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"Show up and hope": GEAR UP in an Urban High School

Kellen Sillanpaa
University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

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"Show up and hope":

GEAR UP in an Urban High School

Kellen Sillanpaa

University of Pennsylvania

Kellen Sillanpaa graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2018, earning a B.A. in
Urban Studies with an emphasis on urban education. This paper is the culmination the Urban
Studies program's honors senior seminar, in which students are given two semesters to conduct
original research.

Abstract

This research explores the factors that contribute to or detract from the success of college access programs in urban high schools through a case study of GEAR UP at a Philadelphia school. Programs like GEAR UP have real potential to help prepare students for college, but there is a need for stronger program evaluation. First, this study uses existing literature to create a framework for evaluating program effectiveness; this framework is then applied to a GEAR UP program in Philadelphia. Then, the study analyzes the factors that affected GEAR UP's implementation at the high school. This article determines that the program was not implemented successfully because of competition with other similar programs and because of a lack of collaboration between program partners. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for both the School District of Philadelphia and other large urban school districts.

Keywords: urban education, college access, GEAR UP, education policy, college readiness

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Introduction

In 2013, the School District of Philadelphia laid off 283 guidance counselors, depriving students of a resource many use to prepare for college and life after high school (Mezzacappa, 2013). The general rule is now that no school with fewer than 600 students receives a counselor and only schools with more than 1,500 students receives more than one counselor (Lee, 2013). Schools with high student-counselor ratios have to prioritize which students receive academic and college counseling services over others; for example, this often results in counselors prioritizing older students despite the fact that 9th grade is possibly the most crucial year for students with college aspirations (Woods & Domina, 2014, p. 7; Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016, p. 4; Tierney & Venegas, 2006, p. 1698; McKillip, Rawls & Barry, 2012, p. 52; Royster, Gross & Hochbein, 2015, p. 218).

The college preparation services that counselors have traditionally provided seem to have been taken over in the city by college access programs. These programs, typically administered by outside non-profits, have much potential to harness the power of community partnerships to provide students with services that a large urban school district would struggle to provide on its own. They also have much potential for failure if not closely regulated. The qualities that make these college access programs so desirable – chiefly, their independence from the school district – create a situation in which such programs are able to exist in schools nearly completely unregulated and unevaluated. Philadelphia's situation is not unique. Most other urban areas also feature high student-counselor ratios and a growing number of college access programs (Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016, p. 4; Harvill et al., 2012, p. 1; Rose, 2010, p. 47).

More research on college access programs is necessary. For one, such research could be used to learn more about the effectiveness and operation of these programs, which policymakers could use to make some concrete suggestions to help programs better serve their students. Research could also reveal that, in some schools, these college access programs stray so far from their missions that it would be wise to reallocate both the public and private dollars being spent on underperforming college access programs to other programs with greater need and greater success rates.

This study explores the factors that contribute to or detract from the success of college access programs in urban schools through a case study of GEAR UP at a Philadelphia neighborhood high school. First, the study creates a framework to operationalize implementation effectiveness in a college access program using the existing body of literature. This framework is then used to evaluate the operation of GEAR UP at the high school and determine whether the program abides by college access program best practices. The second portion of the research analyzes what factors affect GEAR UP's implementation at the high school through observation and interviews with key individuals within the partnership, paying special attention to the amount of collaboration between the program's partners.

Ultimately, this study determined that GEAR UP is not successful in fulfilling its mission at the high school because of a lack of collaboration with the school and competition with other similar programs for students and attention from the school's administration.

Literature Review

Though there is a rich body of literature examining the barriers disadvantaged students face, the racial gap in college enrollment rates, and the benefits of a college degree, many disadvantaged students do not receive much college guidance at school (Fitzpatrick & Schneider,

2016, p. 1; Musu-Gillete et al., 2017, p. 91-108; Gandara, 2001, p. 4). College access programs, which draw on the collective resources of the school, local universities, and community agencies, are designed to help fill in this gap (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 313). They aim to improve the level of academic achievement and college enrollment in struggling schools with low graduation or college enrollment rates (Bergin, Cooks & Bergin, 2007, p. 730).

