

Oregon GEAR UP

College: It's not a dream, it's a plan.

Key Evaluation Findings for Year 6 (2019–20)

The goal of the Oregon GEAR UP program is to ensure that Oregon's low-income middle school and high school students are prepared for, pursue, and succeed in postsecondary education, whether that be a college degree, certificate, apprenticeship or other career training.

To accomplish this, Oregon GEAR UP works with select middle schools and high schools over seven years to create a college-going culture by providing funding and technical assistance, professional development for educators, and enrichment opportunities for students. The initiative is grounded in an evidence-based framework developed by Oregon GEAR UP that relies on five research-based principles, titled the 5 “R”s: Reaching Higher, Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, and Raising Awareness.

In 2019–20, the sixth and penultimate year of the current federal grant, Oregon GEAR UP was implemented in 34 middle and high schools in 21 school districts (from here on referred to as “clusters”) and served over 8,300 students in grade 7 through grade 13 (the first year of postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation).



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In February/March 2020, the world experienced an unprecedented event—the COVID-19 pandemic—that resulted in schools closing all across the country and transitioning to distance learning models. The effects of the pandemic on the economy and the lives of individuals, families, and students have been challenging for virtually everyone, placing a huge responsibility on schools to continue providing instruction and supports to families in a very difficult context. During these times, GEAR UP continued to provide supports to schools, and schools adapted their programming to respond to the rising needs of families.

Conducted by Metis Associates, an independent research firm, the Oregon GEAR UP evaluation is designed to assess program implementation in participating schools and the impact on key outcomes areas, as well as document promising practices, challenges, and lessons learned. This Evaluation Report highlights key findings and lessons learned for the 2019–20 school year.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

In 2019–20, the sixth and penultimate year of the grant, Oregon GEAR UP served over 8,300 students in grades 7–13 in 34 schools in 21 rural communities. Evaluation results show many positive successes and some areas for growth, described below.

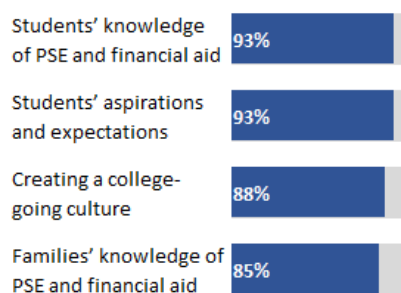
GEAR UP schools have continued to implement a wide range of college and career readiness programming.

- ➔ During the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, GEAR UP schools modified their programs, replacing several of the spring activities (such as in-person college visits) with virtual programming.
- ➔ Coordinators and administrators identified a number of key steps and practices that enabled them to continue deliver GEAR UP services, including: providing students and families with access to technology, creating Google classrooms, and using a variety of means (phone calls, emails, home visits, and social media) to disseminate important information and deadlines for regarding college admission, financial aid, job and internship opportunities, scholarships, and webinars and workshops for students and families.

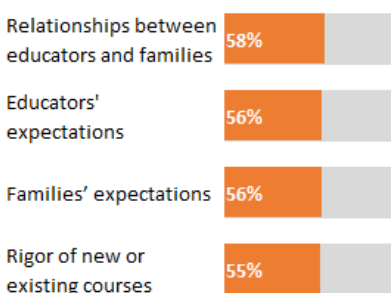
Reaching Higher and Raising Awareness were the highest rated areas of impact that GEAR UP has had on students and schools.

% Coordinators and administrators reporting *Moderate to Large Impact*

HIGHEST RATED AREAS



LOWEST RATED AREAS



- ➔ While the vast majority of students (83%) and parents (90%) expect students to go on to complete a college degree or certificate, both groups cited the cost of college as the main reason why they might not go. Educators reported “planning or needing to work” as the main reason. Students and parents who could not correctly identify the cost of college were more likely to think students cannot afford to attend college.



In summer 2019, GEAR UP students spent a week on campus with OSU Precollege Programs' STEM Academy
(Credit: Oregon GEAR UP Facebook)

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GEAR UP has been an instrumental tool for our students, staff, and community. It really broadens people's perspective of the possibilities.

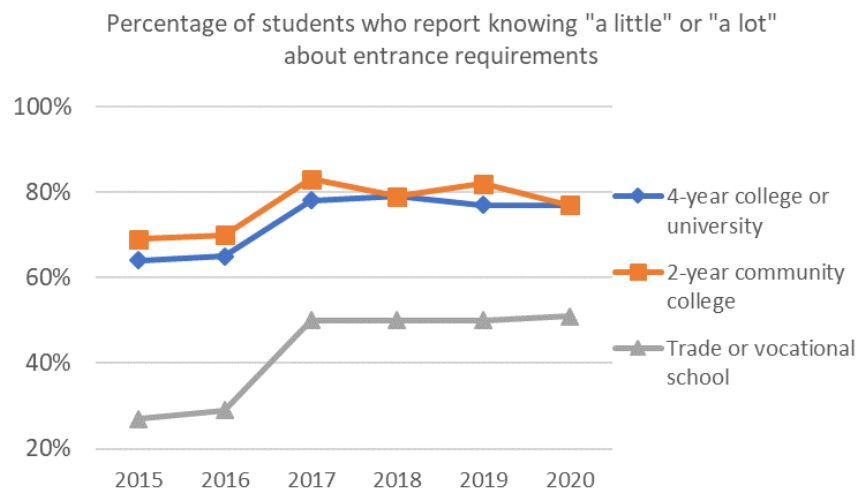
—GEAR UP Principal

GEAR UP in general has really been a full circle help to understand what you want to do, how you're going to do it, and how you're going to pay for it. I'm going to be a first-generation student so I am really nervous about it. ...It was rather easy for me to decide exactly which career I wanted to go into. Now, it's the hard part of figuring out how I'm going to get there, which GEAR UP has definitely helped me out a lot.

