



**Site and County Coordinator  
Focus Group Memo**

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## I. Overview

ICF conducted two focus groups with 19 West Virginia GEAR UP (WV GEAR UP) site coordinators and one focus group with three county coordinators in May 2021 to gain their perceptions of the program and its operation during the 2020–21 school year. This memo provides a high-level overview of findings with a focus on implementation, sustainability, and the impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic during this period. Topics included student and parent activities, barriers to participation, college partners, academic assistance, and college awareness activities. Focus group participants also provided extensive input on GEAR UP during the pandemic, which impacted nearly all aspects of their GEAR UP responsibilities and required them to work with students remotely when schools were largely closed for in-person learning during the first half of the year. After the findings, the memo provides some recommendations for the future.

This data collection was conducted as part of ICF's Year 7 evaluation of WV GEAR UP. It builds on findings from prior-year focus groups with site and county coordinators. It also reflects ICF's annual goal to provide qualitative data on the operation of GEAR UP, in this case during the seventh year of operation after cohort students have graduated high school. During this final year of the grant, WV GEAR UP served senior priority students, offering one year of assistance to help them make decisions about college and career.

Prior to this data collection, 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, with WV HEPC assistance, due to concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants consented to participate, and all focus groups were recorded. ICF then coded transcriptions of the audio recordings under themes such as: implementation, impact and sustainability, operation during COVID-19, and major successes or challenges.

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 in which 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.

## II. Findings

### 1. Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted a major influence on all factors of GEAR UP service delivery during the 2020–21 school year. Based on extensive coordinator comments, the pandemic had a significant effect on in-person schooling, GEAR UP outreach and services, college partners, parent involvement, and student engagement. This section contains subsections based on these themes.

#### 1.1 School Schedules and Remote Learning

Given the tremendous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, site coordinators said that the resulting move to remote and hybrid learning presented challenges not only for GEAR UP

but also for participating schools. One consistent challenge was lack of Internet access for students at home, which forced schools to arrange for students and families to pick up paper packets for academic assignments.

Even after schools resumed in-person learning three or more days a week, students and staff had to quarantine at home if exposed to the virus, and as a result, there was often little face-to-face interaction even with schools in session. Coordinators said that while most schools offered some remote GEAR UP events, attendance and access was often less than optimal. College representatives could not visit high schools for much of the year, and college visits were stopped in favor of virtual options. As a result, most coordinators said high school seniors in 2020–21 had less access to college awareness activities. Said two site coordinators:

*I guess they just don't even really know what's out there—the opportunities—like they normally would.*

*I can't say that they were definitely on that [college] path before the pandemic. I'm just saying the pandemic has really made it harder for us to lure them down that path because all of the stuff that we do, normally, we just weren't able to do it to the extent we typically do.*

The isolation caused by the pandemic also brought concerns. A few site coordinators said mental health was a challenge for some students, as was the adjustment to online classes. As one coordinator said, students were fatigued by online classes and in many ways “desensitized” to the virtual world.

*They've been living in a virtual world most of their lives with video games, television—everything at their fingertips. I think for this group and for a lot of the kids behind them, it's that personal touch, physically being there, that is what's needed because they've grown up in the virtual world.*

Despite these challenges, county coordinators, in particular, thought there were some benefits as GEAR UP staff experimented with new strategies and technologies to reach students and parents. These coordinators said the pandemic forced site coordinators to “think out of the box” and use technology to maintain contact. As one stated:

*I think the silver lining is that it's forced us to find new ways to do things. And we've figured out it's not so bad. We can still make it through and we just have to do it differently and be willing to change.*

## 1.2 GEAR UP Outreach and Services

Coordinators indicated that students used the West Virginia Virtual Platform to attend school during the first semester of the 2020–21 year. In the second semester, schools offered in-person classes, some as often as four or five days per week. However, several site coordinators believed that 15% to 30% of students elected to remain virtual after this resumption of in-person classes. Reaching these students often proved difficult, as one coordinator stated:

*It's so much more challenging to reach out, and you've had to be very creative and tech-savvy this year to try any way to communicate with them. And with that,*

*it's still a challenge... Even your strong academic students, they've just been very removed and complacent.*

Some of those who returned to school also proved hard to reach about the idea of planning for college. For these students, remote learning was difficult and pandemic-related restrictions affected motivation. As a result, many site coordinators believed college application numbers were down compared to past years. These comments from coordinators echoed the views of many:

*They were virtual for the first half of the year and for some it wasn't a good experience. It's hard to motivate them to think college now.*

*We essentially did lose them within those few months. I can name at least a quarter of my seniors that would have been on a collegiate path that are now not.*

Two coordinators said that they believed lack of interest in college occurred because some students are planning to take gap years in 2021–22 to figure out what to do next. Another potential barrier may be transportation, a few noted. With incomes declining, a family may have only one car, which complicates the situation for GEAR UP students who would commute to a community college next year.

