

# Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Austin

## 2019 Fall Student Focus Group Results Summary

March 2020

### Introduction

The AISD (Austin Independent School District) evaluation team conducted student focus groups with GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) participants in the fall of 2019. Student participants in focus groups were 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students at five GEAR UP campuses: Dobie, Lively, Mendez, Paredes, and Webb. In total, 46 students participated in the focus groups. On average, nine students participated in each focus group.

The purpose of the student focus group was to gather information about students' perspectives on the GEAR UP program, their experiences with the GEAR UP activities, and their plans for future education. Students were asked to provide feedback in the following areas: (a) understanding of the GEAR UP program, (b) GEAR UP facilitators, (c) GEAR UP activities, (d) intention to attend college, (e) teacher expectations, and (f) any other information students wanted to know about college.

### Focus Group Highlights

In summary, students who participated in focus groups across five GEAR UP campuses had a good understanding of the GEAR UP program. They reported the program helped them prepare for college. Most students provided positive comments about the GEAR UP activities and GEAR UP facilitators, including:

- Students described the helpful and resourceful nature of the GEAR UP facilitators and reported their facilitators cared about their future education.
- Students regarded college visits as the most helpful GEAR UP activity to prepare them for college.
- Students reported Austin Partners in Education (APIE) tutoring was helpful in supporting their academic progress.
- Students wanted to go to college, because they thought college enrollment helped fulfill their career goals.
- Students reported their teachers expected them to go to college and supported their college preparation.

Findings obtained from the 2019 fall student focus groups echoed those obtained from the 2018 fall student focus groups (Wang & Orr, 2018), as well as the 2019 spring staff focus groups (Wang & Orr, 2019). Both students and staff indicated that:

- College visits were the most helpful GEAR UP activity in preparing students for college.
- GEAR UP facilitators were helpful in preparing students for college.
- Teachers expected students to go to college and were supportive of students' college preparation.
- More information about financial aid was needed to prepare students for college.

## Summary of Findings



### **Students had a clear understanding of the program's purpose.**

Students who participated in the focus groups across five campuses consistently recognized the role of the GEAR UP program in preparing students for college. Students indicated the program helped them understand college life, college options, and steps to get into college. Students identified academic support and college visits as helpful in preparing them for college. A handful of participants indicated college is expensive and thought cost is a hurdle to their college education. When asked to comment on things they need to do to prepare for college, participants listed having good grades, graduating from high school, applying for college, participating in extracurricular activities, and writing a good application essay. Excerpts of students' comments about the GEAR UP program include:

*It's something that prepares you to go to college. Talking about it and going to colleges, so you can understand it.*

*It's a program that educates us on what choices we can make, what colleges we can go to, and helps prepare us for steps we can take to get into college.*

*I think it is a really good program. It prepares us for college.*

*It shows us persons' experiences in college, questions we need to know about what we are going to do, and what will happen to us when we reach it.*

## GEAR UP Focus Groups

To gather information about students' and teachers' perspectives on the GEAR UP program, GEAR UP evaluators conduct focus group interviews with both students and teachers in the 2019–2020 school year.

In Fall 2019, the focus group interviews were a planned series of discussion with small groups of students from five GEAR UP campuses. Evaluators randomly selected a group of GEAR UP students that reflected the demographic composition of the campus, and GEAR UP facilitators invited 7 to 10 of those students to participate. The discussions were facilitated by evaluation staff, using a standard set of questions, and participants shared additional ideas and perceptions.

