



West Virginia **GEARUP** Evaluation

Year 5 Site Coordinator
Group Interviews:
Summary of Findings

July 2013

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West Virginia GEAR UP Site Coordinator Group Interview Summary

Evaluators conducted group interviews with site coordinators²¹ 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 fifth year of the project (August 2012 – July 2013) 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

Following their regularly scheduled meeting on June 4, 2013, three groups of site coordinators, assembled according to their region¹, spoke with evaluators about the implementation, impact, and sustainability of the West Virginia GEAR UP program. A semi-structured questioning route, aligned with applicable evaluation foci, guided the discussions. The interviews ranged from three to six participants, and each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded, and transcripts produced from those recordings formed the basis for thematic analyses.

Implementation

As in previous years, the site coordinator group interviews suggest that the West Virginia GEAR UP program is being fully implemented at all participating sites, with site coordinators indicating that a range of services are delivered to targeted stakeholders, resources are used as intended, and partners provide assistance and support. The sites continue to experience some challenges in implementing the program and achieving their desired impact; however, they also continue to find ways to work toward overcoming those challenges. The following section presents findings related to implementation of the West Virginia GEAR UP project, organized by evaluation question, with the question numbers indicated in brackets. A complete list of evaluation questions is available at the end of this summary.

Service Delivery and Reach

Are services to students, parents, and schools/teachers achieving the desired reach? [F2]

As during the first four years of the project, GEAR UP site coordinators reported that their sites were implementing various activities and services for students, parents, and teachers. Specific services mentioned included

- various events involving families, such as kick-off or welcome back to school and end-of-year events

²¹ 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 5, most site coordinators had served in the role during the previous school year.

- financial aid workshops and events, such as FAFSA assistance and presentations by HEPC staff
- tutoring and credit recovery
- test preparation, mostly for the ACT®
- mentoring and Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs²²) clubs
- job site and college visits
- college and career fairs
- college and career counseling, including use of CFWV.com
- College Application and Exploration Week
- College Goal Sunday
- professional development for school staff

Site coordinators' descriptions of the services provided during the year were in line with the activities required by the grant work plan for the 2013 fiscal year, indicating full implementation of the program at each site. In providing the GEAR UP services, site coordinators incorporated a number of delivery strategies and settings, depending on what is most appropriate and useful. One coordinator explained,

Sometimes it's whole group, maybe a big activity, sometimes it's just an assembly, sometimes it's an after school activity, it might be a classroom activity, it might taking the kids to the computer lab, it's a lot of different ways.

As in previous years, site coordinators in Year 5 described students as the stakeholder group easiest to reach 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 are more successful in recruiting parent participation, and others have more success getting teachers to participate in GEAR UP events. On the whole, GEAR UP services appear to be reaching students who need them and, perhaps to a lesser extent, teachers and parents.

Attendance and Participation

As in previous years, site coordinators' discussions of attendance at and participation in GEAR UP-sponsored activities and events suggests that participation varies across schools and across stakeholder types (i.e., students, parents, and teachers). At some schools, participation across all stakeholder groups is satisfactory; at others, student participation is high but parent and/or teacher participation does not meet coordinators' expectations. At a small number of sites, however, participation may be low among all stakeholder groups.

Student participation generally continues to be better than participation from teachers or parents. Such a finding is understandable given that site coordinators often try to schedule GEAR UP

²² HEROs, which stands for Higher Education Readiness Officers, is a GEAR UP-sponsored club at each school. Students who are part of the HEROs group serve as knowledgeable peer resources and provide support for other students to improve knowledge and awareness about postsecondary opportunities. HEROs clubs may also do special projects within their schools or communities.

activities during the school day when students are (or should be) at the school already and generally available to participate. Site coordinators also continue trying to plan GEAR UP events in conjunction with other types of events at school (e.g., sporting events, band concerts, activities for other grants) to reach out to as many students and families as possible. In one discussion group, one of the site coordinators stated that student participation in GEAR UP activities was much higher in Year 5 than it had been in the first year, estimating that “I think I saw like 98% [participation] or something, when we started out at maybe 70%.”

Although responses might vary from site to site, coordinators generally felt that they did a better job of reaching faculty than they did parents. This is another understandable finding given teachers’ proximity (i.e., their regular presence in the school building) and their direct access to materials and resources purchased through GEAR UP funds (e.g., computer labs, tutoring software).

Across sites, parents tended to be the hardest group to reach through GEAR UP activities and resources. Parent participation was described as “very low.” The level of parental involvement is not consistently low across sites, however. One site coordinator described parental involvement at his or her school as “great,” and attributed the high level of participation to a culture of “fantastic” parental involvement within the middle and elementary schools that constitute the high school’s feeder pattern. The site coordinator said, “They are used to coming to school events, and we have a lot of parent involvement, and I’m glad.”

However, in some places, “parent participation happens out in the real world, not in the school setting.” The site coordinator then described instances of parents “cornering” teachers in local stores asking questions about school activities or incidents. Site coordinators may, then, be delivering GEAR UP-relevant information to parents in unexpected venues like grocery stores, church services, or any other place parents might encounter them and ask questions.

Although participation in and attendance at GEAR UP events varied across sites, all discussion groups did mention that there seemed to be core groups of students, parents, and teachers who regularly participated in the activities and strongly supported them.

And we have the same set of people. We have the same set of teachers that are always going to be there and the same ones that are never there. We have the same kids that want to do everything, and then there’s other kids who don’t want to do anything. And I think it’s the same way with the parents. . . . The parents I see, I see them constantly.

The site coordinators who referenced these core groups stated that these stakeholders greatly appreciate the services they receive through the project.

Although sites may have experienced different kinds of successes, all of them still faced challenges in recruiting as much participation for GEAR UP events as they would have liked to see. These challenges will be discussed later in this report.

Awareness and Buy In

In previous years, site coordinators consistently mentioned that awareness and buy-in to the program appeared to be improving, although there was not yet universal understanding of the program. During the Year 5 discussions, site coordinators did not specifically mention levels of

awareness and buy in with frequency. However, comments made during the sessions indicate that although some groups and individuals within the sites are familiar with the program, others continue to be unaware of the GEAR UP program and its purposes.

Among teachers, the greatest level of familiarity with and support for the program may be among those who have directly benefited in some way from the services and resources GEAR UP provides. One site coordinator commented that the Advanced Placement (AP) teachers at the school, who received a great deal of assistance from GEAR UP funds, were “really supportive,” as were “the teachers that get to use the computer labs most often.” Many teachers, however, may still be unaware of GEAR UP’s purposes and activities, although in some schools, they may actively seek out more information. One site coordinator stated, “My teachers at our school want to know more about GEAR UP. It’s like they . . . can’t get enough information.” Other site coordinators also mentioned that teachers ask them questions about GEAR UP’s purposes and activities.

During the group discussions, site coordinators did not mention any active hostility toward the program or its aims. Although teachers may not have been fully aware of the program’s purposes or activities, they appeared to either support the general goals or to remain completely neutral—acting as neither supporters nor detractors. At one site, an administrator appears to have motivated improved buy-in among faculty. According to the site coordinator,

The buy-in [among teachers] has been better this year than it has in the past because we have an administrator that’s also a part-time site coordinator, and that’s really helped with the teachers. They are willing to do more because she tells them to.

Students appear to have the greatest level of awareness about the program, which is understandable given that they are the most likely to experience GEAR UP services directly. However, in one group, a site coordinator stated that students will occasionally ask how they can sign up for GEAR UP, indicating that they may not fully understand how the program operates. Again, given students’ age and relative inexperience with other formal or grant-funded programs (particularly from an operational viewpoint), it may be reasonable to assume that they would not have a complete understanding of program operations, regardless of the length of time the program has been in place.

Parents’ awareness of and buy-in for the program were not specifically mentioned during any discussion. Given previous years’ discussions (in which parental awareness of the GEAR UP program has routinely been lower than awareness among other stakeholder groups) and the current findings of limited parental involvement in formal activities at the school, it may be reasonable to think that parents’ awareness of the program continues to be somewhat lacking in comparison to the other stakeholders receiving direct services. Several stakeholders did mention that parents who received services were very appreciative, most did not indicate that there was widespread parental familiarity with the program.

In one discussion group, one site coordinator mentioned that members of the local community were becoming more familiar with GEAR UP, in large part because of the HEROs program. According to this site coordinator, community organizations are calling the school to ask if the HEROs can help with specific activities or projects. The site coordinator believes that the program and the club, specifically, are providing “a huge impact now, within our community.”

