West Virginia GEAR UP Year 7 Interim Evaluation Report

May 2021

Submitted to:
West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

Submitted by:
ICF External Evaluation Team

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I. Introduction

The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (the Commission) is providing services for the seventh year in its current Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant, which began in 2014 and ends in 2021. GEAR UP goals are to help high school students access and succeed in postsecondary education. In Year 7, the West Virginia (WV) GEAR UP program focused on delivering postsecondary education support services to cohort students from the class of 2020 during their first year after high school. In particular, the WV GEAR UP program provided transition and first-year program staff to serve students from the GEAR UP cohort who enrolled in the following eight West Virginia postsecondary institutions:

- Bluefield State College
- BridgeValley Community and Technical College
- Concord University
- Marshall University
- New River Community and Technical College
- Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College
- West Virginia University
- West Virginia University Institute of Technology

At these WV GEAR UP partner institutions, transition and first-year program staff maintained regular contact with first-year college students from the GEAR UP cohort through virtual or in-person workshops, assistance with academic and personal challenges, and notifications about important dates related to registration, financial aid, and other issues.

The context for delivering postsecondary support services in Year 7 was unique given the substantial disruption to education caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic. Many students completed their classes virtually or in a hybrid instructional format (i.e., partially online and partially in person). Students also largely accessed support services—including GEAR UP—virtually. While many postsecondary students continued to live at home with their families during their first year of postsecondary education, some students opted to live on campus, where they faced social distancing guidelines that presented challenges for becoming acclimated to life on a new campus.

The challenges presented by the pandemic also compounded the existing economic, educational, and public health challenges already faced by the state. For example, while the state experienced a 1.7% decline in total employment between 2016 and 2017 (United States Census Bureau, 2019), the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to further job losses. Specifically, from February 2020 to March 2021, the state lost 37.3K jobs, a decline of 5.2% overall (Ettlinger & Hensley, 2021).

In terms of education, while West Virginia's educational attainment rates were below the U.S. average prior to the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a nationwide decline of 6.8%—including in West Virginia—in fall college enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020 (Causey, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2021).

Further, while West Virginia had the highest rate of death due to drug overdose in the nation prior to the pandemic (51.5 per 100,000 in 2018) (National Center for Health Statistics, 2020),

recent data from show that there has been a 20% increase in fatal drug overdose deaths—the highest number ever recorded in U.S. history in a single year—during the COVID-19 pandemic (McFarling, 2021; NCHS, 2021).

These challenges underscore the importance of the WV GEAR UP grant, the important work of the Commission to promote access to and success in higher education, and the achievements that have been accomplished thus far. For example, the state's four-year high school graduation rate reached an all-time high of 91.4% in 2018–2019, and this rate was 12 percentage points higher than the 2011–12 rate of 79.3% (West Virginia Department of Education, 2020).

In addition, the total number of degrees and credentials awarded at the state's public postsecondary institutions increased by 21.5% from 2009 to 2018 (WVHEPC, 2019). Not only does GEAR UP aim to support these trends in the 10 counties participating in the grant, but the Commission, the West Virginia Community and Technical College System, and the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV), with support of the Lumina Foundation, have put forth a new campaign to boldly increase college access and success statewide. West Virginia's Climb aims to ensure that at least 60% of West Virginians have a postsecondary credential by 2030 (West Virginia's Climb, 2018).

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many of these recent successes, the important accomplishments in recent years demonstrate the potential of college access and success programming to support growth across the state—which is needed now more than ever.

To provide formative and summative feedback regarding progress of the WV GEAR UP program, the Commission contracted with ICF to provide an external evaluation of the program. Using a mixed-method evaluation design, the evaluation team provides feedback on WV GEAR UP implementation, outcomes, impact, and sustainability to the Commission twice per year. The main purpose of this report is to provide updates on the postsecondary experience of GEAR UP primary cohort students who received postsecondary services in 2020–21 during their first year of college. These findings stem from postsecondary student and parent surveys and postsecondary student focus groups. Additional details regarding the surveys and focus groups and associated methodologies are presented in Chapters II and III. Findings are presented in Chapter IV, followed by a discussion of trends (Chapter V) and recommendations for consideration (Chapter VI). Additional findings from data collected and analyzed in Year 7 will be presented in the October 2021 report.

II. Data Sources

This report draws on data collected from students and parents through surveys and interviews. The instruments used to collect these data are described in further detail in this section. In this report, Year 7 refers to the year of the WV GEAR UP grant in which the research took place; it does not mean the seventh year in which such research (such as a postsecondary student survey) was conducted.

1. Year 7 Postsecondary Student Survey

In October 2020, ICF collaborated with the Commission to develop a Postsecondary Student Survey and associated informed consent documents for the Year 7 cohort student group. The Postsecondary Student Survey was organized across five principal sections: (1) About You, (2) Completion of High School, (3) Current Postsecondary Educational Status, (4) College Experience, and (5) Education Future. Of the 44 items developed, ten demographic items were designed to gather background information about respondents and their families; four questions gathered feedback regarding support and preparation for college received in high school; six questions measured students' current educational and enrollment status as well as their perceived support for enrollment; 18 items were developed to understand the students' college experience, perceived postsecondary supports and challenges, communication patterns with counselors, participation in summer activities, study and job related responsibilities, and items about the effects of COVID-19 and lifestyle stresses such as hunger and anxiety; and six items were designed to gather students' perceptions about remaining enrolled and paying for college.

2. Year 7 Postsecondary Parent Survey

For the first time, ICF collaborated with the Commission in Year 7 to develop a Postsecondary Parent survey, administered to parents/guardians of Year 7 cohort students. The survey was organized into four sections: (1) About You, (2) About Your Student, (3) Education Future, and (4) Participation in GEAR UP. Of the 25 items developed, 10 demographic items were designed to gather information about respondents and their families, six items were developed to gather information about their student's college experience, three items to gather information about their student's future education plans, and four items to collect feedback about their student's participation in GEAR UP.

3. Year 7 Postsecondary Student Focus Group Protocol

To gather more information about the experiences of first-year college students from the GEAR UP high school Class of 2020, ICF conducted focus groups at the eight partner in-state postsecondary institutions enrolling a sizable number of cohort students. This work builds on previous qualitative efforts that included focus groups with GEAR UP students during high school and interviews with college transition and first-year staff in 2020 as they prepared to welcome cohort students to campus. With Commission input, ICF developed a focus group protocol examining issues such as students' early impressions of college; impact of high school GEAR UP activities on college transition; impact of COVID-19; academic, social, and personal challenges; GEAR UP and other campus activities during the 2020-2021 academic year; and student plans for the next academic year. ICF's Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the data collection instrument prior to its use.

III. Methods

The following section describes the WV GEAR UP evaluation participants, instrument administration methods, and analytic approaches used in the development of this report.

1. Evaluation Participants and Data Collection Methods

1.1 Postsecondary Student Survey

Postsecondary student surveys were administered to students who completed high school in the 2019-20 school year in both online and paper/pencil formats. A total of 775 students from this graduating class and who were enrolled at one of the eight WV GEAR UP partner institutions received a link to the online survey and/or a paper survey from their GEAR UP counselor. The surveys were administered between November 2020 and February 2021, which covered the fall and spring semesters. The overall response rate of those at the eight partner institutions was 29%. Those not enrolled at one of the partner institutions received the survey link via a Signal Vine text message sent by the Commission; 51 responses were received via the method.

1.2 Postsecondary Parent Survey

A total of 2,406 parents of students who completed high school in the 2019–20 school year were mailed a postcard with a link to the online postsecondary parent survey and a request for their participation in the survey. Responses were collected between November 2020 and February 2021. The overall response rate for the postsecondary parent survey was 1%. As stated in the results section, due to the low response rate, findings from the Postsecondary Parent Survey should be interpreted with extreme caution.

1.3 Postsecondary Student Focus Groups

The evaluation team worked with WV GEAR UP staff to recruit cohort students for focus groups held in April 2021. WV GEAR UP provided contact information for all transition and first-year staff members assigned to these institutions: Bluefield State College, BridgeValley Community and Technical College, Concord University, Marshall University, New River Community and Technical College, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, West Virginia University, and West Virginia University Institute of Technology. Working with staff to schedule convenient focus groups, ICF conducted eight separate sessions that included 16 students. Recruitment was a challenge as many students attended college remotely with limited contact with both campus personnel and transition and first-year program staff. Concord University and Marshall University accounted for half of the focus group participants, with others having only one or two participants. As travel to campuses was not possible for the evaluation team due to COVID-19, the evaluation team conducted all focus groups virtually through Zoom or Microsoft Teams in early April 2021. All participants consented to the recording of interviews, and the evaluation team analyzed transcripts to identify trends.

2. Analytic Approach

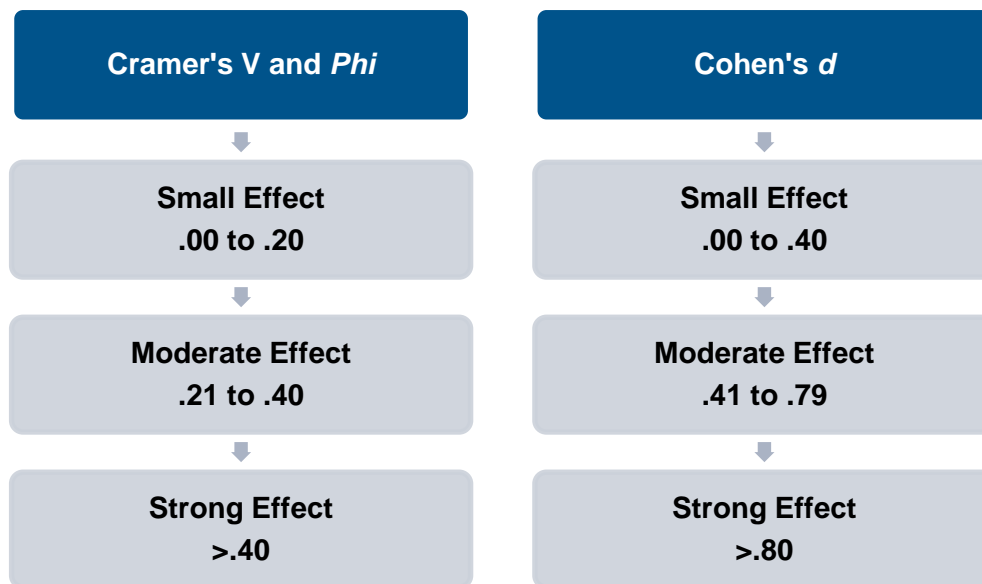## 2.1 Postsecondary Student and Parent Surveys

The evaluation team used descriptive and comparative statistical analyses to examine trends in survey outcomes. Mean values for continuous outcomes and the frequency of responses for

categorical outcomes are presented. For open-ended survey items, the evaluation team conducted thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves reviewing and coding participants' responses according to broad themes, breaking those themes into subthemes, and analyzing and assessing the interrelationships among themes. Results are described in narrative form and supported by illustrative quotes.

Where possible, Year 7 cohort student responses were also compared to responses from the Year 6 postsecondary student survey (from the class of 2019). The class of 2019 respondents are referred to as Year 6 retrospective comparison (R-Comp) students throughout this report. When looking for significant differences in these comparisons, the evaluation team used independent samples t-tests for continuous outcomes and chi-square analyses for categorical outcomes. For these analyses, the evaluation team interpreted statistically significant differences using common effect size calculations.

For chi-square analyses, the evaluation team interpreted *Phi* or *Cramer's V*, as appropriate depending on the number of degrees of freedom in the categorical data. For independent samples t-tests, the evaluation team used Cohen's *d*. See Figure 1 for the interpretations used.

Figure 1. Effect Size Interpretations for Cohen's d, Cramer's V, and Phi

Cramer's V and *Phi*	Cohen's *d*
Small Effect .00 to .20	**Small Effect** .00 to .40
Moderate Effect .21 to .40	**Moderate Effect** .41 to .79
Strong Effect >.40	**Strong Effect** >.80

2.2   Postsecondary Student Focus Groups

After conducting focus groups of first-year college students, the evaluation team analyzed transcripts of these recordings and coded results under these key thematic areas:

- Early impressions of college and academic, social, and personal challenges;
- Effect of high school GEAR UP activities on the transition to postsecondary study;
- Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their college experiences;
- Value of GEAR UP and other campus activities during the first year of college;
- Student plans for the 2021-2022 academic year; and
- Recommendations for the future.

By aggregating comments into these areas, the evaluation team can provide a detailed look at implementation of services and explore student perceptions of the initiative and of their college experience during this challenging period.

IV.   Results

1.   Postsecondary Student and Parent Survey Outcomes

This section provides a variety of analyses from Year 7 postsecondary surveys of cohort students and parents, compared with Year 6 responses from R-Comp students. A total of 279 responses were included in analysis of the Year 7 cohort students, compared to 204 Year 6 R-Comp students. A total of 25 Year 7 cohort parent responses were included as well; due to the low number of responses, parent survey findings should be interpreted with extreme caution. Student survey responses included those who reported that they were enrolled at one of the eight WV GEAR UP partner institutions, those enrolled at another higher education institution, and those who reported they were not enrolled in postsecondary education. Results for all analyses reported in this section are based on those who responded to the question. All effect sizes are small unless otherwise noted.

1.1   Characteristics of Respondents

As in previous years, Year 7 surveys included questions prompting respondents to report on their demographics, including their gender, race, ethnicity, language, highest level of education of parents/guardians, family income, and other children in the family. Year 7 cohort students continued to be mostly White (93%), non-Hispanic (95%), and spoke English (99%). Almost three-quarters of respondents were female (71%). Among those who were aware of the highest level of education of their parents, 65% of respondents indicated their parents/guardians attained at least some college education. Characteristics of Year 7 cohort students were similar to those of Year 6 R-Comp students. Year 7 cohort parents were also mostly White (96%), non-Hispanic (90%), and spoke English (96%). Almost all parent respondents were female (80%) and were a parent of the student (92%). Among parent respondents who were familiar with their family income, 40% reported that their family earned $60,000 or less; 52% of respondents indicated further that their family's financial situation was affected by COVID-19. Among those who were aware of the highest level of education of their parents, 83% of respondents indicated their parents/ guardians attained at least some college education. More than half of Year 7 parent cohort respondents (56%) indicated that they do not have any other children or do not have any other children who currently attend or have attended college.

1.2   Findings

The following sections highlight student and parent feedback related to preparation for college, students' current education status, students' experience with support services, the college experience, students' future education plans, and student feedback to enhance educational experiences.

1.2.1 Preparation for College

This section highlights student and parent feedback related to activities and supports that helped them prepare for college and the workforce.

Year 7 students and parents provided feedback on the effectiveness of GEAR UP while in high school. The mean effectiveness rating provided by Year 7 cohort students of GEAR UP in preparing them for college was 2.98. The mean effectiveness rating for the same item from Year 7 cohort parents was 2.80; their mean effectiveness rating for GEAR UP preparations to enter the workforce was 2.40. Figure 2 provides an overview of these ratings.

Figure 2. Student and Parent Perceptions of GEAR UP Effectiveness
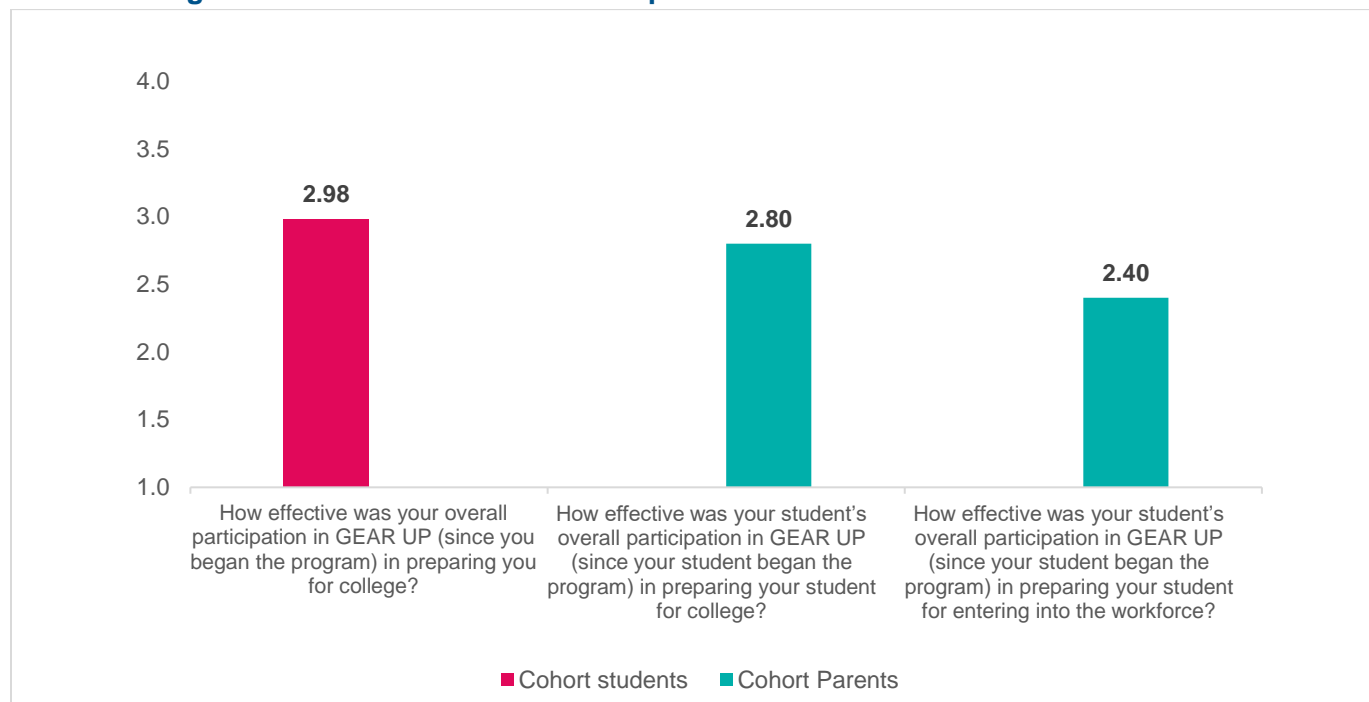
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

Parent survey respondents were also asked to provide additional feedback about their experience with the GEAR UP program. Many respondents reported that they found GEAR UP to be helpful for their student. Representative comments are below.

