



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

2021 Fall Student Focus Group Results Summary

Introduction

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) evaluation team conducted student focus groups with GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) participants in the fall of 2021. Student participants in focus groups were 10th-grade students at four GEAR UP campuses: Akins, Travis, Eastside, and LBJ. In total, 30 students participated in the focus groups. On average, eight students participated in each focus group.

The purpose of the student focus groups was to gather information about students' perceptions of the GEAR UP program, their experiences with 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 four 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 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 academic performance.
- 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 a college education would help fulfill their career goals.
- Students reported their teachers expected them to go to college and supported their college preparation.

Findings obtained from the 2021 fall student focus groups echoed those obtained from the 2018 and 2019 fall student focus groups (Wang & Orr, 2018, 2019a), as well as the 2019 spring staff focus groups (Wang & Orr, 2019b). Both students and staff consistently indicated:

- 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 / scholarships 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 four campuses consistently recognized the role of the GEAR UP program in preparing students for college. Students indicated the program provided academic support and helped them understand college life, college options, and steps to get into college. Students identified college visits, counseling, job site visits, and tutoring as helpful in preparing them for college. A handful of participants indicated college cost was 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 and financial aid / scholarships, passing college entrance exams, having time management skills, and having a positive attitude. Excerpts of students' comments about the GEAR UP program include:

GEAR UP program is like a ladder that helps us understand about colleges and gives us experiences.

A program that tells us about college and how to prepare for it.

It shows us what the colleges offer, what they most major in, and gives us an option whether we want to go there or not.

It is a program that will probably help you see what path you would rather take. It is helping you take those steps to get into a college.

GEAR UP Focus Groups

To gather information about students' and teachers' perceptions of the GEAR UP program, GEAR UP evaluators conduct focus group interviews with both students and teachers in the 2021–2022 school year.

In Fall 2021, the focus group interviews were a planned series of discussions with small groups of students from four 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 five 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 2022, a series of teacher focus groups will take place at the three remaining GEAR UP campuses. Focus groups also were conducted in the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 school years. Information about these focus groups and findings can be found at <https://www.austinisd.org/dre/publications>





Students reported GEAR UP facilitators were supportive and caring. All student participants across four GEAR UP campuses reported appreciation for their GEAR UP facilitators. Participants reported GEAR UP facilitators cared about students' progress and helped them in various ways. Students reported that GEAR UP facilitators offered help with their school work, personal issues, and college and career

exploration. Examples of students' comments about their facilitators include:

The facilitator is helpful. The facilitator can help you with classes if you are struggling with assignments.

They help things you get stuck on. They go to different classes and help the students better understand things they are learning. They are just helpful.

The facilitator would allow us to look at careers. Looking at some colleges that offer those careers.

The facilitator is very supportive on everything. The facilitator is open to talk to anytime you need her and help you.



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

Additionally, participants described a wide range of GEAR UP activities, including college visits, job site visits, counseling, tutoring, workshops, reading groups, and pep talks with professionals. Students' comments about the most helpful GEAR UP activity include:

College and job site visit is just like a hands-on thing that you can do and you get to know what is happening.

It shows us what the colleges offered and what majors they most provided. It gives you an option whether you want to go there or not.

I think visiting the colleges does help me get a plan. If you are struggling to stay in a dorm, you could still stay at a close place nearby.



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 that APIE tutors helped them on college courses and increased their understanding of concepts. Examples of participants' comments about academic support APIE tutoring provided include:

The tutor helped me with a medical class. So the tutor helped me understand the chapter that I am reading.

I have a college student tutor who helped on my college classes.

They helped me figure out how to solve the problem easier. They helped me pick up grades.



Career goals contributed to college aspiration. The majority of student participants indicated they planned to attend college, based on their career goals. Participants indicated that college opened up opportunities for a better education, better jobs, higher pay, and stronger motivation. Some participants felt owning a business requires going to college. Some participants who were not sure about going to college identified debt or uncertainty about their future career as the primary obstacle for their college education. A handful of students thought college might not be the only option for them. Excerpts of students' comments about their college aspirations include:

Because I already know what I want to do. To do what I want to do is I have to go to college.

There would be more job opportunities if you go to college.

I want to go to college because I want to make my own business.

I need to go to college to show that I could do it. To show to my younger siblings that they could do it too.



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 encouraged them to go to college by talking about colleges and their grades. Students indicated their teachers saw college as a pathway for better opportunities in the future and therefore motivated them to succeed. Some participants reported that their Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teachers had high expectations about them going to college. Examples of students' comments about their teachers' support include:

Probably they work hard on the weekend making sure that we are passing. I think they want us to make it to the college.

They tell us that you get a better opportunity at work if you go to college.

They see the career path that I am going into, so they suggest going to college to get a better job.

They teach us stuff and they care about our grades.



Students wanted more information about student loans / financial aid / scholarships, college applications, and college life. This year, college cost continued to be the top concern about college for many focus group participants. Students were interested in learning more about the cost of going to college and student loans / financial aid / scholarships to help pay for college. Students also wanted to know more about the SAT that might prepare them for scholarships. Some students indicated interest in learning more about college life, college classes, and dorms. Examples of students' comments include:

What scholarships are offered for different careers?

More information about SAT to get scholarships and get into college.

I think I want to get into the college. How do you know what classes you are supposed to do in order to do the job that you want to do?

I am probably looking forward to the dorm rooms.

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

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