—GEAR UP Student



- ➔ Most students know about entrance requirements for 2- and 4-year institutions. Over the grant period, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion who know about requirements for trade/vocational schools.



- ➔ Most (85%) of students know about scholarships, but considerably fewer indicated they know a little or a lot about FAFSA/ORSA.

Promoting academic rigor and preparing students academically continued to be challenges in many of the schools, yet many stakeholders indicated improvements in these areas to GEAR UP.

- ➔ In 2019–20, 50% of cohort clusters and 20% of priority clusters offered AP or IB courses, and 69% of cohort and 40% of priority clusters offered dual enrollment courses, fewer compared with previous years.
- ➔ Educators reported that just over half (54%) of their students are capable of completing a college prep curriculum, but they expected that fewer (41%) will complete one.
- ➔ Educators provided very positive feedback about the impact of GEAR UP-sponsored professional development (such as the Summer Institutes on curriculum alignment and the Oregon writing project) on their knowledge and practices. Some reported that these experiences were invigorating and rekindled their passion for education.

Family engagement and ensuring high, consistent buy-in and involvement from educators were two of the most challenging aspects of implementing GEAR UP. Yet, school stakeholders credited GEAR UP for the substantial gains they have seen in these areas. Furthermore, survey results show that educator involvement in college and career readiness has steadily increased over the course of the grant.

School administrators in most schools are confident they will be able to sustain most of the GEAR UP-funded activities and supports—most notably the college visits, technology enhancements, college and career centers, college and career fairs, and GEAR UP classes. However, several administrators expressed concerns about the financial impact of COVID-19 on their schools and how that could impact sustainability.

As they enter the last year of the grant, Oregon GEAR UP and its network of schools should focus their efforts on **devising effective strategies for schools to sustain the improvements, events, and activities spearheaded by GEAR UP** over the course of the grant. Oregon GEAR UP could disseminate information on sustainability and promising practices through its social media, a sustainability toolkit, facilitated sessions with school/district staff at planning retreats, and virtual model school visits at current and past GEAR UP schools.

“

I have been an educator/administrator for just over 30 years and have been very involved in various grants over the years. GEAR UP is by far the best grant I have worked with due to its focus on improvement and sustainability. I love that the grant always made us focus on how we could sustain our improvements. The grant lasts long enough to institutionalize many improvements. Well done and thank you so much!

—GEAR UP Principal

METHODOLOGY

The GEAR UP evaluation includes a formative component designed to assess the successes, promising practices, challenges and lessons learned of the initiative, and a summative component designed to assess the impact of GEAR UP on key student and school outcomes. The evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach drawing data from multiple sources, described below.

OREGON GEAR UP EVALUATION DATA SOURCES

SOURCE OF DATA	DATE COLLECTED	TOTAL N					
School report card data	February 2021	N=21 clusters					
Student surveys	Jan.–Feb. of each year	7,174 (2015)	5,474 (2016)	4,717 (2017)	5,964 (2018)	6,694 (2019)	6,246 (2020)
Educator surveys	Jan.–Feb. of each year	1,394 (2015)	3,352 (2016)	2,627 (2017)	3,362 (2018)	2,663 (2019)	2,151 (2020)
Parent surveys	Aug.–Nov. of each year	574 (2015)	560 (2016)	734 (2017)	738 (2018)	754 (2019)	586 (2020)
College and Career Readiness Inventory (CCRI) (locally-developed)	Jan.–Apr., 2020	N=21 clusters					
Senior exit surveys	Apr.–May 2020	N=529					
GEAR UP coordinator and administrator surveys	May 2020	N=43					
Virtual site visits at 3 case study schools	Nov.–Dec., 2020	Interviews with stakeholders (3 principals, 3 GEAR UP coordinators, 10 educators and staff, 6 students, and 3 parents)					
College data from the National Student Clearinghouse	Expected: April 2021	Graduating classes of 2020 and earlier					
Events and Cost Share Tracker (ECST)	February 2021	N=21 clusters					

Some of the findings included in this report are derived from data collected prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Oregon and the resulting school closures and transition to remote instruction. As such, the extent of the impact of these events on GEAR UP students and school communities during the 2019–20 school year may not be fully reflected in this year’s report, with the exception of: the qualitative data gathered during fall 2020 interviews, the senior exit survey and the coordinator/administrator survey administered in May 2020, and the CCRI data for some schools that updated their activity inventory after the outbreak. Furthermore, college enrollment data for the first graduating cohort of 2020 (in cohort schools) and college persistence data for priority students enrolled in college in fall 2020 were not yet available at the time this report was written. **Metis will conduct a rigorous quasi-experimental impact study to assess the impact of GEAR UP on high school graduation and college enrollment.** Results will be reported in an addendum to this report.

Note of caution: Student, parent, and educator surveys are not matched at the individual level over time. Furthermore, response rates for the student, parent, and educator surveys declined—particularly in priority schools (which focused mainly on serving first-year college students in 2019-20)—over the last year; therefore, results should be interpreted with caution.