> *We loved being able to participate in gear up. It was a great opportunity for my son, who chose one of the schools he stayed [at]…for Gear Up Summer Camp.*
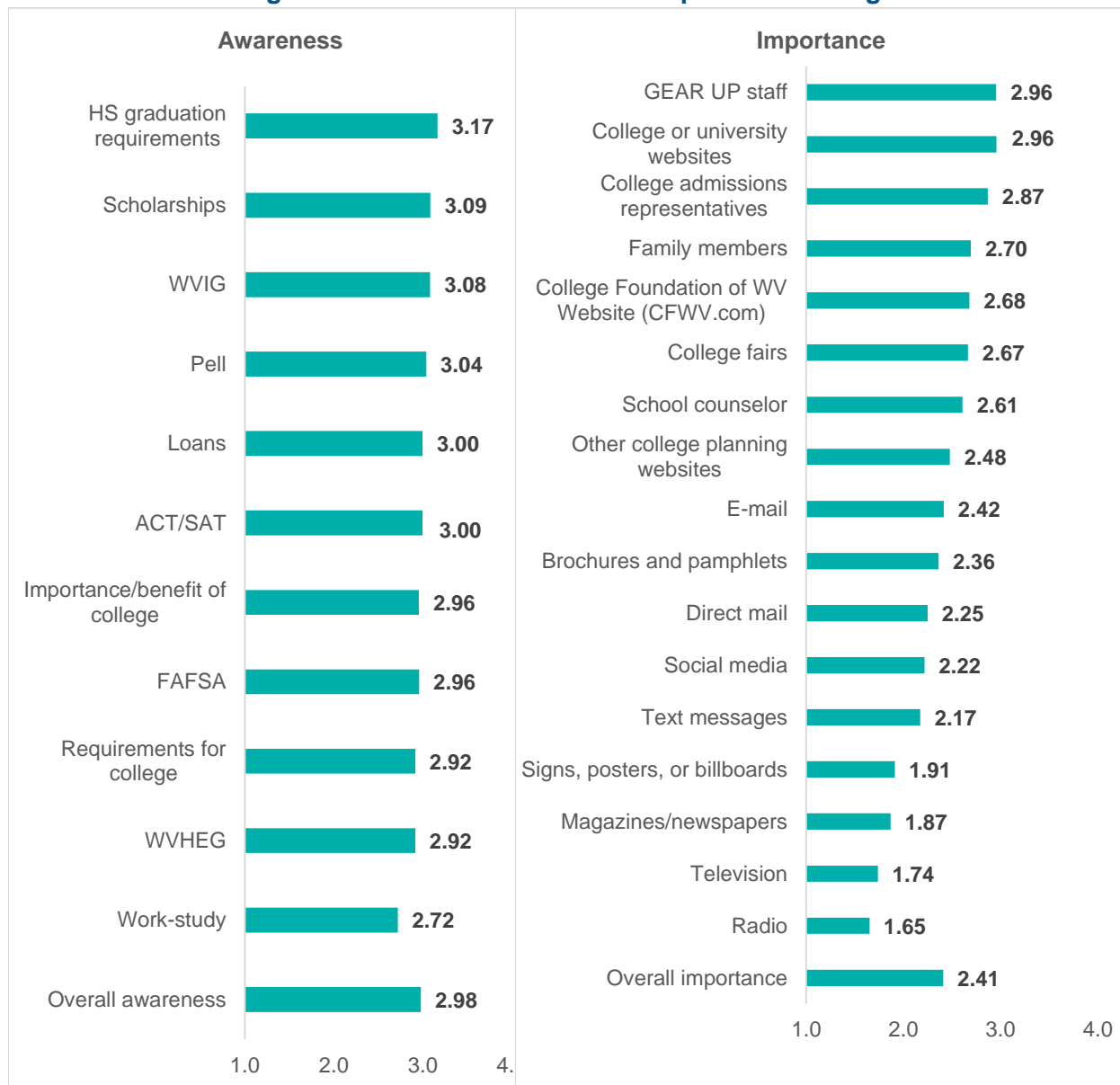
> *The Gear Up program provided great opportunities for my son to visit and learn about different colleges, and financial aid, scholarships, and grants. The staff was well-educated and good-hearted people who provided excellent learning opportunities at the camps. I feel like the Gear Up program worked closely with the school Guidance Counselor. [Name] does an excellent job working with students, reviewing graduation requirements, providing assistance with the FAFSA, providing students with access to scholarship information, etc.*

> *GEAR UP had a tremendous impact on my daughter's life. The information given, encouragement, and trips to visit various campuses were wonderful. She*

knew how to research colleges, programs offered, and what questions she should ask to help determine which school was the best choice to help her reach her future goals. Thank you for allowing her to participate.

Year 7 cohort parents were asked to indicate their awareness of 11 postsecondary education topics and the importance of 17 resources that provide information about postsecondary options. The items used four-point Likert-type response scales (1 = *Not at all,* 2 = *Slightly,* 3 = *Moderately,* 4 = *Extremely*). The evaluation team calculated average awareness/importance ratings for both scales by averaging responses to the individual scale items.

As seen in Figure 3, the items that Year 7 cohort parents reported they were most aware of were high school graduation requirements (3.17), scholarships (3.09), and the WV Invests Grant (3.08). The overall mean awareness rating was 2.98. The items that Year 7 cohort parents reported were the most important for providing information about postsecondary options were GEAR UP staff (2.96), college or university websites (2.96), and college admissions representatives (2.87). The overall mean importance rating was 2.41.

Figure 3. Parent Awareness and Importance Ratings

Awareness

Category	Rating
HS graduation requirements	3.17
Scholarships	3.09
WVIG	3.08
Pell	3.04
Loans	3.00
ACT/SAT	3.00
Importance/benefit of college	2.96
FAFSA	2.96
Requirements for college	2.92
WVHEG	2.92
Work-study	2.72
Overall awareness	2.98

Importance

Category	Rating
GEAR UP staff	2.96
College or university websites	2.96
College admissions representatives	2.87
Family members	2.70
College Foundation of WV Website (CFWV.com)	2.68
College fairs	2.67
School counselor	2.61
Other college planning websites	2.48
E-mail	2.42
Brochures and pamphlets	2.36
Direct mail	2.25
Social media	2.22
Text messages	2.17
Signs, posters, or billboards	1.91
Magazines/newspapers	1.87
Television	1.74
Radio	1.65
Overall importance	2.41

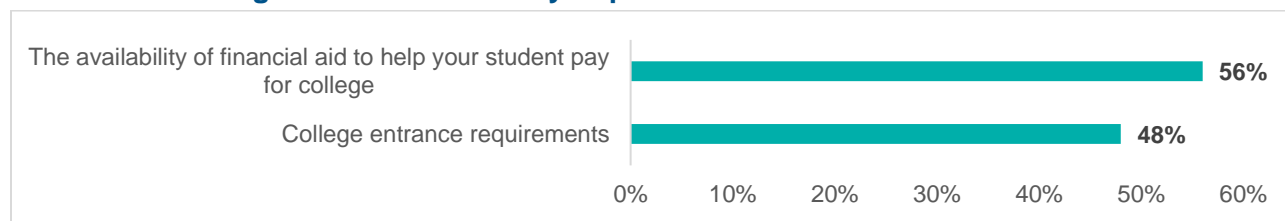Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

The majority of Year 7 cohort students reported that they were offered support to submit the FAFSA (97%) and college applications (87%) while they were still in high school, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Students Who Received Support on College Applications and the FAFSA

Category	Percentage
FAFSA	97%
College Applications	87%
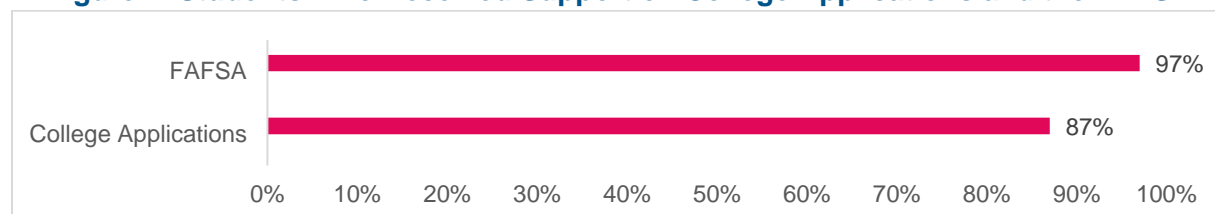
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

Approximately half of Year 7 cohort parent respondents reported that someone from GEAR UP or their student's high school spoke with them about the availability of financial aid to help their student pay for college (56%) and college entrance requirements (48%), as seen in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Postsecondary Topics Talked About with Parents**

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

Approximately half of Year 7 cohort students reported that they participated in college preparation activities in Spring 2020 to help them prepare for college. As seen in Figure 6, the most frequently reported activity among students was virtual college decision day (57%). Of those who reported participation in at least one activity, 87% reported that they were enrolled in a college/university in Year 7. Students then rated the effectiveness of each activity in preparing them for college on a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all effective*, 2 = *Somewhat effective*, 3 = *Effective*, 4 = *Very effective*). The overall mean effectiveness rating was 2.65. The activity that received the highest overall rating was the College Q&A sessions (2.72); more details are in Figure 7.

Figure 6. Student Participation in College Preparation Activities in Spring 2020
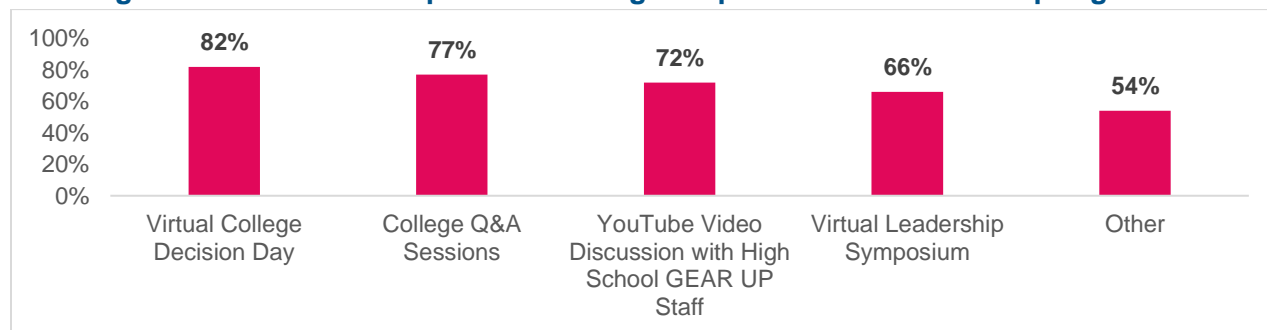
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

Figure 7. Student Effectiveness Ratings of College Preparation Activities in Spring 2020
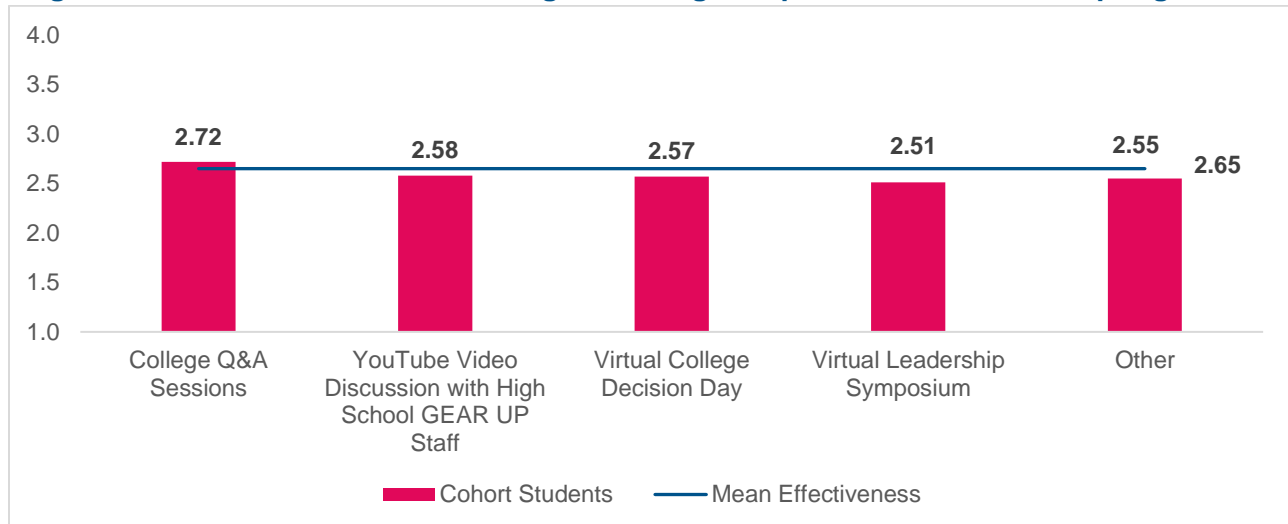
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

1.2.2   Current Educational Status

Student and parent surveys included questions for respondents to report their current enrollment status, factors that affected students' plans for after high school (including COVID-19), as well as additional information about students' status in college. This section provides the findings from these questions.

Overall, 89% of cohort student respondents reported that they were enrolled in college/ university at the time they participated in the survey. Among those who were enrolled in a college/university, 92% were enrolled at an institution that partnered with WVHEPC to provide WV GEAR UP postsecondary services. Table 1 provides an overview of the institutions selected by respondents.

**Table 1. Respondent Enrollment Status**

Enrollment Status	Cohort	R-Comp
Enrolled in college/university	**89%**	**89%**
Bluefield State College	21%	8%
Concord University	14%	13%
Marshall University	15%	12%
Southern West Virginia Community & Technical College	21%	41%
West Virginia University	12%	10%
West Virginia University Institute of Technology	6%	4%
New River Community & Technical College	0%	--
BridgeValley Community & Technical College	3%	--
Other Institution of Higher Education	8%	12%
Not enrolled in postsecondary education	**10%**	**11%**
Enrolled in military	**1%**	**0%**

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: New River Community & Technical College and BridgeValley Community & Technical College were new partner institutions in Year 7.

Student surveys also included items that helped to influence their college choice, including their *GEAR UP/high school counselor/high school teacher, someone else from their high school, college staff, family member, friends or peers, CFWV.com,* and *other college planning websites*. As noted in Figure 8, the most frequently selected item among Year 7 cohort students was *family members* (72%) followed by their *GEAR UP/high counselor or high school teacher* (59%). A significantly higher percentage of Year 7 cohort students selected *GEAR UP/high school counselor/high school teacher* as well as *someone else from my high school* than Year 6 R-Comp students.[1]

### Figure 8. Items That Helped Students Determine Which College To Enroll In
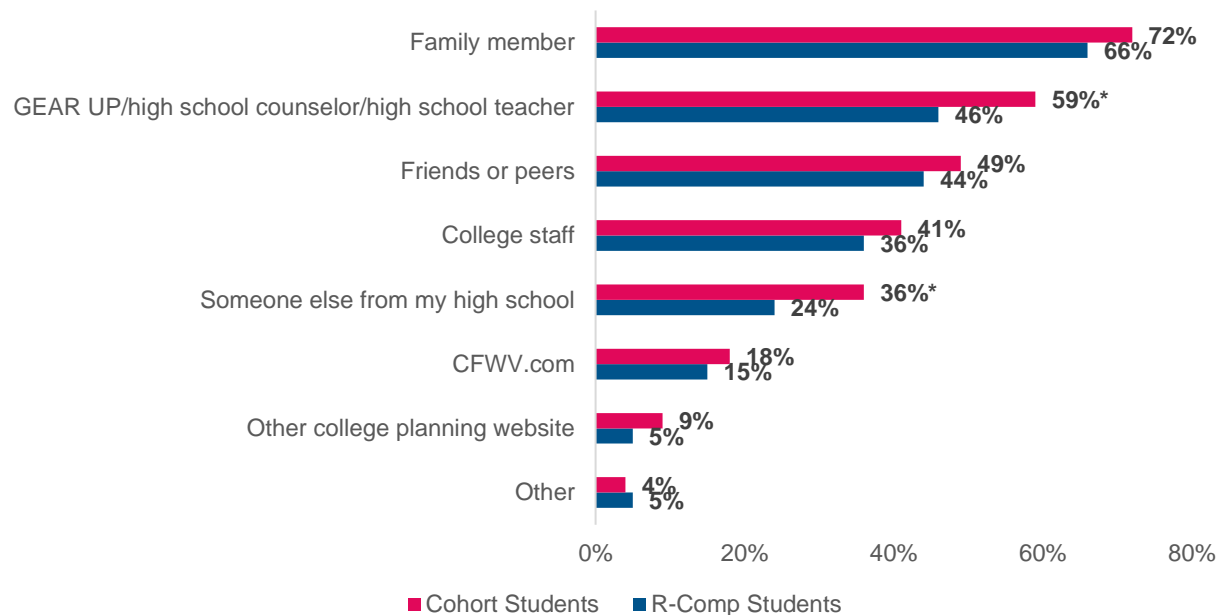
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (p<.01).

