



Transition and First-Year Program Staff Interview Memo

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I. Background

ICF conducted interviews with seven West Virginia GEAR UP (WV GEAR UP) transition and first-year program staff in February 2020 to gain their perceptions on implementation of a pilot program of services to first-year college students during the 2019–20 school year. This memo provides a high-level overview of findings with a focus on implementation, student buy-in, student activities, and lessons learned for next year. It includes topics such as program staff roles and responsibilities, workshops, one-to-one meetings with students, academic assistance to students, and perceptions of their success to date. The memo also provides recommendations for the future.

This data collection was conducted as part of ICF's Year 6 evaluation of WV GEAR UP. It is the first time ICF has collected data from these program staff who began work in summer or fall 2019. For 2019–20, the staff members' primary goal was to serve GEAR UP priority students who had one year of GEAR UP assistance, graduated from program high schools in 2019, and enrolled in postsecondary education the following fall. WV GEAR UP considers the 2019–20 period as a pilot year in serving first-year college students in preparation for the arrival of WV GEAR UP cohort students in fall 2020. This work reflects ICF's annual goal to provide qualitative data on the operation of GEAR UP and findings that can be used to enhance services in the future.

For the 2019–20 academic year, WV GEAR UP hired transition and first-year program staff at six postsecondary institutions expected to enroll a significant number of GEAR UP students:

- Bluefield State College
- Concord University
- Marshall University
- Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College -- main campus and Williamson Campus
- West Virginia University, and
- West Virginia University Institute of Technology.

Prior to this data collection, ICF developed an interview protocol with input from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC). This protocol was reviewed and approved by ICF's Institutional Research Board. All interviews were conducted by phone, with each lasting 40 to 60 minutes. ICF recorded calls, transcribed the recordings, and then coded the transcripts according to major areas of implementation. ICF conducted these interviews prior to the restrictions and policy changes made by many colleges and universities in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

II. Overview of Findings

Major findings were organized into the following categories: overview and approach to the job, student buy-in, GEAR UP activities conducted, communication, lessons learned, and impact and sustainability. Each of these categories of findings is described in more detail in this section.

1. Overview and Approach to the Job

All program staff began work during the summer or fall of 2019. Three started in June or July; two others began in August and the remainder started after the launch of the academic year. Overall, most had some prior experience in student services or advising in a postsecondary education setting. Typical pre-GEAR UP employment included work as an academic success coach, advisor on another federal grant, and tutoring program manager.

All staff members recalled that they received some training from WVHEPC and that it helped them in learning their roles and responsibilities. They also cited practical advantages from the training such as learning allowable and non-allowable costs. Most did not have any suggestions to improve training, although one mentioned it would be helpful to know more about GEAR UP activities that took place during high school. All praised the work of WVHEPC to stay in touch with staff via email and individual or group phone calls during the academic year.

For the spring 2020 semester, most transition and first-year staff have caseloads of 35–55 students after losing some students from fall 2019. They reported that students left for a variety of reasons, including jobs, academic probation, medical reasons, and a decision to switch programs or transfer to another college or university. One has a spring 2019 caseload of 90 students. Another staff member from a large university has 118 students.

Staff members described their role as advisors whose primary goal was to promote student adjustment to and success at college. They identified one key metric of success as having GEAR UP students post a retention rate that is above the average rate at the individual institution. To attain that objective, students should be on track to earn 15 credits per semester and 30 credits during their freshman year. In supporting this goal, staff schedule one-to-one meetings with students as well as group workshops. Another requirement is for students to complete an Individual Success Plan (ISP) for their college careers. Staff said they monitor credits earned, midterm grades, and the number of students with grade point averages of 2.0 or above. They also maintain individual student records regarding participation in one-to-one meetings, attendance at group workshops, and overall hours of participation.

2. Student Buy-In

Many staff members reported low buy-in among students, few of whom believed they had participated in the GEAR UP program as priority high school seniors. In addition, some students were quick to point out that the class behind them received GEAR UP services and they were unhappy about that and less inclined to participate now. These two comments from staff members reflected this view:

Students said they knew about GEAR UP, but they said it was the class after them that got all the services. They were a little upset about that and didn't understand why they would have to do it now.