THE NEED AND CONTEXT FOR OREGON GEAR UP

Oregon GEAR UP is being implemented in 21 rural communities, serving 28 cohort schools and six priority schools. In 2019–20, GEAR UP served 8,127 students in grades 7–12 in cohort schools and 195 students in grade 13 (the first year of postsecondary education) in priority schools.

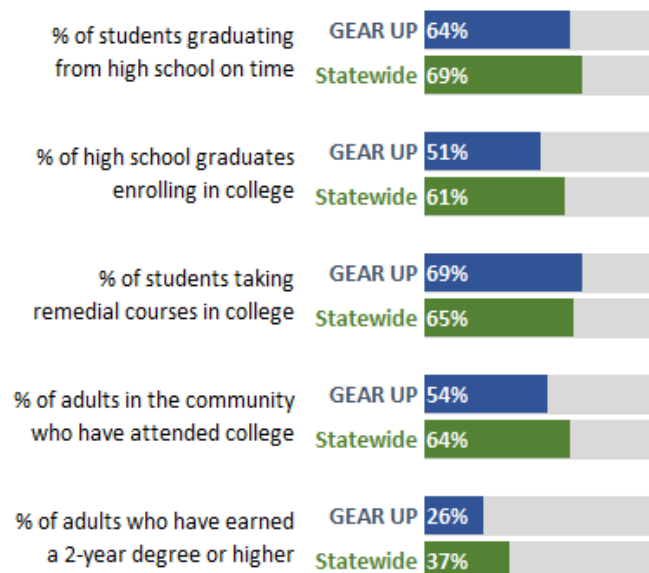
- **Cohort schools** follow a grade-level cohort approach, thus serving all students within target grades. In Year 1 (2014–15), cohort schools began serving students in grade 7; each subsequent year, they continued to serve these students while adding a new cohort of seventh-grade students.
- **Priority schools** were part of the federal grant from 2008–14 and have continued from 2014 through 2021, under a modified direct service model that targets “at risk” or disengaged students within target grades. In 2014–15, priority schools served students in grades 8–13. Each year, they continue serving these same students without adding a new cohort, thus, “losing” a grade level each year.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN RURAL EDUCATION:

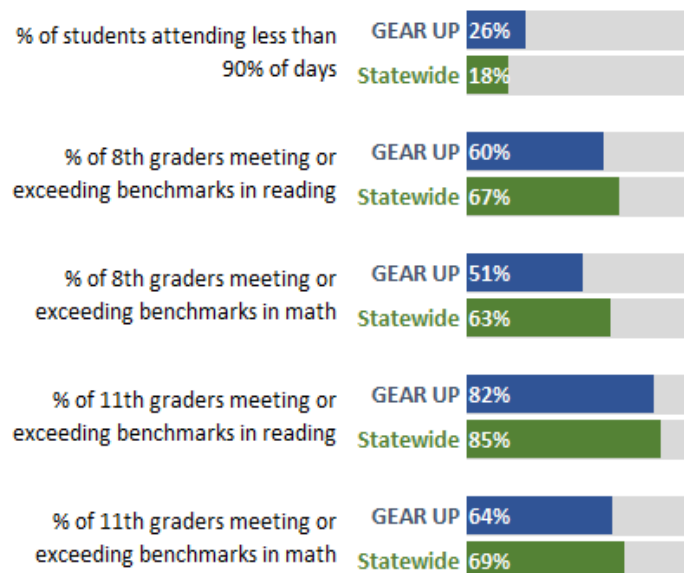
- ✓ High poverty
- ✓ Under-resourced schools
- ✓ Declining school enrollment and local employment opportunities
- ✓ Geographic isolation and transportation challenges
- ✓ High staff turnover and student mobility
- ✓ Limited availability of advanced courses and electives
- ✓ Limited exposure to postsecondary education

Oregon GEAR UP communities lag behind the rest of the state and the nation in key education indicators. Baseline data for the target communities show a strong need for GEAR UP.

Baseline (2014) Educational Attainment Indicators (GEAR UP Communities vs. Statewide)



Baseline (2014) Academic and Attendance Indicators (GEAR UP Communities vs. Statewide)



*Source: Oregon GEAR UP proposal to the US Department of Education (2014)



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

In addition to existing needs facing Oregon GEAR UP schools, the end of the 2019–20 school year was also marked by significant challenges arising from the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In Oregon, Governor Kate Brown ordered the closure of all K-12 schools to in-person instruction on March 12, 2020, which she eventually extended through the remainder of the school year. In April, the Oregon Department of Education issued guidance for schools to develop and implement Distance Learning for All, which schools began on April 13, 2020, as well as advisement on adjustments to graduation requirements. As was the case across the country, state assessments were cancelled. Between March 14 and June 30, 2020, the state had 10,805 positive COVID cases, or an infection rate of about 1 in every 400 residents (Oregon Health Authority's COVID-19 Data Dashboards).

According to coordinators and administrators in GEAR UP schools, **the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures had huge, detrimental economic, emotional, and academic impacts on students and families in their communities.** Specific challenges noted by school staff included: lack or limited access to Internet and working devices, difficulties engaging students in online learning, problems communicating with families, and social and emotional issues for students and their families facing hardships, such as loss of employment, during COVID. The pandemic also disrupted the implementation of GEAR UP activities planned for the spring and summer of 2020, including college visits, college and career fairs, and family events.