Communication strategies. Although not specifically asked to indicate how they announce GEAR UP events or activities, site coordinators in some discussions did indicate that they

tried several different methods for reaching the various stakeholder groups. For instance, one site coordinator mentioned that events were listed on the school calendar, in the school or student agenda, and in the student handbook; further, these events were listed or announced from the start of the school year. Site coordinators also made use of school-specific one-page information sheets provided by HEPC to remind school staff about the activities and resources sponsored by GEAR UP as well as some of the achievements for the school during the school year. Edline, the web-based communication tool many West Virginia schools use to communicate with students and parents, also served as a communication tool for several site coordinators. School websites and newsletters, Facebook or other social media, emails, phone calls, and personal interactions also contributed to site coordinators' communications about the program. It appears, then, that site coordinators are using a variety of methods and strategies to offer information about GEAR UP at their schools.

Resources and Partnerships

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

Site coordinators' group discussions in Year 5 continue to suggest that sites are using GEAR UP-provided resources appropriately and effectively. Partnerships with institutions of higher education are also generally positive and seen as mutually beneficial. Although few sites appear to have formal partnerships with other entities, some communities and organizations provide support in various forms, and a few sites are continuing to leverage 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. As in previous years, GEAR UP funds in Year 5 were used to purchase technological tools, software, and other resources, materials, and supplies for academic or instructional enhancement. Per their work plans, site coordinators also offered various professional development activities for school staff; organized college visits and job site visits; helped pay for tutors in core content areas (particularly English and mathematics); and arranged for speakers or other special presentations to come to school sites to offer activities or workshops. Sites are also making appropriate use of promotional and advertising resources purchased or provided through the grant. Site coordinators' comments indicate that they are very familiar with the restrictions and requirements associated with the use GEAR UP funds and that they do their best to follow the rules closely.

Technology purchases were frequently mentioned during group discussion, indicating that the use of GEAR UP funds to purchase technology equipment and software is a vital and much appreciated aspect of the grant. In describing how he or she used grant resources, one site coordinator stated, "The biggest percentage of my money is spent on the technology." Sites purchased computer equipment, including laptops and mobile computer labs; charging stations (e.g., EarthWalk) that enable simultaneous battery charging for multiple laptop computers; software (e.g., Study Island) for tutoring, remediation, and test preparation; and so on. In describing a charging station, one site coordinator described it as "like winning the lottery" because the previous equipment had allowed charging only one laptop at a time, which was burdensome. Site coordinators occasionally referenced previous years' technology purchases and stated that those purchases continue to pay dividends, particularly with enabling improved and individualized instruction. As one site coordinator said, the technology purchases "are being continually used to benefit the kids and

instruction.” The general sentiment among the site coordinators seemed to be that the GEAR UP grant provided tools and resources that the schools would not otherwise be able to access: “We would not have the technology we have now without it.”

Although the large technology purchases like laptops or mobile computer labs tended to be mentioned more frequently, a couple of the site coordinators did mention smaller purchases and items that appeared to make a large impact on students. One site coordinator, to agreement from others in the discussion group, explained,

This is very simple, but the thumb drives²³ . . . They are so important to those students. I mean, they love them. They can come and ask me for one, and I can give it to them and, again, you would think you gave them a million dollars. That’s been great for us.

In the same discussion group, site coordinators referenced “those little tablets of paper that we did this year” as another small but important resource provided through the grant that students appreciated.

In addition to material resources like technology and software, GEAR UP resources were also used to support grant activities requiring transportation and food. For instance, college visits utilize grant funds both to procure transportation to the site and to provide a meal to students during the day. Some counties have limited capacity to provide busses or drivers during the school day to take students on out-of-county trips; in these counties, GEAR UP funds are used to pay for charter busses to transport students to college visits or other events (e.g., the Leadership Academy). GEAR UP funds were also used to pay for food or refreshments at events hosted at the school (e.g., welcome-back events, family events, workshops).

Although not frequently mentioned, GEAR UP resources were also used to support professional development for teachers and to provide personnel to offer tutoring or remediation for students. Although not always in the context of using GEAR UP resources, site coordinators did mention using GEAR UP funds to support professional development for teachers, including paying stipends to participants and, in some cases, supporting off-site professional development (e.g., paying for travel and/or hotel costs).

Overall, the GEAR UP project is providing opportunities for participating schools to purchase tools—particularly technological tools—and other resources that the schools likely would not have the capacity to buy otherwise. GEAR UP funding may be seen as particularly fortuitous for districts or schools that are facing budget cuts or budget shortfalls. One site coordinator explained, “We have had more requests this year, I think, for material things from the school than we ever did before . . . As budgets are cut, they are looking for money.” However, as GEAR UP funding ends at the close of the 2013-2014 school year, schools and districts will need to seek other funding sources for new purchases or maintenance of previously-purchased resources (e.g., computers).

²³ The grant purchased GEAR UP-branded thumb drives pre-loaded with information about college options and financial aid. In the past, the thumb drives were typically given out to students at an incentive for returning forms or materials (e.g., the Student Information Release Form providing parental permission to participate in the GEAR UP evaluation and follow up study).

Partnerships

As in previous years, partnerships for most GEAR UP sites tend to consist primarily of arrangements with institutions of higher education. During discussions with the site coordinators, these partnerships were described in very positive terms (e.g., “Wonderful.”) and were perceived to be very positive and helpful. The colleges and universities—including those who officially partner with the sites and those who host GEAR UP students for special events or activities—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. In describing the relationships between the high school and the official college partner site, one site coordinator said that, “It goes above and beyond what it needs to do.” Other site coordinators stated that they received “total support” from the partnering college sites and that the higher education partners are “great in working with us.” In addition to working with official partner colleges, other colleges “are eager to come in and work with” schools. Several GEAR UP schools have displays of college posters or pennants; according to site coordinators, college representatives are eager to ensure that their schools are represented. One site coordinator explained that those kinds of efforts, in addition to being “free advertising” for the schools, also spark student interest in the colleges and are mutually beneficial for colleges and students:

The kids always ask for stories about all of the schools. So that’s been a neat way just to build a little kind of relationship with the colleges, knowing that their pennant is hanging up in the office that all of the kids are going to see.

The Year 5 discussions suggested that partnerships between GEAR UP high schools and their partnering institutions of higher education are positive and beneficial. In one region, site coordinators stated that the relationship with their partnering college site had improved in Year 5 relative to the previous year. Previously, “the relationship was very disconnected,” according to the consensus in the regional group. The site coordinators reported that they would often receive different answers or information from different people at the college. However, the college appointed a new staff member to serve as a liaison, particularly for the dual credit program; the site coordinators all felt that the appointment was very helpful in providing them with an easier and more reliable venue for asking questions and finding information. According to one site coordinator, “I know the one person to go to, to talk to, and she gives me a definite answer.” Another added, “And if she doesn’t know, she will find out.” The site coordinators in the region, who credit the college for working to improve the relationship with the high schools, generally felt that the college liaison was doing “a phenomenal job” and that her appointment “has significantly improved communication and our relationship with them.” No current or lingering challenges with any partnering college site were noted in any of the group discussions.

Sites may be trying to build on or develop other partnerships to help achieve GEAR UP goals. For instance, some sites are able to harness funding or resources provided through other grant programs to enhance GEAR UP services (and vice versa). Although GEAR UP funds cannot be used to purchase or provide entertainment, other grant programs (e.g., Safe and Supportive Schools grants) are able to use funds to pay for such items like tickets to sporting events. In schools with both kinds of grants, the programs are able to partner such that the GEAR UP program can provide an event (e.g., a financial aid workshop) timed to coincide with another event at the school (e.g., basketball game, band concert) and can provide food while the other grant program can offer tickets to the event. Some sites may have other grant programs, including local programs, that can provide different kinds of support; for instance, a grant program at one school provides transportation after school hours,

which GEAR UP students can use if they participate in after school tutoring or in off-site events that might result in them returning to the school after the regular bus runs. At another site, a principal arranged to use “Step 7 money” to help fund an off-site professional development event in conjunction with GEAR UP funding; GEAR UP provided stipends for participants, and the other funding was used to defray the costs of the hotel and training space. These kinds of partnerships are seen as very positive and beneficial.

Most sites do not have formal partners other than the identified colleges and universities for their regions. In some areas, community businesses and individuals do provide support for the schools in various ways, although it may not necessarily be directly related to the formal goals of the GEAR UP program. During the Year 5 site coordinator discussions, community-based support was only discussed extensively in one regional group; it is unclear, then, whether community support for the schools is widespread and common (to the point of being accepted and expected), or whether the extent, quality, or nature of the support in the specific region differs from the support schools in other regions of the state receive. Community supporters included banks, local or regional businesses, and parents or alumni of the schools.

