

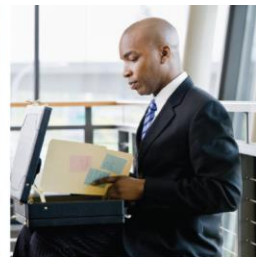
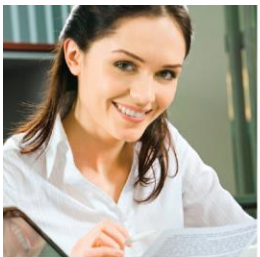


# WV GEAR UP Year 1 Evaluation: Executive Summary

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## Introduction

West Virginia (WV) GEAR UP is a federally funded program that helps students in 50 high-poverty middle and high schools situated in ten counties<sup>1</sup> across the state prepare to succeed in education and training beyond high school. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (Commission) manages WV GEAR UP in collaboration with a variety of public and other community partners. The Commission has contracted with ICF International (ICF) to conduct a federally required external program evaluation of WV GEAR UP. The evaluation framework proposed by ICF includes components designed to help the Commission understand the implementation, outcomes, impact, and sustainability of WV GEAR UP.

This executive summary describes the results of the first year of ICF's external evaluation of WV GEAR UP. For more information, readers are referred to the *Year 1 WV GEAR UP Interim Report* and the *Year 1 WV GEAR UP Annual Evaluation Report*, both of which are available at [www.wvgearup.org/research](http://www.wvgearup.org/research).

## Data Sources

The Year 1 WV GEAR UP evaluation relied on three primary data sources, as described below.

### Student and Parent Surveys

The *WV GEAR UP Student Survey* and *WV GEAR UP Parent Survey* were developed and administered from December 2014 to January 2015. During Year 1, we surveyed 2,892 grade 7 students and their parents/guardians, 2,866 grade 8 students and their parents/guardians, and 1,866 grade 12 students (N = 7,624). Ultimately, 6,320 students completed the survey (i.e., 2,525 in grade 7, 2,486 in grade 8, and 1,309 in grade 12). The total number of parent/guardian surveys returned was 2,545 (1,383 for grade 7 and 1,162 for grade 8). Combining the grade 7 and grade 12 returned student surveys, as required for Annual Performance Reporting (APR), yielded an overall student survey response rate of approximately 81% for students served by the program during Year 1. The grade 7 parent/guardian response rate, also required for APR was 47.8%.

### School Personnel Survey

The *WV GEAR UP School Personnel Survey* was administered from May to June 2015 to all grade 6-12 teachers, counselors, site coordinators, and school administrators employed in WV GEAR UP schools. A total of 800 (N=800) individuals responded to the survey, with the majority reporting that they were teachers (89.5%); 6.0% were administrators, and 4.5% were counselors. Most respondents reported serving students in the middle grades (i.e., grades 6-8). Slightly fewer served students in high school grades (i.e., grades 9-12).

### Site and County Coordinator Focus Group Interviews

*WV GEAR UP Site and County Coordinator Focus Group Interview Guides* were developed and administered in May 2015. Interview participants included a blend of site coordinators working in schools serving cohort, priority, or both cohort and priority students, and a mix of both site and county coordinators from the three regions served by WV GEAR UP (Central, Southern, and

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<sup>1</sup> Boone, Fayette, Mason, Mercer, Mingo, Nicholas, Summers, Webster, Wirt, and Wyoming

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Southwestern). Ultimately, we interviewed 23 site coordinators in three groups of 5-9 individuals. Of the ten county coordinators involved in West Virginia GEAR UP during Year 1, we interviewed half (N=5).

## Findings

### Implementation

#### *Faculty Participation in GEAR UP Events/Activities*

More than half of all school personnel surveyed (52.7%) reported at least some participation in GEAR UP activities during Year 1. This included approximately half of all teachers surveyed and more than 70% of administrators and counselors. Of those who provided specific details about their participation, most faculty mentioned participating in college visits or tutoring activities. Of those who indicated no involvement in GEAR UP, several noted the mid-year start of the new grant as the primary reason. A majority of faculty members who were surveyed reported that they received adequate support through GEAR UP during Year 1 (60%).

#### *Services Provided to Students and Families*

**Tutoring.** Almost 80% of school personnel who were surveyed during Year 1 reported being aware of tutoring services provided in their schools as part of WV GEAR UP. Both county and site coordinators provided examples of how GEAR UP supported these services. For example, some noted using iPad tutoring software and hiring new staff to assist students during class rather than after-school. Site coordinators observed that GEAR UP-supported tutoring added value by helping to target at-risk or failing students and redirecting them back on track academically. One minor concern noted by some focus group respondents was that tutoring offerings may have overemphasized mathematics and English/language arts, potentially deterring some students who thought their primary weaknesses were in other content areas (e.g., science, social studies).