The COVID-19 pandemic was shown to have effects on the pursuit of postsecondary education among those in the class of 2020. Both Year 7 cohort student and parent surveys prompted respondents to report how the pandemic affected their or their student's plans. Approximately two-thirds of both groups (69% of students and 64% of parents) reported that their plans were not affected. However, 13% of student respondents reported that they decided not to move away from home and 16% of parent respondents reported their student decided not to move away from home and/or their student decided not to enroll in college. More information can be found in Figure 9.
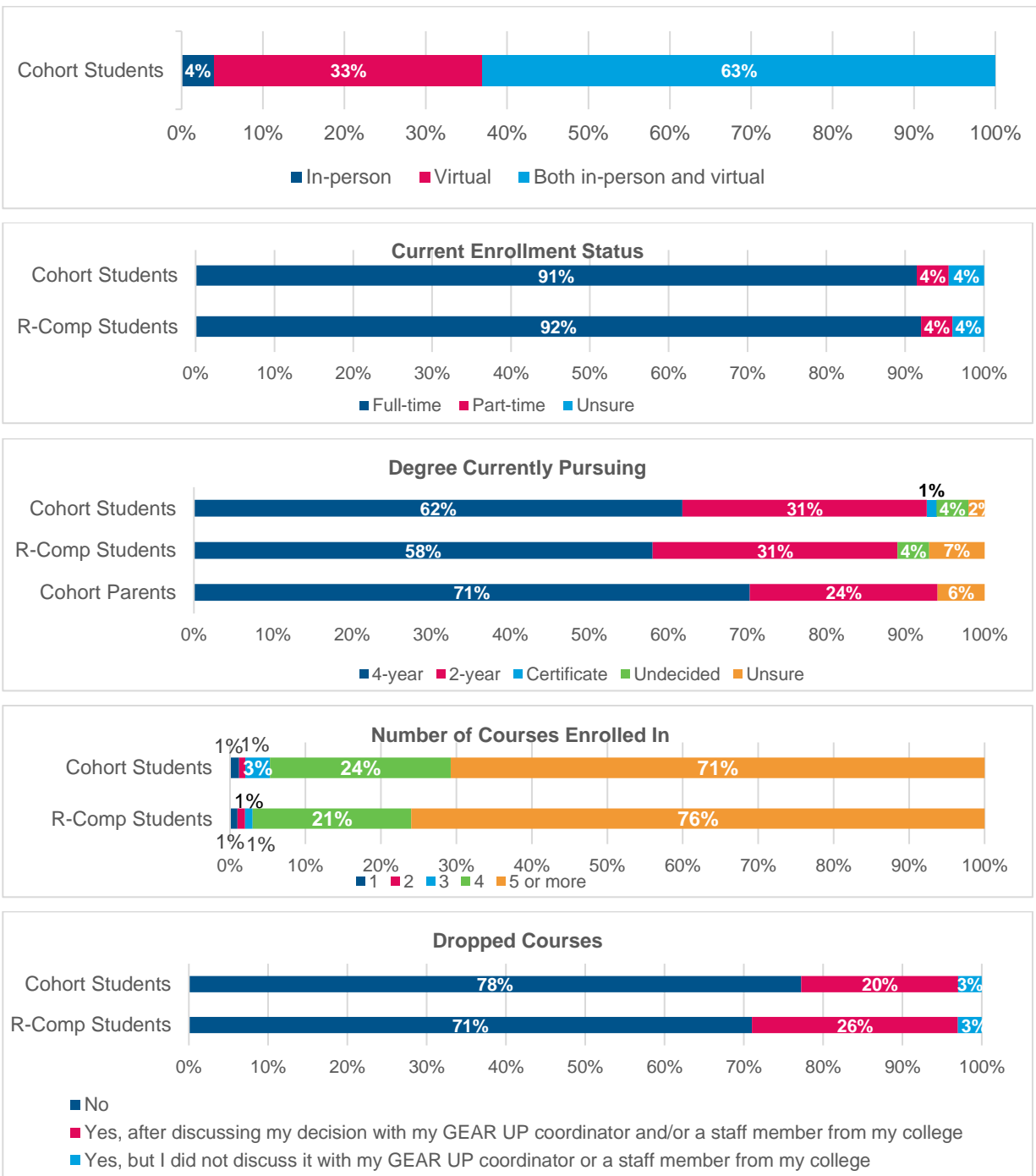
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[1] GEAR UP/high school counselor/high school teacher: X^2=7.02, p≤.01, (phi=.13); Someone else from my high school: X^2=7.72, p≤.01, (phi=.13)

Figure 9. Effects of COVID-19 on Respondent Education Plans After High School
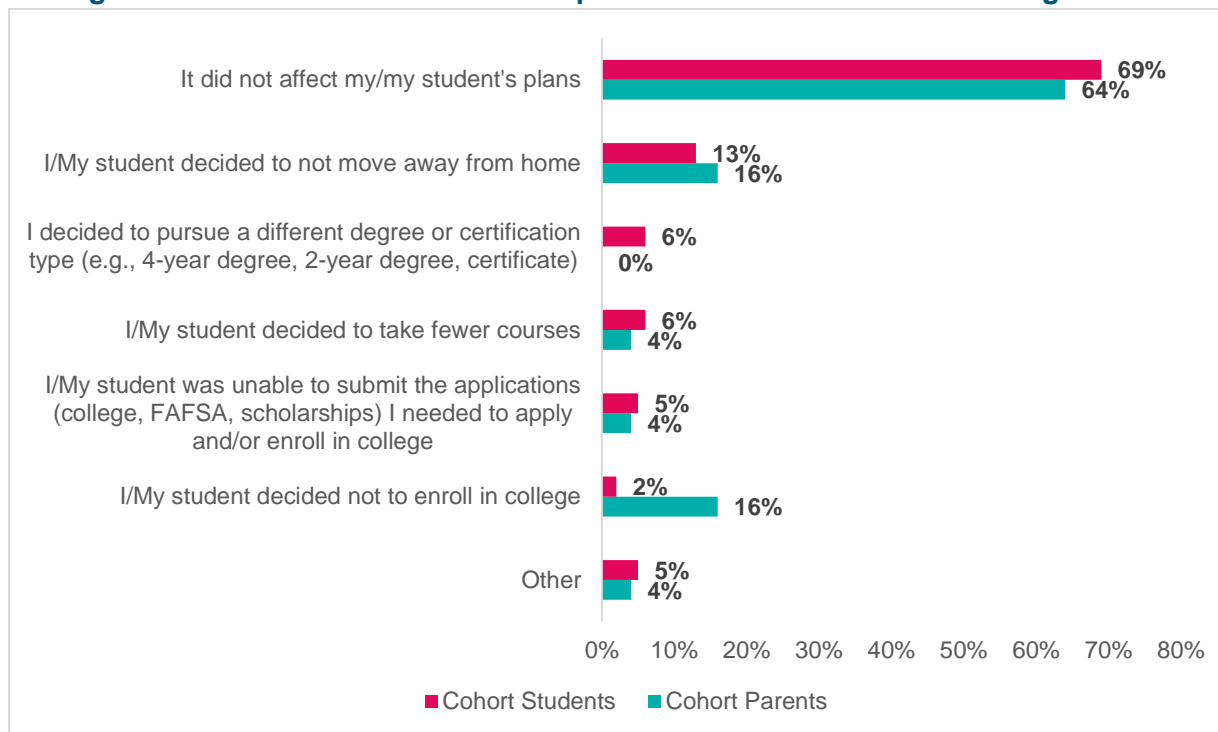
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

Among Year 7 cohort student respondents enrolled in any college/university, nearly all attended virtually at least part of the year (96%). Almost two-thirds (63%) reported that they attended both in person and virtually; only 4% reported that had attended only in person. Further, as seen in Figure 10, most reported that they enrolled full-time (91%), pursued a 4-year degree (62%), enrolled in five or more classes (71%), and had not dropped a class at the time of the survey (78%). Twenty percent of Year 7 cohort student respondents indicated that they dropped a course after talking with their GEAR UP coordinator, six percentage points lower than R-Comp students in Year 6. Overall, Year 7 cohort student responses were statistically similar to those reported by R-Comp students in Year 6.

Figure 10. Current Status of Students Enrolled in a College/University

Current Enrollment Status

Degree Currently Pursuing

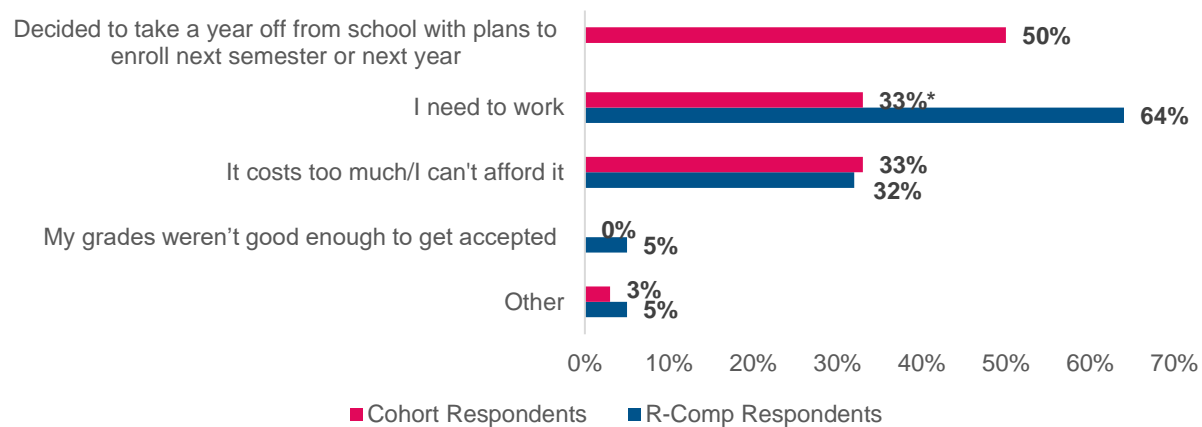**Number of Courses Enrolled In**

Dropped Courses

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: Some items may not total to 100% due to rounding.

As seen in Figure 11, among the reasons why respondents did not enroll in a college/university, the most frequently selected option among cohort respondents was *Decided to take a year off from school with plans to enroll next semester or next year* (50%). The percentage of cohort respondents' selection of *I need to work* was significantly lower than the percentage of R-Comp

respondents (33% vs 64%) with a moderate effect size.[2] Among those who indicated that they did not enroll because they decided to take time off from school, 73% reported that COVID-19 affected their plans for after high school.

Figure 11. Reasons Respondents Did Not Enroll in Postsecondary Education

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: Response option "I want to take a year off" was not offered on the Year 6 GEAR Student Postsecondary survey.
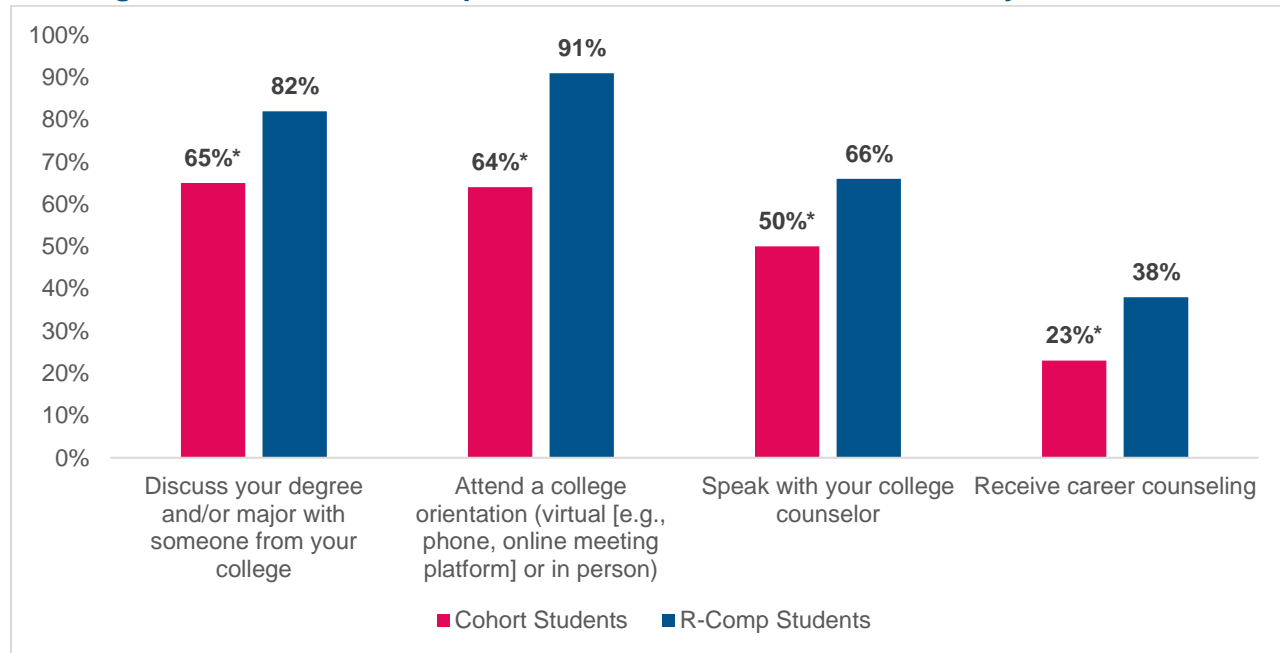*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (*p*<.05).

1.2.3   Student Supports and Services

This section provides findings related to support services received by students enrolled in college in the summer before they started college and since starting college.

Students enrolled at a college/university provided feedback about their college experience so far, which can be found in Figure 12. In the summer before postsecondary enrollment, at least half of Year 7 cohort students reported that they discussed their degree and/or major with someone from their college (65%), attended a college orientation (64%), or spoke with their college counselor (50%). Year 7 Cohort students reported participation in all activities asked about was significantly lower than Year 6 R-Comp student participation, with a moderate effect size for attendance of a college orientation.[3] This decrease is likely due to concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[2] X^2=4.69, p≤.01, (phi=-.30)
[3] Discussed your degree and/or major with someone from your college: X^2=14.90, p≤.001, (phi=.19); Attended a college orientation: X^2=42.02, p≤0.01, (phi=.31); Spoke with your college counselor: X^2=10.46, p≤.001, (phi=.18); Received career counseling: X^2=11.41, p≤.001, (phi=.16)
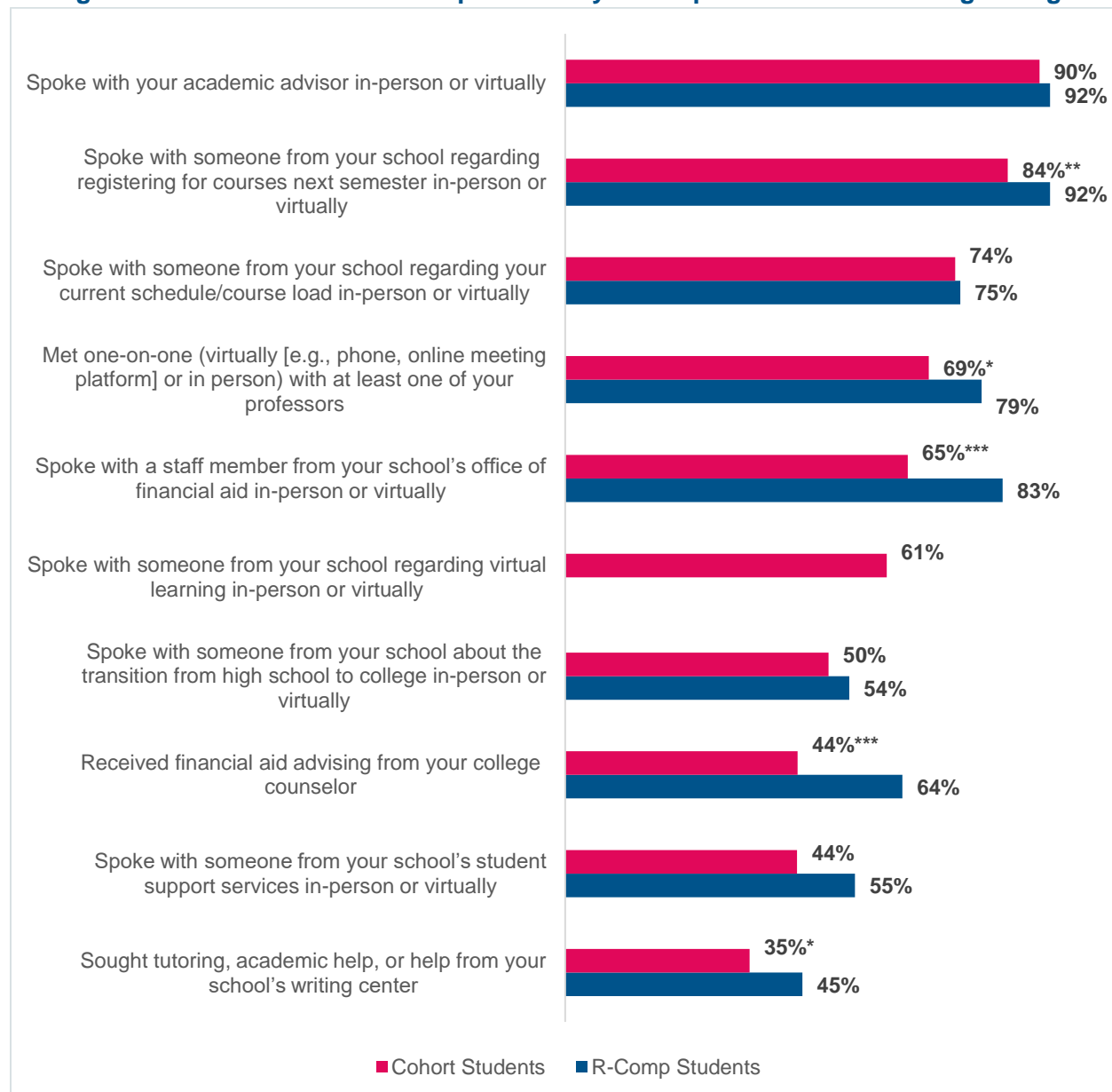
Figure 12. Activities Participated in Summer Before Postsecondary Enrollment

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.001$).

Students enrolled at a college/university provided feedback about their college experience so far. More than three-quarters of Year 7 cohort students reported that they spoke with their academic advisor (90%), spoke with someone from their school regarding registering for courses next semester in person or virtually (84%), or spoke with someone from their school regarding registering for courses next semester (84%). The percentage of cohort students who reported that they spoke with someone regarding registering for courses (84%); met one-on-one with at least one professor (69%); spoke with a staff member from their school's office of financial aid (65%); received financial aid advising from a college counselor (44%); and sought tutoring, academic support, or help from the writing center (35%) was significantly lower in all cases, compared to the Year 6 R-Comp students (92%, 79%, 83%, 64%, and 45% respectively).[4] Additional findings are in Figure 13.

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[4] Spoke with someone from your school regarding registering for courses next semester: X^2=7.02, $p≤.01$, (phi=.13); Met one-on-one with at least one of your professors: X^2=5.29, $p≤.05$, (phi=.11); Spoke with staff member from your school's office of financial aid: X^2=15.96, $p≤.001$, (phi=.19); Received financial aid advising from your college counselor: X^2=16.48, $p≤.001$, (phi=.20); Spoke with someone from your school's student support services: X^2=15.79, $p≤.001$, (phi=.19); Sought tutoring, academic help, or help from your school's writing center: X^2=4.42, $p≤.05$, (phi=.10).

