



# West Virginia **GEARUP** Evaluation

Year 4 Site Coordinator  
Group Interviews:  
Summary of Findings

July 2012

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For information about Edvantia research, products, or services, contact



P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 • 304.347.0400 • 800.624.9120 • fax 304.347.0487

One Vantage Way, Suite C-200, Nashville, TN 37228 • 615.565.0101 • fax 615.565.0112

[info@edvantia.org](mailto:info@edvantia.org) • [www.edvantia.org](http://www.edvantia.org)

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## GEAR UP Site Coordinator Group Interviews

Evaluators conducted group interviews with site coordinators<sup>1</sup> to gain a deeper understanding of how the West Virginia Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (West Virginia GEAR UP) program was implemented during the fourth year (August 2011 – July 2012) and to discern any issues that might have arisen during implementation. The purpose of gathering this feedback was to provide formative input to West Virginia GEAR UP program staff that will allow them to make any adjustments they deem necessary. This report summarizes highlights of the major findings of the site coordinator group interviews and presents recommendations and questions to facilitate discussion about programmatic adjustments.

### A Brief Word about Methods

Edvantia evaluators conducted group interviews with site coordinators following the coordinators' regularly scheduled meeting on June 12, 2012. Three groups of site coordinators, assembled according to their region<sup>2</sup>, spoke with evaluators about the reach of GEAR UP services, dissemination of information, perceptions of service quality, problems with implementation, and other relevant topics. Interview questions are included in Appendix A. Questions were aligned with applicable foci of the evaluation. Each of the group interviews ranged from four to six participants, and each session lasted between 40 and 45 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded, and transcripts produced from those recordings formed the basis for thematic analyses.

### Major Findings

Findings are organized by evaluation question, with evaluation question numbers indicated in brackets. Please refer to Appendix B for a full list of evaluation questions.

#### Implementation and Reach of Services

Are services to students, parents, and schools/teachers achieving the desired reach? [F2]  
How, to whom, and how successfully is project information being disseminated? [S1]

As during the first three years of the project, the GEAR UP site coordinators reported that their sites were implementing various activities and services for students, parents, and teachers. The site coordinators generally indicated that they were implementing the activities as outlined in their work plans and that the program was fully implemented. Site coordinators continued to state that of the groups served (student, parents, and teachers), the students seemed to be the easiest to reach

<sup>1</sup> GEAR UP site coordinators are hired by the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission to plan, implement, monitor, and track program services and activities at each participating school. Site coordinators can be teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, or others who apply for the position (although most are staff members at the school for which they coordinate services). In Year 4, most site coordinators had served in the role during the previous school year.

<sup>2</sup> The West Virginia GEAR UP project serves 10 counties in three primary regions throughout the state, centered around partner institutions of higher education: Central (Clay, Roane, Webster, and Wirt counties; Glenville State College), Southern (McDowell, Summers, and Wyoming counties; Concord University), and Southwestern (Boone, Lincoln, and Mingo counties; Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College).

through services and activities. Parents and teachers were more difficult to reach, although different sites had different levels of success reaching each group; some schools have more success getting parents to participate, and others have more success getting teachers to participate in GEAR UP events. Some interview participants indicated that they were reaching more stakeholders through better participation in GEAR UP events, and some indicated that there was improving awareness of the program within their schools. One site coordinator commented that there was a “spillover effect” of some GEAR UP activities that has affected students throughout the school (for instance, when students in all grades are able to attend presentations or seminars funded through the grant). In some cases, then, GEAR UP may be reaching more students than planned.

Less explicit and prevalent than in previous years was the feeling that site coordinators wanted to do more or better in the coming year. One site coordinator did specifically mention the drive to exceed expectations, but also mentioned that circumstances sometimes hindered those efforts:

*You always have things that you want, you know, you want to go above and beyond, but you know one thing happens and then something else happens, and it's not that you're not planning for those things. It's just sometimes time is an issue, transportation has been an issue in our county. So it's like we're planning, but we're always hitting those road bumps, so.*

Another site coordinator expressed some concern that focusing on the needs of developing and implementing the annual work plan has hampered his or her ability to plan for ensuring the sustainability of the goals and activities encouraged by the grant:

*And if I had to lose the grant tomorrow, I'm not ready and I feel like I need to be more vigilant [about] how I can get these things sustainable, how I can get to that piece. Because, granted we have two years, but we only have two years and these four have flown. . . . and every year we sit down and say, we need to do this, we need to do that, we need to do this. And it always seems like we always accomplish everything that is set out, but we never get to those extra pieces that we want to integrate.*

With regard to the extent to which the grant is being implemented in schools, one site coordinator captured the general sentiment of the others, saying, “the goals are met as well as possible under the circumstances that we’re dealing with, with our students and parents and teachers.” On the whole, GEAR UP services appear to be reaching students who need them and, to a lesser extent, teachers and parents.

## Awareness and Buy-In

Awareness and recognition of the GEAR UP program within GEAR UP schools continue to improve, although there is not yet universal understanding of the program. Some sites are still struggling to cultivate widespread faculty knowledge of and support for GEAR UP, while others have full support from local and district-level stakeholders. One site coordinator described having “total support from our school administration [and] also from the county,” while another said that there was “good teacher buy-in” at that school because “they know the importance of some sort of training or education beyond high school.”

Many teachers may be familiar with the program because of the resources it has been able to provide for their classrooms and schools. Several comments during the group discussions addressed how appreciative teachers were of the materials and training they had received courtesy of GEAR UP. One site coordinator explained,

*Our teachers love the fact that GEAR UP has provided them with a lot of technology within their classroom . . . so you know that's a big buy-in for them because they're getting those teaching tools that they can use. But also GEAR UP has paid for several technology trainings. It's not just they buy this stuff for them, but they bring them in and show them how to use it.*

Some site coordinators may try to leverage their GEAR UP funding to reach different groups of teachers and build support through reciprocity. One site coordinator explained, in a lighthearted way, how the process worked:

*Well I tried with my classroom enhancement money . . . to go to a different pool of teachers. So like for this upcoming year, it was AP teachers, you know. And I'm like, "Remember this when you go fill out your survey." I bribe them, but because I think that's what it's about, is making our school a better place, and I don't want to give all the money to ACT prep. So now we've kind of put some computer labs throughout the whole school, and teachers have them closer to their classroom, so hopefully stuff like that, now I've helped you now you better reciprocate. I don't want to make it that way, but in a small town, that's just how things run. So, I'm like I helped you so you better get over here and help me.*

The site coordinator went on to explain that those efforts did seem to work with some teachers.

Providing resources and services is not sufficient to build support in other places, however. A few site coordinators described instances where teachers continued to be unfamiliar with GEAR UP and its goals. One said, "Even with what I've been able to provide for teachers in the school, they still are like, 'what do you do, what is this for'" and so on. Others stated that some teachers "still ask a lot of questions" and are vaguely aware that "GEAR UP has to do with college," but the teachers do not necessarily know or understand the specific purposes or activities of the program.

At some schools, site coordinators may have philosophical support from teachers for the project, but they do not necessarily have practical support. During the group discussion, one participant stated that at his or her school, "staff agree that it's a good program, but their involvement in it is very limited aside from the professional developments that we offer strictly for them." Other site coordinators reported that teachers were unwilling to participate in events outside of school hours unless they were being paid to attend. Such statements suggest that buy-in may be lacking.

When discussing awareness and buy-in for the project, site coordinators primarily focused on teachers, in large part because the discussion guide prompted participants specifically to talk about faculty buy-in. However, some site coordinators did mention parental buy-in and support. These comments seemed to be a result of a high level of parental support—or, perhaps, a higher-than expected level of support from parents. For instance, one site coordinator commented, "I think I have more buy-in from my parents than I do from my teachers." Another site coordinator, however, described how parents' awareness and support of the project have improved. The site coordinator

explained that he or she was seeing more understanding because the information was becoming more directly relevant to the families:

*My first year in it, the parents were just real confused, even though their child had been in it since the seventh grade. They weren't real sure what it was about and what all opportunities were out there available through GEAR UP. But this year, being my second year, they're buying in a little more and they're understanding a little more . . . I can get that valuable information out there that parents are ready to listen to because it's time for their kid to graduate.*

Although several site coordinators mentioned talking with parents who were appreciative of GEAR UP's services and resources, most participants in the group discussions did not indicate that there was widespread parental awareness or support for GEAR UP.