*When your family has just one vehicle, how is the child going to get to and from school? WV Invests may offer money for community college, but how do you get there without a car?*

Despite these views, site coordinators continued to work actively with students who showed an interest in postsecondary study next year. To address outreach challenges, they hosted remote events via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. One main example across GEAR UP was College Decision Day, held virtually due to health concerns and crowd limitations. Tutoring services also often took place virtually through tutor.com or other means. One coordinator cited success with virtual tutoring via Microsoft Teams, as students may have felt less pressure working with a virtual tutor than staying after school to work with a teacher. Another emerging theme was support for outdoor events, particularly in spring 2021. Several coordinators purchased projectors and screens to hold outdoor college-themed events.

Nonetheless, some coordinators said their schools did not allow club meetings during the pandemic. As a result, they were not able to offer the Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs) program or Student Success Societies mentoring activities as they would have done during a normal year.

### 1.3 College Partners

Despite challenges in serving students during the pandemic, most coordinators praised the work of colleges and universities who served as valuable partners this year. High schools generally did not allow any visitors until late spring, which prompted some creativity. For one school, BridgeValley Career and Technical College conducted an outreach event in a parking lot to interact with potential students and their families.

*BridgeValley was the first outsider that they've seen, and students were incredibly excited.*

Coordinators credited Concord University and Bluefield State College for helping with various Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college application events. One coordinator related how, after school reopened, Glenville State College regularly sent a financial aid counselor to the school to work one-to-one with seniors.

*I would pull students into my room, and she would sit in the back, and help them do their FAFSA and answer any questions they had.*

Near the end of the school year, some high schools did start allowing visits by college admissions staff, often during lunchtime. Postsecondary institutions also participated in virtual College Decision Days. Said one county coordinator:

*It seems like any time they have something that they need them to be a part of, they're jumping on it and coming in.*

## 1.4 Student Employment

Many site coordinators indicated they had less access to students than in previous years, first due to the pandemic and then because some students chose to work while school operated remotely. Many coordinators knew students who decided to stay virtual for all of spring 2021 so they could continue working instead of attending school in person. At one school, the coordinator said only about 80%–85% of seniors may graduate this year, instead of the typical 93% mark, as some students focused on jobs instead of academics. One short-term issue from this trend was that students became hard to reach. Said one coordinator:

*In a lot of ways, they've been out of school for a year now, a lot of them have picked up full-time jobs, so they're just more removed, less accessible.*

One immediate concern was that some students who took jobs during the pandemic rarely attended school in spring 2021 and were at risk of failing. Others might only show up for classes required to graduate, such as English or Civics, some coordinators indicated:

*They come in for just 1–3 periods a day. Whoever needed to work, had to work.*

*Our employers locally are desperate for entry-level workers and these kids can pick up a lot of work hours. I think they feel pretty set for now. They're not thinking long term or something I want to do the rest of my life. But they don't see any further training after high school or even completing high school.*

One site coordinator said she reached out not only to GEAR UP students but also to their employers if students were failing classes and at risk of not graduating. In some of these cases, the coordinator, employer, and student worked out a schedule so that students could do what they needed to graduate. At another school, a coordinator said, counselors and a social worker performed similar outreach with employers to help failing students.

In a more extreme case, one coordinator noted that a few students had taken jobs in the mines during the pandemic. At that point, working out a schedule to balance work and school was extremely difficult.

*How do you try to convince them to quit making that big money and come back when we returned to in person?*

At another school, re-opening meant that students attended school every other day. But some students did not adjust their work schedules accordingly, this coordinator said. Overall, the switch to work jeopardized the academic standing of some students and often overwhelmed those who monitor attendance.

*I would say that's probably the number one thing with seniors this year is trying to change that mindset of going to work.*

## 1.5 Parent Involvement

Parents were unable to attend in-person events for much of the academic year due to COVID-19 closures and restrictions on school visitors once schools reopened. However, coordinators said they sought to stay in touch via phone calls and electronic messaging, with limited success. Said one county coordinator:

*They didn't know how to get involved with this remote learning as much. We tried to communicate and put everything out with phone calls, notices, Facebook posts, all those things. But they seem to trust their kids to tell them things more than wanting to get involved.*

However, the FAFSA sometimes was a motivator behind parent involvement, as GEAR UP helped families complete this important financial aid form. A coordinator at one school reported success with a FAFSA session via Zoom in fall 2020 that attracted 12 to 15 parents. Other schools offered FAFSA assistance such as a drive-through service in a parking lot so that parents did not have to come into the school building. Once schools reopened, several coordinators allowed parents to make appointments for help with completing the form and held a FAFSA Day on site.

A small number of coordinators said parent involvement improved since the resumption of in-person instruction. They said that, in addition to FAFSA assistance, they had more back-and-forth communication between coordinators and parents in the spring as seniors moved closer to graduation and some aspects of school returned to normal.

## 2. Working With Other GEAR UP Staff

Along with their comments on COVID, coordinators responded to several queries regarding their satisfaction with communication, both with WV HEPC and with other GEAR UP staff. Overall, both site and county coordinators praised the work of WV HEPC to maintain contact during the 2020–21 academic year. As one noted, WV HEPC “has been pretty understanding and supportive.” However, several mentioned that they missed the camaraderie and conversations that would take place through the usual in-person meetings held during Years 1-6.

