The mixed experiences of students with school and family support made GEAR UP support all the more important. In the 2004-2005 school year, GEAR UP made an intensive push to focus the resources of their staff on the senior class and our data suggests that these efforts successfully reached a large number of students. Fifty-four percent (54%) of students reported that they had received counseling or advising from a GEAR UP coordinator at least once and one quarter (25%) of the students said they had received counseling and advising from the GEAR UP coordinator three or more times. Similarly, twenty-nine percent (29%) of stu-

dents said they had worked individually or in small groups with a GEAR UP coordinator. For the overwhelming majority of students in the focus groups, GEAR UP staff and other college access program staff provided them with consistent support and encouragement. One student expressed:

Even if you don't get the support at home, you come here [to the SSC], and you get more support in what you want to do in school.

Unanimously, focus group participants describe the SSCs as a vital space and resource within the high school. College access program counselors within the SSCs worked collaboratively and provided a comprehensive network of support to the students. Focus group participants shared:

I thought it was like a room for a bunch of nerds. So, [the GEAR UP coordinator] brought me to it. It's good for the school.

When I met these people in this room, I felt that I made the transition from being a child to being an adult.

The [college application] process is scary. I would never have done it if [my GEAR UP coordinator] hadn't helped me understand that it wasn't a big deal to fill out an application. We need more people like everyone in this room. Not enough people got this support.

The support of GEAR UP staff was especially important to focus group participants. They found the college application process to be stressful and credited GEAR UP staff with helping them through the process.

The supports provided by GEAR UP and other college access programs are all designed to help students prepare for college and specifically to successfully navigate the college application process.

In the survey analysis we looked at how many students had taken all the necessary steps to prepare for college. These steps include learning about several financial aid options, taking college entrance tests, applying to colleges, applying for financial aid and being accepted at one or more institutions. Thirty-five percent (35%) of students surveyed were in this position in the spring of 2005. The majority of focus group students attributed their ability to take steps toward college in large part to GEAR UP.

A few students described a relatively easy experience applying to college:

Well, I don't want to sound arrogant, but when I was applying to college, I felt like I was the truth because I applied to 21 colleges and I didn't have to pay application fees. They [colleges] were sending me, like, "Come to our college." I felt like I was being recruited.

If you completed your applications early, you wouldn't have to worry about a deadline. If you knew, even in your senior year, that you were going to go to college, that you want a college education, they're [the applications are] not hard. They don't really ask a lot of questions. I think it's [completing the applications] easy.

The college application process was not as stressful for some students because they were being recruited or because their applications were submitted early.

However, the common college application experience was characterized by stress. The majority of focus group participants bemoaned the tedium of the college application process — completion of multiple forms, writing and revising college essays, attention to details, coordination of the submission of documents from diverse sources (SAT scores, high school transcripts, letters of recommendation), paying college application fees, and meeting multiple deadlines. Students used the following adjectives to describe their experiences applying to college: stressful (7), hard (4), frustrating (3), challenging (2), confusing (2), long (2), nerve-racking (2), and others.

Focus group participants explained that GEAR UP helped to alleviate some of this stress. GEAR UP's resources were important to students' completion and submission of their college applications. One student summarizes:

GEAR UP provides the resources in a big way. Some people might get college stuff in the mail. But, let's say you had to write an essay. A lot of people don't have computers at home. You can come here [to the SSC to] type up your essays. They'll explain to you what you need to do to get into school. They help you get your transcripts, different applications and fee waivers, and all the things that you need. I mean, it's all the resources that you need to get where you need to go.

Preparing for college: Financial, academic and social issues and concerns

While focus group students 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. Financial concerns loomed large for students as they contemplated college expenses. Many felt confident that their first year was covered, but apprehensive about the remaining three years. Similar concerns were expressed about academic preparation. Interestingly, the highly involved and decidedly college-oriented focus group students expressed more concerns about college than survey respondents. Across the board, participants felt socially prepared for college, anticipating the freedom and new experiences that college promises.

