



Site and County Coordinator
Focus Group Memo

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Overview

ICF conducted two focus groups with 24 West Virginia GEAR UP (WV GEAR UP) site coordinators and one focus group with five county coordinators in April 2020 to gain their perceptions of the program and its operation during the 2019-2020 school year. This memo provides a high-level overview of findings with a focus on implementation and sustainability. These include topics such as coordinator roles and responsibilities, college partners, academic assistance, and college awareness activities. It also provides early input from coordinators on the operation of GEAR UP during the COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020. After the findings, the memo provides some recommendations for the future.

This data collection was conducted as part of ICF's Year 6 evaluation of WV GEAR UP. It builds on findings from prior-year focus groups with site and county coordinators and reflects ICF's annual goal to provide qualitative data on the operation of GEAR UP as cohort students move closer to high school graduation.

Prior to the April meeting, ICF developed a detailed focus group protocol with input from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WV HEPC), and this protocol gained approval from ICF's Institutional Research Board. ICF staff conducted all focus groups virtually due to stay-at-home orders and related concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. ICF used the Microsoft Teams platform to conduct these groups as this platform met the privacy and security requirements of ICF's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. As some coordinators lacked the ability to have audio and/or video due to connectivity concerns, participants sometimes used Microsoft Team chat functions to answer focus group questions. ICF then coded all of this source material under themes such as: school buy-in, development of college-going culture, college visits and related activities, parent participation, participation by colleges and universities, and coordinator satisfaction. Additional analysis involved looking for common threads across the staff members and identifying areas of consensus and disagreement. Finally, ICF identified pertinent comments from participants that illustrate findings from this memo.

Overall, site and county coordinators expressed largely similar views about the operation of the program; as a result, ICF uses the term "coordinators" to encompass the views of both groups. In cases where there may be different opinions between the two groups, the memo specifically identifies whether the views are held by a site coordinator or county coordinator.

Implementation/Buy-In

Most said they saw stronger buy-in among students, parents, and teachers during the 2019-2020 school year prior to the COVID-19 closings. Most schools continued to offer the Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs) program, college visits, guest speakers and the Student Success Societies (SSS) mentoring initiative. Some coordinators cited up to three SSS groups active at individual schools. At one high school, SSS seniors created a tutoring program to help 6th and 7th graders in math. GEAR UP also added a range of senior-focused activities including financial aid/FAFSA workshops, career days and College Application Week. Reflecting on these

activities, many coordinators said students seemed more interested this year, as indicated by these comments:

Buy-in was better this year because students knew everything we focused on was relevant to them this year. I had more participation from students and parents overall.

Our students have been great about participating and they seemed even more invested this year as seniors.

Some coordinators said more teachers in the building also participated in GEAR UP. One coordinator noted that College Application Week at the school included bingo games about college topics and events where students asked teachers about career and college. Said one:

I have been able to strengthen my staff participation, especially in regards to College Application Week and FAFSA completion. My staff has stepped up and assisted me in these events.

Another activity considered effective, even with just a small number of students, was SAT and ACT prep. One coordinator had several students who newly qualified for the Promise Scholarship after participating in after-school tutoring for the SAT.

A minority of site coordinators thought student interest had declined compared to past years, perhaps due to senioritis, jobs and too many other competing activities. Given these challenges, one noted that GEAR UP has “had to get much more creative in getting students to participate.” Two noted that they had one group of interested students and another with little or no interest. “It continues to go well with those who choose to be engaged,” this site coordinator said.

Communication with State and County Staff

Similar to past year’s findings, site and county coordinators expressed high levels of satisfaction with WV HEPC. Site coordinators noted that they receive at least weekly emails from WV HEPC and that staff are quick to respond to questions.

Site coordinators had mixed views of their GEAR UP county coordinators but were generally more positive about this relationship than in past years. Most seemed to communicate with the county coordinator about once a month, often by phone or email. One noted that she contacts the county coordinator “only when I need to,” while another said her coordinator “is always available to answer my questions by email and phone.” At least one county coordinator led the district’s secondary schools and so “had a strong interest in our program,” a site coordinator said. For their part, county coordinators had generally high praise for the work of site coordinators, who they believed were the critical linchpin of the program.

Both site and county coordinators had strong praise for many of their postsecondary partners, some of whom attended school events such as FAFSA nights, College Decision Days, dual credit programs, and college fairs. They cited participants such as Concord University, Bluefield State College, Marshall University and Southern West Virginia CTC. Glenville State College provided a member of their financial aid department to help students and their families complete the FAFSA. Said one coordinator of college partners:

Many of them make specialized visits to my school and speak with the students, answer questions and offer free applications to complete.