Several studies have attempted to describe the activities successful college access programs engage in. I use five of these studies to construct my effectiveness framework in the data section. Ward, Strambler and Linke studied the outcomes of a GEAR UP program administered in New England by the Yale University School of Medicine (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 315). One portion of the study evaluates the implementation of the program and the services it provides, and one portion uses a longitudinal design to assess the impact of the program on student outcomes (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 318). The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance published a report that relies on a panel of college access program experts to suggest specific steps schools and college access programs could take to help students graduate and enroll in college (Tierney et al., 2009, p. 1). Their suggestions are drawn from expert analysis and a systematic survey of literature on effective college access programs (Tierney et al., 2009, p. 1-2). Gandara published a report through the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative that uses data from prior research, interviews with state higher education executive officers, and information from a series of organizations in the education field to determine what activities successful college access programs engage in (Gandara, 2001, p. 11). The research only evaluated college access programs that used an experimental or quasi-experimental design, in that they attempted to compare program results with similar, untreated students (Gandara, 2001, p. 13). Perna examined a national survey of

college access programs and then compared the information from the survey to a list of eleven

"optimal" college access program activities and goals drawn from prior research to determine

what percentage of programs addressed the known predictors of postsecondary attainment

(Perna, 2002, p. 64-69). Finally, my framework draws on a 2008 national evaluation of the early

outcomes of the GEAR UP program by the U.S. Department of Education. This study selected

eighteen sample GEAR UP middle schools and conducted a matched comparison with eighteen

non-GEAR UP middle schools, using a statistical model to see if GEAR UP improved outcomes

in the sample schools (Standing et al., 2008, p. xvii).

Each of these reports concluded that the college access programs they studied had, to

varying degrees, a positive impact on program participants that likely improved their chances of

achieving a post-secondary education. There was much overlap in the services each successful

program provided; they all tended to engage in some combination of mentoring activities,

academic achievement activities, and college knowledge activities (Perna, 2002, p. 79; Ward,

Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 314-317; Gandara, 2001, p. viii-27; Standing et al., 2008, p. xvi-23;

Tierney et al., 2009, p. 7-33). A more comprehensive breakdown of these activities will be

included in my framework in the data section.

Though the literature is full of descriptions of the activities college access programs

engage in, few studies have engaged in a thorough evidence-based evaluation of the programs

themselves; often, they are simply assumed to help disadvantaged students (Gandara, 2001, p. x).

The impact of college access programs that utilize a university, school, and community

partnership is also unclear (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2014, p. 314). There are several barriers to

evaluating college access programs. Because these programs are often run by private

organizations, there is little compelling them to demonstrate their effectiveness beyond whatever

basic requirements are mandated by the grants they operate under. College access programs also often view outside evaluators as a threat to their funding (Gandara, 2001, p. x). To further complicate the matter, GEAR UP, the focus of this study, was designed to have much flexibility for individual projects and their unique populations, making any national evaluation of the program very difficult (Standing et al., 2008, p. 14). However, it is important to note that schools still have the moral, social, and legal responsibility to provide the services college access programs intend to provide to students (Rose, 2010, p. 474).

GEAR UP, like many college access programs, stresses partnerships between colleges, school districts, and community organizations (Standing et al., 2008, p. xviii). Such partnerships can bring together private technical expertise, funding, innovation, and management knowledge (Forrer et al., 2010, p. 475). However, nearly all studies on college access programs mention that the success of programs depends on good communication among partners and equal investment in the decision-making process (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2014, p. 313; Forrer et al., 2010, p. 481). Successful college access program partnerships share characteristics like meetings between guidance counselors and program administrators, collaborative self-assessment of effectiveness, and coordination with other programs within the school (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 313-317; Tierney et al., 2009, p. 15-37; Standing et al., 2008, p. xx-92). One caveat is that if the school puts students at such a disadvantage during the day that what happens after school does not matter, programs will not have much of a chance to succeed (Reumann-Moore, 2006, p. ii; Gandara, 2001, p. 4).