In spite of high levels of involvement in GEAR UP financial aid workshops, survey respondents and focus group participants continue to be concerned about the affordability of college.

Once accepted, students needed to negotiate the process of paying for college. While the majority of American students and families contend with the question of how to pay for college, this is a particular challenge for low-income families. Previous research has shown that an inability to pay for college is a primary obstructive factor in college choice and completion for low-income students. (St. John, 2000; Kern, 2000) Findings from this study are consistent with earlier research.

Money was the most frequently identified barrier to college among survey respondents. Overall, only 23% of survey respondents felt certain that they could afford to attend a four year college. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of survey respondents felt that they probably could afford college with financial aid.

Twenty-three percent of respondents were unsure of its affordability and 11% of respondents were definite that they could not afford it even with financial aid. It was even more of a concern for students who had already decided to go to college. In other words, if students were not able to actualize their goals for a college degree, the number one reason would be financial.

Similarly, money emerged as a concern for students in focus groups. For some, the acceptance letter represented a mixed blessing. An exchange between students revealed money was a factor for students choosing between colleges:

Student 1: Sometimes it depends on how much they're going to give you.

Student 2: Yeah, and if you have a single parent, you have to worry about are you going to be able to make this year's payment, or, have your books. That was my problem. You got all that stuff to take care of.

Student 3: My problem was the money, too.

Student 2: I think that's a lot of people's problem, the money, because they [the students] ask for a lot and the schools that you want to go to the most, are the ones that you can't afford.

In addition to being a factor in college decision-making, money was an area of high concern in other ways as well. Students were anxious about having enough money to finish college:

I'm financially stable for my first year, I don't know about the rest of the years.

[Money is] really my number one concern, because I can deal with the work and classes. I just wonder am I going to be able to stay there.

The majority of survey respondents (87%) had some awareness of financial aid options. However, some focus group participants had serious concerns about taking out loans.

Thirty-six percent (36%) were aware of four or more types of financial aid. Fifty-five percent (55%) of students were aware of federal student loans and 46% were familiar with PHEAA loans and grants. Many fewer students were familiar with institutional scholarships and only one fourth of students were familiar with work study programs. By the spring of 2005, 65% of students said that they had applied for at least one form of financial aid. Only 34% had applied for a student loan and 15% had been notified of qualifying for a loan. A third of the students had already been notified of receiving some financial aid.

While loans were the type of financial aid with which most students were familiar, many students seemed to have misgivings about loans.

Student 1: We don't have that money. Nobody wants to take out a loan.

Student 2: A-duh, but they give you time to pay it back.

Student 1: I don't want to pay that money back the rest of my life.

Well, another thing to worry about to me, it's like, loans too. I got to take out a loan. My mom told me about it. You got to pay after college, and then they put interest on it, and that means you worry about that more.

I do [know how to get additional funding] but I don't want to take all the loans, I really don't want to do that. I have scholarships. They are renewable until I finish college. But, that still might not be enough, because every year the amount [cost of tuition] is changing.

Many students did not seem to know yet how they would pay for college. Some simply voiced optimism that they would be able to do it somehow:

Yeah, it's going to be hard because I don't have the money but hopefully I'll just try my best in college and then I can get better scholarships.

I feel that God will provide, because if He wants me to do this, that's what I'm going to do. I believe if I have faith in God, he's going to see me through.

While half of survey respondents felt academically prepared for college, the majority of focus group participants did not feel prepared. Student outcomes data indicate that lack of academic preparation is a serious issue for many GEAR UP students.

Previous reports have identified academic preparation as a challenge of the GEAR UP program (Lewis & Reumann-Moore, 2004). An analysis of student academic performance when the first cohort was in 11th grade raised concerns. Only 28% were at basic or

above on the PSSA reading exam compared to 40% in a comparison group. Only 13% were at basic or above on the PSSA math exam compared to 27% in a comparison group. The survey and focus group data provide different reports of students' perceptions of their own academic preparation. On the survey:

- 52% of students said that they felt their high school was preparing them for college.
- 47% felt that they were challenged by what they learned in class.

The percentages were even higher for students planning to go to college in the fall.