Parent Involvement

Several coordinators believed that parent involvement increased as students neared high school graduation. They said this may be due to questions about college and financial aid and events such as College Application Week. One school offered a Life of a Senior event in fall 2019 that drew many parents. Said one: "Parents are more engaged this year than they have been in the past."

Most cited an active group of parents at their schools who attend financial aid workshops and college events although it may be only a small group. Such views were reflected in these comments:

We have a core group of about 20 GEAR UP parents who have supported us and attended events.

We have 50% full support and participation. The other 50% are simply not able to be present or engaged due to other commitments.

Hard-to-reach parents often engage only at mandatory events they must attend, such as a required meeting about a summer camp. As one noted:

Some parents are very involved where others don't seem to care and let the students figure stuff out on their own.

It is always a challenge to get parent participation, especially when students reach the high school level.

One of the greatest concerns among coordinators is that families have little interest in their child attending college. Even if they have an interest, parents lack understanding of the process, making it more challenging in planning for college.

College-Related Activities

Coordinators cited a variety of strategies to help students learn about colleges. Coordinators described Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs) and Student Success Societies (SSS) as important ways to bring together students to talk about these issues. One-to-one counseling also has grown as important for seniors. College visits also are important; at one school, seniors had the opportunity to visit 10 different colleges.

The college visits are amazing opportunities for students that many would not get a chance to do otherwise.

One coordinator also said that, over time, the GEAR UP parent and student surveys have helped increase awareness about college entrance requirements and costs. Several identified the College Foundation of West Virginia website as an important tool.

Many also cited College Decision Day as a popular and essential GEAR UP activity where schools honor students for their college and/or career choices, often with family members in

attendance. This in-person activity was one of the major casualties of the COVID-19 situation. However, many schools organized virtual decision days via Facebook or other platforms or by uploading videos to a school district website where students talk about their decisions.

At one school, GEAR UP sponsored yard signs for students showing the college they plan to attend. The site coordinator and teachers are going to each student's house to take a picture and post it on social media. A few schools have created an Adopt a Senior event, where faculty at every school in the county – plus some community members – are assigned one senior to remain in contact with as they make their post-high school decisions. A county coordinator called it “a tremendous success.”

Some site coordinators also have made home visits to drop off material such as a transcript or a scholarship application. They also email and call students. However, site coordinators have found that some students do not have current phone numbers. As a result, it is clear that some postsecondary momentum has ground to a halt, although outreach continues. As two noted:

The best way I have found to get seniors and parents' attention is to post stuff on their senior class page. It gets the students' and the parents' attention.

We send cards, encouragement, gifts, so that they know we are still behind them as they move forward even though we aren't seeing them face to face.

College-Going Culture

Most coordinators believed that GEAR UP had improved the college-going climate of their schools over the life of the grant. One noted how the college-going rate has increased since the school joined GEAR UP. Another cited the value of college visits as well as simple activities such as GEAR UP and college posters displayed prominently throughout the building. Activities such as “Why I Chose” a specific college also have proved effective to build a school climate conducive to future postsecondary study. These comments were indicative of the view of coordinators:

There is a college-going culture in both of our high schools. Students know that post-secondary education is a must whether they are going to a four year, two year, or certificate program.

The culture definitely has improved with GEAR UP, but we still have room to grow. I think many students who wouldn't have even considered it as an option now see it as possible.

A few mentioned that they worry what will happen after GEAR UP ends. Prior to GEAR UP, only students with clear interest in postsecondary study received assistance, one site coordinator noted. Yet a county coordinator believed that teacher support has continued to increase every year, a trend that bodes well for the future.

Success in the Site Coordinator Role

Site coordinators described success in two major ways, a combination of meeting tangible goals and the ability to achieve specific, individual success stories. Such progress can be reflected in a stronger college-going culture at a school and in the enthusiasm of teachers, GEAR UP students, and younger students who are not in the GEAR UP cohort. As one noted:

I see students going to college who would not have gone before. We have 11th graders wanting to visit colleges and complete the FAFSA. To me this defines success.

County coordinators said success largely depends on the hard work of site coordinators. For their part, site coordinators said they have learned over time how best to design GEAR UP activities. One site coordinator explained her process to build more effective programs over time:

I feel like I've made improvements each year that I have been involved with this group of seniors since 7th grade. I've learned what events work best and what times to do those events. I have learned how to better reach out and talk with the students and make an impact on their decisions to continue their education after high school.