In surveys, coordinators and administrators described a number of **successful practices their schools engaged in to provide college and career services during the pandemic**, including:

- ✓ Providing access to technology to ensure a smooth transition to distance learning and programming;
- ✓ Creating Google Classrooms with a focus on college and career readiness and the development of post-high school plans for students;
- ✓ Connecting with students one-on-one regularly (“making it a priority”) and including college and career readiness in these conversations;
- ✓ Delivering food, Chromebooks, and other materials to students’ homes using the bus routes;
- ✓ Using a variety of means, including phone calls, emails, and home visits, to check-in with students frequently and disseminate key information to students and families, and
- ✓ Frequently updating social media accounts to “provide updates regarding admission, financial aid, job and internship opportunities, scholarship info and support, webinars and workshops for students and families to participate in.”

School staff also praised GEAR UP for playing an important role in supporting their efforts during these challenging times. Several schools mentioned that GEAR UP was instrumental in expanding families’ access to technology. Others mentioned using GEAR UP resources, such as the COVID-19 page on the Oregon Goes to College website and newsletters, to communicate important information to students.

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This spring has definitely been very tough. I have been using email and other virtual platforms to connect with students in sharing scholarship and college and career readiness resources. I love the COVID-19 page on the Oregon Goes to College website, and have been frequently utilizing that and sharing it with students and families.

Since we were already a 1:1 Chromebook school (thanks to GEAR UP), our transition to online learning was quick and streamlined. Teachers jumped to it and got to work quickly and have rolled with every update with grace and understanding. We have supported each other, been eager to help our community, and all have been volunteering to make meals and hand out food on our bus routes.

—School staff



CONTEXT: National research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted 2020 high school graduates' college plans.

For example, preliminary data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center¹ show that the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial, detrimental impact on Fall 2020 college enrollment rates, affecting impoverished communities disproportionately.

Nationwide, schools in high poverty communities showed the sharpest decline (of 32.6%) in college enrollment, from an enrollment rate of 29% for the Class of 2019 to 19.7% for the Class of 2020. When looking at institution type, community colleges' enrollment rate declined the most (by 30.3%), more than doubling the decline for 4-year public institutions (at 13.8%).

The 2019–20 school year was the sixth year of GEAR UP implementation in cohort schools and the first graduating cohort of students who began in GEAR UP in 2014–15 as seventh-graders. Although data on fall college enrollment were not available at the time this report was written (and will be reported in an addendum to this report), preliminary data on seniors' postsecondary plans—and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on their plans—were collected through a senior exit survey that was completed by 529 seniors from 17 of the 22 Oregon GEAR UP high schools (37% response rate) in May 2020. Results show that **22% of seniors reported changing their plans as a result of the pandemic** (see graph on the next page).

- **Students who had “other plans” (e.g., missionary work, travel, gap year) or those who were planning on attending a 2-year/4-year institution¹ before COVID hit were impacted the most**, with over half of students in each group changing their plans. Among students who said they had “other plans,” the most common reason for changing their plans was they decided to work instead. Among students who were planning on a 2-year/4-year institution, the most common reason for changing their plans was their decision to attend a 2-year community college only.
- **Students who were planning to attend a 2-year college and those who were planning to attend a 4-year institution experienced the least movement (i.e., change in plans).** About 16% of students who were planning to attend a 2-year college before COVID-19 changed their plans, with some deciding to work instead and others unsure of what to do. And an even smaller proportion of students who were planning on a 4-year institution changed their plans, including some who said they were planning to enroll in community college first.

“

I don't want to move into a bigger city, where COVID-19 cases are higher. I also don't want to have to stay in dorms and be exposed to many people.

I was supposed to be working during the pandemic to save money for college but, since I haven't been working, I need to work when the pandemic is over so I can have money.