These community supporters may provide funding to the school or to students directly, or they may provide materials or other kinds of support. For instance, two site coordinators mentioned that local businesses provided score boards for athletic facilities. In one case, the school was able to benefit from competition between two local banks; both are business partners for the school and neither wants to be out-done by the other, which results in both banks making contributions. At one of those sites, the local business also provided new padded chairs for the school; it also offers a monetary reward to students who have perfect attendance during the school year. An alumnus of one school in the region has begun working to revitalize the region by building or renovating buildings and businesses. The alumnus has also provided opportunities for students to participate in events like the Chick-fil-A Leadercast, an annual leadership development and motivation event broadcast around to selected locations around the world (three of which were in West Virginia during the 2013 event). At another school, a group of parents and community members raise money and support the school in various ways (e.g., helping fund building projects). One site coordinator in the region also stated that local businesses were very supportive of a career fair that the school hosted to help boost students’ awareness of relatively local career and training opportunities, in addition to college opportunities. Although some of these activities and resources provided by local school partners and supporters do fit well with the goals and aims of the GEAR UP program (e.g., the Chick-fil-A Leadercast, incentives for school attendance, support for career fairs), there does not appear to be a concerted effort to channel local support to efforts focused on college and career readiness and success.

Other Support and Assistance

In addition to the support sites receive from their partner colleges and other local stakeholders, sites receive direction and guidance, technical assistance, and support—both material and moral—from the HEPC staff who implement and administer the West Virginia GEAR UP project. This support is universally and tremendously appreciated. As in every previous year, GEAR UP regional coordinators²⁴ and HEPC personnel continued to receive very high praise for their helpfulness,

²⁴ Regional coordinators, employed by HEPC through the GEAR UP program, are based at partnering institutions of higher education within each of the three GEAR UP regions and serve as resources for site coordinators for

supportiveness, responsiveness to questions and concerns, and overall professionalism. Site coordinators agreed that “the whole GEAR UP staff is great” and “always sound happy to talk to you.” One site coordinator praised staff members’ patience, saying, “They don’t make you feel like a nuisance,” even though the site coordinator may need to have information or instructions repeated. Site coordinators generally agreed that staff “know their jobs very well” and “are very competent.” One added that the competence of the project staff is reassuring for site coordinators: “They make you feel secure because they know what’s going on.”

Regional coordinators, specifically, also received praise and appreciation during the site coordinator group discussions. According to site coordinators, the regional coordinators often offer to help site coordinators in any way they need and work to keep site coordinators focused and on track. The regional coordinators also offer encouragement as well as guidance, which the site coordinators greatly appreciated. One site coordinator expressed the general sentiment by saying, “I appreciate everything that [regional coordinator] does.”

The tools and resources that GEAR UP project staff provide for the sites are seen as very high quality and very helpful. In addition to recognizing and praising (often profusely) their regional coordinators, site coordinators stated that material support and resources, such as the site-specific one-page information sheet about GEAR UP activities and impacts, were very helpful.

School and district support. Although not a frequent theme in the discussions, some site coordinators did mention ways in which the GEAR UP program and activities receive support from their schools and districts. For instance, in one group, one site coordinator stated that he or she had access to “four buses that we can use all day long.” He or she acknowledged that the school was “a little more privileged” than other schools in having such flexible access to transportation. Another type of support schools may offer is providing lunches for trips. One site coordinator explained that, “if we tell them ahead of time how many kids we’re taking, [the school cooks will] do a bag lunch for us and pack it up and give it to us for free to take with the kids.” Another site coordinator explained that such an arrangement is beneficial both for the students and for the school: “Our cook . . . love for us to do that because it helps with their lunch count.”

Quality 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 5. 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). Site coordinators did not spend a great deal of time during the Year 5 discussions talking about the quality of program services and activities. However, the brief discussions on the subject suggested continuity in quality over time.

planning and coordinating events and as liaisons between the sites and HEPC or the higher education institutions, as needed.

Services for Stakeholders

As mentioned previously, all sites implemented 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. As in previous years, sites also participated in College Application and Exploration Week; encouraged students to participate in College Goal Sunday; sponsored HEROs clubs; hosted special speakers or presentations; and purchased technology equipment, software, and other resources to enhance instruction. Participants in the group discussions indicated that stakeholders (including students, parents, and school staff) were satisfied with the activities in which they participated and that the stakeholders were getting valuable information and experiences through GEAR UP. Parents, in particular, were reported to be very appreciative of the information they received during GEAR UP events.

Discussion of the quality of activities tended to be skewed toward activities and events designed for students. This has been the case in previous years as well and may be a reflection of the greater focus on and frequency of activities for students than for other stakeholder groups; it could also be a reflection of site coordinators' greater interest in student activities than in activities designed for other groups. Comments like, "It's provided really great services for our kids," and "not just services, but opportunity" were common. Specific services and activities that were perceived as particularly high quality and useful included

- college visits
- mentoring
- tutoring
- career fairs and career days
- HEROs

Technology purchases, as mentioned earlier, were also cited as very beneficial for students and schools. Words and phrases used to describe the quality of services and activities included "fantastic," "wonderful," "high quality," and "good," among others. Some site coordinators acknowledged that they "had issues with certain things," but on the whole, they indicated that the services and resources planned and provided through the program were very good.

In describing the extent and quality of GEAR UP implementation and services, one site coordinator explained that students created a video for the annual competition and took total ownership of the project:

I didn't participate at all. It was completely student created—student verbiage, video, even lack of poor sound quality. But it was the kids' perception of what GEAR UP has done for them. So I think that is indicative of the implementation of services when you have students and parents who are saying, "When I started in GEAR UP, I had no idea what I wanted to do." Or a young girl who said, "I had no friends and now I have lots of friends and I was not able to speak in front of people and now I'm speaking on video." You know, "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and now I know." Or, "My parents didn't go to college and now we're talking about college." Or, "I'm

helping my sibling [learn about college].” I think those are all indicative of full implementation and the quality of implementation of the program.

According to site coordinators, students want to be part of GEAR UP, asking how they can sign up (which, as mentioned before, is an indicator both of high interest in GEAR UP and limited awareness of how the program operates). Further, students who are not enrolled in the eligible grades “want to be included” as well. One site coordinator stated, “I have some very, very jealous tenth graders,” prompting agreement from others in the discussion group. Comments during the discussion groups suggested that although participation in events may not always meet site coordinators’ expectations, the participants are satisfied: “I’ve never heard anything but positive things from the students and parents.”

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]

Although site coordinators believed that the services they were delivering and the resources they were purchasing for their schools were of high quality and very helpful, they all reported that they continued to face challenges in implementation. As in previous years, the most frequently-mentioned challenges were related to attendance and participation in grant events. A few site coordinators also mentioned facing some challenges related to administrative requirements and bureaucratic processes. Transportation, which both impacted participation and was impacted by administrative issues, also proved to be a challenge in some situations. A few other minor or unique challenges were also mentioned. In comparison to the first years of the project, comments during Year 5 discussion groups suggest that many early challenges have been resolved and site coordinators are facing fewer major problems. However, the challenges experienced during Year 5, particularly those related to stakeholder participation, 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.

Participation and Involvement

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. As in previous years, focus group data suggest that site coordinators faced the least challenge in securing participation and involvement in activities for students. The greater level of success in reaching students than other stakeholder groups is likely a result of students’ daily proximity to available services; that is, because (most) students are at the schools during the day for most days each week, site coordinators are able to schedule events and services during the school day and thereby reach students in their natural habitat, so to speak. For instance, HEROs happens as a regular school club, although students may occasionally need to be called out of class for special events; tutoring happens at various times before, during, and after school; test preparation and credit recovery can also happen before or after school or during students’ free time

throughout the day. Site coordinators also generally find it easiest to schedule college visits and other events during the school day, although this strategy is not always feasible (e.g., for visits to colleges relatively far away from the school or for visits to colleges that schedule campus tours on Saturdays).

Although site coordinators do make every attempt to schedule events and activities at times that will allow them to reach the broadest number of students, they are not necessarily able to consistently reach all students that could benefit from GEAR UP services. In several sites, students do not attend events after school or on the weekends, either because they are not able or because they choose not to do so. Transportation issues continue to pose a stumbling block for students in attending activities schedule outside of regular school hours. Other extracurricular activities (e.g., sports or band) may also interfere with students' abilities to participate in GEAR UP events after school hours. Activity buses that run after regular bus hours may help alleviate some of the transportation issues, but that is an option available only at a small number of sites and does not help ameliorate the scheduling conflicts with extracurricular activities. Site coordinators continue to try working around these kinds of scheduling issues by offering GEAR UP services during lunch or at other times during the school day.

