



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

## 2018 Fall Student Focus Group Results Summary

### Introduction

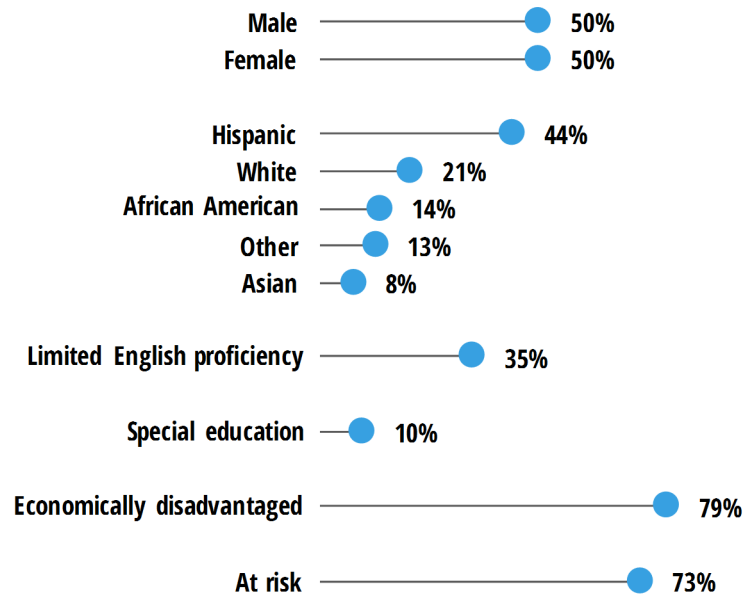
The AISD (Austin Independent School District) evaluation team conducted student focus groups with GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) participants in the fall of 2018. Student participants in focus groups were 7<sup>th</sup>- grade students at six GEAR UP campuses: Bedichek, Burnet, Covington, Garcia YMLA, Martin, and Sadler Means YWLA. In total, 52 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.

### Characteristics of Student Focus Group Participants

Figure 1.

The majority of student focus group participants were economically disadvantaged and categorized as at risk of dropping out of school.



Source. 2018–2019 AISD student demographics records

Note. Other includes American Indian or Alaska native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

## Summary of Findings



**Students had a clear understanding of program purpose.** Students who participated in the focus groups across six campuses consistently recognized the role of the GEAR UP program in preparing them for college and career. Students identified academic support, such as tutoring, and college visits as helpful in preparing them for college. They stated that the GEAR UP program offered help in increasing their grades and deciding which college they want to attend. Excerpts of students' comments about GEAR UP program included:

*It helps you get your grades up.*

*It is fun and gets us ready for college.*

*It stays with you until college.*

*It helps us find a successful career.*



**Students reported GEAR UP facilitators to be helpful, resourceful, and trustworthy.** All student participants across six campuses expressed appreciation for their facilitators. GEAR UP facilitators provided help with students' personal issues, school work, college visits, and college and career choice exploration. Students reported they felt comfortable talking to their facilitators, stating that their facilitators sometimes took the role of counselor and helped them through hard times. Examples of students' comments were:

*He is like a counselor because he is someone you can trust, so we can go talk about other issues too.*

*The thing I like about the program is Mr. X. He always helps us accomplish what we want.*

*She wants us to go to college. And she has lots of information on where to go or what we want to do.*

## GEAR UP Focus Groups

To gather information about student and teacher perspectives of the GEAR UP program, GEAR UP evaluators planned focus group interviews for both students and teachers in the 2018–2019 school year.

In Fall 2018, the focus group interviews were a planned series of discussions with small groups of students from six 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 8-10 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.

Additional focus groups will be conducted. In Spring 2019, a series of teacher focus groups will take place at the five GEAR UP campuses that did not conduct student focus groups in Fall 2018. In the 2019–2020 school year, the six GEAR UP campuses that had student focus groups in Fall 2018 will hold teacher focus groups, and the five GEAR UP campuses that had teacher focus groups in Spring 2019 will conduct student focus groups.





**College visits were most helpful.** Student participants consistently reported college visits as being the most helpful activity in preparing them for college. Students described college visits as an informative experience that helped them think about college and work. They said college visits helped them develop a greater understanding of college options that fit their interests, and a better sense of what the college environment is like. Therefore, students suggested the program provide more college visits and college-related activities as ways to help them choose a college.