Methodology

This study focuses on what factors contribute to or detract from the success of college access programs in the School District of Philadelphia through a case study of GEAR UP, a

federally funded after-school college access program, at a Philadelphia neighborhood high

school. The name of the high school, as well as the names of specific organizations affiliated

with GEAR UP have been anonymized; for the purposes of this paper, the high school will be

referred to as PHS.

This research, conducted over a period of about six weeks, relies on both observation in

the field and a range of informal interviews conducted with individuals important to the program.

The study first assesses the overall effectiveness of GEAR UP at PHS. Due to time constraints, it

would not have been feasible to measure the true effectiveness of the program – chiefly, if

students who participate in the program attend college at a higher rate than students who do not

participate. Effectiveness in the context of this research will refer to implementation

effectiveness, or whether GEAR UP at PHS engages in activities that the literature has

determined to produce the best outcome for students. I operationalized this implementation

effectiveness using a list of sixteen activities drawn from the literature, broken down into four

categories, that other successful college access programs have been known to engage in [see

Figure 1]. I then compared the activities actually undertaken by GEAR UP at PHS to this list to

determine whether the program follows the best practices for college access programs.

Second, I sought to understand what affects GEAR UP's implementation at PHS through

a series of informal interviews. I conducted interviews with nine officials possessing a unique

vantage point on the program. These included the GEAR UP coordinator, GEAR UP manager,

Outreach Project OST (out of school time, another term for after-school) site director, PHS

guidance counselor, PHS dean of students, several College Life staff members, and Upward

Bound program counselor. College Life, Upward Bound, and Outreach Project OST are other

similar programs at PHS.[1] I also conducted 17 short, informal interviews with PHS students, and spoke with a series of students from a nearby university who work as tutors for GEAR UP. I paid special attention to the amount of collaboration and communication between GEAR UP and the PHS administration, as well as between GEAR UP and other similar college access programs within the school. It is important to note that while some of the struggles of the program could be traced to factors having to do with the student body itself, things such as student reading level or GPA will be treated as a given for the purpose of this study and will not be used to discount for any factors having to do with the success of GEAR UP.

Background

PHS

PHS is a neighborhood high school, meaning that, unlike many other schools in the School District of Philadelphia, it pulls its students from a catchment area around the school. As of the 2016-2017 school year, it had an enrollment of about 500 students. Enrollment has continued to trend downward. Roughly one third of students at the school are considered special education, about 100% are African-American, and about 100% are deemed economically disadvantaged (School District of Philadelphia, n.d.). In 2015, out of the 76 Philadelphia high schools surveyed, PHS ranked in the lowest quartile in both graduation rate and college enrollment rate ("Graduation rate flat", 2016). On the PSSA and Keystone state examinations from the 2015-2016 school year, roughly 20% of students were deemed proficient in English, less than 5% were deemed proficient in math, and less than 5% were deemed proficient in science (School District of Philadelphia, n.d.).

GEAR UP

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[1] Pseudonyms have been created for the Outreach Project and College Life programs.

GEAR UP was created in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Education to complement three existing federal college access programs, also known as the TRIO programs, which were created in the 1960's (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 314). GEAR UP is unique in that it serves entire cohorts of students from 9th grade to graduation, and requires the incorporation of a university, school, and community partnership in each individual program (Ward, Strambler & Linke, 2013, p. 314). GEAR UP is eligible to any school with at least 50% of students on a reduced lunch plan (Bergin, Cooks & Bergin, 2007, p. 731; Standing et al., 2008, p. xvi).

The federal GEAR UP grant funds several different programs in Philadelphia. The school district has used the grant to create the College Readiness Collaborative Communities Project, or CRCC. The CRCC consists of a series of private and non-profit organizations that have combined efforts in an attempt to raise the level of postsecondary attainment in twelve low-performing neighborhood high schools in the city. Each organization has a different role; for example, one group provides schools with curriculum and staff development, while another helps with STEM programming in schools. The college access program GEAR UP provides the CRCC with its direct service component, and is run in the twelve high schools by several local universities. At PHS, the college access program is administered by a community service organization known as the Outreach Project that is operated one of these nearby universities. Because the college access program is only one part of the larger CRCC program, it receives only one part of the funding available under the larger GEAR UP grant. For the purposes of this study, GEAR UP will refer solely to the direct service college access program administered by the Outreach Project, and not the larger CRCC system funded by the GEAR UP grant.