A new concern about student involvement and participation emerged in one group. The site coordinator stated that students at his or her school were not motivated to participate or take action on their own, sometimes even in simple tasks. The site coordinator explained that when she described the GEAR UP incentive award to students, many of them were reluctant to fill out the paperwork to be considered for the award. Additionally, at that site, students were reluctant to participate in an event at which local scholarships and other awards were announced. The site coordinator expressed frustration with that lack of motivation, saying,

If I laid \$200 across my table in enveloped, they would not walk up there to get it. They would be like, "Can you not just bring it to me in class? Why do I have to come and get it?" . . . If money doesn't motivate them, I don't know what else will.

In another group, a site coordinator mentioned experiencing a similar lack of motivation among students, although the circumstances appeared to be slightly milder. The site coordinator explained that the students did not seem to have "that intrinsic motivation" to participate in GEAR UP events like HEROs meetings. The site coordinator went on to explain that students would not consistently participate in meetings, with some students participating in one meeting but not the next. Further, the site coordinator explained that students tended to resist doing certain types of activities and did not typically complete activities or prepare materials on their own time; rather, the site coordinator would have to call students "out of class to sit down in my office and make valentines with glitter for financial aid or whatever it is."

Other site coordinators stated that students in grade levels not served by the program were often "jealous" of the students who received services. Similar statements have been made in previous years of the grant, as well. Site coordinators continue to wish they could involve as many students in the grant as possible, given that if the state is not successful in the next round of the GEAR UP grant competition, "our ninth and tenth graders are never going to be able to be a part of it," leaving many deserving students potentially underserved.

Parent involvement. As in Years 1 through 4, most site coordinators in Year 5 struggled to obtain a high level parent participation and involvement in GEAR UP activities at their schools. Limited parental involvement was a concern for site coordinators across the state, with the issue

emerging in every discussion group. As with the student activities and as in previous years, site coordinators tried to increase the likelihood of parental involvement by scheduling GEAR UP events in conjunction with other school events (e.g., football or basketball games, band or choir concerts, and art shows) “where [parents] are going to be at the school” without making a special trip only for GEAR UP. Offering food also works as an incentive in most locations, although a few site coordinators indicated that offering food does not always guarantee a high level of parental participation.

In addition to trying to schedule events at times that are most convenient for parents, site coordinators try many different methods of reaching out to parents (and other stakeholders) to notify them about events and provide them with information. In addition to “old-fashioned mailing to every parent” and sending announcements or notifications home with students, site coordinators have also reached out through phone calls, emails, school materials (e.g., newsletters, calendars, and student agendas), website announcements, Edline, and social media (e.g., Facebook). One site coordinator stated that he or she would “communicate any way you want to communicate,” and another described using a variety of strategies “in hopes of attracting a different group of parents.” Despite these efforts, however, most site coordinators continue to see “the same parent” participating at events and do not often see participation from

The continuing struggles to get more parents involved in GEAR UP activities are disappointing and frustrating for site coordinators. One site coordinator, in describing the frustration about participation from both parents and teachers, stated, “It’s just that GEAR UP could be a lot more helpful if people would buy into it a little more.” In one group, a site coordinator described efforts at his or her site to use parental word-of-mouth to encourage other parents to participate in GEAR UP activities. The site apparently experienced some success with asking parents to spread the word among themselves and to bring other parents to events.

Parents’ reluctance to participate may be due to many factors, including limited time, lack of transportation, or limited interest; parents may also misperceive communication attempts or may feel uncomfortable in the school setting. As one discussant explained,

I think some of it may be that they are a little intimidated by the school setting, I mean truthfully. Some of our parents haven’t graduated, they struggle with just reading, some of them can’t read at all, and I think they are a little intimidated about coming into the school. I really do. They are afraid they are in trouble or they are going to get fussed at for something. Whereas, they are really just needed to talk to; they always think that it is something negative.

At one site, using funds provided through another grant, school staff send home postcards with positive comments or observations about students in order to “open that communication” with parents and show them that school staff “are not just here to catch your kids being bad” but are “interested in them, and not just their academic, but personally.” The site coordinator indicated that school staff hope the effort will help parents feel less intimidated about coming to the school. It is not clear from the GEAR UP discussion, however, what impact the efforts are having at present.

Teacher involvement. Site coordinators’ success in involving teachers in GEAR UP activities continues to vary across schools. However, no site coordinators report having complete buy-in and full participation from their school faculty. Even at sites where teachers understand and support the GEAR UP program, participation may still fall short of coordinators’ expectations. As with the parents, site coordinators reported that they tended to “have the same set of teachers that are always going to

be there and the same ones that are never there.” Sites across the state appear to “struggle with getting teachers to stay” after school for grant activities like professional development events. Several site coordinators indicated that teachers were motivated to participate in professional development because of stipends offered through the grant but perceived that “if you don’t pay them, they won’t stay at all.”

In one discussion group, the site coordinators explained that the teachers seem to be unaware of the program and its purposes and activities. One of the site coordinators explained that teachers would approach him or her and ask what GEAR UP was about, and the coordinator would offer an explanation about how the program makes “college access a little more understandable.” The coordinator went on to explain his or her frustration, however, at having to continue explaining the program in its fifth year: “I do all of this work and they don’t even know what is going on. I’m like a gnat [buzzing around]. They just want to swat me away.” Other participants in the group agreed that teachers did not always know what the grant provides for their schools.

In some cases, teachers may also feel frustrated with the program because students are called out of class to participate in events or plan activities. One site coordinator explained,

My HEROs group, they’re awesome . . . but the teacher get upset when I have to get them out of class because mine are so involved that I have to literally meet with them about every three weeks . . . and sometimes it lasts 45 minutes, you know. The teachers get upset about it. They like the end result of the things we do, but they just don’t want to let them out of class.

Other site coordinators also mentioned that teachers occasionally complained about students being pulled out of regular classes for various GEAR UP activities and surveys. It isn’t clear how teachers’ frustrations with students’ activities—in particular, needing to be called away from class—feed into teachers’ perceptions of or buy-in to the GEAR UP program overall.

Community involvement. In one discussion group, site coordinators stated that they “need more community involvement.” The participants in the discussion stated that it was difficult to involve community members in the school activities but felt that it was important. They explained that the contexts of their communities—economically “hit hard and . . . hurting right now” and with “so few resources to really tap because they are all tapped out”—made it difficult to know how to approach community members and businesses and invite their involvement. Although the challenge was explicitly mentioned in only one group and other regions may have greater levels of community involvement, the challenge does appear to be an important one, given the need to plan for sustainability and the general lack of partnerships with business, organizations, or other entities or individuals in the schools’ communities.

Administration and Bureaucracy

Although not as prominent a challenge as it was in the previous years, site coordinators in at least one region continue to contend with various administrative issues that frustrate them and impact how implement GEAR UP activities and services. These issues were not typically related to the structure or guidelines of the GEAR UP program itself, but rather were issues that arose as a result of how the GEAR UP guidelines intersect with district policies and practices. In the discussion group where these issues were specifically discussed, the site coordinators stated that they had so much difficulty in navigating bureaucratic procedures that rather than dealing with those procedures, they

occasionally purchased items—specifically, postage—out of their own funds. One of the site coordinators explained:

I can't even get any postage. I've paid all the postage all year because you don't want to get a purchase order, and have that sent to the county, and then they have to —. It's just easier to buy a stamp.

The site coordinators also explained that “purchasing procedures are really strict,” which occasionally posed difficulties for them. One explained that he or she has faced “a major issue with getting purchases worked out” because all of the contacts and communications that need to happen are “very difficult [and] it takes months to get anything.” As an anecdote, the site coordinator explained that the school had been trying to purchase toner for a copy machine “for six months, and we still haven't got it.”

Of most concern to one of the site coordinators, however, was that a technology purchase—two mobile computer labs—purchased through GEAR UP funds had been delivered at some point during the summer of 2012 but had not yet been put into use at the school because a program called Deep Freeze had not been installed on each of the computers. The program, which provides safety features, must be installed on all computers in the county, although it is unclear why it was taking so long for the program to be installed on the machines GEAR UP purchased.