Figure 13. Activities Students Reported They Participated in Since Starting College

Activity	Cohort Students	R-Comp Students
Spoke with your academic advisor in-person or virtually	90%	92%
Spoke with someone from your school regarding registering for courses next semester in-person or virtually	84%**	92%
Spoke with someone from your school regarding your current schedule/course load in-person or virtually	74%	75%
Met one-on-one (virtually [e.g., phone, online meeting platform] or in person) with at least one of your professors	69%*	79%
Spoke with a staff member from your school's office of financial aid in-person or virtually	65%***	83%
Spoke with someone from your school regarding virtual learning in-person or virtually	61%	
Spoke with someone from your school about the transition from high school to college in-person or virtually	50%	54%
Received financial aid advising from your college counselor	44%***	64%
Spoke with someone from your school's student support services in-person or virtually	44%	55%
Sought tutoring, academic help, or help from your school's writing center	35%*	45%

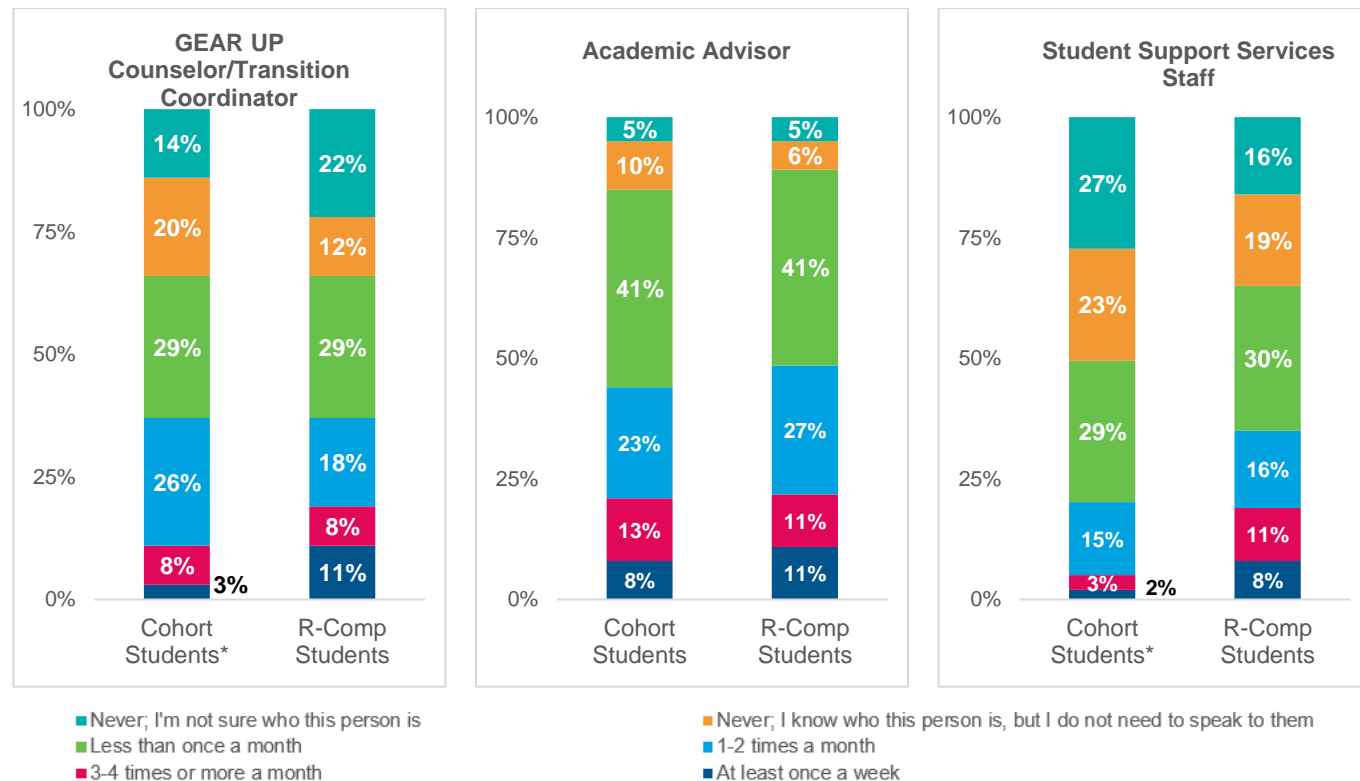Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Postsecondary Survey. Note: Response option "Spoke with someone from your school regarding virtual learning in person or virtually" was not offered on the Year 6 GEAR Student Postsecondary survey. Only respondents from institutions with a Student Support Services TRIO grant are included in the analysis for "Spoke with someone from your school's student support services".
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.05$); **Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.01$); ***Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.001$).

The frequency in which respondents communicate with their GEAR UP counselor/transition coordinator, academic advisor, and student support services staff as well as the ways students received postsecondary counseling since high school were also reported on by student respondents. As seen in Figure 14, among Year 7 cohort students, 66% reported that they spoke with their GEAR UP counselor, 85% spoke with their academic advisor, and 49% reported that they spoke with student support services staff. For each group, they were most likely to report that they spoke with them less than once a month. The distribution of responses

regarding communication with GEAR UP counselors/transition coordinators as well as student support services as reported by cohort students was significantly different than those reported by R-Comp students in Year 6, both with a moderate effect size.[5] The decrease in the percentage of students who were unfamiliar with their GEAR UP counselor/transition coordinator may be due to Year 7 cohort's increased familiarity with GEAR UP compared to Year 6 R-Comp students.

Figure 14. Frequency Students Spoke to GEAR UP Counselors/Transition Coordinators, Academic Advisors, and Student Support Services Staff

Legend:
- Never; I'm not sure who this person is
- Never; I know who this person is, but I do not need to speak to them
- Less than once a month
- 1-2 times a month
- 3-4 times or more a month
- At least once a week

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Postsecondary Survey.
Note: In Year 6, all student survey respondents were asked about the frequency in which they spoke with their GEAR UP Transition Coordinator/College Counselor. However, only student survey respondents enrolled at a partner institution were asked about the frequency in which they spoke with their GEAR UP Counselor. Some items may not total to 100% due to rounding.
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.001$).

Most Year 7 cohort students reported that their counseling was completed via email (68%). The percentage of Year 7 cohort students who reported that they received counseling via text message (45%) and phone (34%) was significantly higher than the percentage of Year 6 R-Comp students (32% and 23% respectively).[6] The percentage of Year 7 cohort students who reported that they met face-to-face was significantly lower than the percentage reported by Year 6 R-Comp students (32% vs 73%) with a strong effect size.[7] See Figure 15 for more details.

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[5] GEAR UP Counselor/Transition Coordinator: X^2=19.88, $p≤.001$, (V=.22); Student Support Services: X^2=22.78, $p≤.001$, (V=.23)
[6] Text messages: X^2=7.37, $p≤.01$, (phi=.13) ; Phone: X^2=6.19, $p≤.05$, (phi=.13)
[7] X^2=71.93, $p≤.001$, (phi=.41)

These significant differences are likely due to the adaptation of counseling formats as required by institutions due to COVID-19.

Figure 15. Format of Postsecondary Counseling for Students
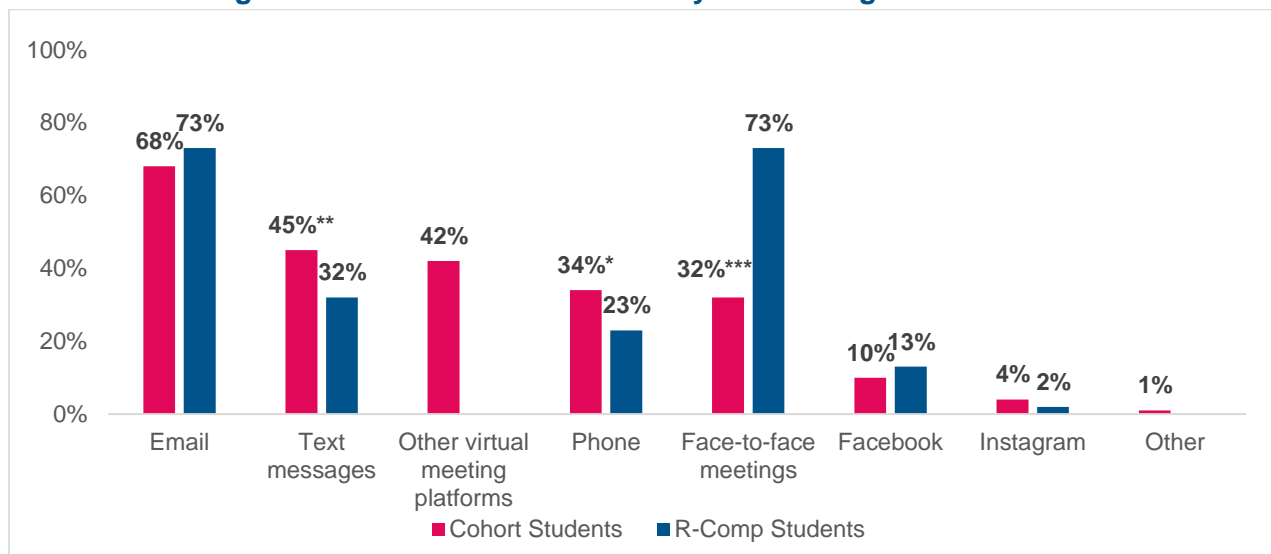
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
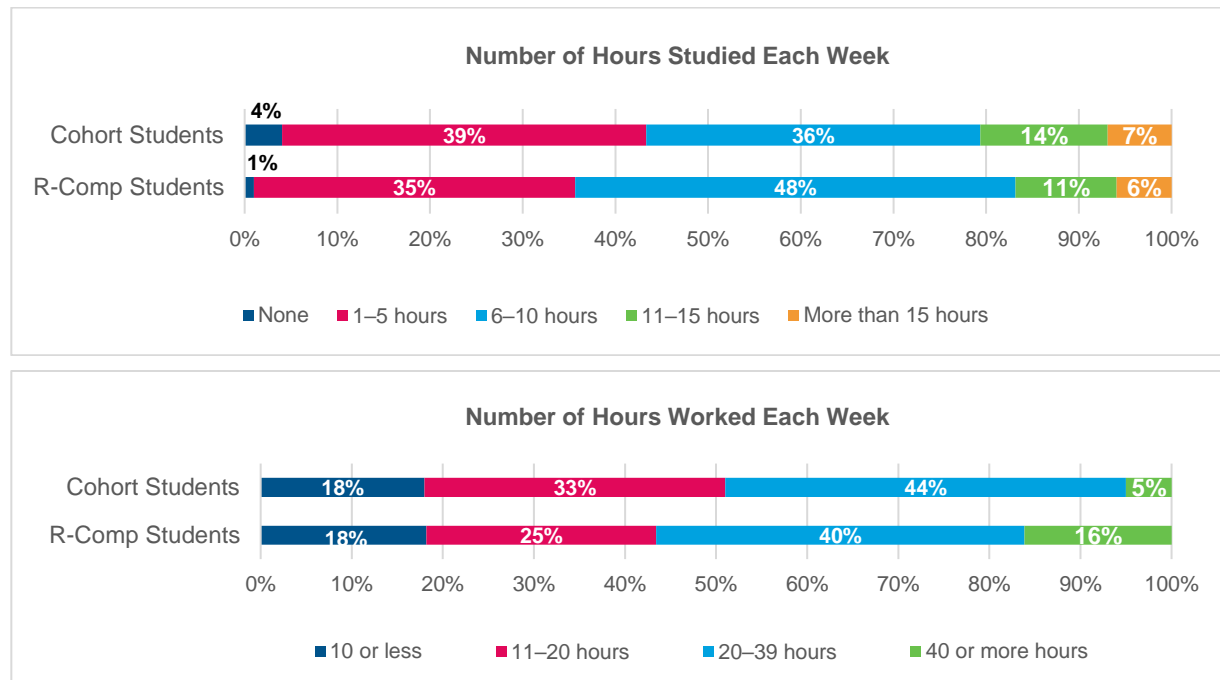Note: Response option "Virtual" was not offered in the Year 6 survey.
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (*p*<.05); *Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (*p*<.01); ***Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (*p*<.001).

1.2.4   College Experience

Students and parents provided feedback on experiences in college, including the amount of time spent working and studying, financial aid used to pay for college, where students live, food insecurity, the effects of COVID on their experiences, and other aspects of attending college. Findings related to these topics are highlighted in this section.

Most Year 7 cohort respondents indicated, as shown in Figure 16, that they studied 1–10 hours each week (75%). Of the 47% of Year 7 cohort students who reported they have a job, the most frequently selected range of hours they work each week was 20–39 hours. Findings were similar to those reported by Year 6 R-Comp students.

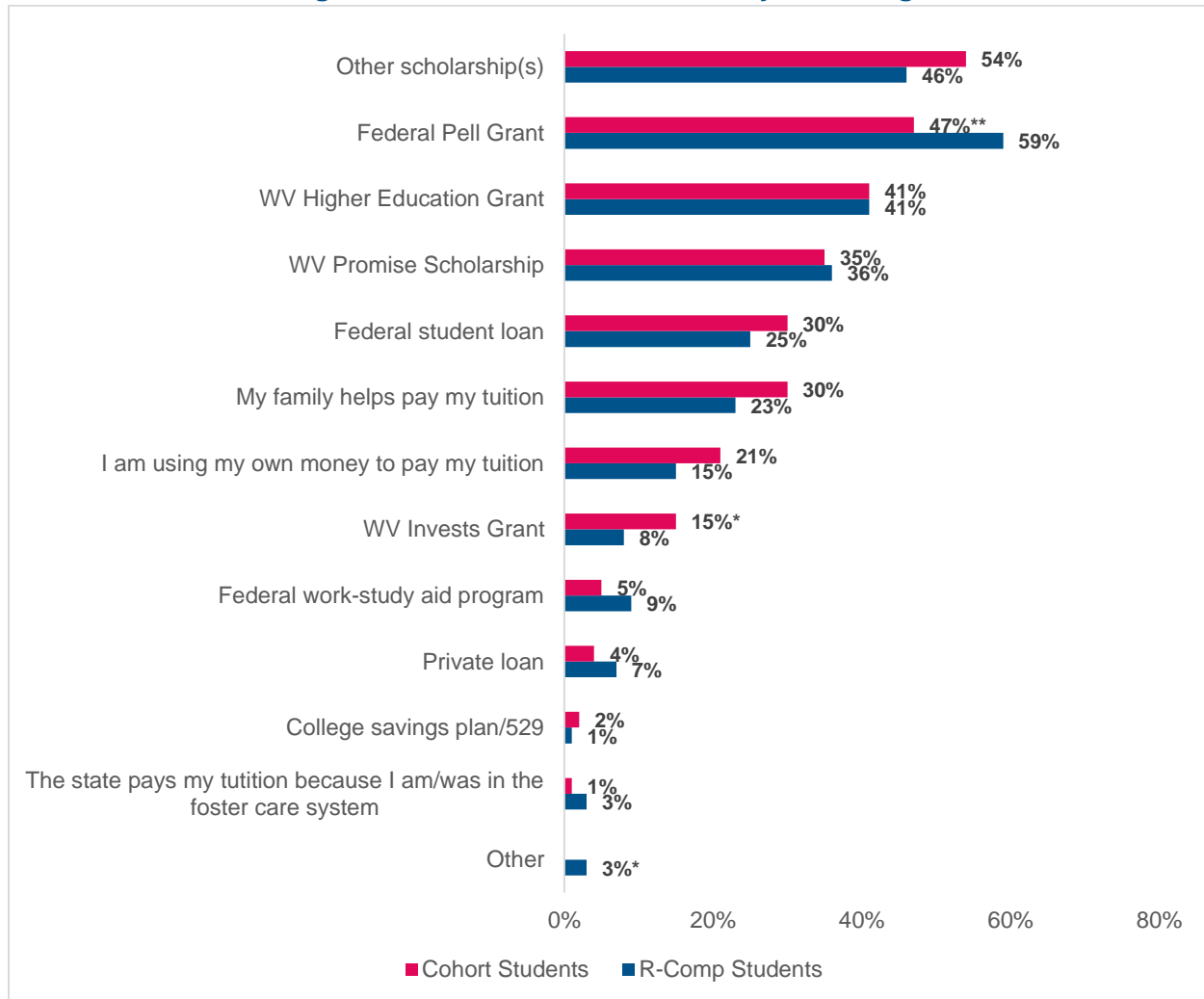**Figure 16. Number of Hours Studied and/or Worked Each Week**

Number of Hours Studied Each Week

	None	1–5 hours	6–10 hours	11–15 hours	More than 15 hours
Cohort Students	4%	39%	36%	14%	7%
R-Comp Students	1%	35%	48%	11%	6%

Number of Hours Worked Each Week

	10 or less	11–20 hours	20–39 hours	40 or more hours
Cohort Students	18%	33%	44%	5%
R-Comp Students	18%	25%	40%	16%

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: Some items may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Year 7 cohort students reported that they relied on a variety of financial aid resources to cover the cost of their postsecondary education, including other scholarships (54%), Federal Pell grants (47%), and the WV Higher Education Grant (41%). Significantly fewer Year 7 cohort students reported the use of Federal Pell grants (47%) than Year 6 R-Comp students (59%).[8] However, the percentage of Year 7 cohort students who reported the use of WV Invests grants (15%) was significantly higher than Year 6 R-Comp students (8%).[9] Findings in Figure 17 suggest respondents used more of a variety of financial aid sources in Year 7 than the respondents in Year 6. Further analysis revealed that students living on campus in a dorm were significantly more likely to be recipients of a Federal Pell grant than those living off-campus. Additional financial aid sources along with differences in living situations (e.g., on campus, at home with family) may have affected the financial aid students sought. The impact study in the upcoming Year 7 Annual Report will provide more in-depth information about those who enrolled in college. However, the percentage of Year 7 cohort students who reported the use of WV Invests grants (15%) was significantly higher than Year 6 R-Comp students (8%).[10] Additional findings about financial aid sources used to pay for college can be found in Figure 17.

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[8] Other scholarship(s): X^2=6.92, p≤.001, (phi=.13); Federal Pell Grant: X^2=6.27, p≤.01, (phi=.12)
[9] X^2=4.80, p≤.05, (phi=.11)

![ICF logo]

Figure 17. Financial Aid Used to Pay for College

Category	Cohort Students	R-Comp Students
Other scholarship(s)	54%	46%
Federal Pell Grant	47%**	59%
WV Higher Education Grant	41%	41%
WV Promise Scholarship	35%	36%
Federal student loan	30%	25%
My family helps pay my tuition	30%	23%
I am using my own money to pay my tuition	21%	15%
WV Invests Grant	15%*	8%
Federal work-study aid program	5%	9%
Private loan	4%	7%
College savings plan/529	2%	1%
The state pays my tuition because I am/was in the foster care system	1%	3%
Other		3%*

■ Cohort Students ■ R-Comp Students

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.05$); **Statistically significant compared to R-Comp ($p<.01$).

Nearly two-thirds of Year 7 cohort students reported that they lived at home with their parents/guardians while attending college (61%). Further, 30% reported that they lived in a dorm on campus, 6% reported an apartment/house near campus, and 3% reported other. Despite COVID-19 restrictions and regulations, the distribution of responses was similar to those reported by Year 6 R-Comp students. More information can be found in Figure 18.