As stated in the "GEAR UP Coach Handbook" given to all GEAR UP work-study employees at PHS, the program's mission is to increase the number of low-income students who

are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP began working with 9th grade students at PHS during the 2016-2017 school year. The program added a second cohort of freshmen in the 2017-2018 school year, so it should serve 9th and 10th grade students exclusively. It will serve these two cohorts of students until they graduate.

GEAR UP has two full-time employees: the GEAR UP coordinator and an AmeriCorps VISTA member, who assists the coordinator. The GEAR UP coordinator also oversees the program at two other local high schools. Several work-study students from two nearby universities serve as GEAR UP coaches, and carry out much of the program at the school level. The School District of Philadelphia also provides PHS with a GEAR UP manager, who oversees the implementation of the entire CRCC project at the school. The GEAR UP manager exists to serve as an intermediary between the CRCC partners and the school. The GEAR UP manager at PHS also coordinates CRCC parent engagement in all twelve partner high schools.

GEAR UP both administers an after-school college access program and provides teachers with work-study students that serve as in-class tutors; the focus of this paper is on the after-school college access program. GEAR UP's after-school program is presented to students as part of a larger Outreach Project OST after-school program, which consists of several different programs such as dance, strength and conditioning, and chess. GEAR UP meets in the same place and is presented as one of these programs, though the two programs are distinct and do not share any staff.

Data Presentation

Operation of GEAR UP

During the 2016-2017 school year, the GEAR UP program coordinator began the fall semester intending to implement original college readiness lesson plans in a classroom each day

after school. However, these plans were cancelled after several weeks of little to no student participation. Eventually, the coordinator was able to form a group of around four or five 9th grade students that would attend GEAR UP consistently after school to receive homework help and informal mentoring from the work-study students.

When I began this research during October of the 2017-2018 school year, this small group of students was no longer participating in GEAR UP. The coordinator and work-study students had continued to create lesson plans, but because no students attended the program, they were not implemented. To provide the program with a reliable source of participants to satisfy the conditions of the grant, the GEAR UP coordinator entered into an agreement with the football and boys' basketball team in which the student-athletes would receive homework help after school a few times each week. The following is a description of a typical GEAR UP session under this arrangement.

Each day, either the football or boys' basketball team entered the library, usually accompanied by a coach, to receive tutoring and homework help from the GEAR UP coordinator, work-study students, and AmeriCorps VISTA member. The teams consisted of students from 9th through 12th grade. The sessions began with a brief multiple choice warmup "question of the day" having to do with college knowledge. After the question of the day, the program transitioned into homework help. Occasionally, when it seemed that none of the students were doing homework, the AmeriCorps VISTA member would attempt to get the students to write to a prompt related to college knowledge she had written on the board, though I did not observe any students responding to the prompt. After about an hour, the teams would leave, and the GEAR UP staff would either assist an Outreach Project OST program, conduct

personal business, or leave. On days when the teams did not come to receive tutoring, there was simply no GEAR UP program that day.

Implementation Effectiveness

Using my notes from the field, I evaluated the program using the framework constructed for this study, which measures implementation effectiveness based on what scholars have determined to be the best practices of college access programs [see Figure 1].

The list is broken down into four categories – mentoring activities, academic achievement activities, college knowledge activities, and all-encompassing activities. Based on this framework, I concluded that the program was not effective in implementing the best practices of college access program largely because the program consisted only of tutoring. Out of the sixteen activities in these four categories, GEAR UP only completely satisfied one activity in the academic achievement category. One important note is that the structure of the program does not allow it to engage in each activity on this list; for example, because during this school year GEAR UP should only be working with 9th and 10th grade students at PHS, the program is not expected to provide assistance with financial aid.

<INSERT FIGURE 1>

    Mentoring activities.

GEAR UP completed none of the five possible mentoring activities. It is possible that some sort of informal mentorship occurred when the coaches chatted with students or helped them with their homework, but there were no formal actions taken by GEAR UP to support a system that would satisfy the criteria.

