



# Off to College?

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

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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](http://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.*

### **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 groups 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 the 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 Community College of Philadelphia was the school which most students planned to attend (28%). 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 support from families, counselors, and teachers 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 students 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 predominantly white universities. Students' expressed confidence in being socially prepared partly due to the experiences made possible through GEAR UP and other programs 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). Tutoring programs that involve college students also provide opportunities for high schoolers to learn more about college from college student role models (McCormick, 1995). Report card conferences which support children's investment in their own education identify and develop strategies to address current academic needs, and educate students about courses needed for college could also be expanded.

**8** It's crucial for programs like GEAR UP to place strong emphasis on strengthening students' academic skills and to align their efforts with district academic programming as closely as possible. 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. In turn, schools need to be able to integrate GEAR UP staff into academic aspects of school life.