- 63% of those who had applied to four year colleges felt that their high school was preparing them for college.
- 54% of those who had applied to four year colleges felt they had been challenged.

Some students may have felt prepared for college because they might have participated in Advanced Placement classes and higher level college preparatory work. Twenty-two percent (22%) of students said they had participated in AP classes while 16% had taken dual enrollment courses at CCP. At the same time, about half of the students expressed feeling unprepared.

Focus group students' comments are more similar to this later group of survey respondents. While a few students said they felt confident in certain subject areas, the overwhelming majority of focus group participants expressed that they were ill-equipped for the academic rigors of college. The heightened awareness of focus group participants derives from their scores on the SAT and knowledge of the inequities present in their schools.

Some focus group participants, accustomed

to being among the academic elite at their high schools, described disillusion and disappointment when they received their SAT scores. In this exchange between students, they described retaking the test to improve their scores:

Student 1: The SATs kicked my butt really bad. ... I got a good enough score the second time. I just passed the mark to get into the summer program. I got a 810 the second time. The first time I got a 680. Here everyone telling me I was smart and then I take this test, and that was a big shock to my self esteem.

Student 2: It was just, like [student 1] was saying, the thing about the whole SAT, I thought I was smart until I took the test. I took the test, the first time I took it I got a 740, the second time I got a 9-something. I thought that was horrible, until I heard other people's scores. [laughs, and other students join in laughter]

Student 3: I got accepted to the first one [college] I applied for, and I was like, "Alright, this is the one I'm going to go to. I don't got to worry about nothing else." And then they [college officials] sent me a letter [stating that] I had to go in an early enrollment class because my SAT scores were low. It was discouraging.

Among the best and brightest in their high schools, students were "shocked" and discouraged by their SAT scores.

Participants were conscious and critical of the shortcomings of their high schools:

Student 1: They didn't give us enough challenging work to make us really think and think critically.

Student 2: We're like on a middle school level.

Student 1: We don't have real teachers. We've got substitutes.

Student 2: We have teachers that play movies all day.

I think I can do it [perform well in college]. But, with some of the classes and the education we've received... it's not good enough.

In addition to these barriers, participants described high principal turnover, disruptive classroom environments, outdated textbooks, and limited resources among the reasons they felt that their schools were not adequately preparing them for college.

Despite the challenges posed by their schools, focus group students felt confident that they would persevere in college. They are prepared to work hard and seek out available services to support them academically. As these students declared:

I think I'm prepared in the sense that I'm a very resilient individual. If you set your goals as to what you want to do, and you keep at it, then there's no way you can possibly fail. I won't fail.

I'm ready. Once I get to college, I'm going to use all the resources they have, as far as counseling, tutoring, etc., and that will help me to get ready.

Highly involved GEAR UP students felt socially prepared for college as a result of GEAR UP. However, many did not anticipate challenges that might be faced in predominantly white university settings.

Focus group participants were also asked if they felt socially prepared for college. The overwhelming majority of students responded affirmatively, many with excitement and enthusiasm and they pointed to GEAR UP supports as helpful in this regard.

I've been ready! I can't wait to get away! People tell me that the transition is hard, but I can't wait!

I think that GEAR UP had been most helpful to me in the way that they showed me a lot of things about college, like when we go on trips. We got a little taste of what it would be like when you actually get to college.

Many students feel socially prepared for college because of their participation in college trips. Participants listed their conversations with college students, observations of college classrooms, and understanding of the challenges of college adjustment (being away from home, being responsible for one's self, etc.) as reasons why they felt confident that they were socially prepared for college.

Several participants credited summer programs housed on college campuses as helping to prepare them for the social aspects of college. The Rising Senior Institute, a program initiated by a GEAR UP coordinator, was cited by several students as introducing them to the daily realities of college life on a small scale.

However, a few students did not feel socially prepared for college. They shared:

I'm like a people person, all the way. I've always been outgoing. So as far as being socially ready, yeah, but, time management is something that I'm still working on.