    Academic achievement activities.

The program completed one of three possible academic achievement activities. Because this hour-long homework help was the extent of the program, this satisfies the need for tutoring and help with existing coursework. It is important to note, though, that the quality of the tutoring is unclear. I frequently observed a sizable number students in the sessions socializing, sleeping, or checking their phones as opposed to getting homework help from the work-study college students. No workshopping of essays or other assignments occurred; the work coaches did with students seemed to be restricted to assignments that were due soon, or preparation for upcoming examinations. Though the AmeriCorps VISTA member attempted to get the students to write responses to outside prompts, this does not count as providing students with special coursework that supplements normal coursework in the way that, for example, Upward Bound does.

College knowledge activities.

GEAR UP completed none of the six possible college knowledge activities. GEAR UP had not conducted any college tours as of this writing, though during the 2016-2017 school year they toured three Philadelphia universities in cooperation with the Outreach Project OST. Very little having to do with college or college readiness is discussed in the sessions outside of the brief questions of the day.

All-encompassing activities.

It is less clear how to grade the two all-encompassing activities. The program did not create individualized student success plans with students, but it did have an after-school program. This may seem like a redundant or arbitrary activity to include in the list, but it is important to remember that some college access programs, such as Upward Bound, do not have an after-school program and instead operate during the school day or on weekends. However, though GEAR UP does technically have an after-school program, because the program followed

so few of the best practices for college access programs, it does not seem appropriate to state that this feature is absolutely present.

Voluntary participation.

According to this metric, GEAR UP does not do what successful college access programs should do. The biggest cause is a lack of voluntary participation. The arrangement with the sports teams was positive for GEAR UP in that it guaranteed a steady stream of students into the program to avoid violating the conditions of the grant. However, because it was mandatory for the students to attend, because they were only there to receive the hour of tutoring, and because the program did not serve 9th and 10th grade students exclusively, the program did not operate like a GEAR UP program should operate.

Part of the reason why there was such low participation in GEAR UP seems to be that few students were aware of the program; the dean of students, the OST site director, and the GEAR UP coordinator echoed this idea. Of the seventeen students I interviewed, seven were able to positively identify some aspect of what GEAR UP does or attempts to do in its after-school program. However, it is worth noting that because this study could only be conducted in the after-school programs themselves, each student I interviewed was currently actively participating in one of the three programs offered after school, including GEAR UP itself. It stands to reason that it would be very hard to have no awareness of what GEAR UP does while participating in an after-school program that either operates in close physical proximity of GEAR UP or is GEAR UP, and yet, the majority of the students interviewed did not know what it was. If I had interviewed students randomly from the larger student body, I would argue that there would be even less awareness of the program. Why GEAR UP struggles so mightily to attract students must be analyzed in detail.

Factors

Lack of collaboration with the school.

The first reason why GEAR UP has struggled at PHS is because of a lack of collaboration between the school and the program. GEAR UP did not have any one school staff member that served as a "point person" through which they could communicate with the school at large. Several sources indicated that during the 2016-2017 school year, PHS had a vice principal that was instrumental in helping GEAR UP find students to participate. However, this vice principal abruptly left before the school year began. My research was able to uncover that the vice principal had left the school permanently before either the Outreach Project OST or GEAR UP knew exactly where he had gone. The dean of students, the principal, and the school counselor did not recommend the program to students or parents in any substantial manner. Contacting teachers proved difficult logistically over the course of this study; however, the GEAR UP coordinator stated that teachers did not help to refer students to their respective programs.

Though one of the main responsibilities of the GEAR UP manager is to facilitate communication between the school and the program, very little of this occurred. The GEAR UP coordinator remarked that the manager at times added a layer of complexity to communicating with the school, and said that she thought it would often be simpler if school staff spoke to her directly. It is worth noting, though, that the GEAR UP manager was new to the position, and, by early December, the two had begun meeting on a biweekly basis. Additionally, because the GEAR UP manager is also responsible for helping the entire CRCC project communicate with the school, as well as for CRCC parent engagement at all twelve GEAR UP high schools, she does not have much time to deal directly with the college access program.