In addition, the three county coordinators interviewed were generally more upbeat than site coordinators about efforts to reach students this past year. As county coordinators may have had less daily contact with students, their view may be based largely on seeing the efforts of site coordinators to maintain contact. For example, one county coordinator noted how hard site coordinators this year have worked to “overcome the crisis and promote college.” Said another county coordinator:

*We're definitely outside of our box and I think the silver lining is that it's forced us to find new ways to do things. And we've figured out that, 'Hey, it's not so bad. We can still make it through this and we just have to do it differently and be willing to change.'*

Another county coordinator believed that remote learning benefited some students, giving them more comfort and confidence. This coordinator believed these new skills will position students well for their post-high school experiences.

Site coordinators had generally positive views of the county coordinators, although some reported less contact than in past years. At some sites, meetings that used to occur in person became virtual, while some issues simply were resolved via email.

### 3. Sustainability and Impact

Despite the challenges of the past academic year, most site coordinators praised GEAR UP's work throughout the seven-year grant. Experienced coordinators said that they gained new knowledge about college, and this led to increased school capacity to provide postsecondary advice and counseling. All coordinators believed that the program impacted the college-going culture in a positive way. From college visits and College Decision Days to more college discussions in the classroom, the program has had a strong net positive effect, they said. Looking across the life of the grant, these coordinators noted the impact of the program:

*I think kids have found a lot of success and encouragement, and just a lot of good things through this project.*

*It's been a wonderful addition to [name of] county and what it's done for a lot of kids through the years has just been amazing. We're definitely going to miss it and hopefully it'll come back around. But it's definitely been a blessing to have it in our county."*

*It's a wonderful program. You take out even this year and all the craziness that it's had, the GEAR UP program is a phenomenal program. And I know my kids are better for it here.*

*I think my takeaway lesson from GEAR UP in my years at [school] is the knowledge and exposure we can offer kids really does make a difference even when it doesn't feel like it.*

Most coordinators believed schools will sustain College Decision Day, FAFSA assistance, and possibly some career events. However, they were less sure about the ability to provide in-person college visits, due to their cost. While virtual visits remain an affordable option, some believed they are not as beneficial as in-person visits.

One coordinator noted how students at the school have become accustomed to receiving help with applications for college and scholarships. The coordinator plans to continue this work with or without GEAR UP funding. Another coordinator suggested that GEAR UP develop a calendar of events for school counselors that include items from the GEAR UP workplan—this would provide a blueprint for schools going forward after the end of the grant.



### III. Conclusion and Recommendations

WV GEAR UP coordinators provided services in a challenging environment during the 2020–21 year, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most schools were remote for the first half of the year, only returning to in-person classes during the second semester. As a result, many activities were held virtually with coordinators improvising to make sure that senior priority students had access to services. Many coordinators cited lower participation this school year. One factor behind this trend is that some students took jobs while school was 100% remote, and not all returned to schools when they reopened. Despite these challenges, coordinators continued to offer services that included virtual college visits, FAFSA assistance, and college advising.

With the WV GEAR UP grant set to end in fall 2021, coordinators believed that, over its seven-year lifespan, the program had made many positive contributions to its high-poverty schools. Most believed that GEAR UP enhanced college-going culture by raising awareness among students and getting buy-in from teachers and staff. Reflecting on their tenure with the program, many coordinators also said they gained new knowledge about the current college application and financial aid process. Many also believed that their schools would sustain some low-cost GEAR UP activities such as College Decision Day, FAFSA workshops and college application assistance. They were less sure about their ability to continue activities such as in-person college visits due to cost concerns.

Given such challenges, one strategy going forward may be for WV GEAR UP to develop a sustainability checklist so that site coordinators can develop plans prior to the end of the current grant. This one- or two-page checklist could serve as a handy guide for new teachers and counselors to use in planning future college-is-possible activities. By including activities such as College Decision Day or FAFSA workshops, it could serve as a quick way to educate and onboard others (school board members, new administrators) about the most important elements of GEAR UP services.

In a similar vein, WV HEPC could assemble a document of promising practices gleaned from the seven-year grant. The agency could make this document available to new school leaders and others, serving as another way to educate teachers or administrators about practices found effective during the GEAR UP grant.

Despite challenges this year, many site and county coordinators offered praise for the program and said they gained important skills and knowledge to help students plan for their futures. With that in mind, WV HEPC may consider recruiting experienced site and county coordinators to serve as peer leaders for new schools during the initial years of a future grant. These seasoned coordinators have developed a variety of innovative strategies, both pre- and during COVID, and new coordinators would benefit from their insight.

Finally, the perseverance shown by coordinators this year exemplified the excellent work many have done both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. WV HEPC may consider events or celebrations to recognize the work of site and county coordinators so their supervisors and district leaders can learn more about the efforts made during the seven-year grant. Such events also could build enthusiasm for sustaining some GEAR UP activities after the end of the grant.