### Attendance and Participation

Site coordinators' discussions of attendance at and participation in GEAR UP sponsored events suggest that participation is uneven across schools and across types of events. Student participation in events and activities generally continues to be better than participation from teachers or parents. In general, participation in events that occur during the school day tends to be better than participation in events after school or on the weekend. For instance, one site coordinator explained that although faculty participation in weekend events is fairly poor, the school "never [has] a problem of getting chaperones through the week" for GEAR UP events. In addition, some types of events (e.g., special presentations like those from Aric Bostick, college visits) may be better attended and better received than other events (e.g., College Bowl Sunday).

However, at some schools, site coordinators stated that participation—especially among students and parents—depends on the group being served. Some classes have greater levels of engagement and involvement than others. One participant explained,

*It's improved, our attendance. Of course a lot of it depends on really the groups that you're serving. It comes in, you'll have a certain group that will have a great amount of parent participation, we had this year with our seniors and juniors. So I think that makes a big difference. And then you have like our freshman and sophomores, it won't be that way with them.*

Some site coordinators reported seeing improvements in attendance at events since the previous year. At least one site coordinator attributed the improved participation to stakeholders' improved understanding of the program. In general, however, site coordinators mentioned far more challenges than successes in achieving the desired level of attendance and participation at GEAR UP events. These challenges will be discussed later in this report.

## Quality and Impact of Services

How do stakeholders perceive the quality of project activities, interventions, products, and outputs? [F3]

Reactions to and perceptions of GEAR UP activities and staff continued to be positive during Year 4. As in previous years, site coordinators reported that most of the services were of good quality, highly relevant, and highly useful. Site coordinators also continued to praise the quality of service and support they received from project staff at the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC). Perhaps more than in previous years, though, site coordinators discussed the value of technological resources provided through the grant. Participants in the group discussions indicated that stakeholders (including students, parents, and school staff) were generally satisfied with the activities in which they participated and that the stakeholders were getting valuable information and experiences through the GEAR UP project that they may not be able to have without the grant. Site coordinators expressed a high level of appreciation for the GEAR UP program, making comments like,

*I think GEAR UP is probably one of the best things that's ever happened to our county, all around. It's provided so many opportunities for students and staff, the teachers . . . It's been a God send. It's been wonderful.*

### Services for Stakeholders

In Year 4, site coordinators again remarked that the services offered to stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers) through the grant were of high quality, highly relevant, and “very, very helpful.” All sites are implementing activities as required and expected by the grant—tutoring, test preparation, dual credit courses, mentoring, college visits, career days, job site visits, workshops and information sessions, professional development, and so on. Sites also participate in College Application Week, sponsor Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs) clubs, host special speakers or presentations (e.g., Aric Bostick), and purchase technology and other resources to enhance instruction. Site coordinators routinely report that students are “appreciative” of the opportunities they have, especially trips to colleges and job site visits. Although GEAR UP sites appear to be implementing the range of expected activities and services, some stood out more during Year 4 discussions, including college visits, technology purchases and professional development, job site visits, and the incentive award. Activities like tutoring, which were mentioned frequently in past years, were less prominent. Further, as is typically the case during site coordinator discussions, the focus of the groups was tilted more toward student activities; services and outcomes for parents and teachers were typically discussed less frequently than services for students.

**College visits.** As in previous years, college visits were perceived as particularly useful for students. One site coordinator commented that the 2014 Cohort “when they graduate, they will probably have been to just about every college in the state, or within driving distance.” Another added, “Or they’ve at least had the opportunity.” Site coordinators reported that students are excited about activities like college visits, often talk about these experiences long after they are completed, and often ask their site coordinators where they will get to go next. These visits may help students decide to attend or not attend a specific school. One site coordinator recounted, “I’ve had so many kids make decisions for specific schools because we took them there.” Site coordinators in all three groups agreed that their schools would not be able to provide similar opportunities without funding through the GEAR UP program.

**Technology.** Site coordinators in all groups also frequently mentioned the technology that has been provided through the program—whether the resources were purchased solely with GEAR UP funds or whether GEAR UP funds supplemented district monies to enable the purchases. The technology, and the professional development trainings that often accompanied the purchases, were perceived as very useful in helping teacher present material in “newer ways” and enable them to teach “at a little higher level of teaching,” which is helping students get a better, “more up-to-date” education.

**Job site visits.** In one group, site coordinators discussed how beneficial job site visits and career fairs were in showing students possible careers “aside from the coal mines.” One site coordinator in the group explained that students in the area are most familiar with coal mining, so being able to expose them to different careers through a GEAR UP job site visit was “a very interesting experience.” At another site, a career day “opened up opportunities for job shadowing”; through those experiences, students were able to experience jobs first hand—some of which “they loved, and some of them they hated, and that’s why we want to show that opportunity to them.”

**Incentive award.** Parents and students particularly appreciate the GEAR UP Incentive Award, according to site coordinators. Site coordinators report a high level of interest in the award—particularly among parents who “absolutely love and appreciate the incentive award.” One site coordinator explained, “Most of the really good comments that I get are . . . when they get that scholarship money as seniors. I get it all the time, when I see parents, and they’re so thankful after they get that letter.” The incentive award money is very helpful for families and can also serve as a reminder to students that “somebody else out there really does care, [and] they want to help you through everything.” However, there was also some confusion about the award at some schools, with some families and students thinking that it is an ongoing award or asking how they can apply for it multiple times. In one group, one of the coordinators explained, “I think there’s some confusion because the old GEAR UP, they used to get it every year.” Families of students who participated in the previous GEAR UP grant (or others who were aware of or familiar with that grant) may believe that this program operates in the same way.

**Other services.** Other services were also mentioned as being of particularly high quality and value for students and teachers. GEAR UP U! was perceived by a site coordinator in one group as being “instrumental in peaking interest in higher education” among students who attended. The site coordinator explained that participants in the first year came back and told their friends about what a great experience it was, which helped encourage more interest not only in GEAR UP U! but also in higher education among both participants and their peers. Dual credit courses were also seen as particularly valuable because they allow students to accrue college credit while they are in high school, thereby saving the students some tuition money, helping them “start the college journey,” and increasing the probability that students will continue their postsecondary education after high school. One site coordinator complimented the dual credit instructors, saying that their instruction was challenging and of high quality, and commenting that the students “are earning that credit, they’re just not getting handed college credit.”

**Suggestions for changes.** Very few suggestions for changes to services or activities emerged during group discussions. One site coordinator suggested that school staff may be more willing or more likely to give feedback about what kinds of professional development they want if they had a list or menu from which to select options. Other site coordinators in the discussion group mentioned that some districts have lists of this type that can be used as a menu for selecting training

offerings. Site coordinators in one group expressed a fairly high level of dissatisfaction with the Governor's Honor Symposium. They were dissatisfied with several aspects of the event, in particular the fact that the Governor had not attended the event since Year 1. One site coordinator said, "It ticked me off. I think the governor should be there . . . the Governor wasn't there and the wife was there for the first two years, and then the wife wasn't even there this year so whoop-di-do, you know." Other site coordinators mentioned the effort and funding that both the project and the students put into the event and stated that they felt the efforts were not worth the return the students received. They suggested that those resources and energy could be better spent in other ways (e.g., additional programming, the incentive award). One discussant also suggested that if the governor would not be attending the ceremony, it may be better for the governor's office could send representatives to make awards at the students' own schools during annual award programs held in conjunction with graduation activities.