It is worth noting that none of the other kinds of administrative difficulties that emerged in the previous year (e.g., being unable to access websites like CFWV.com on school computers, difficulties scheduling events during the school day that may require coverage for teachers, difficulties communicating with a higher education partner) emerged as specific concerns in Year 5. This could suggest that the sites (and partners) have effectively managed those difficulties and they no longer pose challenges. Alternately, it could be that site coordinators have come to see these challenges as standard practice and have accepted them as a fact of doing GEAR UP business in the schools. Regardless, the site coordinators did not appear to be as concerned about administrative and bureaucratic challenges as they had been in previous years.

Telling the GEAR UP Story

Although no site coordinators explicitly mentioned it as a challenge, the schools may be having some difficulty telling the GEAR UP story and ensuring that local stakeholders fully understand the program, its activities, and its potential benefits for students and their local communities. During the group discussions, site coordinators mentioned that students, parents, and teachers were not fully aware of how the program operates, what resources it provides, what activities it sponsors, and what it is generally striving to accomplish. Despite the many ways site coordinators try to communicate with stakeholders, there continues to be a knowledge and awareness gap that site coordinators do not necessarily know how to bridge.

In one group, a site coordinator stated that it may be difficult for some people to see the importance of the program “unless [they] see the difference, like we see it, in some of the kids.” The site coordinator went on to explain:

You see kids that maybe came in as freshman and you really, really worried for their well-being, and then they get involved, and they start caring about school, and then they

start applying to college, and then they graduate and they go. I mean there's not anything that can match that until you see it for yourself.

Site coordinators did not mention any specific efforts to share those kinds of individual success stories with local stakeholders and decision-makers, although doing so may help build continuing support and possibly promote sustainability for activities and services that promote college awareness and access.

Outcomes to Date

When considering the whole GEAR UP program, site coordinators throughout the state consider it to be successful. Some services (e.g., college visits and 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. Site coordinators generally spoke most about the successes they saw with regard to students. Such a circumstance makes sense, given that the site coordinators tend to have the most contact with students and are better able to monitor students' progress and actions related to college searched and application. Site coordinators tended to speak only briefly about outcomes observed for parents and teachers; they did, however, mention several positive outcomes they had observed for their schools overall.

Students

The site coordinators discussed several different successes they had observed with regard to student outcomes. Academically, the site coordinators describe rising graduation rates and ACT scores as well as increases in the number of students who receive PROMISE scholarships—outcomes that are good not only for students but for the schools and districts as well (see the description of outcomes for “Others” later in this section). Some site coordinators also credit GEAR UP with helping the Advance Placement (AP) programs to grow at their schools, in part through providing resources and in part through motivating students to take the more challenging classes. Additionally, through the resources and personnel GEAR UP has provided, students have been able to recover credits to maintain their progress toward graduation. Likewise, site coordinators believe that the tutoring component has helped students who might struggle to keep better pace with their classes, while enabling teachers to continue challenging the students who more easily grasp the material. Site coordinators also noted improvements in the college-going rates for their schools.

Motivation

Site coordinators noted that students may also be developing greater motivation to perform well academically. Students may be more motivated to take the ACT multiple times in order to qualify for the PROMISE scholarship and other awards. Students ask site coordinators when the next ACT or ACT preparation session will be and, in the words of one site coordinator, “are actually seeking out that information instead of you having to announce it all the time.” Several site coordinators mentioned that the PROMISE scholarship, in combination with GEAR UP services, has helped motivate students to perform better:

They think more about their GPA. It's not irrelevant anymore. It's actually more important, because a lot of them were just trying to get out of high school. They didn't care if they got that D, well they passed that class. Now, they are actually worried.

Like “What can I do to get a better grade?”, “What am I needing to do so I can get into whatever school?”

Site coordinators believed that because GEAR UP is helping student “see that college is an option,” the students “do better within the high school environment.” The combination of GEAR UP services and other policies and programs (e.g., the PROMISE scholarship and COMPASS testing to avoid remedial classes in college for students who do not perform well on the ACT) has “given them a little bit more motivation so it’s not just like ‘D is for diploma.’”

In some cases, the motivation to perform well and work to qualify for academic awards may be trickling down to other grade levels. One site coordinator explained that ninth grade students at his or her school “are finally figuring out that [they] can’t wait until [their] senior year to get serious about the PROMISE scholarship—it starts at ninth grade.” Although that diffusion of awareness about the need to prepare as early as possible for college admittance and financial awards did not yet appear to be universal, site coordinators noted that it was “slowly happening.”

The motivation site coordinators noted in students also came from other sources, such as the leadership activities in which students participated and the motivational speakers (e.g., Aric Bostick) who led events to inspire students. According to the site coordinators, through these activities, students received messages like, “anything’s possible,” and that even “without perfect lives, there can still be a rainbow at the end for them.” Students particularly enjoyed the motivational speakers

Knowledge and Awareness

Site coordinators indicated that the GEAR UP program was successful in improving students’ knowledge and awareness of postsecondary options in various ways. Site coordinators in each group indicated that students who participated in GEAR UP activities were aware of their options after high school and how to pay for the path they choose. In having that knowledge, students may also have a greater understanding that they can attain a college education. Site coordinators reported that improvements in student understanding were notable over time within GEAR UP participants and in relation to students in prior years who did not have the benefit of GEAR UP intervention. As one site coordinator explained,

These students know much more about the colleges and about why they should go and how to get financial aid. They know more about that than the generation before them, much more. I wish I had known all of that.

In addition to being more aware of their options and how to pay for them, site coordinators believe that students are starting to develop a better understanding of the costs of postsecondary education:

They have a more realistic understanding of what it is, how much it really costs. I mean they are still off, they are still overinflating it, but I’ve noticed that just over the last three years that I’ve been working with GEAR UP that it is getting better. They know more about it. It seems more attainable. I think that’s directly correlating to what GEAR UP does.

Students are also becoming more aware that their postsecondary pathway does not necessarily have to take them to a four-year institution. Some site coordinators stated that they explicitly emphasized other options such as career training and associate’s degrees:

That's a message that I've really tried to push this year. When I say college, I don't mean medical school. When I say college, I don't mean law school. I mean there are six-month programs, there are 12-month programs, there are 18-month programs, there are eight-year programs, and everything in between.

Site coordinators may also have tried to emphasize different options through events like career fairs. According to one site coordinator, these efforts are working to broaden students' understanding of their opportunities:

[Through a career fair] the kids realize that it's not necessarily a four-year institution to go into higher education. There were other avenues for them to pursue because they were not looking for a business degree or an education degree. There were other activities out there

GEAR UP not only helps build students' awareness and knowledge about facts and possibilities, it helps students build knowledge through experiences that can help them find the best possible postsecondary path. Site coordinators through the years have consistently lauded college campus visits as extremely beneficial activities for their students because they expose the students to actual campuses and help students learn about potential colleges through firsthand experience. In Year 5, site coordinators particularly focused on the lack of exposure many students in their regions have with respect to college campuses and, in fact, other parts of West Virginia. To these site coordinators, the campus visits helped students check their perceptions of a school against the reality and make better judgments about whether the school would be a good option for them. One site coordinator gave the example of a campus visit to West Virginia University in Morgantown:

[The students] are like, "I'm going to WVU, I'm going to WVU." And they have never been there before, and [after the visit] they realize that it is massive and . . . they realize it's not like a closed college campus where everything is right there and that's all that's there is the college. So I think they need that exposure, especially being from such small, rural areas and some of the students have never even seen the state capitol, much less some of them have never even seen the [prominent local structure], and that means they've probably never been to Kroger.

Other site coordinators agreed that the college visits provide a crucial awareness-building function because many of the students in their schools "have never been out of the county" and have little other experience outside of their local communities. "They just don't know what's out there," and the GEAR UP trips and campus visits fill an important need in helping them discover the wider world.

Confidence and Enthusiasm

In addition to improving their knowledge and broadening their awareness about postsecondary opportunities, site coordinators noted that students are also gaining more confidence and enthusiasm. For instance, activities during College Application and Exploration week that encouraged students and teachers to talk about the teachers' college experience may have helped students to realize that they knew someone who went to (and graduated from) college. The connections built, in turn, may have helped them feel more confident in talking with their teachers about college options. Site coordinators stated that when students had someone to talk to—whether

it was the site coordinator or another teacher—and who could show them the ropes, they tended to become more confident. As one explained,

[Local college is] a small school, and [students] are afraid to fill out the application and it's just a one-pager. You know, but they are scared to death to fill that application out and I think that once someone sits down with them and shows them they can do it and they get accepted, they get excited.