Additionally, participants described a wide range of GEAR UP activities, including tutoring, college fairs, parent nights, a fall festival, a GEAR UP kickoff event, activities to explore students' college interests and options, literacy nights, and an essay award. Students' comments about the most helpful GEAR UP activity included:

*Visit to San Marcos, because it opened my eyes to whether I should go to college first or perhaps work.*

*Because the colleges that they take you are close, and it kind of lets you realize how many colleges you actually have an option to go to.*

*We want to see the actual environment. The field trips are most helpful in preparing for college.*

*So many colleges we could go to. You want to learn about a lot of colleges, so we have a lot of different options.*

*So we would know what that college is about, or what that college does, so when we go to that college, we would prepare for that.*

*Going to see, to check them out, to see how much it costs, to see how many options we have, to decide which one we want to go to .*



**Career goals motivated college aspiration.** Almost all student participants indicated they planned to attend college, based on their career goals. Desire for getting a good job appeared to be the reason students wanted to attend college. When asked to define a good job, students described various professions they wanted to pursue, including engineer, doctor, teacher, athlete, construction superintendent, FBI agent, baker, executive officer, anesthesiologist, scientist, police officer, journalist, artist, and veterinarian. Other reasons for attending college included helping their family, inspiring people, and being a first-generation college student.

Students suggested the program provide more career-related activities. Students liked the activities that helped them think about colleges and careers. They also said talking with college students or professionals was helpful for college preparation. Some students were particularly interested in culinary schools. Excerpts of students' comments about their college aspirations included:

*I do want to go to college so I can get a job and help my family.*

*I want to go to college because I want to show people that is the right way to go, and I just want to inspire people (be a role model).*

*I want to go to college. I want to study medicine. I really like helping people.  
I want a career.*

*More meetings with professionals to talk about what they do and how they went to college, etc.*

*I don't want to be like most of my family members not completing college, I want to do something I want to do and I want to finish college.*

*More information about culinary school.  
Could they take us to culinary arts schools?*





**Teachers supported students' college preparation.** The majority of focus group participants reported their teachers expected them to go to college and supported their college preparation. Only a few students at one campus reported teachers did not expect them to go to college. The program manager was informed of the feedback from these students. Students stated reasons they thought their teachers expected them to attend college. They felt teachers wanted students to succeed. They said teachers used encouraging words. Teachers gave positive feedback on students' progress. Teachers also helped with college preparation through tutoring and sharing information about colleges. Examples of students' comments about their teachers' support included:

*They push us to try to go to college, because they know that if we go to college, we'll be someone.*

*They tell us when we improved from something we did before. Whenever we do something good, they tell us.*

*They are teaching us to write stuff to get up to college, and they help us a lot.*



**Students wanted more information about scholarships, college majors, and college preparation.** Students appeared to have a good understanding about the benefits of scholarships in helping them complete college without debt; therefore, they wanted to know how they could secure good scholarships. Students understood that college study can pave a path to their careers, and wanted to learn more about college majors, the best colleges for specific areas of interest, and the length of various programs. Also, students were interested in information about how to prepare for college, such as which classes to take, grade requirements, grade point average (GPA), and admission tests. Examples of students' comments included:

*If I know what classes to take, like math I or II, or what type of classes I have to take to prepare.*

*Cost I guess, because I don't want it to cost too much. And I guess scholarships too, because I don't know how I am going to pay.*

*I want to know what I want to be, what is the best college, what to study, and how long it would take.*

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, students who participated in focus groups across six GEAR UP campuses understood the GEAR UP program. They knew the program would support them through high school graduation and prepare them for college. Students consistently recognized the positive role of their facilitators in both their school and personal lives. Students described strong, trusting relationships with their facilitators. Students regarded college visits as the most helpful GEAR UP activity to prepare them for college. Students expressed their desire to attend college and specific careers they would like to pursue. Students' career plans provided a motivation to pursue a college degree. Almost all students thought their teachers expected them to attend college.



Additional student comments provided suggestions for program implementation. For example, students requested more college visits; career-related activities; and information about scholarships, college majors, and college preparation steps (e.g., classes to take, grade requirements, and admission tests).

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