I had one student who said, 'Why am I in GEAR UP? I wasn't in it before.' There can be resistance and confusion.

One staff member talked to seven students at an event early in the academic year but had little or no contact with any of the eligible students since that time. In this individual's view, students do not respond to emails and show no record of even opening the emails.

I've tried looking for students around campus. No one wants to approach us or communicate and I've made phone calls.

Most agreed that workshops generally have not been successful and have had minimal attendance. Family events also have not drawn interest. One cited stronger student buy-in during the spring semester, with more students coming in for appointments. However, she still saw little interest in workshops as her first one in the spring semester had no attendees. This staff member filmed the workshop and posted it on YouTube and Facebook hoping that students would access it later.

Transition and first-year staff cited other potential reasons for low student involvement. Some believed that students were unsure about their goals and college choices. Students on two-year campuses are commuters, making it more difficult to participate in activities. Most students also hold jobs on campus, with their family's small business, or at other jobs in their home communities. One staff member cited a scholarship requiring students to perform community service as a competing activity that limited participation. In addition, at many sites, some students opted not to participate in GEAR UP because they are part of TRIO programs that promise multiple years of advising and support services rather than the single year of support provided by GEAR UP.

Despite these trends, three staff members cited progress in reaching students. This success may have occurred because they had specific assignments that required students to interact with them. At one institution, the GEAR UP staffer served as the official academic advisor for students. This was typically not the case at other institutions, where students had another advisor outside GEAR UP who performed this function.

This staff member, who started in June, was able to schedule one-to-one meetings with students soon after they arrived on campus. Since that time, she has embraced the idea of intensive case management with students and reported success.

My students are faithful in contacting me. I have a few that just walk in, but the majority will make an appointment ... I am their first-year assigned advisor here, so they come to me for anything that they need.

At another institution, the staff member taught a one-credit freshman seminar course in which she interacted with GEAR UP students. As a result, she was able to forge relationships with those GEAR UP students in her seminar. Participation in activities was linked to a grade in the course, which helped facilitate a relationship with GEAR UP. However, she cited less interaction with students since the end of this course.

3. GEAR UP Activities

Staff said they offered at least two workshops every semester and encouraged students to meet with them individually to complete an ISP. They also reviewed student progress via grades and early alert systems, and most organized at least one activity inviting parents/families. Their perceptions of key activities are provided below.

Early Alert/Review of Grades: Staff said they receive midterm grades for GEAR UP students, and some indicated they receive information through a campus early alert system during a semester. They said they used this information to reach out to students to publicize the

availability of tutoring and support services. One thought it important to contact all students, even those doing well academically. She separated students into four groups: 1) those doing very poorly; 2) those struggling but not yet failing; 3) those with high grades; and 4) those with middling grades. "Then I just write each of them an email accordingly," she said, with praise for high achievers and reminders for struggling students to meet with her and/or access other available campus services.

Workshops: Staff members designed workshops on a variety of topics including time management, academic planning, self-advocacy, career planning and health/wellness. Many also did financial aid workshops and offered to help students complete the FAFSA. However, most reported low attendance or even no attendance at some of these events. As two noted:

They do not like attending workshops. That's very clear.

I feel like the workshops are not really that valuable. I don't mean to sound negative but there's just so little attendance at them for all the work that's involved.

However, there were some successes. At one campus, a workshop on sophomore housing options was well attended. They also said students are more likely to attend a workshop if it includes food or occurs in late afternoon or early evening. As one noted:

College kids don't have a lot of money so if you feed them, they will come.

One staff member conducted a two-part workshop on academic mindset that drew moderate to strong interest. After the second workshop, she held an impromptu focus group to ask students what they wanted for future workshops. They cited time management, self-esteem, and study skills, among other suggestions. This staffer used these suggestions to develop a success pathway she plans to use with cohort students next year. This GEAR UP Success Ambassadors Pathway includes key tasks and activities to help students develop academic, social, personal, and professional skills to ease the transition to college.

Many agreed that lack of study skills is a major barrier to many students and that workshops on this topic can be helpful. As one noted, "Looking over a PowerPoint before a test is not studying."

Parent/Family Outreach: Staff said they organized at least one parent activity but that few family members attended. In some cases, students did not want their parents present because they wanted their independence; others indicated that they have not lived with their parents for some time. Given that many parents have low incomes, one staffer questioned the value of asking parents to incur travel costs to come to campus.