*I think I'll be able to handle it,
because when I get there most of my
time will be towards my school work.
All the partying will come, but when
I first get to college I'll need to be
strict, and do what I need to do.*

For these students, weak time management skills posed a potential barrier. Interestingly, while the majority of participants in the focus groups plan to attend predominantly white colleges and universities, none of the participants expressed concerns generally associated with being a student of color on a predominantly white campus (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1998).

Recommendations

We hope the findings of this study will inform and inspire interactions with the remaining GEAR UP cohorts, as well as the design and operation of future iterations of the GEAR UP grant in Philadelphia. Toward this end, we offer the following recommendations. These recommendations incorporate suggestions from students who participated in the focus groups, as well as recommendations that grow out of the findings discussed in this report.

Recommendations from focus group participants

Overall, focus group participants voiced satisfaction with GEAR UP programming, activities, and services. Participants' comments fell into two categories when asked how GEAR UP could improve: 1) nothing needs to change or 2) expand existing services. As one student explained, "Add...it doesn't have to change, but add." Participants' recommendations for expansion of services included: more workshops on scholarships and financial aid, more SAT preparation workshops, more college visits, more summer programs, more time (i.e., make GEAR UP available more hours of the day, available on-line, etc.) more funding for GEAR UP, and expanding GEAR UP into college. Focus group participants also suggested that GEAR UP offer a scholarship.

Recommendations based on the overall research

1 Implement a system to track students' college applications, enrollment, and post-secondary activity. In order for school district officials and educators to understand the various educational paths that students take, the District needs to keep accurate numbers and establish well-defined and meaningful categorizations. Without such a system, the District will continue to be unable to truly assess the effectiveness and impact of the program as well as the status of its students.

2 Employ more GEAR UP staff. During Year 5 of GEAR UP, the ratio of GEAR UP staff to students was 1 to 800! GEAR UP staff could reach more students and provide greater assistance if there were more people dedicated to the work. GEAR UP staff should be applauded for leveraging their resources in collaborations with other college access programs and staffs. These relationships should be continually cultivated. At the same time, GEAR UP should work diligently to lower the staff-to-student ratios to realistic figures.

3 Concentrate more attention on young men and on students whose home language is not English. The factors impeding the college attendance of young men are plentiful and staggering. More attention should be devoted to engaging young men in thinking about college earlier and more intensely. More formal interactions could be structured, such as a college visit that was for boys only. However, more informal interactions should be had targeting the young men and time taken to connect with other influential adults in their circles, such as a family member, teacher or coach.

Survey data also indicated that students whose home language is not English were less likely to have college aspirations or plans to go to college. GEAR UP staff should draw more heavily on District resources to send materials home in the language of students' parents and families, as a way to engage parents and build greater support for students at home. Workshops should be offered in the home language, and these should be made available to parents.

- 4 Address financial concerns upfront and continually.** In large part, students' and parents' concerns about college are related to cost. Offer standing financial aid workshops for parents and students and publicize the workshops widely. Directly address concerns about loans and debt. Include panels of high school alumni who are current college students and/or recent college graduates and their parents, so that attendees can draw on the expertise of people in similar circumstances. Educating the family about available funding sources will help to dispel myths and encourage more support for students' college aspirations at home.
- 5 Actively involve parents and family members.** The majority of participants asserted their families were supportive, however, additional steps can be taken to enhance the involvement of parents. For example, host a banquet at the end of students' junior year to launch their college application process, invite parents to report card conferences, or invite parents to an open house in the Student Success Center. In addition to inviting parents to the school, offer workshops and other events in the community spaces that are familiar to them, such as places of worship or community centers.
- 6 Actively encourage students' participation in extra-curricular activities.** In addition to the benefits of character development and resume-building, the adult support present in these settings can further extend and intensify students' support networks. Given this report's findings and other research, extra-curricular involvement may be particularly important for young men considering college.
- 7 Integrate academics and college awareness efforts as much as possible so that programming can address both goals.** For example, all college visits should be "enhanced" (i.e., include visits to classes or conversations with professors); enrichment programs should address both goals; tutoring programs that involve college students provide academic support and opportunities for high schoolers to learn more about college from college student role models; report card conferences can help students identify and develop strategies to address current academic needs, and educate students about courses needed for college.
- 8 Increase emphasis on strengthening students' academic skills; GEAR UP could both align its efforts to build on district academic programming and advocate for change where it is needed.** Given that the vast majority of students' academic experience (key to preparing for college) is outside of GEAR UP's purview, GEAR UP must coordinate its efforts to build on and complement the school district's academic curricula and programs. In turn, schools need to be able to integrate GEAR UP staff into academic aspects of school life. Advocate to make sure high schools are offering all the necessary college preparatory courses.