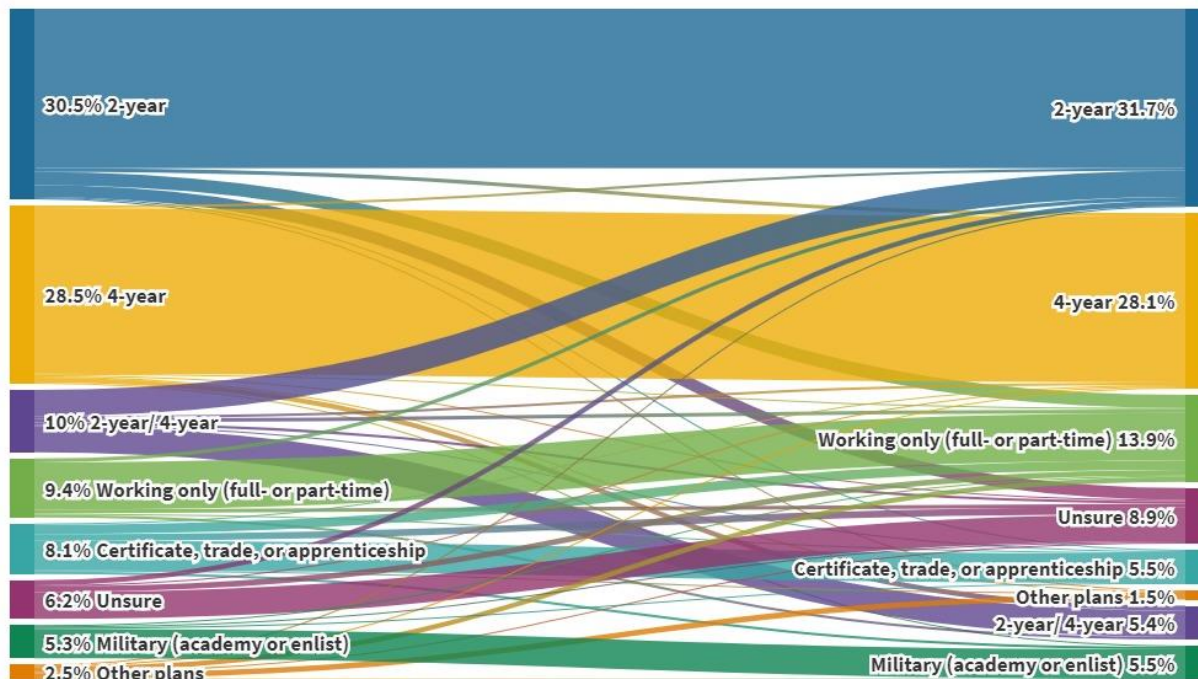
—GEAR UP Seniors

¹ These students chose both 2-year and 4-year institutions as their postsecondary plan (probably because they were either planning to attend a 2-year college and transfer to a 4-year institution afterwards, were undecided between a 2-year or a 4-year institution, or were in a dual enrollment program).

CHANGES IN SENIORS' POSTSECONDARY PLANS, BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 (SENIOR EXIT SURVEY)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, what WERE your plans for the fall?

What are your CURRENT plans for the fall?



GROUPS THAT WERE MOST IMPACTED:

- Students who had other plans (62% changed their plans)
- Students planning to attend a 2-year/4-year institution (58% changed their plans)
- Students planning to enroll in a certificate or trade program or apprenticeship (42% changed their plans)
- Students who were unsure (30% changed their plans)

GROUPS THAT WERE LEAST IMPACTED:

- Students planning to work only (18% changed their plans)
- Students planning to attend 2-year college (16% changed their plans)
- Students planning to enlist in the military (11% changed their plans)
- Students planning to attend a 4-year IHE (7% changed their plans)

As noted earlier, college enrollment data (from the National Student Clearinghouse) were not yet available at the time this report was written. Results will be reported in an addendum to this report.

The rest of the report highlights key findings for each “R” in the Oregon GEAR UP framework (Reaching Higher, Rigor, Relevance, Relationships, and Raising Awareness) and provides a discussion of lessons learned and recommendations.

REACHING HIGHER AND PROMOTING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE



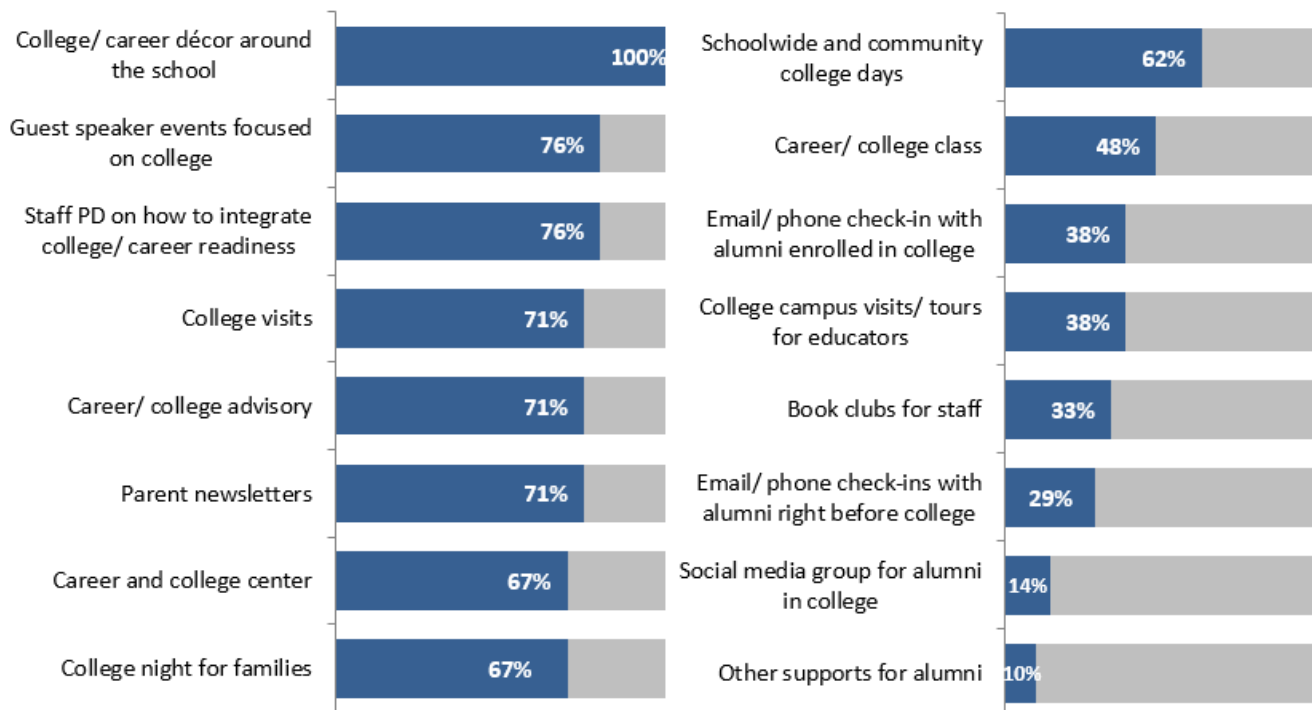
Elgin middle school students in GEAR UP “College” shirts (Credit: Oregon GEAR UP website hosted by Oregon State University)