Figure 18. Location Where Postsecondary Student Respondents Live
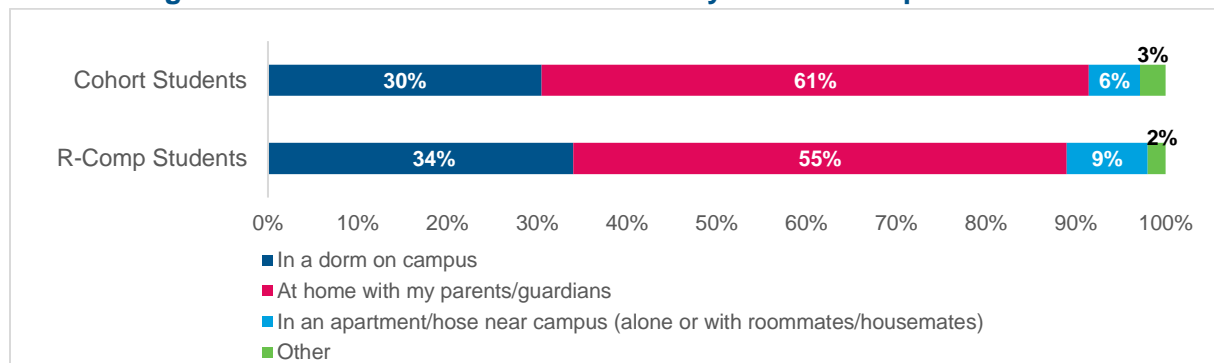
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
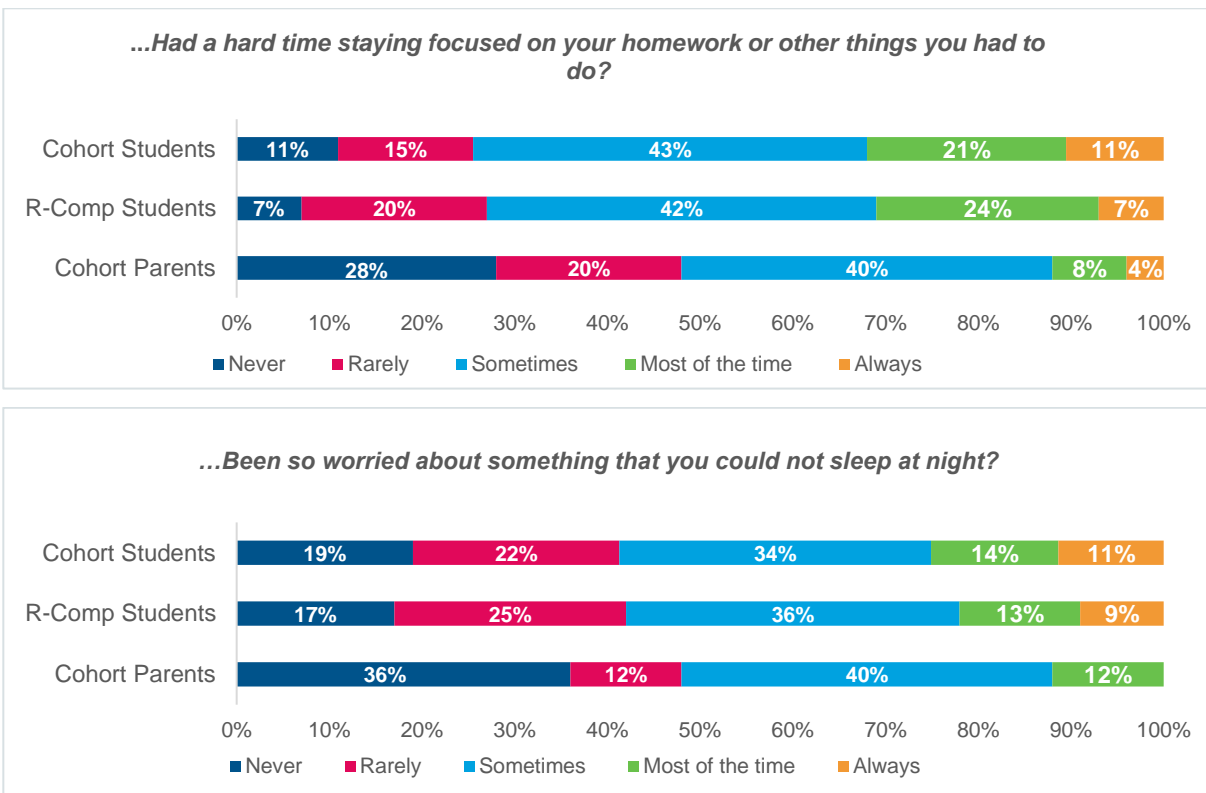
As seen in Figure 19, one-fifth of Year 7 cohort students reported that they *sometimes* or *often* worried that their food or meal plan would run out before they got money to buy more, similar to the frequency reported by Year 6 R-Comp students. Further, of the of Year 7 cohort students who indicated hunger problems affected them in at least one way—the most indicated way was for them to opt to not join an extracurricular activity (18%).

Figure 19. Food Insecurity and Effects Among Students
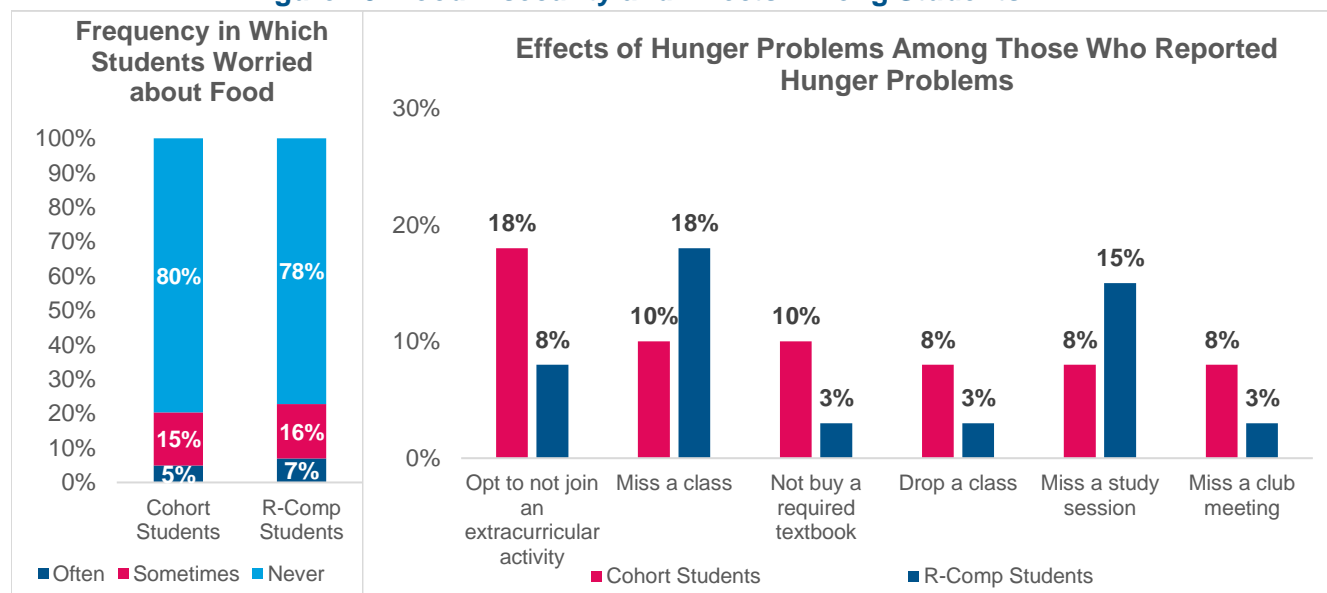
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

Regarding their experience in the past twelve months, students and parents indicated the frequency in which they or their child had a hard time staying focused or been unable to sleep due to worry. Almost half of Year 7 cohort students (43%) and parents (40%) reported that they or their student *sometimes* had a hard time staying focused on their homework or other things. However, Year 7 cohort parents were more likely than their student counterparts to report *never* to the same question (28% vs 11%). More than one-third of Year 7 cohort students (34%) and parents (40%) reported that they or their student were *sometimes* so worried that they could not sleep at night. Again, Year 7 cohort parents were more likely than their student counterparts to report *never* to the same question (36% vs 19%). More details can be found in Figure 20.

Figure 20. Frequency in Which Students Had a Hard Time Focusing on Homework or Were Worried

...Had a hard time staying focused on your homework or other things you had to do?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Cohort Students	11%	15%	43%	21%	11%
R-Comp Students	7%	20%	42%	24%	7%
Cohort Parents	28%	20%	40%	8%	4%

…Been so worried about something that you could not sleep at night?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Cohort Students	19%	22%	34%	14%	11%
R-Comp Students	17%	25%	36%	13%	9%
Cohort Parents	36%	12%	40%	12%	

Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: Some items may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Survey respondents indicated their level of agreement to five statements related their experience beginning college. The items used a four-point scale: 1=*strongly disagree,* 2=*disagree,* 3=*agree, and* 4=*strongly agree.* The average level of agreement to each item was then calculated, as shown in Figure 21. The highest mean among Year 7 cohort students, similar to Year 6 R-Comp students, was for *My family is supportive of me pursuing a college education* (3.65). The lowest means were for *Since starting college, it has been easy to make new friends* (2.66) and *My high school prepared me for college* (2.66). The item regarding new friends was significantly lower than the rating of the Year 6 R-Comp students (3.12) with a moderate effect size.[11] Year 7 cohort student responses to *I feel welcome at my college* were also significantly lower than Year 6 R-Comp students (3.38 vs 3.52).[12] These significant decreases may be due to changes implemented by institutions, such as social distancing protocols, to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19. More information about the effects of the changes implemented can be found in Figure 22.

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[11] t(397.99)=5.27, *p*≤.001, (*d*=.50)
[12] t(423)=2.30, *p*≤.05, (*d*=.25)

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Figure 21. Students' College-Going Experience
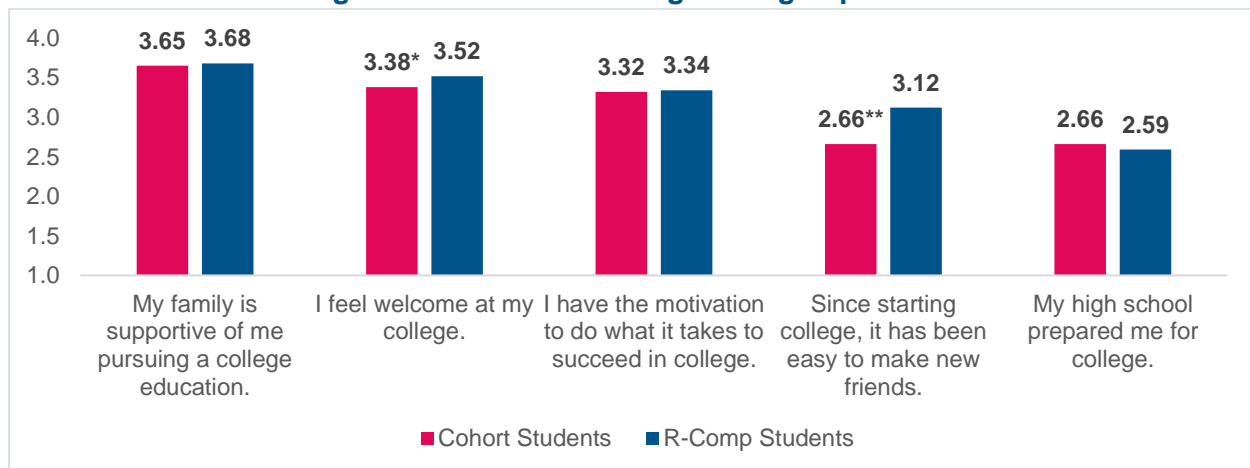
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

*Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (p<.05); **Statistically significant compared to R-Comp (p<.001).

Year 7 cohort students also provided feedback on how COVID-19 affected their college experience. Students were asked to select the statements that were true of their first semester of college. The most frequently selected statement was *It has not been as easy to make new friends in college* (59%), similar to the finding regarding friends in Figure 21. The least frequently selected statement was *I have not been able to find a job on campus and/or work-study job like I expected to help pay for college* (12%). See Figure 22 for more details.

Figure 22. Effects of Changes Put in Place by College due to COVID-19 on Students' First Semester of College
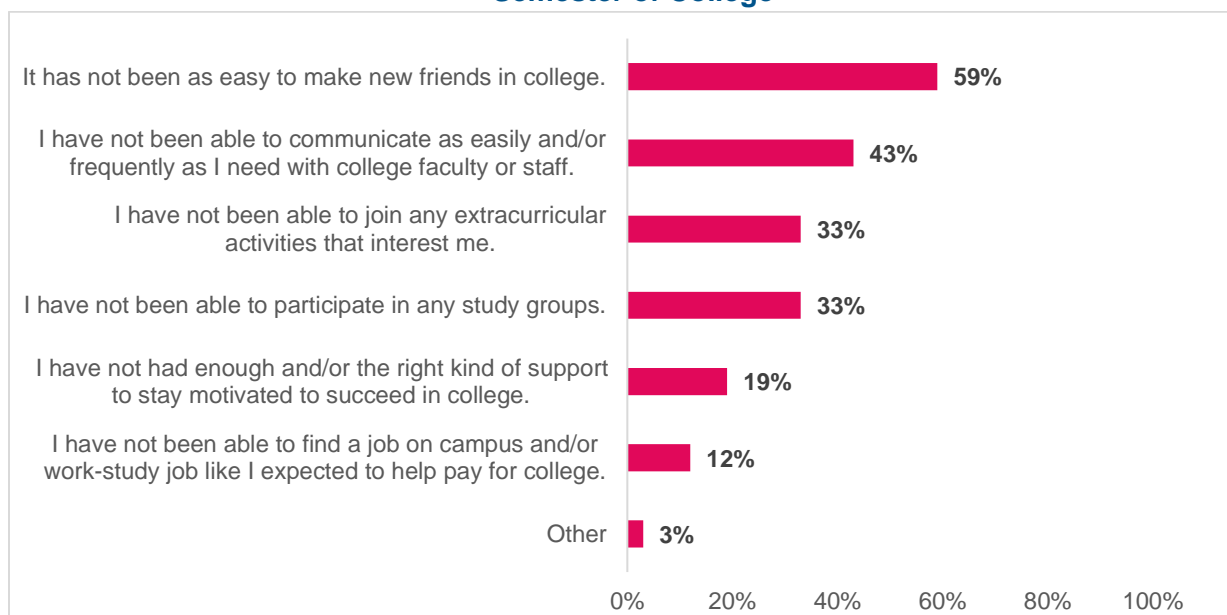
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Postsecondary Survey.

All respondents who reported that they were enrolled in a college or university on the student survey were asked about their experience with the Txt 4 Success program. Nearly half of students reported that they received Txt 4 Success messages (49%), while just under one-

quarter (23%) reported they did not. Just more than one-quarter (28%) reported that they were unsure. Of those who did receive the messages, they reported a mean rating of 3.36, on a four-point scale, for how helpful the messages were in reminding them of important deadlines.

Year 7 cohort students who attended a GEAR UP partner institution provided feedback on their participation as a GEAR UP Success Ambassador. More than half of respondents indicated that they were a GEAR UP Success Ambassador (58%). Of those who indicated they were, they reported a mean rating of 3.38, on a four-point scale, for how helpful the program was in helping them transition into college.

1.2.5   Education Future

This section highlights student and parent responses related to education plans for the following semester and year.

More than three-quarters of Year 7 cohort parents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that attending college was important to their student's career goals and future (76%). As seen in Figure 23, 96% of Year 7 cohort parents aspired for their student to attain postsecondary education while 88% expected their student to attain postsecondary education.

Figure 23. Parent Educational Expectations and Aspirations
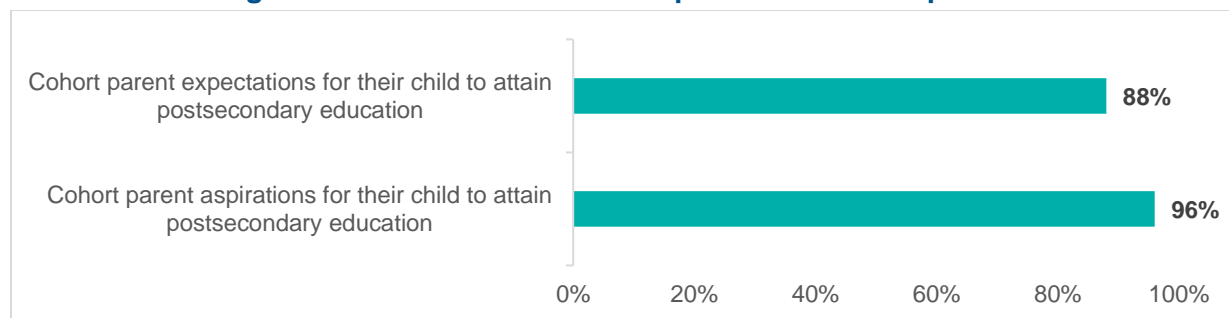
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

Student survey respondents not currently enrolled in college indicated if they plan to pursue postsecondary education in the future. As seen in Figure 24, more than one-third reported that they plan to enroll at some point, but they are not sure when (38%); 21% indicated that they are not sure if they will pursue postsecondary education.

**Figure 24. Plans to Pursue Postsecondary Education in the Future Among Those Not Currently Enrolled**
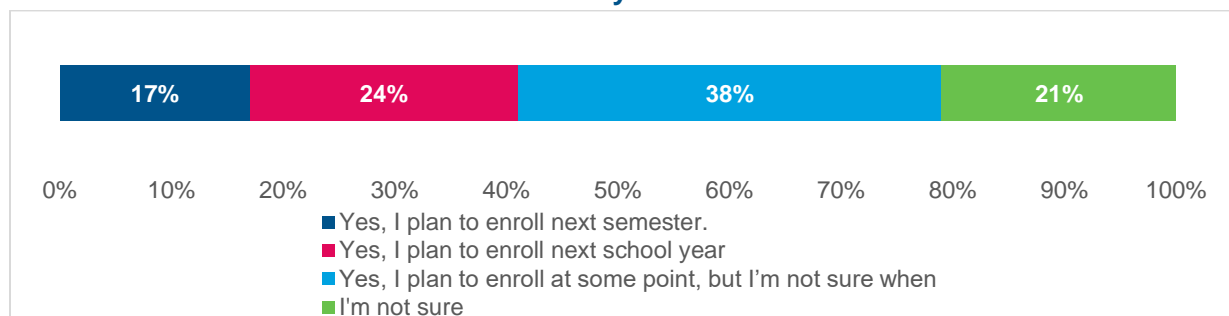
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

Among those who are currently enrolled, 87% of Year 7 cohort students plan to be enrolled at the same school for the spring 2021 semester; 10% do not plan to be enrolled at any school or

were unsure of their plans. Among those who reported that they plan to remain enrolled at the same school or enroll at a different school, nearly two-thirds reported that they plan to enroll in the same number of courses (65%) while 23% plan enroll in more than they were currently. Year 7 cohort parents who reported that their child would enroll at a different school also indicated the type of program their student planned to pursue; half (50%) reported that their student would enroll in a 2-year Associate's program. More details can be found in Figure 25.