Perhaps the most critical blow to the functioning of GEAR UP was the fact that it had almost no relationship with the school's guidance counselor. The counselor is understandably very busy. PHS's counselor is responsible for nearly 500 students, and is also responsible for social and emotional counseling, as well as non-counseling activities such as administering state testing and the helping to create the yearbook. When asked about her relationship with GEAR UP, she mentioned that she had worked closely with a different iteration of GEAR UP from an earlier round of funding in her previous school, but said simply: "I don't know why it's not like that here." The program counselor at Upward Bound summed up the difficulty they and GEAR UP face in accessing the counselor when she described how the best thing to do was "show up and hope" that the counselor would be there and have time to speak with her. Given the counselor's large workload, it is unlikely that she can dedicate much time to the college aspirations of 9th and 10th grade students. While she claimed that she met frequently with these students, many students I interviewed claimed they had not met with the counselor at all during their freshman year.

Contributing to this lack of support from the high school is a sense of what the GEAR UP coordinator described as "uncertainty" present in the building. The school, according to the coordinator, takes actions that unintentionally add up to hurt the success of the program. For example, the school occasionally schedules fire drills for the last five minutes of the school day, which tends to encourage students to leave for home immediately rather than staying to participate in a program. The GEAR UP coordinator also shared a story about being asked to speak at a town hall assembly for all students about an hour before it was set to start. The coordinator scrambled to send the AmeriCorps VISTA member to PHS at the last second, but

when she arrived on campus, she learned that the town hall had been abruptly cancelled. The helpful vice principal's abrupt departure from the school is yet another example.

Because there was so little collaboration between GEAR UP and the school, the onus to promote the program fell solely upon GEAR UP staff members. In the school's defense, GEAR UP could have been more proactive in enlisting the help of school staff. There is a perception in the program that all possible options have been exhausted for improving voluntary attendance. When asked if she had plans to recruit more students, GEAR UP's coordinator mentioned trying to spend more time in the cafeteria at lunch talking to students, but observation has shown that this does not generally result in any increased participation in the program. Also, because she works at three different high schools, she cannot afford to spend much time sitting in on classes to recruit students and attempting to convince teachers and the administration that GEAR UP is worth investing time in. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that PHS and the school district are both ethically and legally obligated to provide these college preparatory services to their students, either by providing the services themselves or by helping GEAR UP provide them.

Competition with other programs.

There are three programs at PHS that are similar to GEAR UP: College Life, Upward Bound, and the Outreach Project OST program**.** Outreach Project OST is a state-funded series of programs presented after school that are available to all students from 9th through 12th grade. Programs include chess, drama, strength and conditioning, dance, cosmetology, and culinary. Upward Bound provides low-income and future first-generation college students from four local high schools with a full slate of classes consisting of supplementary coursework such as math and English on Saturday mornings on the campus of the partner university. It is federally funded and administered by the Outreach Project. All grades may participate. The program has a

selective application process based on teacher recommendations and GPA. College Life is a

district-run, federally funded program for 10th through 12th graders that is administered by four

AmeriCorps members who have their own room and work full-time at the school. The program's

goal is nearly identical to GEAR UP's goal. Each AmeriCorps member is assigned 50 students

each to work with, though the program is voluntary. Some facets of program are intensive one-

on-one counseling and mentoring sessions between AmeriCorps members and students and the

creation of an individualized student success plan for each student. The program also runs

students through a digital college and career readiness curriculum.

The Outreach Project OST site director described the four programs by saying that

"[they] all do the same thing." This sentiment was echoed to varying degrees by GEAR UP and

College Life staff. In many respects this is true; three are based on increasing college readiness,

and all four attempt to provide academic enrichment to students after normal school hours.

However, GEAR UP provides a service that is arguably distinct enough from the other programs.

Unlike Upward Bound, GEAR UP operates an after-school program, and is much less selective.

GEAR UP intends to provide students with college preparatory information and academic help,

which the Outreach Project OST does not. Finally, College Life does not work with 9th grade

students, while GEAR UP places a special emphasis on 9th grade students, something that has

proven vital in helping students prepare for college. However, despite this specialization, GEAR

UP directly competes, unsuccessfully, for student participation and for the attention of the

school's administration.