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

- According to key stakeholders, GEAR UP has been instrumental in helping schools create a strong college-going culture. College visits were singled out as critical experiences that have broadened students’ horizons and allowed them to see college as a real possibility.
- Students and parents have high expectations for students but cited the cost of college as one of the main reasons why students may not pursue postsecondary education.

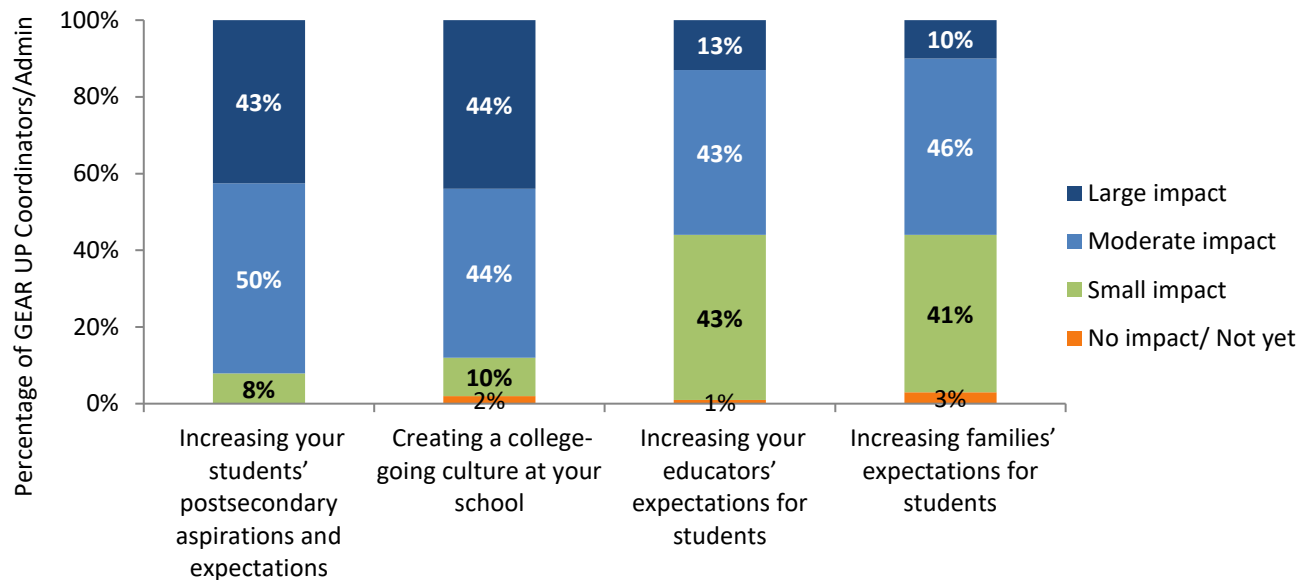
In the 2019–20 school year, all GEAR UP clusters continued to visibly promote a college-going culture with décor around the school, and a majority continued with various other activities, events, and programming to promote reaching higher. For example, 76% of GEAR UP clusters held guest speaker events and professional development for staff, and 71% held college visits, included a career or college advisory period in their schedules, and sent newsletters to parents and families.

REACHING HIGHER: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



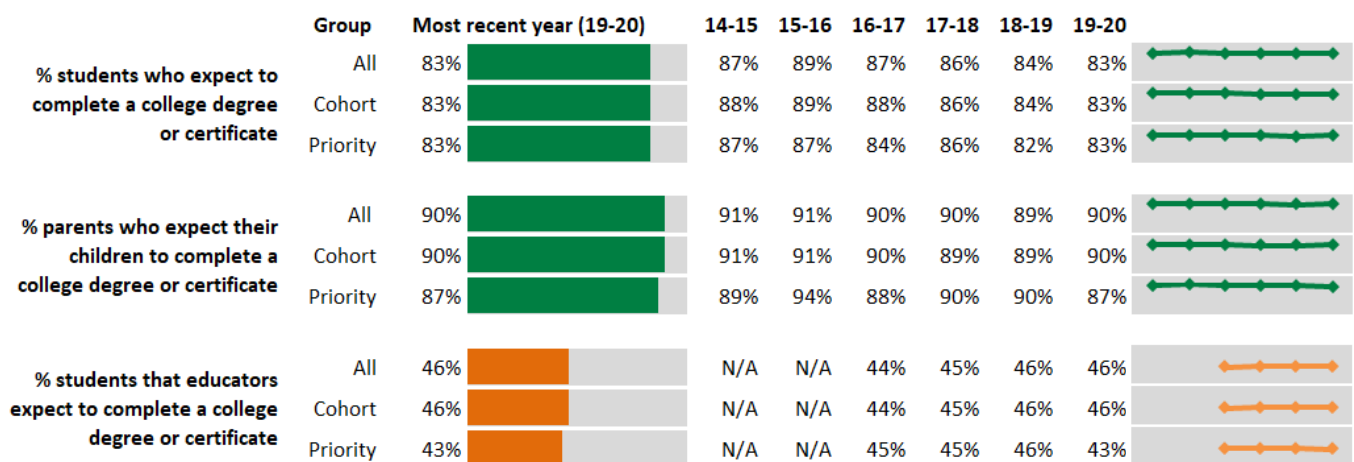
A large majority of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators said their school's GEAR UP program had an impact on increasing students, families, and to a lesser extent, educators' expectations for students. In 2019–20, GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported their programs had a *large* or *moderate* impact on increasing students' postsecondary aspirations and expectations (93%) and creating a college-going culture (88%). These two areas, alongside areas related to raising awareness, appeared to be the most impacted by GEAR UP according to coordinators and administrators. A smaller percentage, but still a majority, also reported GEAR UP had a *large* or *moderate* impact on increasing expectations among educators (56%) and families (56%).