Figure 25. Student Plans for Spring 2021 Semester
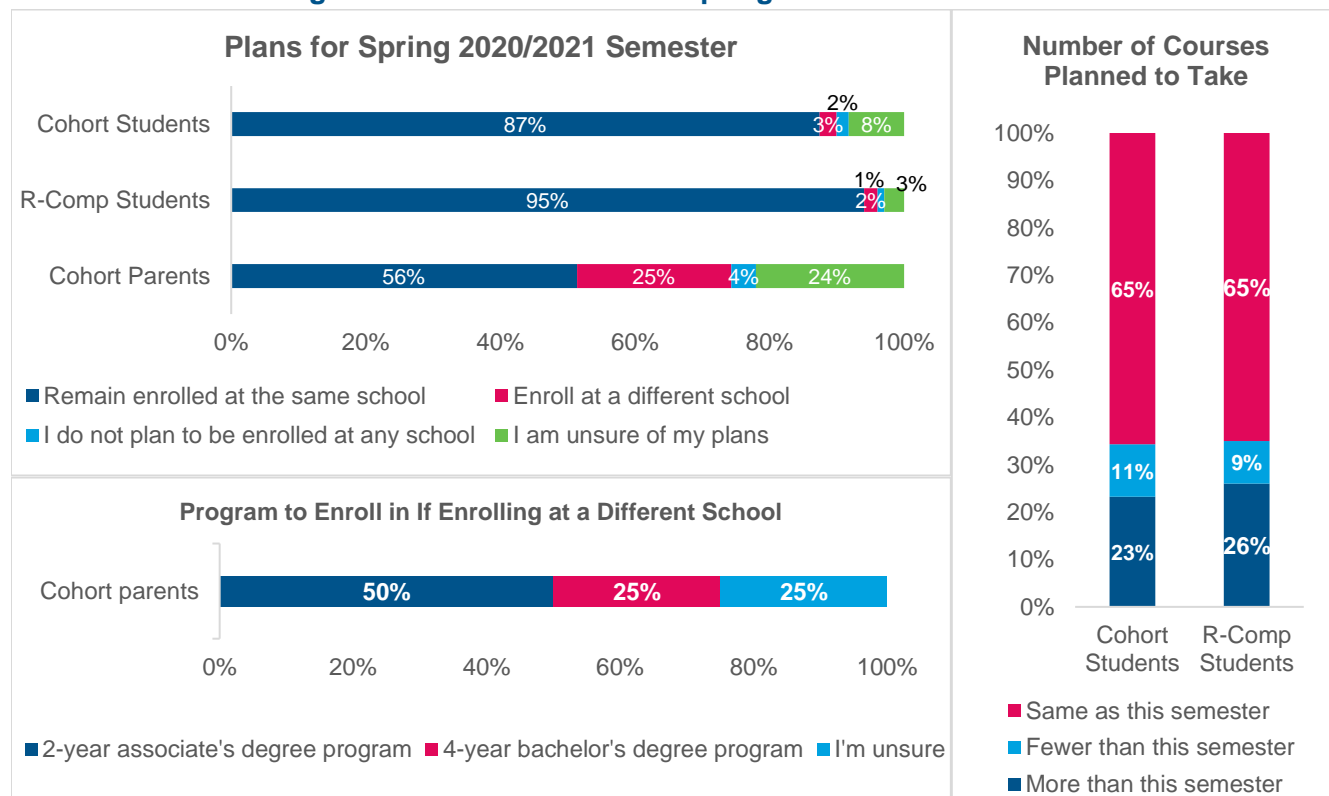
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey, Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey, and Year 7 WV GEAR UP Parent Postsecondary Survey.

Year 7 cohort students who indicated they do not plan to be enrolled at any school in the spring 2021 semester most often reported that this was because they could not afford to pay for their next semester (40%). More information can be found in Figure 26.

Figure 26. Reasons Students Do Not Plan To be Enrolled at Any School in Spring 2021
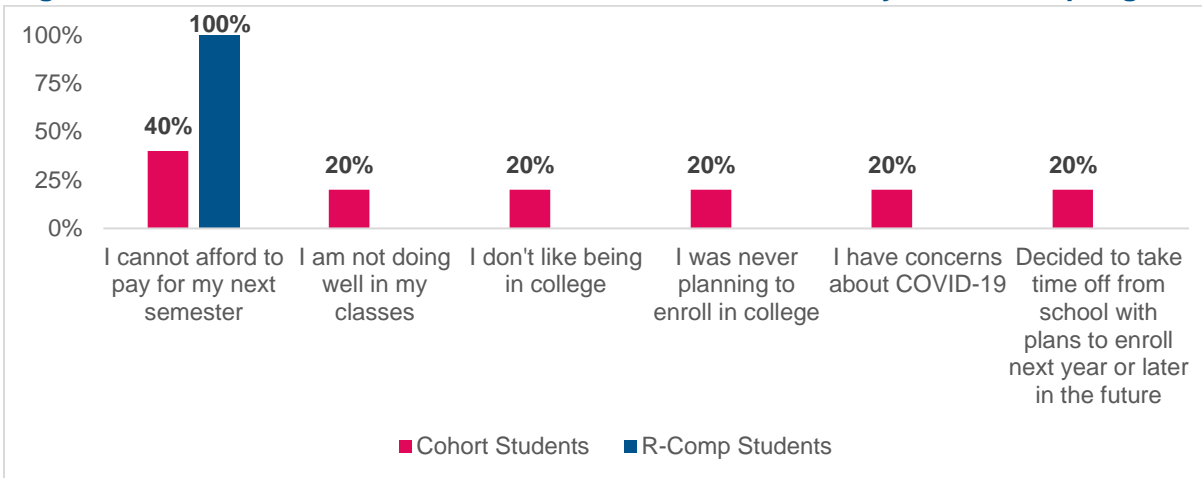
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.
Note: Only one R-Comp student responded to this question in Year 6 so comparisons should be made with caution.

For the upcoming academic year, nearly every Year 7 cohort student enrolled at a college/university reported that they already completed their FAFSA (50%) or planned to do so this academic year (47%), as seen in Figure 27 at the time they responded to the survey. These rates were similar to those reported by Year 6 R-Comp students during approximately the same point in the academic year.

Figure 27. Student FAFSA Completion
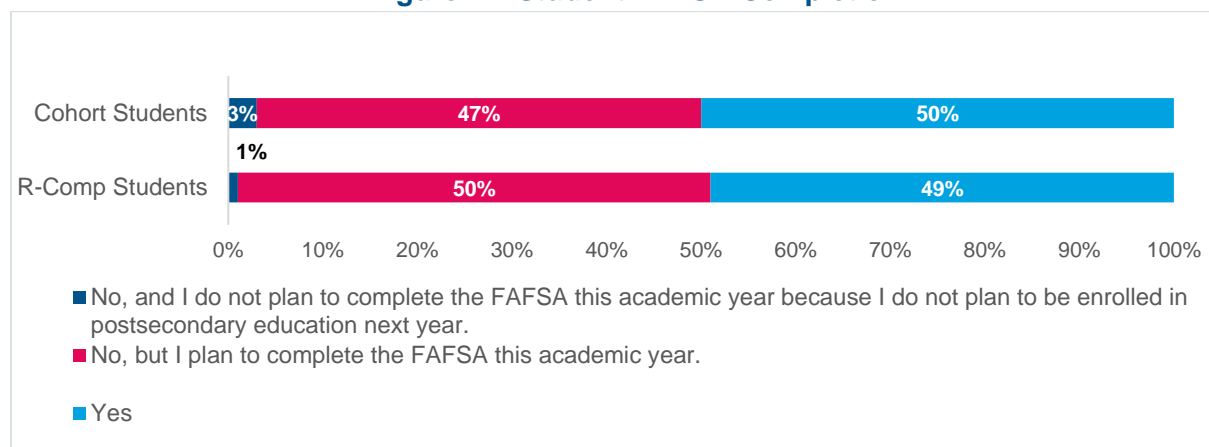
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey and Year 6 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

1.2.6   Assistance and Resources to Help Enhance Experience

The final student survey question called for all respondents to reflect on the kind of assistance/resources that could have helped them have a better experience during the semester in which they responded to survey. Among the resources and assistance that respondents suggested were in-person meetings (e.g., for tutoring, class, meetings with professors, counseling), support to access more financial aid, and support to remain motivated during a difficult year. Some representative comments of these findings are as follows:

Tutoring and having someone push me to succeed.

Some resources that are needed now are financial assistance resources. I think everyone is struggling financially.

Just some motivation, honestly. It's hard to stay motivated when you're online. It doesn't feel like school. It's exhausting.

In-person classes would help tremendously if possible.

I know COVID makes it difficult, but access to more in-person meetings would have been dramatically more helpful than those that were in zoom as my internet doesn't work very well.

Could have done better with helping with my FAFSA.

A financial aid calendar and document with requirements for all prominent WV scholarships. (things on the calendar may include FAFSA (yearly) deadline, etc.)

Many student survey respondents also indicated that their advisors and GEAR UP counselors were very helpful. Additional comments follow:

My advisor has helped tremendously and has answered every question I've had.

My experience this semester was bettered by my advisors who helped me manage my time and often checked in to make sure I was doing well. My academic advisors also were very attentive in any questions I had. The financial aid office helped me often throughout the semester through navigating the finances of college.

1.2.7   Survey Outcomes for First-Generation College Students

The evaluation team conducted analyses to understand potential differences in the experiences of first-generation college cohort students compared to their non-first-generation peers. Overall, approximately one-third of students (34%) reported that they were first-generation students (i.e., the highest education their parents attained was a high school diploma). First-generation students reported similar levels of the effectiveness of GEAR UP for preparing them for college as non-first-generation students; 81% of first-generation and 76% of non-first-generation students reported GEAR UP to be *effective* or *very effective.* They additionally reported similar levels of support received to submit their FAFSA and college applications. While in high school, the two groups reported similar participation in college preparation activities. See Figure 28 for more information.

Figure 28. Year 7 Cohort Student Participation and Engagement with GEAR UP and Other College Preparation Activities
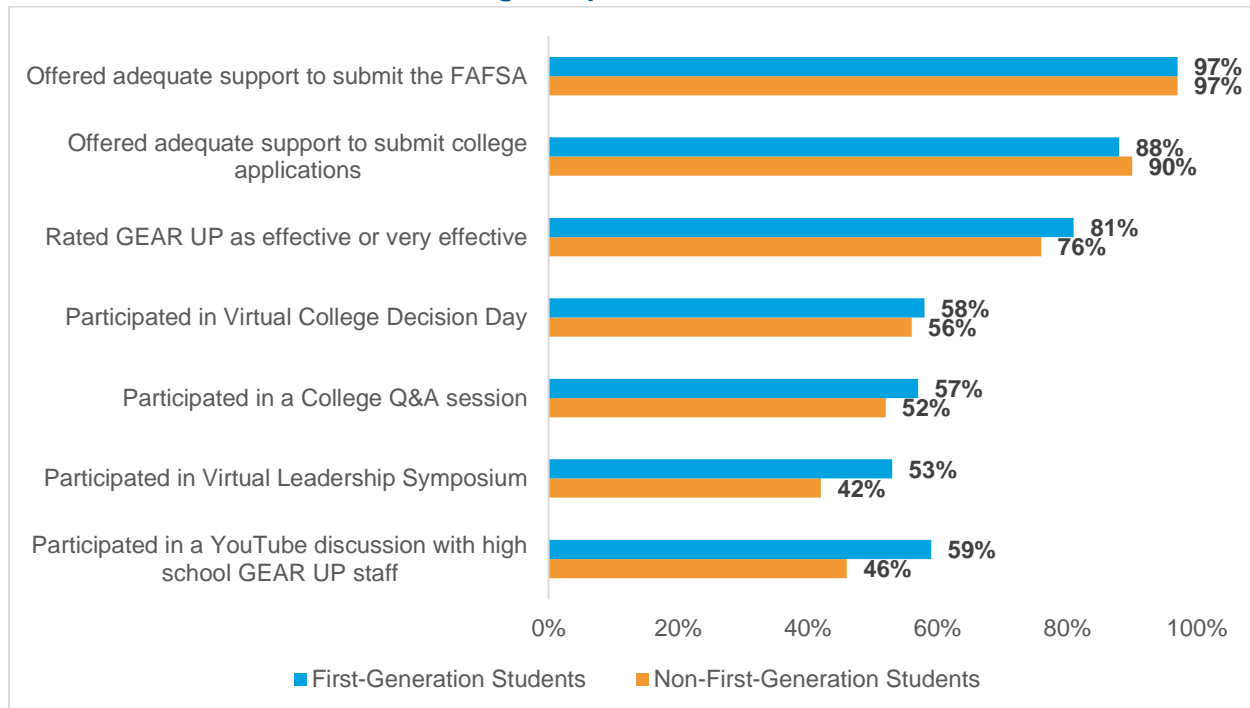
Source: Year 7 WV GEAR UP Student Postsecondary Survey.

Despite the similar levels of engagement and support, 79% of first-generation student survey respondents were enrolled in college/university, which was significantly lower than the 95% of non-first-generation students.[13] Further, COVID-19 may have impacted the college plans of first-generation students more so than their peers; while 74% of non-first-generation students said that COVID didn't impact their plans for after high school, 59% of first-generation students said the same, a significant difference.[14] A significantly higher percentage of first-generation students also reported that COVID-19 affected their plans for after high school as they were unable to submit necessary applications such their college application or the FAFSA (12% vs 8%).[15] The potential differences in enrollment and the effects of COVID-19 on college plans suggest that first-generation students experienced unique barriers or challenges related to college enrollment—such as less familiarity with or access to postsecondary education forms—that required tailored support from advisors and counselors. The impact study, reported in the Year 7 Annual Evaluation Report, will contain more definite findings about differences in enrollment using a more comprehensive dataset.

2. Postsecondary Student Focus Group Findings

ICF conducted focus groups with 16 GEAR UP students attending eight postsecondary institutions during the 2020-2021 academic year to gain their perspectives on GEAR UP services in high school and college as well as challenges faced in the transition to

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[13] X^2=17.43, p≤.001, (phi=.25)
[14] X^2=6.41, p≤.01, (phi=.15)
[15] X^2=12.92, p≤.001, (phi=.22)

postsecondary study. These students entered college at an unusual time with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting the ability of colleges to offer a traditional in-person schedule for students. While the participating WV GEAR UP postsecondary institutions enrolled students and provided instruction during this academic year, COVID-19 meant that many students attended some or all classes via a remote or hybrid format. In addition, most postsecondary institutions did not permit large gatherings of students for clubs or social events on campus. Many students also had to undergo periodic health check-ins, sometimes via an application, prior to attending in-person classes. In this unique time, student focus group participants provided extensive input on their academic and personal challenges for the year. Asked to assess the value of GEAR UP, they also provided insights on both high school and college activities in the program and their contribution to college access and success.

2.1   Students' Academic Experiences

Focus group participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction with their college experience so far, with some saying that it has been difficult to fully adjust to college due to COVID and distance learning. Many students cited time and course management as concerns that caused stress. For these students, the ability to manage deadlines, take remote exams, and maintain a calendar of remote and in-person instructional days proved challenging. As one student said:

> You've got to learn time management, get all your work done but be able to figure out your whole plan for the day, each day.

Students cited similar academic concerns regardless of whether they lived on campus or at home. These two comments represented the views of many students:

> The college and the staff are great but with everything shut down, I think for me, it's kind of hard to learn from home.

> I have a hard time focusing with computers. I'm not very good at learning information from a virtual option. I need to be in person. The virtual option has made it a lot harder for me to do things and do things right.

As students could choose to remain remote even in most hybrid classes, participants said that even a periodic in-person class meant few opportunities for student engagement, discussion, and study groups. Course management seemed particularly stressful for students at Concord. As many of these students lived on campus, several noted that isolation was a related concern as they were often alone with little contact with others.

> Because of all the restrictions, I feel like we're getting cheated out of what college actually is because we can't do anything.

However, a small but vocal number in the focus groups said they thrived in the socially distanced environment. Part of that may be due to the students' own personalities and learning styles as well as their college's approach to reach students. Typical of this view were these comments:

> I've been having a good experience. Definitely during this year with the pandemic, I think they did a really good job adjusting freshmen who were coming in.

> *I've grown to love online learning, actually. And it takes away some of the pressure of being around and saying the wrong thing because you can't see the people that you're speaking to.*

2.2   Students' Personal Challenges

Focus group participants across all institutions had similar experiences in not being able to join clubs or other activities as part of a traditional college experience. While they were aware of some recruitment efforts as well as virtual activities, many students cited fatigue with remote gatherings. As one student noted:

> *Overall, it's mediocre at best.... It just feels like I'm floating along through my college experience.*

Those living in dormitories reported limited interaction with others, particularly in the fall 2020 semester. Students generally could not visit other residence halls and faced restrictions even within their own buildings. One student noted it was particularly difficult early in the year.

> *I didn't know anyone when I got here. I was alone all the time because my roommate was never around. I spent 90% of time in my dorm room on my own.*

Another student, citing isolation on campus during the fall 2020 semester, moved home for spring 2021 and found it more enjoyable. For those staying in dorms, access to other campus buildings was often not possible.

> *Pretty much any place where people can gather, there are always restrictions. Some of them have lifted in the residence halls. We can now go visit other people's residences, but it doesn't really matter because like I said, I have no friends.*

Students said they receive emails about virtual activities but are often overwhelmed with electronic correspondence. With no bulletin boards to look at around campus or informal discussion with professors and peers, some say they easily overlook items that are not related either to academics or the pandemic. Typical of the student view were these comments:

> *COVID just pushes other things aside, and it's easy to forget that there is help out there.*

> *COVID has made it difficult to meet others. You can't do much of anything right now but work.*

Despite the comments about isolation, students said they were making the best of their situations and remained committed to attending college.

Of the 16 students in the focus groups, only two said the pandemic prompted them to change their college plans. In these cases, one chose a smaller school, and another decided to stay closer to home and not attend an out-of-state university. However, a larger number said they had friends from high school who changed plans due to COVID's health or economic impacts.

2.3 Value of the High School GEAR UP Experience

Looking back on their high school experience, students cited a variety of helpful activities in preparing for college. Among all GEAR UP services, however, summer and/or leadership camps appeared to have the most impact on students as they planned their future. These comments illustrated student views:

> *Those camps helped immensely by getting away from home, being on a campus. I think that helped with my transition.*

> *The camps we did at college over the summer were really helpful so we could see different campuses.*

Most students also had a positive view of the Higher Education Readiness Officers (HEROs) program that recruited GEAR UP students to play leadership roles at the school and organize community service events. One student said:

> *HEROs was very informal but it got me in a position to really help out my community and understand the cost of college and scholarships and grants.*

Financial aid and FAFSA workshops were other GEAR UP services that participants cited as helpful in the college application process. However, COVID-19 interrupted many senior year activities, including College Decision Days and senior assemblies. Most participants did not believe that GEAR UP was particularly active after the start of the pandemic, although there were challenges in maintaining contact with many school resources due to the abrupt shift to remote learning.