## Successes and Impact

When considering the whole of the GEAR UP program, site coordinator throughout the state consider it to be successful. Some services (e.g., college visits, the incentive award, the provision of technology to enhance instruction and learning) are perceived as particularly useful and appreciated by stakeholders, which is an important indicator of success. In addition to satisfaction with services, most site coordinators are also seeing positive impacts of the GEAR UP program on students' learning and future plans. Taken as a whole, GEAR UP services may be changing expectations both for individual students and schools. One site coordinator explained,

*It's amazing actually. Those services and I'm sure that I speak for everybody in our school, has completely changed the culture in our school. When we began this is was just like, "Oh, you know, I might think about going to college," or, "I might think about getting some training after high school." Now it's an expectation. Kids, you know, it's not, "Well maybe I will"; it's almost now, "I've got to do something after high school, what am I going to do." So they're thinking about it from day one. So it changed the culture of our school, the services have.*

Another site coordinator in a different group also stated that students are pursuing opportunities that they might not have pursued prior to the grant. As the site coordinator explained,

*At the end of the year, I always have them fill out a little "survey" that's just basically what are your plans after high school, are you going on to work, two-year, four-year. And they write in where they're going to go so I can send transcripts. And as I went through those this year, I was going, "Oh, really, she's going somewhere." With me, it was registering more that this is having an effect because I was seeing kids that, not that they couldn't go, but just I know that they would have never known the ins and outs and ups and downs had it not been for this program. And it was eye opening and heartwarming for me to see those kids that I know had the potential but didn't have the backing from home that could get that information and be able to apply and [be] ready to go.*

Some specific services like the college visits and GEAR UP U! can make higher education feel like a realistic goal for students who may not have previously believed that they could go to college:

*At our school I have a problem. The students have a problem realizing that college is something that's real and actually attainable for them. They know about college, they know that there is help available, but for some reason it seems unreal to them. To be able to go see the college and being told from people from outside the school, "Yeah you can come here and we can help you pay for it," makes it real. And without the funding from GEAR UP, that wouldn't happen.*

A site coordinator from another school also mentioned that many students from the school had not been on a college campus and "maybe not ever out of [the] county." For those students, visiting a college campus in person

*just opened their eyes to see that, you know, "Everyone here is just like me, I'm not some funny looking person from [the] county who is going to stand out," and that, "This is something that I can do." And on the way home they're like, "You know, I think I might really want to go now, I think I can," and I don't think I ever would have heard those words before, had they not had opportunities like that.*

These successes are not uniform across or within schools. Some site coordinators see more of an impact than others, and some see different outcomes (e.g., motivation to attend college after high school) at different grade levels. However, even those who perceive lower levels of interest and motivation in some grades mentioned that GEAR UP was having an impact by lifting postsecondary interest among all grade levels over and above where it might have been without the program.

Some site coordinators also see a positive impact of the program on teachers and, in some cases, on their own job performance as well. Site coordinators commented that teachers "have taken big time advantage" of training opportunities and were making use of the GEAR UP-funded technology in their instruction. As stated previously, site coordinators perceive a higher, more modern level of teaching among those teachers who make use of the technological resources purchased through the grant. Additionally, some site coordinators reported that teachers may feel "refreshed" or energized by some GEAR UP activities like presentations by Aric Bostick. Although some site coordinators found challenges in the level of effort required to fulfill both their regular responsibilities and GEAR UP responsibilities, one site coordinator who also a counselor stated that his or her dual roles enabled him or her to do a better job as a counselor:

*I'm able to do things that a counselor really is supposed to be doing, like financial aid workshops and getting them out there on college campuses, being able to take them to a college fair, being able to have career day. They [GEAR UP] financially helped me, plus they made me a better counselor, so I appreciate them for that, you know, to help me get out of the office sometime, financially, and you know I'm made to do it which is great.*

## Project Staff

As in previous years, site coordinators in Year 4 appreciated the high level of quality and responsiveness they received from the HEPC staff who implement and administer the West Virginia

GEAR UP project. GEAR UP regional coordinators<sup>3</sup> and HEPC personnel continued to receive very high praise for their helpfulness, supportiveness, responsiveness to questions and concerns, and overall professionalism. Comments describing the staff were, as in the past, positive in all three discussion groups:

- “I don’t think there could be a better staff.”
- “They are there, they support you 100% in whatever you want to do.”
- “But the staff you work with, they’re great, from Adam all the way through, phenomenal.”
- “Very responsive.”
- “We don’t even have to ask [for help], they offer.”

Site coordinators were particularly appreciative that they “always talk to a real person every time” the call the HEPC offices. The site coordinators also commented that emails sent to HEPC staff were answered the same day, “usually within the hour.” Comments during the discussions indicated that GEAR UP staff provided answers to questions very quickly, “and if they don’t know they answer, they find someone that does.”

The information, resources, and contacts HEPC staff are able to provide are also greatly appreciated and perceived as very high quality. In some cases, these resources may be vitally important to the site coordinators’ work in helping students apply for college and financial aid. In describing resources used during Year 4, one site coordinator said, “My favorite GEAR UP resource is the people.” The site coordinator went on to explain that having a point of contact who knows what next steps to take or who to contact and what that person’s contact information is has been invaluable. To illustrate, the coordinator related an anecdote from the school year:

*I mean any kind of higher ed question I have, I just picked the phone and like, “Jessica, I need your help with this.” Like I kind of had a sensitive family issue where the child didn’t live with the parent and the parent lived out of state and could she apply for the FAFSA because she didn’t get the Promise and you know. And she was like, “This is the number you need to call and this is the guy who can tell you and he can help you with everything.” So just being able to have that personal reference point and it was like anything that I need that comes up, I just call Jessica and she tells me the person that I need to get to. So that in itself has been, has enabled me to help families, more than me getting on Google. Jessica Kennedy is better than Google.*

Although the comment that Ms. Kennedy “is better than Google” was offered with a laugh, the site coordinator’s appreciation for the knowledge and responsiveness of the HEPC staff was sincere. Year 4 focus group discussions, then, continue to suggest that site coordinators have a high level of trust and confidence in the project staff and rely on HEPC personnel as key resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Regional coordinators, employed by HEPC through the GEAR UP program, are based at partnering institutions of higher education (IHEs) within each of the three GEAR UP regions and serve as resources for site coordinators for planning and coordinating events and as liaisons between sites and HEPC or IHEs, as needed.

## Resources and Partnerships

How effectively, efficiently, and appropriately are (a) resources being used, and (b) partners collaborating toward GEAR UP goals? [F5]

Site coordinators' focus group discussions in Year 4 continue to suggest that sites are using GEAR UP-provided resources appropriately and effectively. Partnerships with institutions of higher education are also generally positive, although the different needs of the different school levels (high schools and colleges) may occasionally pose challenges. As in the past, few sites appear to have formal partnerships with other entities; however, some communities provide support in various forms, and a few sites are leveraging other grants or programs in their schools to enhance or broaden GEAR UP services and activities.

### Resources

GEAR UP site coordinators continue to use program funding to purchase resources and services for their schools. GEAR UP funds in Year 4 were used to purchase technological tools, software, and other resources, materials, and supplies (e.g., textbooks, classroom maps) for academic or instructional enhancement. Per their work plans, site coordinators also offered various professional development activities for school staff; organized college visits, job site visits, and other trips; helped pay for tutors in core content areas (e.g., English, mathematics); and arranged for speakers or other special presentations to come to school sites to offer activities or workshops. Several sites are also using GEAR UP funds to pay for expenses related to students' participation in dual credit courses.

Site coordinators believe that the resources they provide are helping students attain a better and higher level of education and, in doing so, are helping to achieve the goals of the GEAR UP program. During the discussion in one group, the site coordinators noted that programs and activities like student enrollment in dual credit courses are directly beneficial in achieving program goals. One site coordinator explained,

*Obviously one of the goals of GEAR UP is to get the college bound rate up and for students to be able to earn college credit while in high school. That definitely ups their chances of continuing and pursuing a two year to four year degree after high school.*

The site coordinator went on to say, "I think the dual credit in my school is probably the biggest factor" in working toward that goal and constituted "a good portion of the grant money" allocated for the school. Another site coordinator agreed, saying, "A large portion of our budget this year was also for dual credit," and "we were able to help a lot of students start the college journey by offering dual credit classes." Other site coordinators in different discussion groups focused on how the grant was able to help students through supporting Advanced Placement (AP) courses, offering workshops, sponsoring college visits and other trips, organizing career days and college fairs, providing or enhancing tutoring and test preparation, and so on.

