

CREATION OF THE G.E.A.R. U.P. ORIENTATION MANUAL:
AN INTEGRATIVE SERVICE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

There is a great need for programs which assist students from low income and minority background in having the support and resources to attend and complete college. Gear Up is a program which seeks to meet this need by providing low-income students with scholarships as well as in school and after school tutoring. Although they provide excellent service to their students and East High School, they had a lack of training and orientation materials for their paid and volunteer tutors. It was decided that the creation of a training manual would be an excellent integrative service project to address this need. A manual was created including information about Gear Up as a program, the needs and risks of the population Gear Up serves, tutoring and mentoring skills. The community partner was pleased with the outcome of the project and made plans to implement its use as a standard training procedure, in the hopes of improving their tutor's understanding of the population and overall tutoring and mentoring skills.

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Motivation for completing an Integrative Service Project with Gear Up came as a result of several factors. I began volunteering with Gear Up at East High School as part of a service-learning class, Intro to Psychology. Gear up is an organization designed to prepare students from low-income families to enter and succeed in higher education, by providing scholarships, and other services. Being a Gear Up alumni from my own high school fostered great commitment and passion in working with this organization.

In addition to providing its students with scholarships, the Gear Up program at East High school runs an after school tutoring lab as well as providing in class tutoring. During my time as a volunteer tutor, I observed there was a lack of materials which could be utilized for training and orientation of the paid and volunteer tutors. Because of my service-learning background, I felt that in order for volunteers and employees to best serve the special population they work with, education about the needs of the population was essential.

This seemed to be an area in which improvement would be greatly beneficial, and the program director, Salli Robinson, agreed. Work demands on the small Gear Up staff did not allow for much preparation of any orientation materials. It was decided that the coordination of an orientation manual would be a valuable resource to the Gear Up program at East High School. The manual could include information about the risks and struggles for students from low-socio-economic background in their personal, familial, and academic realms. My personal background,

as well as diversity and psychology courses I had completed, assisted me in being well prepared for the completion of the project.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) are found to be at an academic disadvantage even in childhood, with research showing that they perform less well on standardized achievement tests, earn lower grades, and complete fewer years of schooling than students from middle and high SES (Feldman, 2008, p. 322). This academic disparity does not dissipate as children get older, but rather, becomes even more severely pronounced as they enter and progress through high school (Feldman, 2008, p. 322).

A wide spectrum of social and emotional problems are faced by students from impoverished and unprivileged backgrounds (Stormont, Stebbins, & Holliday, 2001, p. 418).

Such difficulties include

higher rates of disabilities, teenage mothers, absent fathers, lower motivation levels, parents without resources, health problem, concerns about safety and daily survival, and increased homelessness (Stormont et al., 2001, p. 418).

They may lack support and resources in developing their academic and personal skills and abilities, are more likely to receive lower quality education than students from higher SES (King, 2009; Stormont et al., 2001).

Ethnic minority groups are disproportionately represented within the low SES population. Consequently, this places minority students at disproportionately risk to the effects and correlations of poverty in comparison to anglo-american students (Feldman, 2008).

Educational attainment is an area where this disparity reflected. Much research has shown

that retention rates in high school and higher education settings are far worse for minority students and non-minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds than for white middle and upper class students (Feldman, 2008; King, 2009; Newman & Newman, 1999; Pidock, Fischer, & Munsh, 2001; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005; Watt, Powell, & Mendiola, 2004).

It is for these reasons that students from low SES families, and students of ethnic minority background in particular, need special attention and focus in order to enter and achieve in higher education. Programs that provide such support services in “career guidance, tutoring, academic and financial counseling, test preparation, mentorship, college visits, and scholarships” *can* be effective in both increasing rates of at-risk students entering and staying in higher education, as has been shown by several effective studies (King, 2009; Newman & Newman, 1999; Watt et al., 2004).

PROCEDURE

After finalizing the nature of the Integrative Service Project with the community partner, brainstorming took place on appropriate content to include within the manual, to provide the best and most comprehensive training for tutors within a text format. Brainstorming occurred through meetings at the community agency, and via email.

A tentative outline was created for the manual and reviewed by the community partner. The tentative outline was approved, and steps were taken to gather content. A fairly loose timetable was created in which to complete each section.

Any pre-existing training materials or content was requested from Gear Up, and provided a foundation of needed content to be included. Further content was searched for mainly via the internet. As content was gathered and further organized, appropriate changes were made to accommodate improved organization.

The manual was approached one section at a time. Sections were reviewed by the community partner as completed, and suggestions for improvement were acted upon through subsequent revision before moving on to the next section. The final manual was reviewed and approved upon completion.

RESULTS

The original outline included four sections of content: Introduction to Gear Up, About the Students, The Role of the Tutor, and References. A fifth section was added: Being a Mentor. The title of one section was also changed to better fit its content, with “The Role of the Tutor” being changed to “Tutoring Skills.” Thus the final orientation manual included five sections: Introduction to Gear Up, About the Students, Tutoring Skills, Being a Mentor, and References.

“Introduction to Gear Up” included information about Gear Up as an organization. Aims of the national Gear Up program was presented, with further information about the national format of the organization provided. This section also provided more specific information about Gear Up at East High school. This included content related to the services East High's Gear Up program provides its students, the specific requirements for Gear Up students, and demographic information.

The second section, “About the Students” provided information about the complex personal and social issues faced by Gear Up students. The literature review provided much of the content for this section.

“Tutoring Skills” presented Gear Up's expectation for its volunteer and employed tutors. It also gave a step by step model for tutoring interactions with students, as well as important skills such as effective question asking in the tutoring context.

The section entitled “Being a Mentor” was added last because it was deemed an

important aspect of Gear Up's mission in serving its students, and something many tutors seemed unsure of how to approach.

The “References” section was considered important not only to correctly cite sources used for the manual, but also to demonstrate to individuals more critically minded in nature, that the information provided was from reliable and scholarly sources. This served an especially important function in the “About the Students” section.

When the manual was completed and approved, ten copies were created and delivered to the Gear Up office. An electronic copy was also provided.

The Gear Up staff and specifically the community partner was very pleased in the outcome of the project, and stated that arrangements would be made to distribute the manual to other Gear Up programs within the state. This greatly contributed to the long term sustainability of this Integrative Service Project.

REFLECTION

I learned a lot from completing this project. For example, as I completed the Tutoring Skills section of the manual, I learned a lot of valuable information about effective tutoring that I wasn't aware of before. I wished that I had had such knowledge when I was a tutor. This realization further reinforced the need for the manual.

In doing the literature review and writing content for the "about the students" I did gain an improved knowledge of the issues at hand. My knowledge of the issue became more specific in nature, and less generalized. I feel I have a more solid understanding of the needs and struggles of the population Gear Up serves, and better knowledge of the research surrounding these issues.

I was very excited that the community partner was pleased with the outcome of the project, and that it will be distributed to other Gear Up programs, as it will achieve a larger impact and be more sustainable.

I hope the manual will be useful when implemented, and that volunteers and employees will really learn and apply the principles that it seeks to teach, and consequently improve their tutoring and mentoring behaviors, thereby impacting the students for the better.

Future projects could also seek to implement sustainable projects which would better educate those working within an organization about the population they serve. If more projects such as this were created, then quality and benefits of service could be improved.

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