Appendix A: Methology

This report draws on data collected through surveys distributed to seniors at each of the GEAR UP high schools and focus groups conducted with seniors who have demonstrated high participation in GEAR UP programs and activities. This section of the report details the methods of data collection and data analysis.

Surveys

Research for Action provided the surveys as well as proctoring instructions to the Philadelphia GEAR UP coordinators in early April 2005. Coordinators were responsible for survey administration within their school building. Many coordinators reported administering the surveys during graduation practice in June of 2005. Others were able to distribute surveys during regular class periods and advisories. Most surveys were not administered until late May or June.

The survey was completed by 1071 seniors across 10 GEAR UP high schools. This represents 45% of the senior class of 2005 according to January's enrollment numbers. The late administration of the survey likely contributed to the low response rate. Thirty-one percent (31%) of the sample was male and 53% was female. Fifty-four percent (54%) of students identified as African American, 18% as Latino or Hispanic, 6% as bi or multi-racial, 2% as Asian and 2% as Native American. Eighteen percent (18%) of students did not respond to the questions about their racial group.

The 70-item survey¹² included questions in nine general areas: 1) GEAR UP, 2) knowledge about financial aid, 3) steps taken to enter college in the fall 2005, 4) personal aspirations, 5) adult support and guidance, 6) involvement in other college prep pro-

grams, 7) involvement in extra-curricular activities, 8) perceived barriers to college and career goals, and 9) demographics.

Questions about *GEAR UP* included fourteen items listing various GEAR UP programs and asking students to indicate if they participated 1-2 times, 3 or more times, or whether it was not offered or they did not attend. The fourteenth item was left open for write-ins of GEAR UP programs not listed. Scores across the fourteen items were summed to create a GEAR UP total participation variable. A corresponding set of 14 items asked students to rank their level of satisfaction with the GEAR UP activities in which they participated. These items used a four point Likert-type scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. A fifth option, Did not attend, was also available. A list of all GEAR UP staff was also provided and students were asked to identify the GEAR UP coordinator at their school.

Knowledge of financial aid was assessed through one item which asked students to check which types of financial aid they were familiar with from a list of ten sources of aid. The total number of financial aid options of which students were aware was computed and used as a variable, labeled Awareness of Financial Aid Options in further analysis.

Personal aspirations were assessed through one item that asked the highest level of education students hoped to attain. Response options included high school or less, some college or other training but less than a four year degree, and four year college degree or higher. This item was required by the federal grant.

Plans for Fall of 2005 were assessed through one item that asked students their

¹² The survey was developed and revised over the course of RFA's evaluation of GEAR UP. Dave Kutzick, Kutzick Associates and Jolley Chrisman were responsible for creating the initial survey and

the revisions that took place over the first four years of the survey. Rebecca Reumann-Moore, Gretchen Suess, and Tracey Hartmann revised the survey in the last two years of the project.

plans for the fall. Four options were given including attend a four year college, attend a technical school, get a job and work or don't know yet.

Adult support and guidance was assessed through six items. Two items asked whether students had talked to adults from GEAR UP or their school about the availability of financial aid to help pay for college and the courses needed to graduate from high school and attend college. Two items also asked whether student had talked to anyone in their family about these same two issues. These four items were part of a set required by the federal grant. They were combined to create a scale of adult support and guidance. This scale had reliability at $\alpha = .67$ at a level slightly lower than acceptable standards.