Site coordinators in all groups mentioned the tremendous benefits their schools have realized as a result of GEAR UP funded technology acquisitions. As one discussant described,

*We have that money in our budget to buy technology and that has been phenomenal for our school because we've been able to buy, we have chosen—with the help from input from our principal and teachers—mobile computer labs. So we have all of these,*

*what, four new ones. Four additional new computer labs that we bought through GEAR UP funds that our students are using, not only in the classroom but after school tutoring, credit recovery, and ACT prep and all of those things. So you know, those funds to buy that technology has been very, very beneficial for our students.*

The site coordinators generally routinely also stated that “teachers actually use [the technology] in instruction.” Regardless of the type of resource GEAR UP purchases, teachers “seem appreciative and they seem excited to be able to buy classroom materials that they otherwise would not have been able to.” Technology purchases—and training in how to incorporate the new technology—may be among the more effective uses of GEAR UP funds. According to one site coordinator,

*Our teachers love the fact that GEAR UP has provided them with a lot of technology within their classroom, smartboards, television, student responders, document cameras, so you know that’s a big buy-in for them because they’re getting those teaching tools that they can use but also GEAR UP has paid for several technology trainings. It’s not just they buy this stuff for them, but to bring them in and show them how to use it. GEAR UP has paid for our TIS to provide training afterschool and on Saturdays and our teachers have taken big time advantage of it.*

Site coordinators in all groups generally agreed that GEAR UP is able to provide resources and materials that the schools might not be able to purchase otherwise. Comments like, “the technology that GEAR UP has provided for our students to be able to use, we would never have had without the GEAR UP money and enhancements,” were common among discussants. Additionally, GEAR UP funds supplement existing resources to support schools and students. For instance, at one site, a group raised money to enable students to travel to Washington, D.C.; however, the funds were not enough to pay for the cost of a bus to take the students. The site coordinator was able to use GEAR UP funds to help the group rent a charter bus for the trip. According to the coordinator,

*They fundraised \$14,000 and wouldn’t have been able to go because they didn’t have that last little bit, and GEAR UP just put up a little bit of money to help them go and it was, I mean, it’s an experience that a lot of those students would never have had otherwise, and it makes them want to achieve something bigger.*

The site coordinators also appreciated that the GEAR UP program “gives stuff” to the students, because “for some of my students, that tee-shirt is the best thing that anybody gave them all year.” Site coordinators acknowledge that some activities sponsored by the program would likely happen to some degree without the grant (e.g., family information nights); however, the program is able to supplement and enhance the programs to make the activities better and, perhaps, better attended.

## Partnerships

As in Year 3, site coordinators in Year 4 described their partnerships with institutions of higher education in very positive terms. The colleges and universities—both official partners and others—were perceived to be good resources; enthusiastic about working with the GEAR UP sites; open, cooperative, and receptive to GEAR UP students; and accommodating for the groups during visits. When asked what colleges the site coordinators had taken students to visit, one coordinator responded, “It would be easier to tell you the ones we haven’t been to.” In-depth discussions about partnerships with institutions of higher education, however, focused on the official partner sites:

Glennville State College, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, and Concord University. The site coordinators generally reported that the partner colleges tried “to help us out any way they possibly [could].” Other typical comments included:

- “It’s just tremendous, I mean they really, we’ve been there a lot, we feel like that’s our second home, almost.”
- “We have a good relationship with our partnering college. We’ve done a lot of things there.”

Ongoing relationships with the partnering sites, and characteristics of the schools themselves, may be contributing to a high level of student comfort with those colleges. One site coordinator explained that students from his or her school felt “very comfortable” with the partner college because of its size and its location (close to home). In one case, the partner college has a satellite office located on the campus of one of the GEAR UP high schools. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the site coordinator for that school reported a very positive, highly collaborative, “really, really good” relationship between that site and the partnering college. The site coordinator said, “They’re in our building, and so it just makes it so much easier.” Students visit the college office in person to take care of paper work issues (e.g., for enrollment in dual credit classes). Further, college representatives are available to visit classrooms in the school to speak directly to the students at nearly any time.

Only one challenge with a partnering college or university was mentioned. Schools in one county were experiencing some changes in their relationship with the partnering college with respect to how dual credit courses were conducted and administered. According to one site coordinator, the school and the college had a “good relationship,” although “it lacked a lot in the communication” between the two levels. The high school and the college had different understandings about and difficulties relating to submitting and managing the paperwork enrolling students in the dual credit classes. (The section addressing challenges, later in this report, includes a more complete description and accompanying quotes.) Because of administrative concerns (e.g., accreditation) from the higher education partner, the school can no longer offer dual credit classes in the manner it had been doing so; further, the site coordinator’s comments suggested that the district will not be offering AP as an alternative for those classes. Unfortunately, there did not seem to be any resolutions to these challenges, and dual credit may not be offered in that school during Year 5 of the grant.

As in previous years, most sites do not have formal partners other than the colleges and universities. In some areas, community businesses do provide support for their schools. It is not clear, however, whether that support is specifically related to GEAR UP and/or initiatives for college access and success or if the support is more general. In one community, a local bank sponsors entrance fees to athletic events for students with good attendance. In other communities, supporters include banks, grocery stores, insurance companies or representatives, car sales companies, and military recruiters. These community supporters may provide funding for an activity, contribute supplies or materials (e.g., food), or they may bring educational programs to the schools (e.g., banks teaching students how to save money).

Some sites may also be creating partnerships among different grants and programs operating in their schools. In these cases, site coordinators leverage and coordinate resources provided by GEAR UP and other grants to expand, enhance, or maximize services provided to schools and students. For instance, one site coordinator described coordination between GEAR UP and another grant at his or her school:

*We've been able to collaborate, we have an [other] grant which can purchase entertainment and GEAR UP can purchase food, so we've been able with the [other] grant, to buy tickets to basketball games and football games. So like the first 50 parents that come to a parent night, then they get free admission to basketball and football games, but they have to do something for us too. They have to fill out evaluations, they have to fill out surveys, they have to, you know, we're getting them in there and we've actually been able to, because we have to do surveys for the [other] grant also, so they have to do both, so we make them work while they're there. But you know, if they're getting, you know, typically if they're paying \$15 to get themselves and their other child into a ballgame and they just have to pay \$5.00 for their other child, then that's been a big incentive. So we're able to collaborate.*

The extent to which such collaboration occurs across sites is not clear; however, site coordinator group conversations did not reveal a great deal of evidence for these kinds of intra-school/inter-grant partnerships. GEAR UP's contributions to existing programs or initiatives, like AP programs in schools, could be considered partnerships to the extent that the programs and the GEAR UP grant work collaboratively to determine needs and make decisions regarding the most effective use of program and grant resources.

## Challenges and Resolutions

What problems have emerged in implementing project activities and interventions, and how are they being resolved by those responsible for delivery? [F4]

When asked what problems they have encountered in implementing project activities, site coordinators generally mentioned a two major types of challenges: administrative issues and issues related to attendance and participation. Several other minor or unique challenges were also mentioned. Responses to this discussion item appear to suggest that site coordinators are experiencing fewer challenges than in previous years. However, some of the challenges with which they must contend (e.g., stakeholder involvement in activities, bureaucratic hurdles, transportation) appear to be persistent and have not been sufficiently resolved by previous years' efforts. Site coordinators did not offer many new strategies for resolving challenges beyond what they have tried in previous years.

### Attendance and Participation

Site coordinators in all three discussion groups mentioned facing challenges in getting stakeholders to attend and participate in GEAR UP events. Generally, participation was best for student events; participation in events for parents and teachers was more limited and difficult to obtain in most sites. Site coordinators would generally like to see greater participation in all types of events; however, they do not seem to know with certainty how they can best achieve greater participation, particularly among parents and teachers.

**Student involvement.** Data from the discussion groups suggest that site coordinators faced the least challenge in securing participation and involvement in activities for students. This does not mean, however, that site coordinators are consistently reaching all students that could benefit from services. In several sites, students do not—or are not able to—attend events after school or on the weekends. Site coordinators suggested several reasons that students may not be able to

attend activities scheduled outside of regular school day hours. Chief among these reasons is that students may not have reliable transportation to or from events, limiting their ability to attend. They may also be involved in other activities that conflict with GEAR UP events. According to one site coordinator:

*You're competing against a lot of different things that are going on in athletics for the afterschool and you know band, and all of these other things that you're competing against, these students have participated in all of their life and there's really not a good day to choose during the week because there is something going on every day.*

Site coordinators also mentioned that family and church obligations may keep students (and families) away from events on the weekends, particularly on Sundays. Some site coordinators speculated that attendance at College Bowl Sunday may not have been as good as it could have due to these kinds of reasons (e.g., Sunday is a day for church, some people "allocate that day [as] their day that they spend at home"). Some site coordinators also speculated that the distance to the sites for College Bowl Sunday may have been too far for some students and families to travel, again indicating that transportation poses a challenge for attendance at GEAR UP events.

**Parent involvement.** Some site coordinators had more success engaging parents in GEAR UP activities in Year 4 than in previous years, and some had more success with parental involvement than with teacher involvement. However, most sites continued to have difficulty in recruiting as many parents as the site coordinators hoped to serve during the year. Although site coordinators can boost participation in student events by scheduling them to occur during the school day or (where available) arranging for activity buses to take students home after school, such strategies are not practical or useful for parent events because parents do not necessarily come to the school building every day (or at all). At some sites, strategies such as providing food for families or combining GEAR UP events with sporting events are not sufficient to draw parents to events (even though such strategies are successful at other sites). As one site coordinator said, "When you don't have parent participation at sporting events, there's really nothing to help then."

