EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Off to College? An Examination of the Post Secondary Aspirations, Plans, and Preparations of the First Cohort of Philadelphia GEAR UP

MAY 2006
Off to College?

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 non-profit education organizations,friends of Philadelphia. GEAR UP is a federally-funded grant program initiated in 1999.

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 groups examine student involvement with GEAR UP, student experiences with the college application process, and other college access programs. The surveys and focus groups also look at individual experiences. The surveys and focus groups provide a closer look at individual experiences. The surveys and focus groups also focus on building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform

Mission Statement

Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth, in particular those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

Research for Action is funded through grants from a range of foundations and contracts for services from a variety of public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations.

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RESEARCH for ACTION

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 college, 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 by spring of 2005 applied by late spring 2005 to at least one post-secondary school including technical schools, community colleges and four-year colleges.

Half of students surveyed (49%) were accepted at one or more post-secondary schools by spring of 2005. Thirty percent (30%) were accepted at one or more four-year colleges. Forty-six percent (46%) were accepted at one or more two-year colleges. By late spring 2005, 63% of seniors surveyed had plans to attend a post-secondary school.

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The Community College of Philadelphia was the school most students planned to attend (28%). Other schools included: Temple University, Penn State (many campuses), Penn State Harrisburg, Penn State Altoona, Ohio State University, West Chester University, Millersville University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and LaSalle University.

Pennsylvania State University, Indiana University, Temple University, Coalition to Raise Academic Expectations, and other major universities.

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 attending the college-going process.
• Adult support from family members, school staff, and GEAR UP is essential in helping students navigate the college application process.
• Financial aid and academic preparation for college remain major concerns of graduating seniors.
• In order to be successful, GEAR UP students need to attend college.
• What are GEAR UP students' perceptions of challenges and barriers to college attendance? How prepared do GEAR UP students feel for college?
• In what areas do GEAR UP students predict they will need the most help in preparing for college?
Adult support is important for all students with college aspirations. GEAR UP's adult support was especially important when support from families, counselors, and teachers was unavailable. For the overwhelming majority of students, college access programs did provide them with college counseling and information about the college application process. Students reported that GEAR UP staff support was especially important during the college application process.

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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 reported that college-going plans were also discussed with family members. Of those students who reported discussing college-going plans with family, the most common occurrence was the college-going plans being discussed with family members who had completed college (67% of those students who reported having discussions about college-going plans with family members). The more adults discussing college with a student, the more likely he or she was to aspire to and have plans for college.

Involvement in extracurricular activities in which students participated while in middle school did not appear to be related to students' college aspirations or college-going plans. Participation in GEAR UP and college-going plans were not correlated with student college aspirations. Participation in GEAR UP extracurricular activities was correlated with college-going plans. In middle school, students who participated in extracurricular activities were more likely to aspire to and have plans for college.

Participation in GEAR UP extracurricular activities in high school was strongly correlated with students' college aspirations and college-going plans. Involvement in extracurricular activities in which students participated while in middle school did not appear to be related to students' college aspirations or college-going plans. Participation in GEAR UP and college-going plans were not correlated with student college aspirations. Participation in GEAR UP extracurricular activities was correlated with college-going plans. In middle school, students who participated in extracurricular activities were more likely to aspire to and have plans for college.

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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 statistics on their college attendance. The reasons for this are to understand how students are performing and what works or does not in their post-secondary education paths. The District should also determine how students are following through with their post-secondary plans and what obstacles they may be facing. This system should be implemented at the school level as well as the district level in order to have a clear picture of college enrollment and attendance.

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 could reach more students and help them to connect with other influential adults in their lives, such as family members or teachers. By increasing the number of GEAR UP staff, the District can ensure that more students are receiving the support they need to be successful in their post-secondary education.

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 the educational process and helping them to connect with other influential adults in their lives, such as family members, teachers, or coaches. The need for more GEAR UP staff is at the heart of this recommendation. GEAR UP staff could help to provide greater assistance to boys and students whose home language is not English. By increasing the number of GEAR UP staff, the District can ensure that more students are receiving the support they need to be successful in their post-secondary education.
Actively encourage students’ participation in extra-curricular activities. In addition to the benefits of character development and resume-building, the adultsupport present in these settings can further extend and intensify the programming as closely as possible. Given that the programming is closely aligned with academic skills, students will be better equipped to address current academic needs. In fact, they may be encouraged to further their education by earning college credits.

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 availability of sources. Publicizing the availability of sources will help to dispel myths and encourage more support. Educating the family about available funding sources, the process, and their options can decrease the burden and ensure that students are prepared for college.

Actively involve parents and family members. The majority of participants asserted their families were supportive; however, additional steps can be taken to ensure ongoing involvement. For example, workshops can be offered in the home language, and these should be tailored to the needs of the family. Workshops should also be offered at times that are convenient for the family.

In addition to involving parents in the school, efforts to involve parents in college preparation and college application processes should be increased. Highlighting the importance of planning for college during college visits and other college-related events can be effective.

Integrate academics and college awareness efforts as much as possible so that programming can address each goal. For example, all college visits should be “enhanced” (i.e., include visits to classes or conversations with teachers). Workshops for parents and students should be offered on college application and financial aid processes. These workshops should be tailored to the needs of the students, and parents and students should be encouraged to participate.

It’s crucial for programs like GEAR UP to place emphasis on academic success. Given that the vast majority of students who are not college-bound are “minoritized,” it’s important to address current academic needs and educate students about courses needed for college. Introducing students to academic aspects of school life is vital. Schools need to be able to integrate GEAR UP into the school district’s curriculum. In addition, GEAR UP must coordinate its efforts to provide students with a cohesive academic experience (key to maintaining students’ academic engagement). Therefore, GEAR UP must be involved in the Student Success Center, as students who are not college-bound are “minoritized.”