#### *Most Common Year 1 Services Provided through GEAR UP*

1. *Tutoring*
2. *College Visits*
3. *Websites and Technology*
4. *Financial Aid/Other Workshops*
5. *Guest Speakers*

**College Visits.** Site coordinators identified college visits as among the most well-received, effective, and commonly offered services during Year 1. These visits were also among the most commonly cited GEAR UP activities when school personnel were asked to describe those that were most helpful in supporting a college-going culture (CGC). Respondents said that students had heightened enthusiasm after visiting colleges and that these events had great potential to be transformative experiences. Notably, both student and parent surveys revealed great interest in additional opportunities to participate in such visits in the future.

*GEAR UP-supported college visits  
have the potential to be  
transformative experiences for  
students.*

**Websites and Technology.** Most participants agreed that the use of the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV) website was a worthwhile stand-alone activity for students. Others noted using CFWV or other technology resources within classes as a supplemental activity.

**Financial Aid and Other Workshops.** Parents were mentioned by site coordinators both as attendees of financial aid workshops and as speakers who attended such workshops to talk about their professions. As with college visits, school personnel ranked this kind of activity among the most helpful when asked which GEAR UP events were supportive of building a CGC in their schools. Notably, large percentages of both parents and students indicated via Year 1 surveys that they would like more information about financial aid/scholarships.

**Guest Speakers.** County and site coordinators noted that guest speakers were helpful in engaging and informing seniors about college or other postsecondary education options. They described multiple opportunities for students and parents to hear from college students and other individuals, such as admissions representatives.

### ***Community, University/College, and Parent Involvement***

**Community Members.** Site and county coordinators indicated they experienced varying degrees of success in building community partnerships in Year 1, with some benefiting from previous partnerships and others hindered by a lack of thriving businesses to call upon in their communities. All county coordinators indicated that they had held at least one College Access and Success Advisory Council meeting as of May 2015, typically centered on promoting FAFSA awareness and increasing application numbers for high school students. Food and catering partnerships were the most frequently mentioned community ties, with these local businesses cited as being among the strongest financial supporters of GEAR UP events.

*Three factors can impact successful community, university/college, and parent relationships:*

1. *Existing Relationships*
2. *Proximity/Geography*
3. *Local Economy and Culture*

**University and College Partners.** Site coordinators reported that most interactions with university and college partners concerned setting up college visits, but also mentioned receiving assistance during college application week and plans for future joint ventures. They reported that smaller colleges—state and community—were often very proactive in building partnerships and offered customized attention during college visits, from which students benefitted. Most respondents reported just beginning to build partnerships, but described positive initial results. When asked about barriers, some respondents noted concerns about the actual, often considerable physical distance to “local” colleges and universities.

**Parents.** Site and county coordinators reported good parent attendance at some events, especially the annual kick-off event, and the extensive involvement of some parents in school activities. A number of site coordinators reported success with catering and aligning events with other (unrelated) school activities or performances as incentives for parents to attend events. While some respondents expressed disappointment about parent involvement, they remained optimistic that it would turn around as GEAR UP gets underway. When describing barriers to parent involvement, some respondents identified scheduling or weather conflicts. When we surveyed parents early in Year 1, we found a large majority appeared excited about GEAR UP, indicating they wanted more information about how they could participate in GEAR UP events at their child’s school.

## Outcomes

### **Educational Goals and Academic Confidence.**

Approximately 94% of grade 7 students and 90% of grade 12 students indicate they plan to continue their education after college. Among the small percentage of students who did not aspire to attain additional education after high school, several cited a desire to join the military, to enter the workforce, or were concerned about the costs of higher education. Notably, among grade 12 students who indicated they planned to continue their education after high school, a great majority noted they had either completed, or planned to complete FAFSA (75%), SAT/ACT (84%), and a college application (85%).

*Students and parents hold high aspirations and expectations. Furthermore, students are confident in their academic ability. Additional support may be necessary, however, to help students feel confident in STEM areas.*

Students in both grades also reported high levels of confidence in their own academic abilities across multiple content areas, with grade 7 students slightly more confident than grade 12 students. While still highly rated, students in both grades tended to report the least confidence in their mathematics, science, and study skills, and were most confident in their English/language arts skills.

**Educational Aspirations/Expectations.** More than two-thirds of grade 7 and grade 12 students (~69%) indicated they aspired to attain a four-year college degree or more education after completing high school. Notably, we found students' expectations to be slightly lower than their aspirations. Parents held similarly high aspirations and expectations for their children's future education. Nearly all parents (92%) agreed that attending college is important to their child's career goals and future and 83% disagreed that it was too early to think about their child going to college.

*Parents/guardians feel that college is important to their child's future and believe in their ability to afford various public college options in WV. However, few understand the actual costs of tuition, especially those parents/guardians without degrees.*

### **College Entrance Requirements, Costs, and Financial Aid**

**General Knowledge.** Grade 12 students were understandably more likely than grade 7 students to indicate they have begun having conversations at school about financial aid and college entrance requirements. Parents of grade 7 students, however, almost universally indicated that no one from their child's school or GEAR UP had talked with them about these topics (91%). Nevertheless, parents and students both reported feeling generally

knowledgeable about both topics.