The continuing struggles to get more parents involved in GEAR UP activities are disappointing for site coordinators. One site coordinator described the discouragement he or she felt, even after trying multiple methods to encourage parental involvement:

*Getting parents to come to events is a definite challenge, even when we offer incentives, giveaways, gift cards, food and we use the school messenger system where we call out to everybody plus the school announcements, the TV announcements, sending home flyers, we do all that stuff and it's still very difficult to get a number of parents out. I mean, you plan for a couple hundred and you only get 10 to 20. It's disheartening, so that's still a challenge.*

**Teacher involvement.** Site coordinators at some schools have a greater level of success involving teachers than do their colleagues at other schools. However, no site coordinators report having complete buy-in and full participation. Even at sites where teachers understand and support the GEAR UP program, participation may still fall short of coordinators' expectations. According to one site coordinator,

*Our teachers, you know, appreciate the technology and use it in the classroom and you know we've been able to provide professional development for them and they always participate in [it]. For me personally, what I would like to see is a greater staff participation in some of the afterschool events that we have with parents, just so they could see other staff members there, just a presence.*

At many schools, site coordinators may be able to recruit teacher participation for events during the school day (administrative issues related to substitutes and class coverage notwithstanding). One site coordinator explained that teachers were “real cooperative” and he or she “never [had] a problem getting chaperones throughout the week.” Another indicated that the principal was very supportive and assigned teachers to participate in events like trips. However, convincing teachers to stay after school or come to events on weekends is very difficult, and principals cannot mandate teacher participation outside of regular school hours. Some teachers are willing to participate in activities out of school time only if they are paid to do so. In some cases, however, even offering payment for participation is not always sufficient to recruit a high level of participation.

Some site coordinators, although disappointed that they were not achieving the level of teacher participation they wanted to achieve, indicated that they understood some of the reasons why teachers may have been reluctant to participate in events and programs like GEAR UP. In expressing concern that teachers were not offering their input about professional development opportunities they might like GEAR UP to sponsor, one site coordinator explained,

*It's difficult for the teachers because they have such limited amount of time, they have one faculty senate [day per month] and those days are already booked with things that they are required to address and . . . to go to a teacher who is already very, very busy and say, “Oh could you guys give me, what are some professional development opportunities you would like to have brought in?”, they don't have time to do that.*

The site coordinator went on to suggest that teachers may be more willing to provide feedback if they were provided with a list of professional development options from which to choose. Another site coordinator in a different group suggested that teachers may be unwilling to participate because they may be experiencing burn out and were “spread so thin” with multiple responsibilities (e.g., teaching and coaching and participating in other activities or programs after school). The coordinator stated,

*You go to the same pot, and you can only go there so many times before the well just runs dry, and I think they're just a lot of times dried up . . . I just think we have to rely on our teachers for so much that then they get frustrated real quick.*

## Parent Attitudes and Concerns

Although previous discussions with site coordinators may have touched briefly upon the coordinators' perceptions about what parents might think or feel about their children enrolling in college and what might happen as a result, those parental concerns emerged as an important challenge in one of the group discussions. In this group, site coordinators specifically mentioned instances where parents expressed concern that a college their students were interested in was too far from home for the parents to be supportive of attendance at that college. One site coordinator related an experience:

*I had three students that were going to enroll at [college A] after we did the tour in April . . . and one little girl, because she lived with her grandmother and grandfather, and they said, “Oh, it’s too far away from home, it’s too far away to go to [college town] from [home town about two hours away].” And I thought, your grandparents probably don’t have a clue of how far away [college town] is or isn’t . . . Out of three, there’s only one that actually went to [college A] because their parents said it’s too far away from home. They want them at home and from [hometown] we commute to [college B, about 55 minutes away] or [college C, about an hour and 10 minutes away] or [college D, about one hour away] or [college E, about an hour and 25 minutes away], and even some commute from home to [college E], and that’s what they want. They want them right there, not living on those dangerous college campuses.*

Another site coordinator, discussing students’ high level of comfort with a higher education partner, explained that parents were comfortable with it as well “because it’s so close . . . they want their kids to go there because it’s so close.” Site coordinators suggested that a way to mitigate these concerns in the future might be to ensure that parents are included on site visits to colleges to help them understand exactly how far away or how close a college is to home and to help them experience the campus and make a more informed judgment about the institution (e.g., in terms of safety, size, location).

Site coordinators in this group also mentioned having to deal with parents’ “preconceived ideas about [what will happen] if their children get an education beyond high school.” One site coordinator explained that parents are “afraid [their children are] going to move away or that they won’t be there” near the family if the child goes to college. One site coordinator stated that he or she tried to deal with this challenge by “do[ing] what GEAR UP does,” namely providing as much information to as broad an audience as possible and trying to encourage parents to be involved and learn more about higher education. Site coordinators must essentially ensure parents that “just because your kid is getting an education, that doesn’t mean that they’re going to be better than you and move” far away from home.

## Administrative Issues

Site coordinators in all three discussion groups mentioned various administrative issues that impacted how they implemented GEAR UP activities and services at their sites. These issues were not typically related to the structure or guidelines of the GEAR UP program itself, but rather were issues that arose in specific contexts (e.g., as a result of district rules or new procedures with partners). Although some sites throughout the state are still dealing with challenges in navigating through bureaucratic processes, it is important to note that these kinds of issues did not appear to be as prevalent or as much of a hindrance to the project as they had been in previous years.

One site faced a rather basic challenge of being unable to access necessary websites like the GEAR UP site maintained by HEPC, the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) site, or the data portal for recording GEAR UP activity and service information. The site coordinator stated that “most people are locked out by the county” and are unable to access those sites. When asked how that challenge was dealt with, the site coordinator said, “I reported the problem to our curriculum supervisor . . . and she took care of it.” Thus, an administrator was able to resolve the connectivity issue for the school.

A few sites may still be struggling to find ways to involve teachers in GEAR UP events that occur during the school day. Although many sites have difficulty in recruiting teachers to participate in GEAR UP events and activities, a few sites may be prevented from including willing teachers as chaperones for daytime events (e.g., college visits). One site coordinator explained, "We're not allowed to take teachers during the school day, unless it's like the librarian where they didn't have their students." In these cases, limited budgets may prevent the site coordinators from using substitute teachers to cover classes. The discussion suggested that some counties may not be able or not willing to provide additional funding for substitutes to allow teachers to attend during the day. Other site coordinators, however, did not seem to have the same restrictions or difficulties in their counties. One site coordinator who mentioned this challenge said that he or she had tried to resolve the issue by requesting that funds be reallocated; however, county officials said that the reallocation was not possible. The site coordinators who face this challenge appear to work around it by asking other, non-instructional staff (i.e., "people that don't need coverage") to serve as chaperones for events during the school day.

As mentioned previously in this report, one site experienced some new challenges in Year 4 when dealing with a higher education partner with regard to administrative issues related to dual credit enrollment. The site coordinator explained that the relationship between the school and the higher education partner had been positive for the dual credit program. The relationship, however, "lacked a lot in the communication areas." The site coordinator explained that the partner site

*wanted us [the school] to do all of the work as far as getting all of the registration papers and getting the kids registered and getting the money in and getting all of that stuff taken care of, and that was fine. But then when it would go to them, a lot of things got lost in the shuffle, and they would have kids enrolled in the wrong classes, and I'd get these rosters and send them back and say, "No, this is wrong." and it was a big issue there.*

The site coordinator for this school went on to explain that the site had been providing dual credit for the AP courses student completed successfully; however, the higher education partner "said for next year, that can no longer happen." The coordinator indicated that the decision was perhaps influenced by concerns about accreditation; however, the changes will result in a "diminished" partnership in Year 5 and fewer opportunities for students at the school to participate in dual credit courses.