Another noted that lack of interest in parent activities reinforced challenges she experienced in other facets of the program.

There's very limited participation in workshops, and there's very little parent interest in attending anything.

Individual Success Plans: Staff members reported mixed success in getting GEAR UP students to create ISPs. On one campus, the GEAR UP staffer did not need health insurance so

the campus re-allocated funds to hire two graduate assistants to help with ISPs. At this campus, about 70% of students created success plans.

At a two-year campus where the transition/first-year staff member is also the student's academic advisor, nearly all students (47 of 50) completed ISPs. The staff member held one-to-one sessions before the start of the academic year, when she also registered students for classes. As an advisor, she was able to do intensive case management that began early and continued through the year.

I feel like the campus mom to freshmen, which is a good thing. I feel like intensive case management helps them to stay on track.

At another campus, however, the GEAR UP staffer could get few students to meet to develop the ISP. She held a welcome to GEAR UP event with food and seven students attended. While these students completed an ISP, no others would agree to a one-to-one meeting. Others also said they scheduled events with meals to draw student interest in completing a success plan, with limited success.

Another staff member found it difficult to schedule face-to-face meetings with students but had some complete their ISPs online. She justified this approach noting that some students attended strictly online and had transportation challenges in getting to campus.

Tutoring: Campuses had individual or small-group tutoring services available to GEAR UP students. Many said it has been difficult to get students to participate, as some do not respond to GEAR UP messaging while others say tutoring may not be available at hours convenient to students. A few said they provided some academic assistance to students on their own, chiefly to help with writing and/or in using Blackboard for online courses.

One institution offers Brainfuse Live Tutoring for students to access at any time. The staffer at this school said some students—mainly those in online courses—appear to be using the service. She added:

A lot of students may be taking only online classes, so tutoring also needs to be online.

4. Communication

Several questions on the interview protocol focused on how transition and first-year staff members communicate with students—including what platforms work well to reach them—and the quality of their interaction with WVHEPC and other GEAR UP staff. Below is a summary of views on these topics.

Communication with Students: Transition and first-year staff said they generally used email to connect with students. One also employed texting but on other campuses this practice was strongly discouraged for privacy reasons. Several used Facebook to facilitate communication, and one posted her workshops on YouTube. Many said they also relied on athletic coaches or other campus advisors to connect with students or to monitor their progress.

Staff members said they kept detailed records of all contact with students.

I keep a file on each student. I type up progress notes every time I speak to them on the phone. If they come in, I'll do a progress note and place it in their file. I also do a degree audit that's kept in their file.

Communication with WVHEPC and Other Staff: All were pleased with the availability of WVHEPC staff to answer their questions. Staff have participated in regular calls via the Zoom videoconference platform. These not only provide opportunities to ask questions but also encourage sharing of ideas across the various campuses. Some staff—typically those hired the earliest—had an opportunity to visit with high school GEAR UP site coordinators. Most believed this contact could be increased in spring 2020 to help promote effective transition of cohort students to postsecondary education this fall.

5. Lessons Learned

Most staff cited lessons learned from the 2019–20 year that will help them plan activities for the GEAR UP cohort that arrives in fall 2020. Early contact with students is essential to build relationships, they said. One institution is planning an early move-in option for cohort students. For approximately \$100, students can move in four days early and GEAR UP will provide special programming to help students acclimate to campus and build community. Interviewees offered two main reasons why they expect improved buy-in next fall: 1) Staff already will be in place when students arrive on campus; and 2) Fall 2020 freshmen will have extensive prior experience with GEAR UP. According to one staff member:

I think student buy-in will look very different next year because these students will be aware of GEAR UP and have been through this program.

However, most staff said it is important to reach out to students in spring 2020 even before they graduate from high school. Some have sent emails to high school site coordinators; one noted that she was a teacher at a GEAR UP high school and has reconnected with colleagues to see if she can visit this spring. Most also said they expected to meet some cohort students at a Governor's GEAR UP Honors Symposium scheduled for spring 2020, but this event has been cancelled due to COVID-19.