Two other items asked about the level of education students thought their parents expected them to achieve and the level of education they thought their teachers expected them to achieve.

Involvement in other college preparatory programs was assessed through asking students to indicate which of eight other college preparatory programs they had been involved in. The number of college preparatory programs was summed to create a scale of college preparatory involvement.

Involvement in extra-curricular activities was assessed through asking students to indicate which of eight extra-curricular activities they had been involved in. Extra curricular activities were summed to create a scale of extra-curricular involvement.

Perceived barriers to college were assessed through a 10-item scale developed by (McWhirter, 1997). The stem states "If I didn't go to college it would be because of:" and lists potential barriers such as "money problems," "family problems," or personal concerns such as "I wouldn't fit in." It uses

a four point Likert scale to assess how strongly students believe something could be a barrier. Reliability of the scale for this population was acceptable at $\alpha = .92$.

Two other items asked about perceived barriers to career goals "I believe there will be many barriers to achieving my career goals" and "I believe I can overcome any barriers to my career goals." The response format was again, a four point Likert scale.

Finally, one additional barrier item was added as a requirement from the federal grant. This question asked students whether they believed they could afford to attend a public four year college with financial aid. The response format was a five point Likert scale that ranged from "definitely," "probably," "not sure," "probably not," and "definitely not."

Demographics included gender, race, language spoken at home, parents' level of education, and middle school attended.

Analysis

Frequency distributions for each variable and scaled variables were computed. Correlational analysis was used to determine which variables would be included in a further regression analysis.

A multivariate simultaneous regression analysis explored the impact of a variety of predictors including demographic factors, participation in GEAR UP, participation in other college preparatory programs, participation in extra-curricular activities, adult support and perceived barriers on outcome variables including personal aspirations, and plans for fall 2005.

Focus groups

Philadelphia GEAR UP coordinators were contacted in May 2005 and asked to select 7-10 highly involved seniors to participate in focus groups. Coordinators were also asked to select a date and time, secure appropriate space, and remind students about the event. Focus groups took place in late May and early June. Focus groups were conducted in the SSCs at three of the high schools. At the fourth high school, focus groups were conducted in a classroom. Snacks were provided and students were given music store gift certificates as expressions of appreciation. At the beginning of the focus groups, students completed brief informational sheets. Four RFA staff members conducted the focus groups in pairs for each of the four schools. One staff member recorded the discussion with a digital recorder and typed notes on a laptop computer. The other staff member facilitated the discussion.

The protocol consisted of questions about students' high school experiences, post-secondary plans and involvement with GEAR UP. Participants were asked about their college preparation, their sources of support, and their experiences during the college application process. The protocol also included questions about GEAR UP. The facilitator inquired about what students found to be the most useful GEAR UP program and/or activity and recommendations to improve GEAR UP.

Focus group interviews averaged 45 minutes. The recorded conversations were consulted to address lapses in the typed notes. RFA staff involved with the focus groups met to debrief their experiences and conversations with the students, and generate a tentative coding scheme. Two RFA staff analyzed the focus group data using this coding scheme, as well as highlighted questions and topics in the 12th grade survey.

Appendix B: Post-Secondary schools where survey respondents reported they applied and received acceptance