More directly, however, visiting college campuses enables students to experience the college environment and learn something about what they can expect as a student. Being present on the campuses helps students build their confidence about being able to navigate colleges successfully (“if they are there, they are not intimidated”). Visiting multiple campuses and seeing that most are very similar has also helped students feel more confident as well because the different aspects of campus—the dining hall or the athletic facility or the library or the dormitories—are “constant regardless of the campus.” One site coordinator stated that GEAR UP U! also serves a similar function in giving students the experience of living on a college campus. He or she explained that one student “had never even considered going to college until he attended GEAR UP U! and was on a college campus and had the experience of living like” a college student; that experience changed his mind, “so that’s a big success story.” Having the experience of seeing those facilities firsthand, touring them, and being able to find their ways around and through them helps students cultivate greater familiarity and decreases their anxiety, according to site coordinators.

Site coordinators in all groups reported that students routinely approached them and asked about GEAR UP events and services—when the next college visits would be scheduled or where they would be going, when the next test preparation session would be held, what the next activity would be. Students were also eager to tell site coordinators and guidance counselor when they received acceptance letters from their chosen colleges. One site coordinator explained that for some students, knowledge was both empowering and exciting:

I have seen students get more excited about college and feel more informed about college and to ask more questions about college because they’ve got a little bit of knowledge about it but they want to know more.

Future

Site coordinators genuinely believe that the GEAR UP program is providing students with options and opportunities they might not have without the grant. The site coordinators in each group stated that students were exploring opportunities and options they probably would not have even known about prior to GEAR UP. The general feeling among the site coordinators was that GEAR UP “provides them with a future.” Put very bluntly, one site coordinator stated that students now realized that their future after high school “doesn’t have to be: get pregnant, get on welfare, maybe get married.” Put a little more genteelly, one site coordinator explained

I think more of them are thinking about going to college that may have never even dreamed that they could go to college. It just has them encouraged that they can go to college.

Parents

Although the GEAR UP grant is designed to increase parents' awareness and knowledge of college application and admission as well as financial aid, site coordinators did not tend to discuss those types of outcomes for parents. Rather, site coordinators tended to focus on other kinds of assistance the program offered to parents—chiefly, peace of mind. Site coordinators generally agreed that they “never heard anything but positive things from the students and the parents” about GEAR UP activities. Parents, in particular, expressed gratitude for the grant and relief about the assistance they received. One site coordinator commented that one mother said “GEAR UP has changed [her] child’s life” in providing options for what to do after high school. In another group, a site coordinator recounted receiving a recent thank you from a parent:

I had a parent bring me my flowers on Friday for helping their student through the process of completing the college application and what they are going to do after high school because they had no clue.

Other site coordinators agreed that parents may often feel anxious because “they just don’t know what to do.” GEAR UP provides information and resources to help parents and students navigate postsecondary options and, in doing so, provides “a big relief for parents that are . . . just as scared as their child.” One site coordinator stated that because so many parents are concerned about financing their child’s education, providing them with information about financial aid and other options to pay for college particularly “eases their mind[s]” and is “a stress reliever for them” Site coordinators across the state indicated that parents were “very appreciative” of GEAR UP’s services and that those services not only increased their awareness but also increased participating parent’s comfort levels with postsecondary options and processes.

Teachers

Site coordinators believe that the project is benefiting teachers, although they did not talk a great deal about direct impacts on or outcomes for teachers. However, in discussing the services and resources provided by the grant, they did repeatedly mention how enriching and helpful the technology purchases were for providing extra support for students and tools for teachers. Some also stressed that having tutors in the schools was helpful and well received (and much appreciated) by teachers who were able to refer their struggling students to the tutors and still be able to keep the rest of the class on track and moving forward. As one site coordinator explained,

We have an English and math tutor that comes in and goes into the classroom and works with the students. I think the teachers appreciate it just as much because they have got another person in there that can go into those students that are struggling, while the other teacher is still teaching the kids that are ready to move on. So I think that’s been a success.

The project, then, appears to be providing instructional tools, resources, and support for teachers which should lead to improvements in instruction and, from there, student learning.

Some grant activities may also be impacting teacher enthusiasm for promoting college, particularly those activities that required them to be involved and tell students about their own college experience. Sites across the state involved teachers in College Application and Exploration

Week by asking them to decorate their rooms or doors with the colors or symbols of or memorabilia from their own alma maters. Site coordinators mentioned that teachers and students both seemed to be enthusiastic about sharing information in that way. In several sites, the activities may have served to improve personal relationships between students and teachers who came to realize “that the kids want to know about their college experience.”

Others

Site coordinators also mentioned other outcomes they have noticed accruing over the life of the GEAR UP grant. As mentioned previously, the schools are acquiring high-quality, state of the art technological tools (e.g., computer labs, iPads, smart boards, and various kinds of software) that they would not otherwise purchase. Site coordinators generally felt that “the technology helps to enrich [their] school[s].” At some schools, site coordinators noted that indicators of academic success such as ACT scores, graduation rates, and PROMISE scholarship awards were improving. They attributed these improvements to GEAR UP-sponsored activities such as test preparation, tutoring, and credit recovery.

GEAR UP, with its concentrated focus on postsecondary preparation and planning, may also be helping schools cultivate college-going cultures. Site coordinators described seeing students who were excited each year to tell teachers and guidance counselors about their plans for their education, training, or careers after high school. They also stated that students are more likely to consider postsecondary education of some kind—“it’s like it is an expectation.” One site coordinator explained,

Every year it seems like we just have an increase in the awareness of what’s available to them . . . and the culture in all of our schools have changed now to . . . not just dreaming about maybe going to college or a vocational-technical or something out there. It’s “what am I going to be doing, I mean, I am doing something.” So, they are making plans for the first time from freshman on up, they are planning. . . . Instead of just sitting back and waiting for someone to do it for them, they are actively involved and I think that’s what GEAR UP has done. We have kind of forced them . . . to take the lead. So, they are actively involved. They get things done. They don’t wait around for us to tell them what to do. It’s “What’s next? We’re ready to go.” I think just the whole culture of the school has changed.

In addition to the benefits that accrue for the whole school community, some site coordinators also stated that the GEAR UP project has a positive impact on their abilities to do their jobs. In Year 5, as in previous years, site coordinators who were also school counselors generally reported that the GEAR UP grant helped them focus on and do a better job of counseling students about their academic options. One counselor explained the benefits of being a counselor/site coordinator,

It’s made me a better counselor in ways that I could go on and on about . . . because I have to do it, and everybody in the school knows I have to do it, and I don’t have time to deal with their stuff because I’m required to do stuff that GEAR UP wants me to do, which is what a counselor should be doing. [That] makes it great for me. I love it. I hate to see it go.

Others in the group agreed that the program “definitely makes you more aware” and “keeps you focused on what you need to be doing with the students.”

For many site coordinators, helping students through the GEAR UP program may be both a part of their professional responsibilities and a personal mission. During group discussions in Year 5, as in previous years, site coordinators spoke in ways that suggested they feel protective of and personally involved with their students. They also occasionally stated that they wished they had had the kind of information and guidance they are providing students through the program. Their statements also suggest that the site coordinators are deeply committed to ensuring that their students have the best possible information and support so that they can choose their best futures. For instance, one site coordinator stated,

I don't want them to ever feel like they got put into a box, like I did. You know, not that I regret my decisions at all, but it would have been nice to have some more options.

It is clear from the group discussions that the GEAR UP site coordinators take pride in their work and in their students. When students are successful, the site coordinators may also feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. These intangible outcomes, although not part of the grant's measurable objectives, may help site coordinators stay motivated to withstand the challenges they face and keep working for their students' futures.

Sustainability

Site coordinators spoke about the likelihood that the services and activities they deliver through the GEAR UP grant will be sustainable when funding ends in 2014. In general, site coordinators stated that many of the activities would probably be sustainable in some form, although certain activities and enhancements are unlikely to continue in the absence of reliable funding. The participating GEAR UP sites, like all public schools, are operating under the realities of limited and constrained budgets and possible district- and school-level attitudes like, "if it costs the county any additional funds, we won't do it."

Likelihood of Sustainability

Funding and availability of resources (including personnel) will be major factors in determining whether activities and services currently funded through the GEAR UP program are viable and sustaining following the conclusion of grant funding. Generally, site coordinators believed that GEAR UP activities would be sustainable if they did not require additional funding, if the schools offered the activities prior to the GEAR UP grant, and/or if school personnel were willing to participate in, sponsor, or support the activities. Activities that require additional funding not already provided for in the school or district budget and those that might require a great deal of logistical or personnel support might be more challenging to sustain.