IMPACT OF GEAR UP ON REACHING HIGHER (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)



Student, parent, and educator expectations that students will complete a college degree or certificate have remained steady over the past six years. In 2019–20, at the time they were surveyed (January and February 2020 for students and fall 2019 for parents), the vast majority of students expected to complete a college degree or certificate (83%), and the vast majority of parents expected the same for their students (90%). Educators (surveyed in January and February 2020) expected that 46% of their students (average across educators) would go on to complete a degree or certificate.

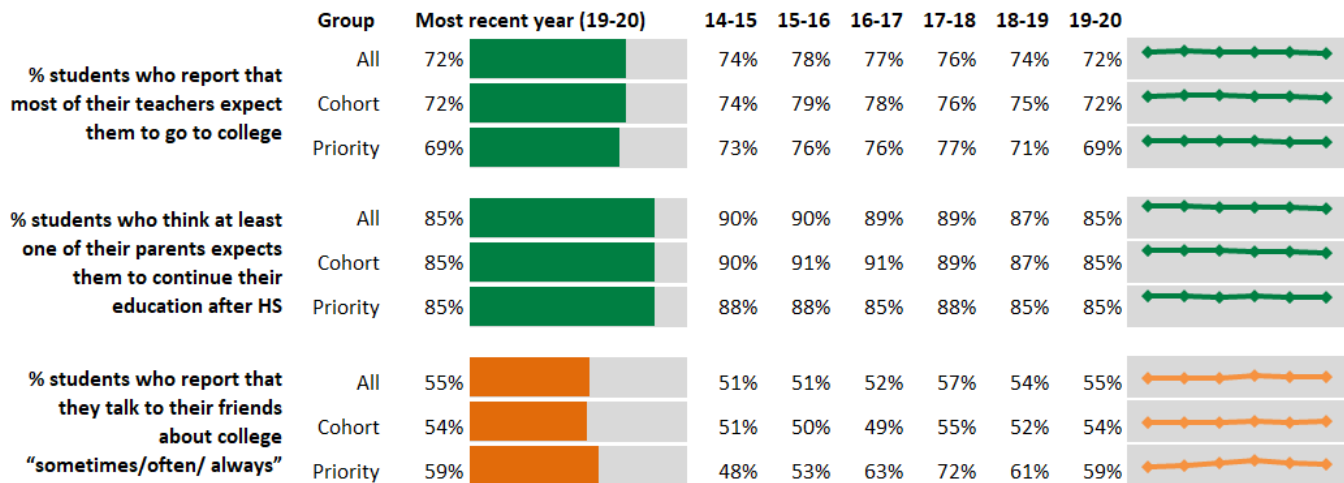
STUDENT, PARENT, AND EDUCATOR EXPECTATIONS (SURVEYS)*



*For all longitudinal graphs, green bars signify positive results (either large proportions of respondents with positive perceptions or large improvements over time); whereas orange bars signify areas of improvement.

Furthermore, the proportion of students who reported that their teachers and family members expect them to go to college was continuously high across the six-year grant, while the proportion of students who reported speaking with their friends about college increased slightly. In 2019–20, 72% of students believed that most of their teachers expected them to go to college, and 85% said the same about their parents, representing slight declines over the years. A smaller percentage, but still a majority, of students (55%) discuss college with friends at least *sometimes*, which represented a small increase over the years overall, and a large increase for priority students specifically.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF, PARENT, AND PEER EXPECTATIONS (SURVEYS)



While the majority of students and parents expect students to go on to complete a college degree or certificate, both groups cited the cost of college as the main reason why they might not. Educators reported “planning or needing to work” as the main reason. Similar to last year, the top reasons students cited in 2019–20 as why they may not continue their education after high school were: cost (35% of students), low grades or test scores (19%), and plans or need to work (16%). When parents were asked, the top reason they cited was also cost (45%), but they also thought that students’ motivation or indecisiveness would be a factor (17%), followed by their student(s) not believing they will need college for their chosen career (9%). Educators continued to see students “planning or needing to work” as the top reason (25%), followed by cost (18%).

TOP REASONS STUDENTS MAY NOT CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL (SURVEYS)

REASONS	Students ¹	Parents ¹	Educators
Costs too much	35%	45%	18%
Grades or test scores are not good enough	19%	7%	13%
Plans or needs to work	16%	6%	25%
Student is unmotivated or undecided	10%	17%	13%
Student does not believe they need college for their chosen career	7%	9%	13%

¹Students and parents who selected “N/A” were excluded from these analyses. Responses may not add up to 100% because only the top choices are included in this table.