**Site coordinator concerns.** Some site coordinators in one of the discussion groups continued to indicate that the administrative burdens they faced in their work were heavy. One explained the stresses associated with project's administrative requirements by saying, "If it wasn't for all the paperwork, it would be wonderful. You almost don't want to do something because you know you're going to have to document it, and that's going to take hours and hours and hours." Site coordinators continued to mention the difficulties site coordinators who are also classroom teachers have in finding sufficient time to perform both jobs well. One site coordinator, who was not a classroom teacher, empathized with what his or her colleagues in the classroom must deal with:

*This is a fulltime job in itself and I can't imagine what you must go through . . . if you concentrate on your classroom, which is your primary job, then the GEAR UP stuff has to take a back seat and it's not always easy to make deadlines and to go in and document and send out surveys.*

Some of the site coordinators also face some resistance from or discord with teachers in their schools because the project requires the coordinators to call students out of their regular classes from time to time; this practice becomes frustrating for the classroom teachers (and also “to the principals who don’t want you to use the intercom . . . to get kids”), and “then GEAR UP becomes a dirty word” to those staff. Although these concerns were raised in only one group, they are important to note, in part because the conversation touched on difficulties site coordinators have when there is only one site coordinator assigned in the school. One person explained that when some personal issues required a great deal of attention and time away from school, there was no one else to step in and assume the responsibilities for implementing the GEAR UP work plan at that site.

## Other Concerns

The Year 4 focus group discussions suggested that site coordinators continue to face a few other challenges, some of which were similar to challenges that have emerged in previous years, and one of which is a concern newly raised in Year 4. Site coordinators continue to struggle with issues related to limited awareness of the GEAR UP program and its goals. Although mentioned less frequently and with less apparent urgency than in previous years, the group discussions revealed continuing challenges of limited transportation and stakeholder concerns about the grade levels served by the grant. Some site coordinators suggested that the composition and characteristics of the 2014 Cohort may itself be a challenge when trying to discern the impact of the program on outcomes.

**Grade levels served.** In both Years 3 and 4, the program served three of the four grade levels in the high schools, and some site coordinators stated that students (and parents) in the grade level that did not receive services felt left out of the program. The concern did not appear to be as prevalent in Year 4, however, with site coordinators appearing to have taken the challenge in stride, with one simply stating, “It’s always been an issue,” and another conceding that the same challenge arises in “any piloted program where they need a comparison group.”<sup>4</sup> Although some site coordinators do not like excluding students from programming, they seem to have accepted that this challenge will always be with them and find their own ways to deal with the occasional comments from students and parents in the non-participating grade levels. Some site coordinators, however, may be using the service delivery discrepancies to convince students and families of the value of GEAR UP. At one school, the site coordinator had, in the past, enlisted the help of a student whose sister participated in the 2014 Cohort to illustrate how useful GEAR UP services were for participating students. The site coordinator explained:

*We had a senior who was a sister to a GEAR UP student in the ninth grade and she was so jealous of her sister because she had been on one of the college campuses and she hadn’t been, as being a senior. So we had her speak at a lot of our events because she could really get to the parents and the students at what a great opportunity GEAR*

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<sup>4</sup> This comment may reflect an incomplete understanding of the program structure. Although the evaluation of the West Virginia GEAR UP program does require a comparison group comprising students in the graduating classes of 2013 and 2015, the structure of the program in the state would still exclude students in certain classes regardless of evaluation design. The Priority Model includes only students in Grades 11 and 12 each year and excludes students in Grades 9 and 10; the Cohort Model includes only students in the selected graduating class (in this case, the class of 2014) and excludes students in all other classes. The hybrid model used in the West Virginia GEAR UP project will always result in at least one high school grade level being excluded from grant activities. The comment could, however, be a general statement and not directly reflect the discussant’s specific understanding of the GEAR UP program and evaluation structure.

*UP was and how jealous she was over her sister. So with her speaking at our events, she really helped, you know, get it out there that GEAR UP is great and you should take hold of it. She was hilarious about her speech, but it was the truth you know.*

**Cohort characteristics.** A new concern that was mentioned in one of the Year 4 focus group discussions involved the characteristics of the student cohorts served—and not served—by the program. Some site coordinators in this group indicated that students in the 2014 Cohort were, as a group, different from the classes before and after them. One indicated that the class of 2012 was a different group than the students in the classes of 2013 and 2014. In discussing whether or not schools had seen more students buy in to college during the school year, this site coordinator explained,

*We didn't this year, but I don't think it has anything to do with whether we had GEAR UP or whether we didn't. I think there are sometimes just years where you have a group where there's a lot of kids that will go to college and then there's the next year maybe you have kids that just aren't interested in it, no matter what you do, that's just not their thing. This was a slow year, but next year it will be up, and the year after it will be higher.*

At that site, then, the site coordinator suggests that the 2014 Cohort will likely be more interested and more likely to enroll in college than the class of 2013, which will be more interested than the graduating class of 2012. At other schools, however, the 2014 Cohort may be sandwiched between classes that might naturally be more inclined. One site coordinator explained how he or she saw the phenomenon:

*Our cohort GEAR UP will not be as good as the group before them or the group after them. It's just because of the students that are in the group. I don't know what the specific issues are, but it's just that group of individuals. I think GEAR UP has made an impact, that some more of those students might go on than would have without it, but I don't think it will be a good number year.*

Site coordinators in the group also noted a similar phenomenon among parents, in which some parents are more likely to come to events than others. According to one site coordinator,

*You'll have a certain group that will have a great amount of parent participation. We had [that] this year with our seniors and juniors, so I think that makes a big difference. And then you have like our freshman and sophomores, it won't be that way with them.*

It is important to keep in mind that these types of concerns about the composition or characteristics of the student and parent group(s) served by the grant emerged in only one group.

**Transportation.** Transportation for students and parents to attend afterschool events has been mentioned as a significant challenge in site coordinators' group discussions since 2009. In the 2012 discussions, however, the issue was mentioned in only two of the three groups, and then only very briefly. One site coordinator mentioned transportation as a challenge when describing implementation and factors that may impact how completely site coordinators are able to implement their plans (the full quote is included in the implementation section of this summary). Two mentions of transportation as a challenge arose in one other group. One site coordinator explained,

*Challenges are always just getting parents to come out and that's partly due to transportation issues and things like that. You know, with the kids, they are there at the school so they can stay after and there are activity buses that run our kids in our county, but pick any parents there and there's always a challenge.*

The other site coordinator who mentioned transportation-related challenges did so in the context of planning events during the school day. That site coordinator explained that due to the lack of activity buses at the site, all events had to be scheduled during the school day and any trips had to be concluded with the students back at the school building by the time the afternoon buses leave to take the students home after school. Transportation did not emerge as a challenge in the third group's discussion. It is not clear from the focus group data whether solutions tried in previous years (e.g., scheduling events during the school day, combining GEAR UP events with other school activities like sporting events) have successfully dealt with the problem, or whether site coordinators' perceptions of this challenge have evolved after having to deal with it continuously since the start of the grant.

**Awareness and knowledge of GEAR UP.** As mentioned in the implementation section of this report focusing on awareness and buy-in, some site coordinators may still contend with limited awareness about or understanding of the GEAR UP project and its various activities. Teachers at some sites "still ask a lot of questions." Although some site coordinators may understand that teachers are less involved with the program on a day-to-day basis and lack specific knowledge about details of the project—"they're not site coordinators"—staff who *are* site coordinators must still deal with some basic questions about the goals and aims of the project. Lack of awareness is a challenge site coordinators must manage among parents as well, both in general and with regard to certain activities. For instance, as mentioned previously, some parents and students do not appear to understand that the GEAR UP incentive award for this grant is a one-time only award.

## Other Comments and Considerations

Site coordinators offered few other comments during focus group interviews in Year 4. Generally, their comments were appreciative and indicated continuing commitment to the GEAR UP project and its goals. One site coordinator, however, did mention plans for the upcoming school year, during which the school would be using GEAR UP funds to support the purchase of software called "Turn It In," which enables educators to determine whether all or portions of assignments are plagiarized. In this school GEAR UP funds will be combined with other funds from the district to purchase the software and provide training for teachers to be able to use it. The site coordinator explained that part of the purpose of purchasing the software is to try "to prepare the kids before they get out" of high school for the demands of college, particularly with regard to academic integrity. Because it is "very easy" for students to copy information directly from Internet sources, the school will use the software to help students understand that "it's not just . . . how to access the information, it's what you do once you access it and how do you make it your own." The site coordinator indicated that the purchase would both "help with enhancing the educational experience at the high school" and help prepare students "for postsecondary and what the expectation are at the collegiate level."

In another group, a site coordinator mentioned a transition program for eighth grade students that was implemented by HEROs in the GEAR UP program. The program created a "mock graduation" for eighth grade students that occurred during the week of the high school's graduation activities. HEROs students served as ushers and conducted the rising freshmen through the graduation

ceremony “just like they would if they were at graduation.” Parents and other family members attended, and the principal spoke. At the event, the eighth grade students were given a certificate that they signed indicating their commitment to graduate from high school. The staff then collected the certificates and told students that “in four years when they graduate, they can get that back with their diploma” with a stamp that says, “Commitment Fulfilled.” The site coordinator described the event as “really empowering.” The HEROs students also “really enjoyed it and were really excited and involved” in the planning. The site coordinator for the school stated, “It’s something that can just be so easily done every year that there’s no reason not to continue doing this every year.”