Post-Secondary Schools	Applied (number of students; percentage of whole sample)	Accepted (number of students; percentage of students who applied)
Community College of Philadelphia	338 (31.6%)	173 (51%)
Penn State University	166 (15.5%)	86 (52%)
Temple University	165 (15.4%)	50 (30%)
Kutztown University	125 (11.7%)	44 (35%)
Cheney University of Pennsylvania	114 (10.6%)	58 (51%)
Lincoln University	113 (10.6%)	55 (49%)
Bloomsburg University	94 (8.8%)	51 (54%)
West Chester University	92 (8.6%)	35 (38%)
Millersville University	87 (8.1%)	36 (41%)
Indiana University of Pennsylvania	74 (6.9%)	37 (50%)
Drexel University	71 (6.6%)	19 (27%)
La Salle University	61 (5.7%)	26 (43%)
Shippensburg University	56 (5.2%)	27 (48%)
Philadelphia University	40 (3.7%)	21 (53%)
Morgan State University	38 (3.5%)	7 (18%)
University of Pennsylvania	36 (3.4%)	10 (28%)
Lincoln Tech	33 (3.1%)	22 (67%)
Mansfield University	32 (3.0%)	10 (31%)
Virginia State University	29 (2.7%)	4 (14%)
University of Delaware	28 (2.6%)	5 (18%)
Arcadia University	26 (2.4%)	6 (23%)
Devry University	23 (2.1%)	15 (65%)
Lock Haven University	23 (2.1%)	10 (43%)
St. Joseph's University	22 (2.1%)	7 (32%)
Widener University	22 (2.1%)	8 (36%)
East Stroudsburg University	21 (2.0%)	5 (24%)
Howard University	21 (2.0%)	4 (19%)
Villanova University	21 (2.0%)	7 (33%)
ITT Institute	20 (1.9%)	5 (25%)
New York University	20 (1.9%)	5 (25%)
Thompson Institute	19 (1.8%)	12 (63%)
Edinboro University	18 (1.7%)	11 (61%)
University of the Arts	18 (1.7%)	4 (22%)
Bethune-Cookman College	17 (1.6%)	4 (24%)
Eastern University	16 (1.5%)	10 (63%)
Delaware State University	15 (1.4%)	10 (67%)
Slippery Rock University	14 (1.3%)	1 (7%)

Post-Secondary Schools <i>continued</i>	Applied (number of students; percentage of whole sample)	Accepted (number of students; percentage of students who applied)
University of Maryland	14 (1.3%)	6 (42%)
Berean Institute	12 (1.1%)	4 (33%)
Hampton University	12 (1.1%)	4 (33%)
Virginia Union University	12 (1.1%)	11 (92%)
CHI Institute	12 (1.1%)	8 (67%)
Rosemont College	12 (1.1%)	10 (83%)
Clarion College	11 (1%)	6 (55%)
Chubb Institute	10 (.9%)	5 (50%)
Camden Community College	9 (.8%)	5 (56%)
Cittone Institute	9 (.8%)	4 (44%)
University of Virginia	7 (.7%)	1 (14%)
Haverford College	5 (.5%)	0 (0%)
Coppin State University	5 (.5%)	5 (80%)
Johnson and Wales University	5 (.5%)	4 (80%)
Katherine Gibbs School & College	5 (.5%)	5 (100%)
Lehigh Valley College	5 (.5%)	7*
Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology	5 (.5%)	2 (40%)
University of Pittsburgh	5 (.5%)	4 (80%)
University of the Sciences in Philadelphia	5 (.5%)	1 (20%)
Wilberforce University	5 (.5%)	5 (100%)
Art Institute of Philadelphia	4 (.4%)	2 (50%)
Barbra Scotia College	4 (.4%)	3 (75%)
Central Pennsylvania College	4 (.4%)	2 (50%)
Chestnut Hill College	4 (.4%)	4 (100%)
Empire Beauty School	4 (.4%)	3 (75%)
Harcum College	3 (.3%)	2 (67%)
High Tech Institute	3 (.3%)	4*
Moore College of Art	3 (.3%)	2 (67%)
Neumann College	3 (.3%)	3 (100%)
Ursinus College	3 (.3%)	4*
Albright College	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
Bowie State University	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
California University of PA	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
Chatham College	2 (.2%)	3*
Clark Atlanta University	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
Jefferson University	2 (.2%)	1 (50%)
Johnson C. Smith University	2 (.2%)	3*
Kentucky State University	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
Liberty University	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)

* More students reported being accepted at this institution than reported applying to the institution indicating respondent inconsistency.