Site coordinators' comments suggest that sites are best prepared to continue offering or implementing those activities that were in place (in some form) prior to GEAR UP or that will cost no additional money to continue. As an example, most site coordinators indicated that continuing HEROs as a school-sponsored club was easily sustainable because it required no (or very little) additional funding from the school for its basic activities. Similarly, mentoring would require few other resources besides time and commitment from teachers. Other events and activities like financial aid workshops, college and career fairs, and so on that were already part of the schools' activities will also be sustained because "we've been doing that for years." Likewise, because College Application and Exploration Week will continue to exist, schools may choose to continue participating without

needing to invest additional money. Schools may also continue offering some forms of tutoring, credit recovery, and test preparation given that many schools implemented similar activities prior to participating in the GEAR UP grant. In these cases where site coordinators believed that activities could or would continue relatively easily without GEAR UP funding, the general sentiment appeared to be that “it’s nice to have the resources that we have” through GEAR UP, but schools could find ways to make some events happen without them.

Grant-sponsored activities, supports, and resources that are not likely to be sustainable include, in particular, technology enhancements, food and refreshments for events, trips or visits, stipends for teacher participation in professional development. Some sites may also struggle to sustain the additional professional development they have offered through the program. Others may not be able to continue offering test preparation, tutoring, and/or credit recovery that they have been able to provide through the use of GEAR UP funds. Tutor positions that were paid through the grant will likely be eliminated.

Although site coordinators were concerned about the all of the activities and supports that their schools would most likely not be able to sustain, concerns about technology resources and maintenance seemed to be most common. Site coordinators in all regions acknowledged that their schools and districts would not be able to continue offering technology enhancements without grant funding. One site coordinator explained, “The biggest percentage of my [grant] money is spent on technology . . . When we had our sustainability meeting, that what our principals [said] . . . ‘That’s the least sustainable thing for us.’” Site coordinators were also concerned about how schools would maintain the technology equipment and resources purchased through the grant: “I don’t know how we are going to upkeep the technology after GEAR UP funds are not available.” Other technology-related purchases—such as software and programs for tutoring, credit recovery, and test preparation—may also be unsustainable as updates and upgrades are needed.” The general sentiment among the site coordinators regarding technology purchases and upkeep was, “We’re not going to be able to sustain that. It’s just not going to happen.” These concerns may, in part, be enhanced by the current emphasis on using and integrating technology into all aspects of children’s education, including high-stakes assessment. As one site coordinator explained, regular or routine use of computer technology is “what we are going to in terms of assessment for our kids. . . . everything has to be on the computer.”

Sites’ likely inability to sustain college and job site visits as the GEAR UP was also a common concern across regions. Although site coordinators were actively planning for ways to continue offering these kinds of opportunities for students, there was concern that limited funding for transportation and other logistical concerns (e.g., lunches/meals for students) could pose major barriers. Although sites may be able to use school buses to transport students to campus and job site visits, relying on buses poses its own challenges (previously discussed in this summary). Creative strategies may be needed to plan for and fund transportation and meals if these kinds of trips and visits are to be sustained.

Strategies for Sustainability

During Year 5, the annual work plans required that each site engage in systematic, focused planning for sustainability. Site coordinators were required to plan at least two structured meetings or other events to discuss sustainability with key stakeholders, including school and district administrators, teachers, community members, students, and others (e.g., “all of those people that we feel are going to be champions to help keep the program going”). Group discussions suggest that site

coordinators were having these discussions at within their local contexts and plan to continue having such discussions and planning sessions in the coming year (2013-2014). Plans for sustainability may be taking different courses depending on local resources and needs. However, all sites appear to be planning to continue supporting postsecondary awareness, access, and success.

No Additional Funding Needed

For activities that were being implemented prior to GEAR UP or that will require no additional funding, strategies for sustainability appear to focus on maintaining or fostering support among school staff. For instance, site coordinators recognized that recruiting teachers to serve as mentors or as advisors for a HEROs club would be crucial to sustaining those activities:

You need a champion, somebody in your school that is going to take it on. You'll need to at least have that teacher or that counselor that's going to take on the group. So as long as you have that one person and they do it for nothing—you know, they are not going to be paid to take on the HEROs or the mentors or whatever—so you have always got to hope that you have that person in your building that's going to keep that going.

The site coordinators did not mention any specific strategies they were using or planned to use to recruit support and participation from other school staff. Most of them specifically mentioned their personal commitments to engaging in and supporting these no-cost activities, however. They may also be able to use the final year of the grant to build support and commitment from their colleagues to institutionalize some of the grant-funded activities (e.g., mentoring, HEROs clubs).

Maximizing Existing Funds

Although plans for sustainability may shape up differently across the state depending on local contexts and resources, certain strategies are emerging that may be useful for most or all districts and schools, particularly with regard to finding ways to maximize other funding sources. For instance, schools may be able to partner with other grants, programs, or organizations to use those resources for multiple purposes, including both the intended purpose and postsecondary access. One site coordinator stated that plans are underway to incorporate multiple purposes into school-sponsored trips that may have previously served only one purpose. Field trips, for example, may become combination field trips/campus visits if the destination of the trip is near a college campus. Such a strategy may work in many places as a way to maximize the use of limited funds and continue to offer students a chance to experience college campuses first-hand. Schools may also be able to capitalize on services offered by the schools (e.g., boxed lunches for trips or events during the day) to make their limited resources stretch further and enable as many students as possible to participate.

Finding New Funding

One of the biggest challenges site coordinators noted was brainstorming for ways to find new funding to continue or expand activities related to postsecondary awareness, access, and success. In some sites, coordinators are considering how well fundraisers might work to generate additional money to support college and career activities. However, some site coordinators may be reluctant to invest too heavily in planning for fundraisers given that schools and school-affiliated activities (e.g., clubs, teams, bands) use fundraisers regularly to generate or supplement their budgets. As one site coordinator said, "Fundraising is always an option, but they fundraise for so many other events at

school that . . . for the resources in our area, that's almost a tapped out thing." In one group, a site coordinator suggested that it might be possible to ask students or parent to contribute some money to offset expenses for events like campus visits, although the site coordinators in the group generally did not think the idea was a good strategy all the time or for everyone. As one site coordinator said, "a lot of our kids, the kids that really need to go, wouldn't be able to go then because there are some of our parents that just don't, honestly don't have" \$10 to send their child to a campus visit. They did, however, discuss the possibility that some parents or other members of the community may be willing to sponsor students (e.g., a parent with means might pay \$20 for their own child and another child). In some places, schools may be able to involve community partners or booster clubs to help support college and career awareness activities, although site coordinators may be concerned about their ability and willingness to help given the other activities those partners already tend to sponsor.

Other suggestions and tentative plans for finding new funding or support involved partnering with institutions of higher education to find ways to pay for college visits. One site coordinator stated, "West Virginia Junior College and Everest . . . will reimburse the county for your bus time, so it's a totally free trip." Another site coordinator stated that a professor at the University of Charleston was interested in forming a partnership with the school that may involve the college sponsoring or paying for the buses to bring the students to campus.

Summary and Recommendations

The Year 5 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. Resources and partnerships are being used appropriately to support the work of the grant. As in previous years and, to some extent, in accordance with program design, students tend to be the group receiving the greatest concentration of services. Student participation also generally continues to be better than participation from teachers or parents.

The discussions suggested that awareness of the program has not yet reached saturation among any stakeholder group. The greatest levels of awareness may be among those who have directly benefited in some way from the services and resources provided through the grant, although stakeholders may not be aware that the grant has funded the service or resources from which they benefit. There do not appear to be specific, systematic strategies in place for building awareness, although site coordinators do announce GEAR UP events, share information about the program, and respond to questions about the grant. Site coordinators use a variety of strategies (e.g., personal communication, letters, emails, web announcements) to reach out to the stakeholder groups and share information.

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. Site coordinators continue to report that college visits are particularly helpful for students because they build students' awareness about their options and the wider world beyond their counties. The visits also give students first-hand experience on college campuses, which can help them recognize that colleges are generally similar (e.g., colleges have the same kinds of buildings with similar functions) and that they can function effectively on campus (e.g., navigating campus successfully). Site coordinators also reported that college visits and other grant-funded activities serve to motivate students to do well in school and build their confidence. Further, the coordinators genuinely believe

that the GEAR UP program is providing students with options and opportunities they might not have without the grant. Overall, based on site coordinators' experiences and perceptions, the West Virginia GEAR UP grant appears to be providing student stakeholders with services and support that are helping them prepare for their pathways beyond high school.