Though these four programs overlap considerably, cooperation between GEAR UP and

the other three programs was limited to the existing partnership with the Outreach Project OST

in which GEAR UP is presented as a sub-program, and cursory conversations between the lead

College Life staff member and the GEAR UP coordinator about possibly differentiating their services. As a result, they must compete for resources. All three programs had more active student participation than GEAR UP. The Outreach Project OST reported that from January to June of the 2016-2017 school year, they averaged 55 active participants per month. Upward Bound struggles to recruit students at PHS, but reported that, from PHS, they had three sophomores, five juniors, and two seniors participating in the program. College Life reported that ten to fifteen students participated in their program every day. Most notably, the small group of students that participated in GEAR UP during the 2016-2017 school year began attending College Life or Outreach Project OST regularly in 10th grade instead of GEAR UP. While each program captured only a fraction of the entire student body, there was a sizable pool of students participating in all four programs combined – somewhere around 10%.

Two of the three programs also received more attention from PHS staff. The dean of students has a desk in the Outreach Project OST room in the library, and stated that she recommends the program to students. College Life has the advantage of a staff that is on campus during the school day, facilitating easier interaction with the counselor, who has daily contact with the program. The College Life staff I interviewed perceived the school's administration to support them "almost 100%". Given the counselor's high workload, is it not surprising that she is forced to pick "winners and losers," and dedicate her time to programs that she believes have the potential to do the most good or are the most readily accessible, even if it means shutting out GEAR UP and Upward Bound. In this fragmented system, no one program is truly achieving as much as it could alone.

Recommendations

Many programs in other urban school districts struggle to implement college access

program best practices and collaborate with partners within schools. Because GEAR UP's

situation in this Philadelphia high school is by no means entirely unique, I have included a series

of suggestions of actions that GEAR UP at PHS, or any other college access program

experiencing the same difficulties, could take to improve their program and create an

environment in which it is easier to engage in the activities outlined in my framework.

1. College access programs could encourage their partner high school to participate more

actively in the program.

There are many ways in which schools could help college access programs recruit, but

programs may have to insist that the school takes the initiative to do so. For example, school

staff could hand-pick students that could potentially benefit from a program's services and

recommend them to the program, or teachers could offer extra credit for participating in the

program after school. Programs could also request better communication from the school's

administration about any events that would complicate the administration of the program in any

way; GEAR UP's problems with town hall meetings and fire drills at the end of the day would be

an example. It is important to remember, though, that college access programs often have no

leverage in situations like these, as these programs could not exist without the schools they

operate in.

2. Competing programs could combine efforts as much as possible.

This could involve promoting the differences between competing programs so that it is

clearer to students and staff what each program does. For example, at PHS, the four programs

could engage in aggressive cross-promotion with an emphasis on the different services each

program provides; for example, 9th grade students that express an interest in College Life could

be referred to GEAR UP as an entry point until they reach 10th grade. However, it must be noted that it is not clear that a general similarity between programs is a large factor in GEAR UP's struggle to recruit students. Also, unless programs are willing to simply turn students away and redirect them to programs with low participation rates, it may be unreasonable to ask students to participate in three or four different college access programs each week. Such an agreement would be less valuable for programs with more consistent participation.

Competing programs could also consolidate into one program. With decreased enrollments, high numbers of students in special education, and low achievement in schools, the pool of students capable of benefiting from college access programs is not large. It may not be feasible to have several specialized programs in a single urban school. Combining programs likely could not happen under the existing grant and funding structures in place for the programs; for example, a GEAR UP program could not abandon the cohort system. However, in schools like PHS where a partner university runs multiple programs, there is potential for some combination of programs. At PHS, for example, the 50 or so active participants in OST each month could be funneled through an hour-long GEAR UP session each day, after which they could start their traditional OST programs, which would simply be an hour shorter. Upward Bound could then aggressively recruit from this pool of students for the Saturday program. One issue with this combination of programs is that it still would not solve the problem of a school administration with little time to work with four separate programs. This arrangement would likely still be a confusing system for students to navigate if each program continued to operate with their own distinct staffs and identities.