Aside from early communication with students, another takeaway from the 2019–20 year is that some students do not like the idea of group workshops. Staff indicated they are likely to repeat workshops that had the most attendance this year and would schedule others based on feedback from students this year and early next year. However, they did not believe that parent/family activities should continue next fall.

Some saw value in offering incentives to encourage student participation. At one campus, students received a goody bag for completing the ISP. On another campus, the staff member set up a free, celebratory lunch for GEAR UP students who placed on the Dean's List or President's List of high achievers.

On reaching students, one noted that persistence was important even if some did not immediately engage with GEAR UP. This staffer outlined a successful approach to reach these individuals:

I would write them emails, and I just started going to classes. And I would let the teacher know that I was here to talk to their new student and would it be okay if I came into the classroom. And if they'd point out the student, I would reach out and schedule a meeting with them.

As noted earlier, one staff member has developed a GEAR UP Success Ambassadors Pathway with tasks and activities to help students develop academic, social, personal, and professional skills that support success in college. The staffer said this pathway is one critical lesson learned and she wants to disseminate this plan to other campuses for possible use with cohort students next year.

6. Program Impact

Asked how they would judge the impact of their efforts, staff generally defined success based on certain statistical goals as well as their ability to build relationships. Some mentioned the ability to reach key metrics such as a high rate of students who returned for the spring 2020 semester or who will return in fall 2020. Yet most said the ability to establish relationships with students was a key barometer of their success. This sentiment was expressed through these comments:

Success is if I reach one student. If a student comes in and asks questions or responds, that's a win.

I think being a successful coordinator is about connecting with them in a meaningful way.

Since many students did not participate at all, staff expressed the opinion that the students likely found other advisors or support services on campus. Overall, many believed that GEAR UP offered services that were similar to those already available on campus including advising, tutoring, and transition-to-college assistance. Most were also able to refer students to other campus services such as counseling, so those services would continue for students who request them.

III. Conclusion and Recommendations

All WV GEAR UP transition and first-year program staff sought to implement their goals and objectives with fidelity during this pilot effort in the 2019–20 academic year. They faced various challenges, however, that included:

- Limited student buy-in to the program;
- A late start for some new staff that hampered their ability to reach students; and
- Uneven attendance at workshops and one-to-one meetings.

Despite these challenges, staff achieved some success by aggressively reaching out to students or employing graduate assistants to help with outreach. Staff with formal advising or instructional responsibilities appeared to have the greatest success as their hands-on roles led naturally to more interaction with GEAR UP students. Incentives also appeared to drive some increased student participation during the year.

Transition and first-year staff should see greater buy-in next fall as they will work with GEAR UP cohort students who have broad knowledge of the program and have received services for multiple years. Based on findings from these interviews, ICF provides the following recommendations as the cohort prepares to enroll in postsecondary education:

- WV GEAR UP should encourage high school site coordinators to invite transition and first-year staff members to their events, particularly College Decision Days held by the high schools. Transition and first-year staff said they are aware of these events and would like to attend as many as they can, if possible.
- If the COVID-19 situation forces cancellation of College Decision Days, WV GEAR UP should use e-mail, video conference platforms, and other media to introduce cohort students to the transition staff and discuss GEAR UP activities for college freshmen. These events can provide a “warm hand-off” so cohort students learn how the program will operate next year.
- WV GEAR UP may want to consider revising the requirement that transition staff schedule at least one parent/family activity. Staff reported low attendance at these events, and some also are unable to obtain parent contact information due to data privacy regulations.
- Participating colleges and universities should include presentations by GEAR UP during orientation and welcoming activities so that students can make a formal connection with transition and first-year staff once they arrive on campus. These events represent an opportunity for GEAR UP to deliver complete or modified versions of the many workshops developed during this pilot year of activities.
- When feasible, transition and first-year staff should be encouraged to undertake opportunities to serve as advisors or instructors for GEAR UP students or to support faculty working with first-year students. For example, staff could teach first-year experience courses or support faculty teaching these courses. GEAR UP staff have designed many quality workshops this year, despite varied attendance. These workshops could be adapted for use in first-year experience courses or as extra credit opportunities outside class. In addition, they could record these workshops for remote delivery should campuses face additional COVID-19-related challenges, providing extra value to their postsecondary institutions.