In Spring 2020, a series of teacher focus groups will take place at the six remaining GEAR UP campuses. Focus groups also were conducted in the 2018–2019 school year. Information about these focus groups and findings can be found at [https://www.austinisd.org/dre/pu\\_blications](https://www.austinisd.org/dre/pu_blications)





**Students reported GEAR UP facilitators were supportive and caring.** All student participants across five GEAR UP campuses reported appreciation for their GEAR UP facilitators. Participants reported GEAR UP facilitators cared about how they were doing at school and encouraged them to improve. Students reported that GEAR UP facilitators offered help with their school work, personal issues, and college visits. Examples of students' comments about their facilitators include:

*The facilitator always has time to talk to people and goes out of her way to make sure that everybody understands.*

*The facilitator takes care of us. The facilitator is really encouraging to make sure we do our work and go to college.*

*The facilitator is caring for us. The facilitator helps us get our grades up if we need it.*

*The facilitator even cares about your problems outside of the program. If you need to talk, the facilitator is there.*



**College visits were most helpful.** Student participants reported college visits were the most helpful GEAR UP activity in preparing them for college. Students indicated college visits informed them of college options. Through college visits, participants developed a better understanding of college culture.

Additionally, participants described a wide range of GEAR UP activities, including college visits, high school visits, job site visits, classroom activities to explore college and career options, visits from professionals, counseling with GEAR UP facilitators, tutoring, book club, and tournaments. Students' comments about the most helpful GEAR UP activity include:

*Field trips helped us see what there is in college, so we can decide where we should go.*

*The college visits get you used to the climate of different colleges. They showed you colleges that you have not really heard of before.*

*College visits make you experience what it is like in college, and help you decide what is the best option.*



**APIE tutoring provided academic support for GEAR UP students.** Focus group participants who participated in APIE tutoring reported APIE tutoring was helpful in increasing their grades. Some participants reported the small-group tutoring was effective in helping them understand concepts more easily than they could do with whole-class instruction. Examples of participants' comments about academic support APIE tutoring provided include:

*It helps us. If you don't understand something, you can ask them.*

*When I was failing in math in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, a tutor actually came to help. I think my final grade when they helped was either A or A+.*

*Help us understand in a small group. It is easier to understand than in the whole class.*



**Career goals contributed to college aspiration.** Almost all student participants indicated they planned to attend college based on their career goals. Participants described various professions they wanted to pursue, including engineering, law, animation, cardiology, business, and law enforcement. Some participants indicated that college opened up opportunities for better education, better jobs, and higher pay. Excerpts of students' comments about their college aspirations include:

*I want to be an immigration lawyer. To be a lawyer, we have to go to law school.*

*You need college to get you jobs that pay you more, and you can focus more on things you like.*

*Because the career I want to do in the future, you need to go to college. College has resources there.*

*I always want to be a biorobotics engineer. I can't just learn it from high school, but I'll attend college.*



**Teachers supported students' college preparation.** Almost all focus group participants reported their teachers expected them to go to college and supported their college preparation. Students stated teachers talked about their grades and provided advice for improvement. Students indicated their teachers gave positive feedback on their progress and motivated them to succeed. A handful of students reported that teachers' high expectations were a little stressful to them, and those students thought college might not be the only option for them. Examples of students' comments about their teachers' support include:

*They always ask us questions about college and what college we want to go to and they are always motivating us to study.*

*They tell you every day to go to college and they try to motivate you.*

*They tell us if you do well in school, some colleges will want you to come. So keep on doing a great job and you will get successful.*

*They tell me that if you finish this work, you can fix up your grades.*



**Students wanted more information about student loans/financial aid/scholarships, cost of college, and college life.** College tuition seemed to be the top concern about college for many focus group participants. Therefore, students were interested in learning more about the cost of going to college and student loans/financial aid/scholarships to help pay for college. Some students reported the importance of understanding college life in preparing for college. They wanted the program to provide opportunities to learn more about college life or to shadow a college student on campus. Examples of students' comments include:

*Are there any easy ways to get scholarships?*

*What if GEAR UP had a special program that allowed you to shadow someone for a day or with an actual college student, so you can see what the average day for an average college student is like.*

*What if you don't have enough money? So I want to know about financial aid and how do you apply for that.*

## References

- Wang, C., & Orr, A. (2018). *Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Austin: 2018 fall student focus group results summary*. Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District
- Wang, C., & Orr, A. (2019). *Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Austin: 2019 spring staff focus group results summary*. Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District

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March 2020

Publication 19.15