Based on what they experienced in the first year of college, some focus group participants thought GEAR UP could do more to prepare students in areas such as study skills, time management, and hybrid learning. However, they acknowledged there was no way to prepare the unique circumstances posed by COVID-19. Many also were likely to give GEAR UP higher marks than their schools in preparing them for education after high school. As one noted:

> *I feel like GEAR UP prepared me more than my high school did.*

Another said that the combination of high school Advanced Placement (AP) classes and GEAR UP college events provided a solid foundation for the freshman year of college.

> *I think they did a really good job. The AP classes prepared me to manage the workload that I have now, and GEAR UP's summer camps helped immensely.*

2.4 GEAR UP Services for College Students

Through the work of transition and first-year staff, as noted earlier, WV GEAR UP continued to provide outreach and services to GEAR UP students at eight postsecondary institutions during the 2020-2021 academic year. Students in focus groups said that they valued this contact, even if they did not participate regularly due to scheduling or other challenges.

Student focus group participants said they received regular email messages from the transition staffer regarding upcoming activities, GEAR UP or other on-campus services, and upcoming deadlines for registration or financial aid. Several also said they sometimes asked the transition staffer for advice on remote classes or personal issues.

Some students, particularly at four-year universities, noted how their transition staff member provided useful everyday items such as supplies, books, backpacks, and snacks. Several staff members organized events including a socially distanced painting party outside in the spring. As one student said:

> *With everything going on, all the COVID restrictions and everything, I think they still did a good job of keeping us updated and trying to do fun stuff like the painting party and the backpacks with snacks. Just little things to brighten your day, that made college better.*

At Marshall University, the transition staffer scheduled Wednesday workshops through the fall and much of the spring on topics such as stress management, housing, careers, Blackboard use, and time management. These activities were part of the Success Ambassadors Pathway developed for GEAR UP students to address common first-year college challenges.

While many workshops moved online, most Marshall focus group participants said they attended sessions in person or virtually, in part because they included food that was available for pickup. "GEAR UP feeds me," one student said, while another said the career activities helped bring a stronger focus to her educational goals.

In addition, the university used its peer mentor program, Friend at Marshall (FAM), to establish and maintain regular contact with GEAR UP students. Marshall dedicated three FAM mentors specifically for GEAR UP cohort students in their first year at the school.

> *They [mentors] are constantly reaching out to us and they really want us to talk to them and come to them with questions.*

2.5   Future Plans

Despite facing unprecedented challenges this year, most focus group participants—more than 80%—said they planned to return to their current college or university in fall 2021. While students did not attribute this decision specifically to GEAR UP, most reported a helpful relationship with the GEAR UP transition staff member to learn about majors, class requirements, and financial aid. The other two students said they were unsure of their plans for next fall.

Although the finding is encouraging, it is worth noting that the small number of focus group participants may not reflect the total WV GEAR UP population. For example, only two of 16 focus group participants reported that they had a job, compared with 47% of students who responded to the first-year college survey. While focus group participants may reflect the academic and personal experiences of first-year college students, they may have somewhat different economic circumstances than the overall GEAR UP population.

V. Discussion

Year 7 WV GEAR UP data collection activities produced important findings regarding the experience of first-year college students and the impact of the program. Noteworthy themes from survey and focus group findings included the following:

Students had a positive view of GEAR UP. In both surveys and focus groups, students generally agreed that GEAR UP helped prepare them for college. Focus group participants cited summer/leadership camps as particularly effective, and many held positive views of the HEROs program and financial aid workshops. Some students believed GEAR UP was more influential than other high school activities in preparing them for postsecondary study. In college, many first-year students also came to rely on GEAR UP for valuable transition support.

COVID-19 had significant impacts on the transition to college. Cohort students in surveys reported much lower participation rates with summer programs, which is not surprising given the switch to remote learning in spring 2020. In focus groups, students said the pandemic interrupted many senior year activities, including College Decision Days, in which they had expected to participate.

First-generation students received the same level of support through GEAR UP as non-first-generation students, however, many have had different postsecondary outcomes. First-generation student survey respondents had similar GEAR UP experiences and support as their non-first-generation peers, which demonstrates that GEAR UP services were implemented equitably across student groups. Despite similar levels of engagement and support, it appears that fewer first-generation survey respondents were enrolled in college/university compared to non-first-generation respondents. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to impact the postsecondary plans of first-generation student respondents more than their non-first-generation peers.

The pandemic presented significant academic challenges. In the survey, students commented that COVID made it difficult to connect with the resources they needed to stay motivated in education. Likewise, some focus group participants struggled to manage assignments, juggle in-person and online classes, interact with professors, and take online exams. Few students appeared to take advantage of tutoring services in college, even if they were aware of these offerings.

Isolation was a common theme among college students. Survey and focus group data both showed that COVID increased students' sense of isolation during the first year of college. In surveys, students indicated that the pandemic affected their ability to make friends. Many focus group participants, especially those living on campus, noted that isolation was a persistent concern as they often spent large amounts of time having little contact with others.

Students experienced fatigue with online education and services. Both survey and focus group data indicated student fatigue with remote learning and virtual activities. In the survey, only 49% reported receiving helpful text messages from GEAR UP despite extensive outreach. In focus groups, students acknowledged they could not always recall receiving program information and emails given the sheer volume of online activity required for them to attend college.

Despite challenges, many persevered through this unusual period. Survey data showed that many students dealt reasonably well with the challenges posed by remote learning. In focus groups, most students said they planned to stay in school and a small but vocal contingent said they enjoyed online learning. For this small group, their personalities and learning styles seemed to match well with online learning.

VI. Recommendations

In reviewing these trends, the evaluation team offers the following recommendations to the Commission as well as colleges and universities based on Year 7 data collection.

Consider supporting first-year college transition advisors for future students. COVID-19 has brought seismic changes to education, and it may take time for students and institutions to return fully to their pre-pandemic normalcy. As a result, the Commission or individual colleges and universities may see value in continuing to provide a transition-to-college advisor for low-income and first-generation students as they make the adjustment to postsecondary study. These advisors can help students acclimate to college while addressing their social/emotional needs and providing an added safety net of support.

Offer workshops for high school students on remote/hybrid learning. As remote learning may remain an option after the pandemic, WV GEAR UP may want to design workshops to help future college students navigate challenges posed by hybrid and remote learning. From organizational needs to exam administration and faculty communication, students cited some difficulty adjusting to online settings. For future cohorts, a common goal for these workshops may be to help students advocate for themselves when facing new or challenging situations.

Consider expanding summer/leadership camps in college settings. Summer and leadership camps proved especially popular with students as ways to see themselves in environments outside their home and school. Such opportunities also gave students a chance to meet new people from across the state. The Commission may want to consider these opportunities in a future GEAR UP grant. HEROs and College Decision Days are other innovative GEAR UP offerings that could be replicated elsewhere in the state.

Disseminate information on the Success Ambassadors Pathway. Designed prior to COVID, this pathway developed for GEAR UP students at Marshall University appeared to pay dividends in engaging students during a challenging time. Students cited the value of regular workshops, often held remotely, on topics such as careers, housing, stress management, and time management.

Continue to explore the experiences and outcomes of first-generation students in research and evaluation to better tailor services to this student population. While first-generation students had similar GEAR experiences as non-first-generation students, they may have had different postsecondary outcomes. The forthcoming Annual Evaluation Report will include more comprehensive findings regarding enrollment patterns of first-generation college students compared to their non-first-generation peers. In addition, their experiences and postsecondary outcomes should continue to be tracked in further study, including the WV GEAR UP longitudinal study and any future grant evaluations. Because first-generation students experienced unique barriers or challenges related to college enrollment—such as less familiarity with or access to postsecondary education forms—they may require tailored support from advisors and counselors to access and succeed in postsecondary education.

Leverage lessons learned from the WV GEAR UP cohort. Class of 2020 WV GEAR UP students who successfully transitioned to college during COVID-19 may be valuable peer mentors or guest speakers for future cohorts of students. After persevering through this difficult time, they can provide a valuable perspective on college challenges and how to overcome them.

VII. References

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VIII. Appendix A: Postsecondary Student Survey Instrument

West Virginia GEAR UP Student Survey – 2020–21 School Year
Postsecondary

Directions: Please respond to all questions by completely filling in the circle for each answer:

Like this: ● Not like this: (✓) (X) (/)

Section I: About You

1. What is your gender?

☐ *Male* ☐ *Female* ☐ *Other* [_____]

2. What is your race?

☐ *White* ☐ *American Indian or Alaska Native*

☐ *Black or African American* ☐ *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander*

☐ *Asian* ☐ *Two or more races*

☐ *Other* [_____]

3. What is your ethnicity?

☐ *Hispanic or Latino* ☐ *Not Hispanic or Latino* ☐ *Other* [_____]

4. What is the main language you speak at home?

☐ *English* ☐ *Spanish* ☐ *Other* [_____]

5. What is the highest level of education achieved by your parent(s)/guardians(s)? *Please answer this question for the parent/guardian who achieved the highest level of education. For example, if your mother has a 4-year degree and your father has a high school diploma, select 4-year college degree.*

☐ *Some high school*

☐ *High school diploma/GED*

☐ *Some college (less than a 2- or 4-year degree, e.g., certificate or career/tech. cert.)*

☐ *2-year college degree (Associate's)*

☐ *4-year college degree (Bachelor's)*

☐ *Master's degree*

☐ *Ph.D. or higher*

☐ *Don't know*

6. Are you enrolled in college or in the military? Select all that apply.

☐ *Yes, I attend a college/university. (Go to Question 7)*

☐ *Yes, I am enrolled in the military. (Go to Question 8.)*

☐ *No, I am not enrolled in a college or the military. (Go to Question 8.)*

7. (Answer only if selected *Yes, I attend a college/university* in question 6.) What school do you currently attend? (Skip to question 10 after responding.)

☐ *Bluefield State College*

☐ *Concord University*

☐ *Marshall University*

☐ *Southern West Virginia Community & Technical College*

☐ *West Virginia University*

☐ *West Virginia University Institute of Technology*

☐ *New River Community & Technical College*

☐ *Bridge Valley Community & Technical College*

☐ *Other (write in name)* _____

8. *(Answer only if did not select *Yes, I attend a college/university* in question 6)* What was the primary reason for not attending college?

☐ *My grades weren't good enough to get accepted*

☐ *It costs too much/I can't afford it*

☐ *I need to work.*

☐ *Decided to take a year off from school with plans to enroll next semester or next year*

☐ *Other _____*

9. *(Answer only if did not select *Yes, I attend a college/university* in question 6)* Do you plan to pursue postsecondary education in the future?

☐ *Yes, I plan to enroll next semester*

☐ *Yes, I plan to enroll next school year*

☐ *Yes, I plan to enroll at some point, but I'm not sure when*

☐ *I'm not sure*

☐ *No*

10. If you are attending Bluefield State College, Concord University, Marshall University, Southern West Virginia Community & Technical College, West Virginia University, West Virginia University Institute of Technology, New River Community & Technical College, or Bridge Valley Community & Technical College , please write your *college ID* number in the spaces below If there are zeroes at the beginning of your number, please include them.

Your College ID number:

This is an Example: College ID number: 09132567

_0_	_0_	_9_	_1_	_3_	_2_	_5_	_6_	_7_	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
●	●	0	0	0	0	0	0	0									
1	1	1	●	1	1	1	1	1									
2	2	2	2	2	●	2	2	2									
3	3	3	3	●	3	3	3	3									
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4									
5	5	5	5	5	5	●	5	5									
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	●	6									
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	●									
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8									
9	9	●	9	9	9	9	9	9									

Section II: Completion of High School

11. Regardless of whether you are in college or not, how effective was your overall participation in GEAR UP (since you began the program) in preparing you for college?

☐ *Not at all effective*

☐ *Somewhat effective*

☐ *Effective*

☐ *Very effective*

12. How, if at all, did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your plans for education after high school? (Select all that apply)

☐ *It did not affect my plans*

☐ *I decided to take fewer courses*

☐ *I decided to not move away from home*

☐ *I decided to pursue a different degree or certification type (e.g., 4-year degree, 2-year degree, certificate)*

☐ *I was unable to submit the applications (college, FAFSA, scholarships) I needed to apply and/or enroll in college*

☐ *I decided not to enroll in college*

☐ *Other _____*

13. While in Grade 12, were you offered adequate support to submit college applications and the FAFSA?

	Yes	*No*
FAFSA	☐	☐
College applications	☐	☐

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14. Did you participate in any of the college preparation activities in spring 2020? If so, how effective were these events in preparing you for college? (You can end the survey after this question if you did not select *Yes, I am enrolled in a college/university* in question 6.)

	Did you participate in this activity?		If yes, how effective was the activity in preparing you for college?			
	Yes	No	Not at all effective	Somewhat effective	Effective	Very effective
Virtual College Decision Day	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
College Q&A session	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Virtual Leadership Symposium	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
YouTube video discussion with high school GEAR UP staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other:_____	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section III: Current Postsecondary Educational Status

15. What is your current status as a student?

☐ I'm a full-time student.

☐ I'm a part-time student.

☐ I'm unsure if I am a full-time or part-time student.

16. How are you attending school this semester?

☐ In-person

☐ Virtually

☐ Both in-person and virtually

17. What degree are you currently pursuing?

☐ 4-year Bachelor's degree

☐ 2-year Associate's degree

☐ Postsecondary certificate

☐ I haven't decided on a degree yet

☐ I'm unsure which degree I'm pursuing

18. How many courses are you currently enrolled in?

1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5 or more*
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

19. Have you dropped any courses since starting college?

☐ No

☐ Yes, after discussing my decision with a staff member from my college

☐ Yes, but I did not discuss it with a staff member from my college

20. Please select all of the items that helped you determine which college to enroll in this semester.

- ☐   High school GEAR UP coordinator/high school counselor/high school teacher
- ☐   Someone else from your high school
- ☐   College staff
- ☐   Family member
- ☐   Friends or peers
- ☐   CFWV.com
- ☐   Other college planning website
- ☐   Other   [_____]

Section IV: College Experience—All Students

21. Do you receive Txt 4 Success messages?

☐   *Yes (Go to question 22)*   ☐   *No (Go to question 23)*   ☐   *I'm not sure (Go to question 23)*

22. (If yes to question 21) How helpful have the messages been in reminding you of important deadlines?

- ☐   *Very helpful*
- ☐   *Somewhat helpful*
- ☐   *Slightly helpful*
- ☐   *Not helpful at all*

23. Select all of the ways you have received postsecondary counseling since graduating high school. *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐   Face-to-face meetings
- ☐   Text messages
- ☐   Email
- ☐   Phone
- ☐   Instagram
- ☐   Facebook
- ☐   Other virtual meeting platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Skype, video calls, etc.)
- ☐   Other   [_____]

24. How many hours do you study each week?

- ☐   None
- ☐   1–5 hours
- ☐   6–10 hours
- ☐   11–15 hours
- ☐   More than 15 hours

25. If you currently have a job, how many hours a week do you work?

- ☐   10 or less
- ☐   11–20 hours a week
- ☐   20–39 hours a week

☐   40 or more hours a week

☐   I do not currently have a job

26. How are you paying for college? *Check all that apply.*

☐   WV Promise Scholarship   ☐   WV Higher Education Grant

☐   Other scholarship(s)   ☐   WV Invests Grant

☐   Federal Pell Grant   ☐   College savings plan/529

☐   Federal student loan   ☐   Federal work-study financial aid program

☐   Private loan   ☐   I am using my own money to pay my tuition

☐   The state pays my tuition because I am/was   ☐   My family helps pay my tuition
      in the foster care system

☐   Other: _____

27. Where are you currently living?

☐   In a dorm on campus

☐   At home with my parents/guardians

☐   In an apartment/house near campus (alone or with roommates/housemates)

☐   Other: _____

28. Think about the time since you started college. Is the following statement true for you?

	Often True	Sometimes True	Never True
Since starting college, I have worried whether my food or meal plan would run out before I got money to buy more.	☐	☐	☐

29. Since you started college, have hunger problems caused you to do any of the following?

	Yes	No
Miss a class	☐	☐
Miss a study session	☐	☐
Miss a club meeting	☐	☐
Opt to not join an extracurricular activity	☐	☐
Not buy a required textbook	☐	☐
Drop a course	☐	☐

30. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel welcome at my college.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Since starting college, it has been easy to make new friends.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My high school prepared me for college.	☐	☐	☐	☐
My family is supportive of me pursuing a college education.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am satisfied with my college's response to COVID-19 challenges	☐	☐	☐	☐

31. How have the changes put in place by your college to address the challenges of COVID-19 impacted your first semester of college? Select all that apply.

☐   It has not been as easy to make new friends in college.

☐   I have not been able to find a job on campus and/or work-study job like I expected to help pay for college.

☐   I have not been able to communicate as easily and/or frequently as I need with college faculty or staff.

☐   I have not been able to participate in any study groups.

☐   I have not been able to join any extracurricular activities that interest me.

☐   I have not had enough and/or the right kind of support to stay motivated to succeed in college.

☐   Other: _____

32. In the past 12 months, how often have you…

	Never	*Rarely*	*Sometimes*	*Most of the time*	*Always*
…had a hard time staying focused on your homework or other things you had to do?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
…been so worried about something that you could not sleep at night?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section V. College Experience—Students at Non-GEAR UP College Campuses

33. During the <u>summer</u> did you…

	Yes	*No*
Attend a college orientation (virtual [e.g., phone, online meeting platform] or in person)?	☐	☐
Speak with your college counselor?	☐	☐
Receive career counseling?	☐	☐
Discuss your degree and/or major with someone from your college?	☐	☐

34. Please indicate the activities you have participated in *since you started college.* <u>Note: Consider both virtual and in-person activities.</u>

	Yes	*No*
Spoke with your academic advisor in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Sought tutoring, academic help, or help from your school's writing center	☐	☐
Met one-on-one (virtually [e.g., phone, online meeting platform] or in person) with at least one of your professors	☐	☐
Spoke with a staff member from your school's office of financial aid in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Received financial aid advising from your college counselor	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school's student support services in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school regarding your current schedule/course load in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school regarding registering for courses next semester in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school about the transition from high school to college in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school regarding virtual learning in-person or virtually	☐	☐

35. How frequently do you communicate with each of these people?

	Academic Advisor	*Student Support Services Staff*
Never; I'm not sure who this is.	☐	☐
Never; I know who this person is, but I do not need to speak to them.	☐	☐
Less than once a month	☐	☐

1–2 times a month	☐	☐
3–4 times or more a month	☐	☐
At least once a week	☐	☐

Section V. College Experience—Students at GEAR UP College Campuses

If you are attending Bluefield State College, Concord University, Marshall University, Southern West Virginia Community & Technical College, West Virginia University, West Virginia University Institute of Technology, New River Community & Technical College, or Bridge Valley Community & Technical College, the following questions ask about your experience and interactions with postsecondary GEAR UP staff this year while you are at college. Depending on your institution, you may know this person as First Year Academic Advisor, GEAR UP Director, GEAR UP Program Coordinator, or Transition Coordinator. Please think about this person when answering questions about postsecondary GEAR UP staff.