## Summary and Recommendations

The Year 4 group discussions with site coordinators suggest that the West Virginia GEAR UP program is being implemented at each site and is offering services, activities, and resources to serve the needs of targeted stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, and teachers). Activities are implemented according to annual work plans and are designed to meet project goals. Awareness of the program has not yet reached saturation, and site coordinators in Year 4 continued to work toward building full awareness among key stakeholders, including school staff. Buy-in for the program also continues to expand, particularly among direct beneficiaries (e.g., teachers who receive resources through GEAR UP funds). As in previous years, the services offered by the West Virginia GEAR UP program are perceived to be of high quality and are also seen as highly relevant and useful, particularly for students. Also as in previous years, college visits are seen as especially beneficial for exposing students to higher education and helping them see themselves as college students. Generally, activities that help students visualize or experience their potential futures (e.g., college visits, job site visits, dual credit, GEAR UP UI) received a great deal of praise from site coordinators. Families also appreciate the monetary support of the GEAR UP incentive award. The purchase of technology and provision of training in its use was frequently mentioned as helpful for teachers. GEAR UP funds and other resources are used to provide experiences and equipment that students, teachers, and schools might not otherwise be able to have (e.g., technology equipment, materials, trips, trainings). Site coordinators continue to ensure that resources provided by the grant are used to enhance academic opportunities and preparation and to further the goals of broadening access to and likelihood of success in postsecondary education. Site coordinators in Year 4 reported that relationships with colleges and universities in West Virginia—both official partner sites and others—are positive, with postsecondary institutions being well aware of the GEAR UP program and very accommodating to GEAR UP schools and students during college fairs and campus visits.

Fewer concerns and challenges were mentioned in Year 4 discussions compared to previous years. Those that were discussed typically were challenges that arose during previous years as well. New in Year 4 was the challenge of managing parental concerns and attitudes, particularly with regard to students moving away from home; some parents do not want their children to move more than an hour away, and others may worry about being “less than” their children if the students go away to college and earn degrees. Additionally, site coordinators continue to be challenged by attendance and participation levels that fall below their hopes and expectations. Issues contributing to poor attendance for students and parents, such as limited transportation options to and from afterschool events in rural areas, seem to be enduring challenges that many sites are not able to resolve fully. Similarly difficult issues contribute to poor participation among teachers, including burnout and unwillingness to participate without compensation; some sites have teachers who are willing to participate but are not always able to do so during the school day due to administrative requirements concerning coverage of their classes. Other administrative issues also posed some challenges during

Year 4, although they tended to arise in specific contexts, with sites generally experiencing their own unique challenges in this area. Site coordinators in Year 4 did not spend much time discussing how they worked to resolve the challenges they faced, indicating that they most likely continue to rely on strategies used in previous years (e.g., scheduling activities during the school day or in conjunction with other well-attended school events). One suggestion for managing parents' concerns was to make a concerted effort to include them on college visits so they could see and experience the college environment and learn first-hand how far away their child will be from home. However, given the difficulties some sites have in generating parental involvement in GEAR UP events, implementing such a solution may be difficult on a wide scale.

Based on the findings of the Year 4 focus groups, several recommendations can be made to continue the successes of and contribute to ongoing improvements in the implementation of the West Virginia GEAR UP project. The recommendations should be considered formative suggestions rather than absolute solutions. While some may be easy to implement during Year 5, others may require more planning for implementation in Year 6. Some may not be feasible within the scope of the GEAR UP grant due to funding or logistical requirements and constraints; however, they should be considered in conjunction with other programs operating at the school, district, and state levels to determine whether they can be implemented via other means or resources. Recommendations are organized to correspond with their related findings.

## Implementation and Reach of Services

- Site coordinators are implementing their work plans and providing required services and activities. HEPC personnel should continue discussions with regional coordinators and site coordinators about expectations for implementation of GEAR UP activities and services. HEPC should also continue providing opportunities for site coordinators to meet with one another to discuss best practices for GEAR UP service and activity planning, implementation, and follow-up.
- Because site coordinators are implementing required activities for all stakeholder groups, HEPC may want to consider encouraging them to begin shifting their focus to planning for sustainability. For instance, as site coordinators plan services and activities for Year 5, they could invite other school or district stakeholders into the planning and implementation process—in so far as doing so is feasible and practical—in an effort to build greater organizational support for and experience with services that will help attain both GEAR UP and school or district goals.
- Site coordinators continue to engage in efforts to educate stakeholders about GEAR UP and appear to be reaching more teachers and parents each year. Because awareness of the GEAR UP program and adequate understanding of its purposes and goals are not yet universal at most GEAR UP sites, however, site coordinators and project staff should continue to find ways to promote the program, its goals and activities, and its benefits for the various stakeholder groups who receive services (i.e., students, parents/families, and teachers).
- Recipients of GEAR UP services appreciate the information, assistance, and resources they receive. However, participation levels—particularly among parents and teachers—generally continue to disappoint site coordinators who may be feeling discouraged or disheartened by this ongoing challenge. For some site coordinators, the feelings of discouragement about attendance, combined with feelings of being overwhelmed by the responsibilities of planning and implementing the GEAR UP activities, may lead to burn out, decreased effectiveness, and

less energy for conducting all the necessary work. In addition to providing support for meeting the challenge of generating adequate participation (e.g., in the form of general or targeted assistance and the facilitation of sessions designed for peer sharing of best practices), HEPC staff should consider expanding both its current efforts to recognize special achievements, improvements, or hard work and its ongoing efforts to provide encouragement as site coordinators work to meet goals and expectations in this area.

## Quality and Impact of Services

- As in previous years, activities and services are being very well received and are perceived to be of high quality, relevance, and utility. Site coordinators should be encouraged to continue building on the experiences and lessons learned through previous years to maintain and expand the level of quality in GEAR UP services and activities.
- Generally, site coordinators are seeing positive outcomes related to students' postsecondary plans and aspirations. Although the impact is not uniform either across schools or within schools, site coordinators report that GEAR UP is having a positive effect on students' plans to pursue education or training after high school and their actions related to those plans (e.g., submitting applications). Services that enable students to experience or envision their postsecondary possibilities (e.g., college visits, job site visits) are perceived as particularly beneficial. Because the experiential activities are often costly, they may be the most difficult to sustain following the end of the GEAR UP grant in 2014. During Year 5, site coordinators, HEPC staff, and evaluators may want to explore ways to document the impact of specific experiential activities on students' plans, expectations, and behavior. Such evidence can be used to demonstrate the value of the activities to local stakeholders (e.g., community partners, district stakeholders) who may be able to influence decisions related to sustainability of these or similar activities following Year 6 of the grant.
- Site coordinators report that teachers are making use of the technological tools (and the associated training) to modernize and enhance their instruction. Site coordinators may want to consider encouraging teachers to form communities of practice within schools or districts (or, if feasible, across districts) to promote sustainable and continuous professional learning related to various types of technology-rich instruction.
- Site coordinators continue to appreciate the level of support and responsiveness they receive from HEPC staff. In particular, they appreciate the speed with which HEPC staff respond to questions or concerns, and they greatly value being able to talk with a person (rather than a voicemail system) each time they call the HEPC office. No changes appear to be needed in the support HEPC provides to site coordinators.

## Resources and Partnerships

- Program resources continue to be utilized for appropriate purposes and in appropriate ways. Although Year 5 may be a good time for site coordinators to work with school and district personnel to plan for the maintenance and possible future upgrading or replacement of material and technological resources provided through the grant (e.g., software, computers, iPads, textbooks), no changes appear to be needed in the ways they monitor the needs of their sites and stakeholders.

