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Bridging the Gap: Ensuring College Success for Maine GEAR UP Graduates

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This project is designed to address the unique and complex challenges faced by GEAR UP graduates as they embark on their college journeys. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programming, GEAR UP, is a federal discretionary grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP graduates in Maine represent a subset of underrepresented students from throughout the state. Bridging the Gap, drawing on the most current research and data, will provide personalized mentoring and support for GEAR UP graduates on four Maine college campuses. Specifically, mentors will work with participating GEAR UP graduates to establish goals and action steps to support successful completion of college programs, identify college-based resources, and develop a process to address challenges in a proactive and targeted manner. Additionally, the mentors will share findings and data from this project to inform the efficacy of the existing college support programs, identify potential barriers or resource gaps, and serve as a resource to the institution in adapting, adopting, or creating more efficacious supports for underserved student populations. Importantly, data from this project will be analyzed quarterly to continuously review and improve project activities and outcomes. The research and information garnered through this project will be shared among GEAR UP high schools to continually improve their college access programs. This research will also be disseminated among project partners and others invested in ensuring Maine students achieve postsecondary success.

Find handouts from today's session online at
<http://www.gearupme.org/news/events.php>



Problem Statement

For low-income and first-generation college students, the road to a degree is uneven, marked with detours and speed bumps: inflexible work schedules, remedial education, day care costs, family responsibilities. And while evidence shows that fostering and maintaining “academic momentum” is the key to improving completion rates, our institutions have not responded to their students’ increasingly complex and diverse needs.

(2009, Gates Foundation)

Researchers examining the challenges facing first generation, low-income students find that: (a) those “whose parents did not attend college are more likely than their non first-generation counterparts to be less academically prepared for college . . .; (b) they have more difficulty in acclimating themselves to college once they enroll . . .; and (c) they are more at risk for not completing a degree . . .” (2004, Tym, McMillon, Barone, & Webster).

The Gates Foundation (2008) reported that only about 25% of low-income students actually complete any type of postsecondary degree. These statistics are clearly unacceptable and even more alarming when it is understood that these students who enroll in a college program and leave, do so without a degree, with debts associated with their education, and with limited prospects for gainful employment (retrieved from September 12, 2010 from <http://www.stateuniversity.com/blog/permalink/College-Drop-Out-Rates-Who-s-to-Blame-.html>).

There are strategies that can help. Tym et al. (2004) found that “Targeted intervention efforts that reach out to first-generation students both before and during college can help mitigate the differences between first-generation and non-first generation students and can help colleges reach their goal of recruiting and retaining all students” (p. 1).



Project Description and Partners

The Maine State GEAR UP project has well documented success in preparing and ensuring GEAR UP students aspire to postsecondary educational goals. The majority of students enrolled in the Maine State GEAR UP program express an interest in, and intention to participate in, postsecondary education. For example, last year over 75% of the students enrolled in GEAR UP completed their FAFSA and indicated they intended to pursue a postsecondary education. However, experience shows that too many of these students run into thorny challenges, such as course study, financial, or individual support issues which they are unable to navigate, resulting in their dropping out. Nationally, researchers have identified significant attrition among all college freshmen and first generation, low-income students' attrition rates are significantly greater than their non-first generation peers. Due to the restrictions of the GEAR UP regulations, Syntiro is prohibited from using grant funds to follow and support GEAR UP students during their postsecondary experiences. Bridging the Gap would provide critical funds and supports to help bridge this enormous gap.

This proposal puts forth goals to specifically respond to the challenges that GEAR UP graduates face through providing personalized mentorship, collaborative problem-solving, a robust evaluation/research process, and a dissemination plan to share findings with our partners throughout the state of Maine.

Project partners will include Maine State GEAR UP high schools, University of Maine (UM), University of Maine Machias (UMM), and Washington County Community College (WCCC). Additionally, GEAR UP partners MELMAC, FAME, and Maine Department of Education (MDOE) will continue to share information, resources, and data collected through the GEAR UP project. The longstanding relationships, information, and resources that these partners bring to this effort will provide rich learning and supports for preparing high school students for postsecondary education.



Action Plan

1. **Identification of GEAR UP Students:** GEAR UP graduates who are currently enrolled in one of the partner institutions will be contacted by the mentors. We will work with campus personnel to identify students.
2. **Orientation meeting:** Participating students attend an orientation meeting to discuss the project and to sign release forms to satisfy the FERPA requirements for sharing of information.
3. **Survey conducted:** Students and staff will create a survey to pose relevant questions to the students about the current level of success and to identify barriers and challenges they face on campus.
4. **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** Working collaboratively, the mentors, GEAR UP graduates, and their individual institutions will identify and access institution-level resources and supports as needed. Specifically, the mentor will work closely with the specified institution to identify student-level supports and resources, and to share learning and expertise in order to develop wrap-around supports for GEAR UP graduates.
5. **Evaluation and Research:** Working closely with the partnering institutions, and the Maine Department of Education, data will be systematically collected and analyzed using a variety of sources, both qualitative and quantitative. Data will be collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups, attendance, and successful course completion to identify barriers and successful educational attainment strategies. Pre- and post-assessments, in tandem with other data, will be used to inform the efficacy of current supports to help identify new supports, as well as contribute to the literature on underrepresented student college success. Importantly, the data will be used to inform a continuous improvement model throughout the project specifically analyzing which parts of the mentorship program are most successful and where it can be strengthened.



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Goals and Objectives

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES	ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES
Provide <u>measurable</u> goals and objectives.	Describe the activities and services that will be conducted to accomplish the goals and objectives.	Present anticipated outcomes based on the implementation of services and activities.
1. To increase the number of GEAR UP graduates who successfully complete Year 1 of college.	Identify GEAR UP graduates enrolled in one of the identified colleges and provide individualized mentorship which will include, but is not limited to, developing a personalized <i>College Success Plan</i> .	An annual increase in the percentage of GEAR UP graduates who successfully complete Year 1 of college.
2. To increase the number of GEAR UP graduates who complete the FAFSA by May 1.	Conduct follow-up and individualized support (e.g., encouragement, reminders, resources, etc.) to ensure all participating GEAR UP graduates complete their FAFSAs by May 1.	An annual increase in the percentage of GEAR UP graduates who complete the FAFSA by May 1.
3. To increase the number of GEAR UP graduates enrolled in college who complete their programs of study.	Ensure that GEAR UP graduates' personalized <i>College Success Plan</i> has goals and action steps directly related to the successful completion of programs of study.	An increase in the percentage of GEAR UP graduates who complete their college programs.
4. To gather and compile data regarding educational attainment and barriers for GEAR UP graduates enrolled in college programs.	a. Identify data related to challenges faced by GEAR UP graduates enrolled in identified colleges. b. Identify data related to successful college participation by GEAR UP graduates.	An increase in the percentage of GEAR UP graduates with fewer risk factors following the mentoring program as measured by pre- and post- student surveys.
5. To identify best practices associated with supporting student participation and success in college.	Analysis of data collected through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and mentor relationships with GEAR UP graduates to inform the identification of best practices associated with successful participation and completion of college by GEAR UP students.	An increase in the number of best practices identified each year of the grant.
6. To share information and research gained with GEAR UP partner schools, MaineCAN, and colleges.	Research findings identified through the data analyses above will be used to inform practices in GEAR UP high schools. Information will be posted on our websites, shared with MaineCAN members and other college-going partners, and reviewed with post-secondary school partners.	An increase in the amount of information shared each year of the grant.