**Affordability and Cost.** Between approximately 60% and 75% of parents and students believed various public college options in West Virginia were either probably or definitely affordable using their family resources. However, surveys also revealed few respondents could accurately estimate the actual costs of tuition. Those parents with college degrees were less likely than those without degrees to drastically over- or under-estimate these costs.



**Knowledge about Specific Postsecondary Education and Financial Aid Topics.** All respondents, regardless of their role, reported having the greatest confidence in their knowledge about the importance and benefits of college and high school graduation requirements and the least confidence in their knowledge of specific financial aid topics (e.g., college savings/529 plans, federal work study options, scholarships, grants, and loans). Indeed, almost half of all grade 7 parents surveyed indicated being not at all aware of federal work study and college savings/529 plans. Among school personnel, we found teachers thought they were less knowledgeable than counselors or principals related to these topics.

*Parents, students, and faculty members all report being knowledgeable about the importance and benefits of college and appear to understand high school graduation requirements. However, all groups lack confidence about their knowledge of financial aid topics.*

**Postsecondary Education-Related Information Sources.** Parents and students cited the importance of family members in gathering information about postsecondary education options. College/university websites were also important sources. Grade 12 students noted school counselors to be an additional resource. Notably, parents did not rate many sources as being particularly useful.

**Additional Supports.** More than half of all grade 7 and grade 12 students stated they were interested in more opportunities to participate in college visits. Parents and students were also interested in information about financial aid/scholarships, college entrance requirements, and GEAR UP events.

*Two components of college-going culture:*

1. *Rigor/Expectations: the degree to which schools hold high expectations for students and for teachers to support academic achievement.*
2. *Visual Cues/Material Resources: the degree to which schools integrate clear messaging and provide material resources related to college-going.*

**College-Going Culture.** This evaluation of GEAR UP revealed two distinct components of CGC, one related to the degree of rigor/expectations upheld by schools, and another reflecting the visual cues/material resources devoted to postsecondary education. We found school personnel consistently rated the first component higher than the second.

Not surprisingly, when compared to teachers, counselors were found to be more likely to believe that their schools had a well-developed CGC, and high school personnel were also more likely than middle school personnel to report an effective CGC in their school. Personnel consistently reported that schools are

better at creating an academically appropriate curriculum and high expectations than at providing a visually stimulating environment that conveys CGC messaging complete with material support and resources. The Year 1 evaluation provides an interesting baseline from which to track the evolution of these components of CGC in participating schools.

## Impact

As this was the first year of WV GEAR UP, we asked respondents to describe what they perceived to be the potential future impact of GEAR UP. Site and county coordinators pointed to a variety of college-related indicators, such as increased college acceptance, enrollment, and retention rates. Additionally, respondents asserted that if students showed interest in and awareness of post-high school options, that would prove GEAR UP had succeeded. Lastly, school personnel as well as coordinators emphasized that GEAR UP should strive to impact parent and community involvement in college-related events and transform the culture of communities related to college-going.

## Sustainability

In the first year of GEAR UP we are only beginning to address sustainability. Nevertheless, we found 63% of school personnel agreed that GEAR UP activities were likely to be sustained after the grant. Administrators and counselors were more likely than teachers to strongly agree about the prospects for sustainability. This is probably partially attributable to the fact that many teachers have not yet been involved in GEAR UP activities in their schools. Overall, survey comments showed some initial concern about the absence of funding when GEAR UP ends, especially funding for activities like college visits. Initial successes and challenges around sustainability were also reported in the context of building teacher and community buy-in to create a lasting CGC. Lastly, a variety of community factors such as declining employment rates, drug use, and geographical barriers to potential partnerships were noted as potential barriers to sustainability and overall program success. WV GEAR UP can play an important role in helping program staff and participants plan strategies to mitigate these potential barriers.

## Recommendations

1. Continue to capitalize upon and foster the positive aspirations and expectations of students and parents and the excitement surrounding WV GEAR UP. These factors are critical to promoting buy-in, achieving intended outcomes, and supporting program sustainability.
2. Work closely with families. They are an important information source for students related to postsecondary education. Expand the definition of family beyond parents/guardians. Include siblings and other family members in events.
3. Focus on math, science, and study skills when planning academic supports for students. Students are least confident in these areas, critical to success in college and the workplace.
4. Continue to increase knowledge about college costs and financial aid options among students and parents. Do so by first building knowledge among school faculty. They have daily contact with students and family members.
5. Encourage county and site coordinators to share effective strategies for engaging faculty members in GEAR UP activities, fostering community support, and building a school-wide CGC.
6. Continue to refine data collection instruments, and use information from the external evaluation to plan targeted support services that address the needs of parents, students, school faculty, and county staff.