Transition Services

Prior to the COVID-19 closings, some site coordinators had established contact with GEAR UP transition staff working at six of the state's public colleges and universities. One noted that the transition staff member from Concord University visited a high school in spring 2020 and others have connected via email. Looking ahead to students' needs in fall 2020, site coordinators agreed that GEAR UP cohort students could benefit the most from these activities during their first year of college:

- Tutoring
- Time management workshops
- Financial literacy
- Activities to promote wellness and mental health
- A calendar with key due dates, including for renewing financial aid and scholarships
- One-to-one check-ins with GEAR UP.

One coordinator said students need "someone they know by name who they can talk to" about the adjustment to college. Another site coordinator plans a more pro-active approach, visiting recent high school graduates at their college or university.

I plan on going to visit college campuses in September to see how students are doing and make sure they know who their GEAR UP transition coordinator is.

Impact and Sustainability

Coordinators generally agreed that GEAR UP will have a great impact on cohort students with some residual benefits for schools going forward. Most believed one impact of GEAR UP is an improvement in the school's college-going culture, something that may carry forward into the future. This improvement is evident, they said, through more college conversations in the halls,

posters around the school, and the more frequent announcements and events about college activities. Said one county coordinator:

I think GEAR UP has been fabulous. They always seem to be looking at new and creative ways to support us.

Most believed they can sustain some activities particularly low-cost events such as College Decision Day, financial aid/FAFSA workshops and College Application Week. Teachers and counselors now have training to conduct most of these activities, they said. Most did not believe or were unsure whether they could continue tutoring or mentoring initiatives while some thought college visits, despite their value, may be too costly to afford:

Our biggest challenge would be the college visits and securing funds to make that possible.

We can sustain almost everything except actual college visits. We will not have money to continue those and with the shortage of bus drivers were limited anyway.

However, at least two site coordinators thought they would pursue outside funding sources to continue college field trips. One planned to approach community agencies while another wants to pursue grant funding.

While site coordinators were cautiously optimistic about the sustainability of some GEAR UP activities, county coordinators generally expressed more certainty that activities would continue. Since county coordinators are typically central office administrators, their optimism may bode well for continuation after the current grant ends although it also may reflect their distance from actual implementation of the program. Typical were these comments from county coordinators:

Without funding through the grant, there will be some changes. However, some activities will be sustained either because of the tradition of it or because of its direct value.

We will continue college visits, financial aid workshops, college signing day, etc. We are committed to sustaining the activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As GEAR UP cohort students approach high school graduation, coordinators expressed positive views about the operation of the program and its impact on schools. Programs such as SSS, HEROs, and financial aid workshops received praise for motivating students and keeping them on a path to enroll in college. While parent involvement appeared uneven, some site coordinators were able to identify a group of active parents and family members engaged in their child's future. Many also believed that GEAR UP had helped improve college-going culture. On administration of the program, site coordinators were pleased with the work of WV HEPC and expressed more positive views about the work of county coordinators compared with focus groups earlier in this grant cycle.

Such developments are positive indicators for the sustainability of some GEAR UP activities as the program prepares a transition to its next phase of success. Site coordinators indicated that they hope to continue lower-cost services after the end of grant funding, although costlier services such as college visits may be more difficult to sustain. County coordinators expressed more optimism about sustainability, a noteworthy finding as these staff members often hold high

positions within a district. Given these factors, one recommendation is for each school or district to develop a sustainability plan that identifies activities for continuation, designates individual champions or a team to carry out the vision, and addresses possible strategies to overcome potential barriers such as cost. With GEAR UP continuing for priority high school seniors in the 2020-2021, site coordinators should have additional time to plan for sustainability after the COVID-19 challenges.

Through county coordinators, GEAR UP has had an opportunity to promote district-wide buy-in to the program at minimal cost. One option for the future may be for districts to continue to designate these officials as college and career resource leaders who work with individual schools to ensure the continuation of a college-is-possible message. This approach could help schools sustain a positive college-going culture within the district.

Finally, some site coordinators have indicated they want to reach out to GEAR UP cohort students as they enter postsecondary education next fall. Such contact could be important as GEAR UP and public colleges and universities both emerge from COVID-19-related closings. WV GEAR UP may benefit from further communication between site coordinators and college transition staff to ensure a smooth transition of services for the cohort. Site coordinators and transition staff could interact virtually or in person, when available, to help students navigate what may be a challenging year as COVID-19 issues and online learning add uncertainty to the transition of low-income students from high school to college.