36. During the _summer_ did you…

	Yes	No
Attend a college orientation (virtual [e.g., phone, online meeting platform] or in person)?	☐	☐
Speak with postsecondary GEAR UP staff/college counselor?	☐	☐
Receive career counseling?	☐	☐
Discuss your degree and/or major with someone from your college (including postsecondary GEAR UP staff)?	☐	☐

37. Please indicate the activities you have participated in _since you started college._ Note: Consider both virtual and in-person activities.

	Yes	No
Spoke with your academic advisor in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Sought tutoring, academic help, or help from your school's writing center	☐	☐
Met one-on-one (virtually [e.g., phone, online meeting platform] or in person) with at least one of your professors	☐	☐
Spoke with a staff member from your school's office of financial aid in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Received financial aid advising from postsecondary GEAR UP staff/college counselor in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school's student support services in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school (including postsecondary GEAR UP staff) regarding your current schedule/course load in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school (including postsecondary GEAR UP staff) regarding registering for courses next semester in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school (including postsecondary GEAR UP staff) about the transition from high school to college in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with someone from your school regarding virtual learning in-person or virtually	☐	☐
Spoke with postsecondary GEAR UP staff about your individual success plan in-person or virtually	☐	☐

38. How frequently do you communicate with each of these people?

	Academic Advisor	Student Support Services Staff	Postsecondary GEAR UP staff
Never; I'm not sure who this is.	☐	☐	☐
Never; I know who this person is, but I do not need to speak to them.	☐	☐	☐
Less than once a month	☐	☐	☐
1–2 times a month	☐	☐	☐
3–4 times or more a month	☐	☐	☐
At least once a week	☐	☐	☐

39. Are you a GEAR UP Student Success Ambassador?

☐ *Yes (Continue to question 40)* ☐ *No (Skip to question 41)* ☐ *I'm not sure (Skip to question 41)*

40. (If yes to question 39) How helpful has being a Student Success Ambassador been in helping you transition into college?

☐ *Very helpful*

☐ *Somewhat helpful*

☐ *Slightly helpful*

☐ *Not helpful at all*

Section VI: Education Future

41. What are your plans for the spring 2021 semester?

☐ Remain enrolled at the same school (answer Question 42, skip Question 43)

☐ Enroll at a different school (answer Question 42, skip Question 43)

☐ I do not plan to be enrolled at any school (skip Question 42, answer question 43)

☐ I am unsure of my plans (skip Questions 42 and 43, answer Question 44)

42. In the previous question, if you indicated that *you are planning to remain enrolled at the same school* or that you are *planning to enroll in a different school* in the spring, how many courses do you plan to enroll in?

☐ The same as this semester

☐ Fewer than this semester

☐ More than this semester

43. In the previous question, if you indicated that *you are not planning to enroll at any school in the spring*, please select the reason(s) why below. *Select all that apply.*

☐ I cannot afford to pay for my next semester

☐ I am not doing well in my courses

☐ I am about to lose my financial aid

☐ I don't like being in college

☐ I need to work

☐ I have concerns about COVID-19

☐ Other: _____

44. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) can be completed as early as October 1, 2020. Have you completed your FAFSA yet?

☐ No, and I do not plan to complete the FAFSA this academic year because I do not plan to be enrolled in postsecondary education next year.

☐ No, but I plan to complete the FAFSA this academic year.

☐ Yes

ICF

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45. What kind of assistance/resources could have helped you have a better experience this semester?

Thank you for your time!

ICF

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IX.   Appendix B: Postsecondary Parent Survey Instrument

West Virginia GEAR UP Postsecondary Parent/Guardian Survey – 2020–21

You are being invited to complete this survey because during the 2019–20 school year, you had a student in the 12th grade. Please complete the following survey with that student in mind,

Section I: About You

1. Did you have a student enrolled in 12th grade during the 2019–20 school year?
    ☐   Y   ☐   N   *(if this option is selected, skip to end)*

2. What high school was your student enrolled in during the 2019–20 school year?
    - ☐   Bluefield High School
    - ☐   Hannan Junior/Senior High School
    - ☐   Meadow Bridge High School
    - ☐   Midland Trail High School
    - ☐   Mingo Central Comprehensive High School
    - ☐   Montcalm High School
    - ☐   Nicholas County High School
    - ☐   Oak Hill High School
    - ☐   Pikeview High School
    - ☐   Point Pleasant Junior/Senior High School
    - ☐   Princeton Senior High School
    - ☐   Richwood High School
    - ☐   Scott High School
    - ☐   Sherman High School
    - ☐   Summers County High School
    - ☐   Tug Valley High School
    - ☐   Van Junior/Senior High School
    - ☐   Wahama Junior/Senior High School
    - ☐   Webster County High School
    - ☐   Westside High School
    - ☐   Wirt County High School
    - ☐   Wyoming East High School

3. Is your student currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution (e.g., certificate or career/tech. cert program, or a 2- or 4-year college or university)?
    ☐   Y   ☐   N

5. What is your relationship to your student in postsecondary education <u>(bubble all that apply)</u>?

☐ Parent   ☐ Legal Guardian

☐ Grandparent   ☐ Step or foster parent

                         ☐ Other

6. What is your gender?

☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Other

7. What is your race?

☐ White   ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Black or African American   ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ Asian   ☐ Two or more races

                         ☐ Other

8. What is your ethnicity?

☐ Hispanic or Latino   ☐ Not Hispanic or Latino   ☐ Other

9. What is the main language you speak at home?

☐ English   ☐ Spanish   ☐ Other

10. Which of the following options best describes your family's total income (before taxes) during the past 12 months? Please include income for yourself and all your family members living with you during this time.

$30,000 or Less	$30,001-$60,000	$60,001-$100,000	$100,001 or More	Don't know or I'd rather not say
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. Has your family's financial situation been affected by COVID-19?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ I don't know yet

12. What is the highest level of education achieved by your student's parent(s)/guardian(s)? (Please answer this question for the parent/guardian who achieved the highest level of education. For example, if your student's mother has a 4-year college degree and your student's father has a high school diploma, select the option for 4-year college degree.) (<u>Bubble only one answer.</u>)

☐ Some high school
☐ High school diploma/GED
☐ Some college (less than a 2- or 4-year degree, e.g., certificate or career/tech. cert.)
☐ 2-year college degree (Associate's)
☐ 4-year college degree (Bachelor's)
☐ Master's degree
☐ Ph.D. or higher
☐ Don't know

13. If you have other students, how many have attended or are currently attending college?

0	1	2	3	4	5 or more	I don't have other students
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section 2: About Your Student

14. **If yes to Q3:** Which of the following is your student currently enrolled in?
- ☐   4-year Bachelor's degree program
- ☐   2-year Associate's degree program
- ☐   Postsecondary certificate program (i.e., career and technical program
- ☐   I'm unsure
- ☐   Other   _____

15. What are your student's plans for the spring 2021 semester?
- ☐   Remain enrolled at the same school (Skip to question 15)
- ☐   Enroll at a different school (Continue to question 13)
- ☐   My student does not plan to be enrolled at any school (Skip to question 14)
- ☐   I am unsure of my student's plans (Skip to question 15)

16. **If "enroll in different school" in Q14,** ask: What type of program will your student be enrolling in?
- ☐   4-year Bachelor's degree program
- ☐   2-year Associate's degree program
- ☐   Postsecondary certificate program (i.e., career and technical program
- ☐   I'm unsure
- ☐   Other   _____

17. **If "My student does not plan to be enrolled at any school" in Q14,** ask: Why is your student not planning to enroll at any school in the spring? Select all that apply.
- ☐   My student cannot afford to pay for my next semester
- ☐   My student is not doing well in my courses
- ☐   My student is about to lose my financial aid
- ☐   My student doesn't like being in college
- ☐   My student needs to work
- ☐   My student has concerns about COVID-19
- ☐   Other: _____

18. How, if at all, did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your student's plans for education after high school? (Select all that apply)
- ☐   It did not affect my student's plans
- ☐   My student decided to take fewer courses
- ☐   My student decided to not move away from home
- ☐   My student decided to pursue a different degree or certification type (e.g., 4-year degree, 2-year degree, certificate)
- ☐   My student was unable to submit the applications (college, FAFSA, scholarships) they needed to apply and/or enroll in college
- ☐   My student decided not to enroll in college
- ☐   Other _____

19. In the past 12 months, how often has your student…

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
…had a hard time staying focused on their homework or other things they had to do?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
…been so worried about something that they could not sleep at night?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section 3: Education Future

20. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Attending college is important to my student's career goals and future.	☐	☐	☐	☐

21. What is the highest level of education that you <u>would like</u> your student to get (<u>bubble only one answer</u>)?
   - ☐ High school or less
   - ☐ Some college (less than a 2- or 4-year degree, e.g., certificate or career/tech. cert.)
   - ☐ 2-year college degree (Associate's)
   - ☐ 4-year college degree (Bachelor's)
   - ☐ More than a 4-year college degree

22. What is the highest level of education that you <u>expect</u> your student to get (<u>bubble only one answer</u>)?
   - ☐ High school or less
   - ☐ Some college (less than a 2- or 4-year degree, e.g., certificate or career/tech. cert.)
   - ☐ 2-year college degree (Associate's)
   - ☐ 4-year college degree (Bachelor's)
   - ☐ More than a 4-year college degree

Section 4: Participation in GEAR UP

23. How effective was your student's overall participation in GEAR UP (since your student began the program) in preparing your student for college?
   - ☐ Not at all effective
   - ☐ Somewhat effective
   - ☐ Effective
   - ☐ Very effective

24. How effective was your student's overall participation in GEAR UP (since your student began the program) in preparing your student for entering the workforce?
   - ☐ Not at all effective
   - ☐ Somewhat effective
   - ☐ Effective
   - ☐ Very effective

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25. How well did GEAR UP make you aware about the following topics?

	Not at All	Slightly	Moderately	Extremely
FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)	☐	☐	☐	☐
ACT/SAT	☐	☐	☐	☐
WV Higher Education Grant	☐	☐	☐	☐
WV Invests Grant				
Federal Pell Grants	☐	☐	☐	☐
Federal student loans	☐	☐	☐	☐
Federal work-study	☐	☐	☐	☐
Scholarships (e.g., PROMISE or institutional)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Requirements for college acceptance	☐	☐	☐	☐
The importance/benefit of a college education	☐	☐	☐	☐
High school graduation requirements	☐	☐	☐	☐

26. How important have the following resources, individuals, or tools been in gathering information about your student's options for college?

	Not at All	Slightly	Moderately	Extremely
College or university websites	☐	☐	☐	☐
College Foundation of WV website (CFWV.com)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other college planning websites	☐	☐	☐	☐
College fairs (virtual or in person)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Television	☐	☐	☐	☐
Radio	☐	☐	☐	☐
Direct mail	☐	☐	☐	☐
E-mail	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brochures and pamphlets	☐	☐	☐	☐
Magazines/newspapers	☐	☐	☐	☐
Signs, posters, or billboards	☐	☐	☐	☐
Text messages	☐	☐	☐	☐
School counselor	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family members	☐	☐	☐	☐
GEAR UP staff	☐	☐	☐	☐
College admissions representatives	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)	☐		☐	☐

27. Did anyone from your student's high school or GEAR UP ever speak with you about…

College entrance requirements?	☐	☐
The availability of financial aid to help your student pay for college?	☐	☐

28. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the GEAR UP program?

Thank you for your time!

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X. Appendix C: Postsecondary Student Focus Group Protocols

West Virginia GEAR UP Evaluation
Cohort Student Focus Group Guide – Spring 2021

Facilitator Guidelines:

➢ Introduce yourself and colleagues as representatives of ICF and describe your role (i.e., facilitator).

➢ <u>Briefly discuss the focus group's purpose:</u> *The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (the Commission) has hired a company, ICF, to study how West Virginia GEAR UP is working. Today, we will have a group discussion, called a focus group, so that you all can share your views and experiences with West Virginia GEAR UP. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers—only your own opinion. The goal is to hear many different viewpoints. I also want to know if you agree or disagree with what others are saying and why. Please, only one person speak at a time. This focus group discussion will take approximately 45-55 minutes.*

➢ <u>Convey to each participant our confidentiality policy:</u> *Before we get started, I want to remind you about a few things related to confidentiality: (1) Your participation in this focus group discussion is voluntary; (2) you can decline to answer any questions or stop participating in the discussion at any time without any consequences; (3) the information you share today will be kept in confidence by the ICF team to the extent permitted by law; (4) the ICF team has signed confidentiality agreements that we will protect the information that you share with us; (5) the ICF team will store focus group data in secure areas; and (6) please respect each other's confidentiality by not sharing any information outside of this focus group.*

➢ <u>Ask if they have any questions before you begin.</u> Review consent forms and obtain verbal consent.

➢ <u>Ask permission to record the focus group:</u> *In order to capture the discussion, I would like to record the session. Only ICF evaluation team members will have access to the recording, which will not be shared with anybody in your school or the GEAR UP program. If at least one person chooses not to have the focus group recorded, we will not record the session but will take notes. We will not include your name(s) in these notes. Any information that can be used to identify an individual will be removed prior to sharing any findings.* **START RECORDING NOW!**

➢ <u>Encourage students to have their cameras on.</u>

Time	Opening Questions	Facilitator's Activity
3 min	**INTRODUCTION** Please introduce yourself, whether you are attending full or part time, and whether you attend college virtually, in-person, or a hybrid combination of the two formats.	Probe whether students have decided on their majors. *If applicable:* What college/university are you attending?

5-7 min	**THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE SO FAR** Can you tell us 2 or 3 words that describe your feelings about college so far? Please enter them into the chat.	Read aloud the responses and ask for follow-up from students to explain their answers. Probe for whether college has met / not met their expectations so far and how their expectations have changed.
5 min	**YOUR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE** How well do you believe your high school experience prepared you for college? What else could your high school or GEAR UP have done to help prepare you for college?	Probe for GEAR UP activities that students believed were impactful in preparing them for college such as Success Societies, HEROs, college visits, Decision Day, FAFSA assistance, other college-going activities.
5 min	**COVID-19 IMPACT ON YOUR PLANS** Did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your college plans for this year? If so, how? How has it affected your friends from high school?	Probe for whether COVID prompted focus group participants to enroll at a different college/university, take fewer courses (enroll part time), or not move away from home. When discussing issues facing their friends, ask whether students in the focus group are facing these same issues, too.
10-12 min	**FIRST-YEAR CHALLENGES** Next, I'd like to ask about challenges you've faced so far this year. I'm going to list some challenges that first-year college students may experience. Can you tell me how whether any of these have been a challenge for you? • Knowing what courses to take • Managing assignments • Keeping up my grades • Balancing academics and a job • Feeling isolated or homesick • Finding clubs or activities • Finding stable housing	If using Teams, we will use Forms to generate a poll prior to the event. Probe if users can access the poll. If not, have them use the chat. After each challenge, ask if one person will share why he/she views that issue as a challenge. Probe whether students have overcome the challenge. After the final item on the left, ask students about any other challenges they may be facing.
5-7 min	**EXPERIENCE WITH GEAR UP** How are you interacting with GEAR UP this year? Who do you talk to? What activities have you participated in?	Probe for frequency and quality of interactions with GEAR UP transition staff. Probe for participation in workshops, Text for Success, one-to-one advising/ mentoring, Success Ambassadors Pathway, family activities. Probe for reasons why students did/did not participate and any suggestions for improvement.

5 min	**OTHER CAMPUS SERVICES** Aside from GEAR UP activities, what other kinds of supports are available to you? What campus services have you used and how have you used them? What services do you need that you're not receiving now?	Probe for use of tutoring services, professor office hours, student support services. Probe for student suggestions about additional services needed.
5 min	**FUTURE PLANS** Do you plan to return to college next fall? Why or why not? If you come back, do you expect to be at this college/university?	Probe for reasons why students may not continue their education or return to their current institution. Probe for whether students want to work or take a year off and factors behind that decision. Probe for what GEAR UP or their college could do that might encourage students to return to school.
2 min	**CLOSING** Is there anything else we should know about what your experience at college this year and what you think of the GEAR UP program?	

Thank you very much for your time.

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West Virginia GEAR UP Evaluation
Adult Interview and Focus Group Consent Form

West Virginia postsecondary leaders and public schools in 10 counties are participating in a federal grant to implement and assess the effectiveness of the GEAR UP program to promote college awareness and enrollment among low-income students across the state. The grant's fiscal agent, the West Virginia Higher Education Postsecondary Commission (HEPC), has contracted with ICF to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of this grant program to better understand strategies used to meet program goals. As part of this important research, you are being asked to participate in an interview or focus group that should take approximately 45-50 minutes. The discussion will include questions about your opinions and experiences with GEAR UP. Please consider the details below prior to deciding to participate in this interview:

• **Confidentiality**: The session will be recorded either by audio files or written notes. The recordings of what you share will only be used by researchers. Data will be stored in a secure area accessible only to the researchers. Your answers to these questions will be kept confidential. Summary reports may indicate particular individuals by the roles they describe but challenges and successes will be reported confidentially.

• **Risks**: The study presents minimal risk to you. You will not be required to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and reports will not identify you by name. If at any time you feel uncomfortable while answering questions or want to talk with someone after the discussion, please let the interviewer know.

• **Benefits**: Study participation helps build knowledge in the state and nationally about how to support students in building momentum for postsecondary education success. Where appropriate, HEPC and participating postsecondary institutions can use the information learned to adjust GEAR UP programming.

• **Voluntary Participation**: Your participation is voluntary meaning that you do not have to participate in this interview or focus group if you do not want to; you can stop participating at any time. We hope you will participate in the conversation, but you do not have to share information that makes you feel uncomfortable. Your decision to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, will not affect your employment status or performance review. By answering questions and signing below, you are consenting to participate.

If you have any questions about the study or your rights as a study participant, you can call Samantha Spinney, ICF, at (703) 272-6681.

To indicate your consent to participate in this interview, please sign your name below in black/blue ink pen.

_____   _____

Sign your name here   **Date**

_____

Clearly print your name here