Site coordinators did not spend a great deal of time discussing outcomes for parents and teachers, instead spending more time talking about their students. This focus on students is understandable given the site coordinators' roles (most of them are teachers, counselors, or administrators who interact with students on a daily basis) and the focus of the grant's services (i.e., most services are designed for and delivered to students). However, site coordinators did report that the grant services are providing useful information and reassurance to parents who appreciate the program's efforts. Teachers are benefiting in various ways, primarily through the technological enhancements the grant provides and through professional development opportunities (for those who participate). Some activities may also be promoting closer relationships between teachers and students (a benefit for both) and promoting enthusiasm for sharing information about teachers' college experiences.

Planning for the sustainability of grant activities was addressed in a concerted and systematic way at each site during Year 5. Site coordinators reported hosting strategic planning events with key decision makers in their schools and districts. Generally, they felt that some activities would be sustainable because they did not require additional funding from district or school budgets (e.g., mentoring, HEROs clubs, college and career fairs, some tutoring). The ability of the schools to sustain some of those activities or to provide them at the level enabled under the GEAR UP grant may differ across sites, however. Schools may not be able to sustain activities or provide resources that require additional funding or a great deal of staff time or support (e.g., purchasing technological enhancements, offering food at school events, some college or career site visits). Site coordinators, through their planning meetings with local stakeholders, are actively looking for strategies to continue providing college and career awareness and access services by finding additional support and resources or maximizing current resources.

Fewer concerns and challenges were mentioned in Year 5 discussions compared to previous years. Those that were discussed typically were challenges that arose during previous years as well, suggesting that they are enduring and possibly systemic issues that are not early or readily resolved by one grant program. Site coordinators continue to be challenged by attendance and participation levels that fall below their expectations. Transportation issues (e.g., limited transportation options for families, constraints on county transportation resources) both impacted student and parent participation and, in some cases, were impacted by administrative issues (e.g., bus schedules). Site coordinators continue to schedule activities at times and in locations that do not require additional transportation arrangements (e.g., co-scheduling GEAR UP activities with other school events, offering student activities like tutoring and mentoring during the school day, scheduling college visits during school hours). Low participation rates among teachers were attributed primarily to teachers' unwillingness to participate without compensation; teacher participation varies across sites, however, with some sites having teachers who are more willing to participate. Administrative issues did not appear to be as prominent a challenge as they had been in previous years, although a few sites may struggle with navigating the intersection of GEAR UP requirements and district bureaucracy.

Based on the findings of the Year 5 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 6, others may require more planning for sustainability following the end of the grant in 2014. 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.

Implementation

- Site coordinators are implementing their work plans and providing required services and activities. Although the grant is entering its last year, HEPC personnel should continue their practice of discussing expectations for implementation of GEAR UP activities and services with site coordinators and regional coordinators. Continued reliance on regional coordinators to serve as liaisons and advisors to participating sites will likely continue to yield high-quality implementation and adherence to guidelines and requirements. As they have done in all previous years, HEPC should also continue providing opportunities for site coordinators to meet with one another to discuss best practices for GEAR UP planning with respect to services and activities, implementation, follow-up, and sustainability.

Service Delivery and Reach

- During the final year of implementation, site coordinators should continue to engage in efforts to educate stakeholders about GEAR UP activities and outcomes. Such efforts may be needed given that awareness of the GEAR UP program and adequate understanding of its purposes and goals are not yet universal at most GEAR UP sites. The awareness-building efforts may also help highlight the importance and potential impact of the services the grant offers and could serve to promote and enhance sites' sustainability planning efforts.
- Stakeholders who participate in or receive GEAR UP services appreciate the information, assistance, and resources provided through the grant. However, participation levels—particularly among parents and teachers—have proven to be a constant challenge and continue to disappoint site coordinators. 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 may want to 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.

Resources and Partnerships

- Program resources continue to be utilized for appropriate purposes and in appropriate and effective ways, and no changes appear to be needed in the area of resource use and monitoring. Sustainability planning begun in Year 5 may help site coordinators continue working with school and district personnel in Year 6 to plan for the maintenance and possible future upgrading or replacement of material and technological resources, although districts may struggle to find ways to fund routine maintenance and upgrades.
- Relationships with colleges and universities continue to be positive and productive. Higher education partners appear to be receptive and responsive to the needs of GEAR UP

sites and students and willing to provide meaningful experiences to students. HEPC staff may want to consider finding a meaningful way to recognize and commend higher education partners for their cooperation with the grant and individual schools. Program staff may also want to continue encouraging relationship-building between postsecondary institutions and high schools, particularly with regard to ensuring sustainability of those relationships in the long term.

- Some GEAR UP schools have relationships with and support from community businesses and local organizations, largely as a result of existing partnerships, arrangements, and agreements not necessarily related to the GEAR UP program. These relationships, however, could be cultivated as foundations upon which to build local support to sustain 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.
- As in previous years, a few GEAR UP sites are 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 site coordinators to engage in similar coordination to avoid unnecessary duplication of services and promote the most efficient and effective use of funds possible.

Quality 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. As they have been consistently throughout the project, 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.
- Site coordinators continue to appreciate the level of support and responsiveness they receive from HEPC staff and their regional coordinators, in particular. No changes appear to be needed in the support HEPC provides to site coordinators.

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. Site coordinators and HEPC personnel may need to consider whether designing and implementing new strategies for increasing awareness, contending with resistance, and encouraging participation will be useful in the final year of the grant. Site coordinators may be able to enlist enthusiastic participants to share testimonials with their peers about the utility and benefits of GEAR UP services. Such a strategy may help sites share information about the program, cultivate grassroots support among the direct beneficiaries of GEAR UP efforts, and enhance sustainability planning.
- Some of the reasons that may underlie limited participation in project events (e.g., transportation challenges) are not likely to be affected by increased awareness or peer-to-peer sharing of information. 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, even though site coordinators try to schedule on-site GEAR UP professional development sessions at times that will be convenient for teachers, site coordinators' discussions suggest that those efforts do not necessarily have a sizable impact on participation in those or other events (e.g., workshops or family events). Because these are enduring challenges that site coordinators are unsure how to resolve fully and effectively, 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 GEAR UP activities can be integrated with current classroom and school work) may be a more productive starting point than trying to addressing a more structural issue like transportation in the GEAR UP counties.

Outcomes

- Although the impact is not uniform either across schools or within schools, site coordinators report that GEAR UP services are having a positive effect on students' plans to pursue education or training after high school and their attitudes and actions related to those plans (e.g., motivation to perform well in school and to qualify for scholarships). Quantifiable student outcomes (e.g., aspirations, graduation rate, postsecondary success, and test scores) will be examined via data from other sources.
- Services that enable students to experience directly their postsecondary options (e.g., college visits) are perceived as particularly beneficial. Experiential activities are often costly, however, and may be the most difficult to sustain in the absence of grant funding. Documenting the impact of specific experiential activities on students' plans, expectations, and behaviors, however, may provide a crucial and effective tool in demonstrating and building support for continuing such activities in the long term.
- Some outcomes for parents may be more difficult to quantify than student academic performance and postsecondary success. However, site coordinators' discussions suggested that parents' awareness, knowledge, and comfort level with respect to postsecondary issues were increasing as a result of participating in GEAR UP services. Although site coordinators struggle to achieve their desired levels of parent participation, they should continue to offer high-quality services for parents. Increasing parents' awareness and comfort level may enable them to provide another layer of support for their children as they pursue postsecondary education or career training.

Sustainability

- In Year 5, HEPC personnel asked site coordinators to begin focusing on sustainability by organizing and facilitating strategic planning meetings with key school and district stakeholders and decision makers. Site coordinators held planning sessions as required during Year 5 and indicated plans to continue sustainability planning during Year 6. HEPC personnel will undoubtedly continue encouraging site coordinators to work with local stakeholders to discuss and implement locally-effective strategies to continue the college and career access and success work of the GEAR UP program. Grant staff should continue their standard practice of encouraging and enabling the sharing of effective practices during site coordinator meetings and via other venues.

- HEPC staff may want to work with regional and site coordinators to target and categorize GEAR UP activities and services based on sites' current capacities to sustain the practices after the conclusion of grant funding. Different sustainability strategies will likely be needed for different types of activities, and categorizing the services based on schools' and districts' capacities may help site coordinators and other committed stakeholders find the most effective strategies for each type of service. HEPC staff may also want to determine whether site coordinators should focus sustainability planning efforts on those activities that are both effective and likely to be easily maintained or on those activities that are high-impact but more challenging to sustain without grant funding (e.g., college visits, technology enhancement). Different strategies may be necessary in different contexts.

West Virginia GEAR UP Evaluation Questions**Implementation**

- 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?

Outcomes

- 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

- 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?