3. Some college access programs could be eliminated completely.

The school's needs should drive the implementation of college access programs, not the organizations running the programs themselves. Because competing programs decrease the overall success of every program, schools with multiple programs must be judicious in determining which programs have the most to offer students, and which programs have the best chance of succeeding. For example, though GEAR UP has great potential to serve its two cohorts of students at PHS in a very intimate, focused setting, it is unclear whether simple school demographics can support a program that limits participants to only two grades. Partner universities must be realistic in asking whether their programs actually help students; the Outreach Project would do well to imagine what College Life would look like if it operated free of competition and accepted all of the students participating in the other three programs as well as the undivided attention of the school's administration.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the effectiveness framework constructed for this study, GEAR UP is not successful in fulfilling its mission at this PHS. A general lack of collaboration between the program and the school is partially to blame. The failure of the program can also be traced to competition with other similar programs in the school. Though GEAR UP has a niche carved out – college readiness work with 9th grade students – many students that could potentially participate in GEAR UP instead attend programs like Outreach Project OST and College Life. These competing programs also monopolize the limited amount of attention the school's administration can afford to after-school programs.

There are clearly some things that are very important to this topic that, given the scope of this research, I could not cover at length. For one, no college access program can account for every problem in urban high schools. College access programs typically operate in

underperforming and at times dysfunctional urban high schools. GEAR UP, for example, cannot eradicate poverty in all of Philadelphia, and cannot guarantee that every student entering the school reads at their grade level. However, GEAR UP can propose that the school and its after-school programs do a better job of collaborating.

Another important factor that is not discussed at length is the partner university's role in the school and the community. It is unclear why the Outreach Project would place three very similar programs within one school without requiring them to work together. One view is that these programs are just an effort to "grant grab" and provide students attending the partner university with work-study jobs regardless of whether it does any good for the community. Another view is that programs like GEAR UP are designed to serve more of a public relations purpose for the university in an attempt to cover for the fractured history between the school and the community. While this research turned up little in support of these assertions, it is clear that GEAR UP's goals and the partner university's goals are not aligned.

Another issue that is neglected by this study is the fact that PHS's guidance counselor is spread so thin that she does not have the time to meet with 9th grade students. This was no surprise, as it was clear in the literature that counselors in inner-city high schools typically have very high caseloads and little time to meet with students in earlier grades. 9th grade students in vulnerable populations must begin to prepare for college and their lives after high school. If neither GEAR UP nor the counselor are preparing 9th grade students for college, then it is likely that no one is.

It is also tempting to place some of the blame for the program's failures on the GEAR UP coordinator, who could likely be more proactive in making changes to the program and requesting more support from partners. However, GEAR UP's goal is to improve low-income

students' chances of enrolling in college through direct service with students, not through organizational management. Again, the school is obligated to find a way to provide students with these college readiness services.

Stepping back from GEAR UP alone, federal dollars pay for three programs at the school, all of which do basically the same thing and compete with each other for resources. American tax dollars are used to employ at least eleven full-time employees in the process. If college access programs exist to supplement what increasingly strapped school guidance counselors can no longer do, then one might question why eleven people are needed to do what just two or three more guidance counselors have traditionally done on their own. If this duplication of effort is happening in one school, how many federal dollars are made to do battle against each other in the entire School District of Philadelphia? In Pennsylvania? In each impoverished inner city in the United States? The amount of money spent on this system would be justifiable if it produced results, but if this case is any indication, it does not.

Policymakers then have a choice – they can wait and hope that this system of college access programs will regulate itself, or they can reform it. They can go through, school by school, and attempt to find places in which funding is being wasted and impact is being diluted. This system, which students often have no choice but to rely on for their college aspirations, cannot continue to exist unregulated and unmonitored. The programs will continue to exist, but it is only students in places like Philadelphia who will continue to suffer. If meaningful changes can be made to the system, though, and programs can be streamlined and schools can learn to better support their college access programs, high schools and college access programs alike may find that the students they serve, according to the director of the Outreach Project OST, "are so much stronger than they know."

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