- Relationships with colleges and universities—including official partner sites and other colleges in the state—generally continue to be positive and productive. Higher education partners largely appear to be receptive and responsive to the needs of GEAR UP sites and students, although some specific situations (e.g., administrative concerns about accreditation in relation to instruction of dual credit courses) may pose challenges for some GEAR UP schools. Such administrative challenges—particularly those related to accreditation—may not be easily resolved. HEPC staff may want to consider whether any technical assistance or intervention may be necessary to ensure that relationships between postsecondary institutions and high schools continue to be positive, collegial, and mutually beneficial.
- Some GEAR UP schools have relationships with and support from community businesses (e.g., local banks), although it is not clear from Year 4 focus group data whether these relationships have developed as a result of the GEAR UP project or for other reasons. It seems reasonable to speculate, however, that these relationships have been cultivated over time and more or less independently of the GEAR UP program (e.g., through organic relationship building, through official Partner in Education designation). These relationships, however, can be used as foundations upon which to build local support to sustain GEAR UP or GEAR UP-like activities that increase access to and success in postsecondary education. Schools may need guidance about how to leverage existing community partnerships or develop new ones in order to sustain and expand the progress made through the GEAR UP program.
- A few GEAR UP sites appear to be leveraging resources provided through other grants or programs in order to coordinate services and maximize the use of funds provided through the different funding streams. To the extent that other resources and programs are present in the schools, HEPC personnel may want to encourage other site coordinators to engage in similar coordination to avoid unnecessary duplication of services and promote the most efficient and effective use of funds possible.

## Challenges and Resolutions

- The West Virginia GEAR UP program continues to encounter challenges like lower than desired participation and limited parental and teacher involvement. Although the challenges differ slightly from school to school (e.g., some schools have more trouble generating parental involvement while other schools have more trouble generating teacher involvement), concerns about stakeholder participation and involvement are apparent throughout the state. In the past, site coordinators have tried various strategies to boost attendance, such as scheduling GEAR UP events to occur during the school day or in conjunction with other school events. Such strategies may have a positive impact on student participation in services; however, after apparent success in the first years, Year 4 data suggest that the impact of such strategies on parent and teacher involvement has become limited. Site coordinators and HEPC personnel may need to consider alternate strategies for increasing awareness, contending with resistance, and encouraging participation. Because stakeholders who receive services generally indicate to site coordinators that they appreciate the information, training, support, or resources, site coordinators may be able to enlist those participants to share testimonials with their peers about the utility and benefits of GEAR UP services. A similar strategy in which a non-participating sibling of a GEAR UP student shared her impressions of the benefits of GEAR UP (based on her observations of services her sibling received that she did not) has been used with some success in the past at one site. Other sites may be able to

adapt this strategy to share information about the program and cultivate grassroots support among the direct beneficiaries of GEAR UP efforts.

- Some of the reasons underlying limited participation in project events are not likely to be affected by increased awareness or peer-to-peer sharing of information. Limited transportation options in the rural areas served by the GEAR UP grant continue to pose challenges, as does teacher workload which, particularly in the smaller schools, might involve teachers filling multiple roles (e.g., teacher, coach, club sponsor), leaving little time for other activities. Although some sites have activity buses to address transportation issues and enable students to participate in activities after school hours, those buses do not typically serve parents. Additionally, some schools schedule on-site GEAR UP professional development sessions to occur during faculty senate meetings; however, teacher involvement in other activities (e.g., workshops, family events) does not appear to be affected by the timing or scheduling of the events. During Year 4 discussions, site coordinators recognized that these factors detracted from participation but did not appear to have workable solutions for resolving the challenges. Because these are enduring challenges that site coordinators are unsure how to manage, HEPC personnel may want to consider discussing the extent to which additional support or assistance may help site coordinators implement strategies to boost participation. Addressing teacher participation (i.e., how teachers can incorporate GEAR UP activities into their current workloads without feeling overburdened; how GEAR UP activities can be further integrated with current workloads) may be a more productive starting point than trying to addressing a more structural issue like transportation in the GEAR UP counties.
- In Year 4 for the first time, site coordinators discussed the need to deal directly with parents' concerns about the effects of a child's college attendance on the parents or family dynamic. Site coordinators' comments suggest that some parents are reluctant to support students when they want to attend a college more than an hour or so away from the family's home; other parents may worry about how their child's perceptions and attitudes might change if they attend college. Site coordinators should continue to deal with these concerns openly and candidly as they arise. Including family members on college visits (as suggested by one site coordinator) might help families feel more comfortable with both the college campus and the distance from home. When parents are concerned about their children's changing perceptions (e.g., of the family), site coordinators may want to consider asking students to give their parents the reasons they want to go to college. These conversations may need to be facilitated by the site coordinator, a counselor, or a teacher, however, in case parents might feel like the student's reasons are a rejection of the family or their way of life. HEPC personnel may want to encourage an ongoing conversation among site coordinators about how these issues are dealt with across different sites and situations.
- Some site coordinators may continue to struggle to balance their GEAR UP responsibilities with other work and personal responsibility. Providing ongoing encouragement, support, and ideas for time and work management may be helpful.
- Other concerns (e.g., grade levels served, characteristics of the cohorts served) did not appear to impact the functioning or implementation of the program. Although site coordinators' concerns about these issues should be kept in mind (e.g., when considering outcomes), there does not seem to be any action or resolution needed at this time.

## APPENDIX A

### Site Coordinator Group Interview Questions

## Site Coordinator Group Interview Questions

*For Target Questions, the number of the corresponding evaluation question is listed following each interview item. Please refer to Appendix B for a complete list of evaluation questions.*

### WARM UP QUESTION:

- 1) Let's go around the room and find out which school or schools you work with as a site coordinator, how long you've worked with GEAR UP, and what your role is when you're not wearing your site coordinator hat.

### TARGET QUESTIONS:

- 2) To what degree are GEAR UP services being provided to students, parents, and teachers? [F2, S1]  
*(Probe for: challenges in achieving intended attendance levels, issues with buy-in from teachers.)*
- 3) Describe any problems you have encountered in implementing the GEAR UP project. How have those problems been resolved? [F4]
- 4) What do you think about the quality of the GEAR UP services and activities? [F3]  
*(Probe for: things they are most and least satisfied with in terms of activities happening at their schools; most and least satisfied with in their activities with HEPC GEAR UP staff; perceptions of relevance; perceptions of usefulness.)*
- 5) Please tell us a little about how the partnering relationships with local colleges and universities are working. What about partnerships with other agencies? [F5]
- 6) Please tell us how you've been using the resources given to you as part of the GEAR UP grant. [F5]  
*(Probe for: professional development, technology, giveaways, advertisements and related materials [flyers, handouts], data)*
- 7) What are some examples of students' or parents' reactions to the GEAR UP project? [F3]
- 8) To what degree do you believe the GEAR UP program is currently carried out in your school(s)? [F2]  
*(Probe for: number of services/activities implemented; number of services/activities planned/workplan activities met)*

### FINAL QUESTION:

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the GEAR UP program?

## APPENDIX B

### West Virginia GEAR UP Evaluation Questions

## West Virginia GEAR UP Evaluation Questions

**Implementation questions.** The central question for the formative evaluation is the degree to which the West Virginia GEAR UP activities are being implemented as planned. This is referred to as the formative question, or “F.” The evaluators also will examine the degree to which the activities are producing the outputs intended.

- F1. Are project activities being implemented with fidelity to the design?
- F2. Are services to students, parents, and schools/teachers achieving the desired reach?
- F3. How do stakeholders perceive the quality of project activities, interventions, products, and outputs?
- F4. What problems have emerged in implementing project activities and interventions, and how are they being resolved by those responsible for delivery?
- F5. How effectively, efficiently, and appropriately are (a) resources being used, and (b) partners collaborating toward GEAR UP goals?

**Outcome questions.** The evaluation includes a number of questions relating to the outcomes the West Virginia GEAR UP project is intended to achieve. These are organized by project objective (O), with the addition of O9, which aligns with all objectives.

- O1. To what extent does GEAR UP increase student interest and involvement in school?
- O2. To what extent is student academic achievement increasing?
- O3. To what extent does GEAR UP promote student academic progression?
- O4. To what extent does GEAR UP promote student career awareness and interests?
- O5. To what extent does GEAR UP promote students’ “college knowledge”?
- O6. Does student participation in postsecondary opportunities increase?
- O7. To what extent do GEAR UP activities promote academic development and capacity of GEAR UP schools and educators?
- O8. To what extent does GEAR UP increase parent knowledge of college admissions and financial aid?
- O9. How do activities and interventions, and other variables, relate to the above goals?

**Sustainability questions.** Through reviews of the development and use of the college information Web portal, project staff interviews, site coordinator focus groups, school personnel surveys, and project documentation review, the evaluation team will examine the degree to which this GEAR UP model shows promise to be sustainable and transferable.

- S1. How, to whom, and how successfully is project information being disseminated?
- S2. Which, if any, project elements appear to be sustainable beyond the life of the project?