Post-Secondary Schools <i>continued</i>	Applied (number of students; percentage of whole sample)	Accepted (number of students; percentage of students who applied)
Manor College	2 (.2%)	1 (50%)
Orleans Tech	2 (.2%)	1 (50%)
Pierce College	2 (.2%)	4*
University of Maryland, Eastern Shore	2 (.2%)	2 (100%)
Rowan University	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
American River College CA	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Berean Institute	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Bryn Mawr College	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Columbia Union College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Delaware Technical & Community College	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Dickinson College	1 (.1%)	2*
Essex County College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Eugene Lang College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Fisk University	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Florida A&M	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Fordham University	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Gannon University	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Gettysburg College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Immaculata University	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Job Core	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Kean University	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Kvaerner	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Long Island University	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Marymount University	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Messiah	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Navy	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Occidental College	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Penco Tech	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Prince George's Community College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Rutgers University	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Seton Hall	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Shaw	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Spellman College	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
Swarthmore	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Thompson Institute	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)
Tuskegee University	1 (.1%)	1 (100%)
University of Vermont	1 (.1%)	0 (0%)

Appendix C: Results of Regression Analysis

Table I

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Aspirations (N = 1071)

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.26	.07	3.71**
Gender	.22	.06	3.74**
Attended a GEAR UP middle school	-.14	.056	-2.42*
Total college prep activities	.12	.03	3.63**
Total extra-curricular activities	.11	.03	3.97**
Total adult support	.10	.02	4.66**
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	-.06	.03	-2.37*
GEAR UP participation	.01	.01	1.90
Number of family members with a college degree	.03	.02	1.15

Note. $R^2 = .15^{**}$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table II

Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Aspirations for Girls (N = 568)

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.17	.10	1.75
Attended a GEAR UP middle school	-.13	.07	-1.84
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	-.13	.04	-3.12**
Total college prep activities	.10	.04	2.65**
Total extra-curricular activities	.08	.03	2.29*
Total adult support	.06	.03	1.89 ($p < .06$)
Number of family members with a college degree	.03	.03	1.14
GEAR UP participation	.01	.01	1.68

Note. $R^2 = .10^{**}$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table III**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Aspirations for Boys (N = 503)**

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.27	.10	2.67**
Total extra-curricular activities	.15	.05	3.21**
Total college prep activities	.15	.06	2.47*
Total adult support	.12	.03	3.94**
Attended a GEAR UP middle school	-.13	.09	-1.50
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	-.04	.04	-1.07
Number of family members with a college degree	.00	.04	1.32
GEAR UP participation	.01	.01	1.25

Note. $R^2 = .14^{**}$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table IV**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College-Going Plans for Fall 2005 (N = 1071)**

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.42	.12	3.87**
Gender	.28	.09	3.01**
Attended a GEAR UP middle School	-.08	.09	-.95
Total college prep activities	.09	.05	1.81 ($p < .07$)
Total extra-curricular activities	.12	.04	2.63**
Total adult support	.23	.03	6.76**
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	.05	.04	1.25
GEAR UP participation	.02	.01	1.90 ($p < .06$)
Number of family members with a college degree	.05	.03	1.32

Note. $R^2 = .16$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table V**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College-Going Plans for Fall 2005, for Girls (N = 568)**

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.20	.17	1.21
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	-.13	.07	-1.87 (p < .06)
Total adult support	.12	.05	2.51*
Total extra-curricular activities	.08	.06	1.38
Total college prep activities	.06	.06	1.02
GEAR UP participation	.03	.01	2.01*
Attended a GEAR UP middle school	-.03	.11	-.30
Number of family members with a college degree	.02	.05	-.54

Note. $R^2 = .06^{**}$

*p < .05

**p < .01

Table VI**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College-Going Plans for Fall 2005, for Boys (N = 503)**

Variable	B	SE B	t
Language spoken at home	.41	.15	2.73**
Total adult support	.28	.05	5.99**
Total extra-curricular activities	.15	.07	2.26*
Total college prep activities	.13	.09	1.44
Attended a GEAR UP middle school	-.11	.13	-.79
Total perceived barriers to achieving career goals	.10	.06	1.61
Number of family members with a college degree	.08	.05	1.12
GEAR UP participation	.01	.01	1.00

Note. $R^2 = .21^{**}$

*p < .05

**p < .01

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