During the fall 2020 virtual visits at three participating schools, many school stakeholders—including administrators, coordinator, educators, and students—discussed various ways in which GEAR UP has contributed to creating a college-going culture at their school. Stakeholders from each of the schools noted, for example, that the GEAR UP-funded trips and events, and particularly the college visits, have broadened students' horizons and made the idea of college a real possibility for many students.

As explained by staff in one school, **every travel opportunity was considered an eye-opening experience for their students who typically don't travel much outside of the county.** The eighth-grade trip to Portland was considered particularly impactful because it introduced students to a different lifestyle and debunked "some of the myths that people who live in the valley don't like people over here." Because the travel opportunities were so valuable in expanding students' horizons, the high school made it a standard practice to include a college visit to every trip they took with students. As the principal stated, "some of the things we'll continue to do just because we've created that mindset... any time we go somewhere, we'll be looking at ways we can get our kids into something that they typically wouldn't get into. So, a lot of times if we have a football game six hours away, we're looking at what community college is down there or what trade school is down there, or what opportunities down there that our kids wouldn't have, wouldn't take advantage of, that we can expose them to."

This "mindset" shift extended beyond travel opportunities to broaden students' horizons to discussions about college itself. For example, one educator indicated that "now instead of having a college application night, we're having a constant discussion with our seniors on what those colleges might be and why you would choose those... and conversations include the financial part... I think it's a manner that's going to be a lot more effective at getting information to the kids."

At another school, stakeholders also noted that GEAR UP has contributed to building a college-going culture by **encouraging students and educators to engage in important conversations around postsecondary education.** As one staff member commented, "And then also a big thing too, is we have teachers often talk about their own journey through becoming an educator, because all the educators obviously have had to go through college, and so it's nice to hear, you know, a vast amount of different stories and different avenues, different pathways." One student indicated, "our teachers have always encouraged us to pursue education in different ways, whether that would be apprenticeship, study abroad, or college."

Beginning those conversations in middle school was also seen as a critical contribution that GEAR UP has brought to their communities.

As noted in an interview, "I was actually at our middle school the very first year that we got the GEAR UP grant when it actually started following the seventh graders through, and so I really think the conversation starts there and I think ... the most success we had as far as numbers was when we really had those intense conversations with the kids and families at that middle school level, and then once they transition to high school, it was much more of a common vocabulary, and the systems were already in place; and that really helped further along those conversations and really made them go much more depth."

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School culture has improved by getting students out of a small town to visit college campuses and participate in student leadership camps. The GEAR UP grant has had major impact on the formation of a college and career center including technology improvements. This is also true of our CTE programs and STEM lab. Student tutoring to improve student grades has also made a big difference in students' overall performance.

—GEAR UP Principal

[GEAR UP] started a conversation that may not normally happen in the classroom. Classrooms are driven by content and curriculum, especially at the high school level. And so sometimes those conversations are left out and GEAR UP has really helped show the value of having those conversations about wherever post-secondary opportunity may lie.

—GEAR UP Educator



At a third school, several stakeholders noted that GEAR UP has **broadened students' horizons, allowing them to dream big, and more importantly, put in place a plan to achieve those dreams**. One staff member said, "I think one of the greatest impacts that I've seen in my students is that they're exposed to all these other, not just locales, but colleges, and it gives them an opportunity to dream and then to make those dreams happen." Another one commented, "I think probably the biggest impact is just making college more accessible, as far as just understanding what college is. I think a lot of our population sees college as just kind of extra time in the educational system and not really understanding the value of you honing in on skills and being able to experience [college], whether it's living in a dorm or living away from home, meeting new people, new connections, networking, all those different kinds of things. GEAR UP has provided that." Reflecting on her own experience, one student commented, "at [SCHOOL NAME], we are mostly a low-income area and a lot of people have actually turned away the idea of education simply for financial reasons. That was also one of my factors. It wasn't until I realized how many scholarships I qualified for that I decided, okay, I'm going to shoot for big dreams."

Yet, at some schools, instilling a college-going mindset remains an ongoing challenge. As one staff member stated, "one of the biggest obstacles is swaying opinions" that college is a viable option. Many students, even those interested in college, are influenced by the number of people around them who choose employment over pursuing a college education. Stakeholders shared that "over the last couple of years, probably half [of the students] went to college," while the other half found employment. They added that their community is "a logging community [where] a lot of people didn't see [college] as an option in the past" and often work at the local mill or a nearby plant. College was widely considered beyond people's economic reach and "many felt like they couldn't obtain funding or financial aid and didn't have the means or drive to do that."



Bulletin boards at Bandon High School share a variety of college options. (Source: Oregon GEAR UP Facebook)

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As I think back on all of the years, I have seen tremendous growth in our college-going culture. ... I can name many student success stories, students who would not be succeeding in college or college graduates without the support and awareness activities made possible by GEAR UP. ... One of my graduates is now a Student Ambassador at the University of Oregon and led my high school group on our campus tour. Going on a tour made possible by GEAR UP was impactful for him while he was in high school, and now he is giving back and showing first-generation and other high school students that college is possible through his role as an Ambassador.

GEAR UP Coordinator

INCREASING RIGOR AND PREPARING STUDENTS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS



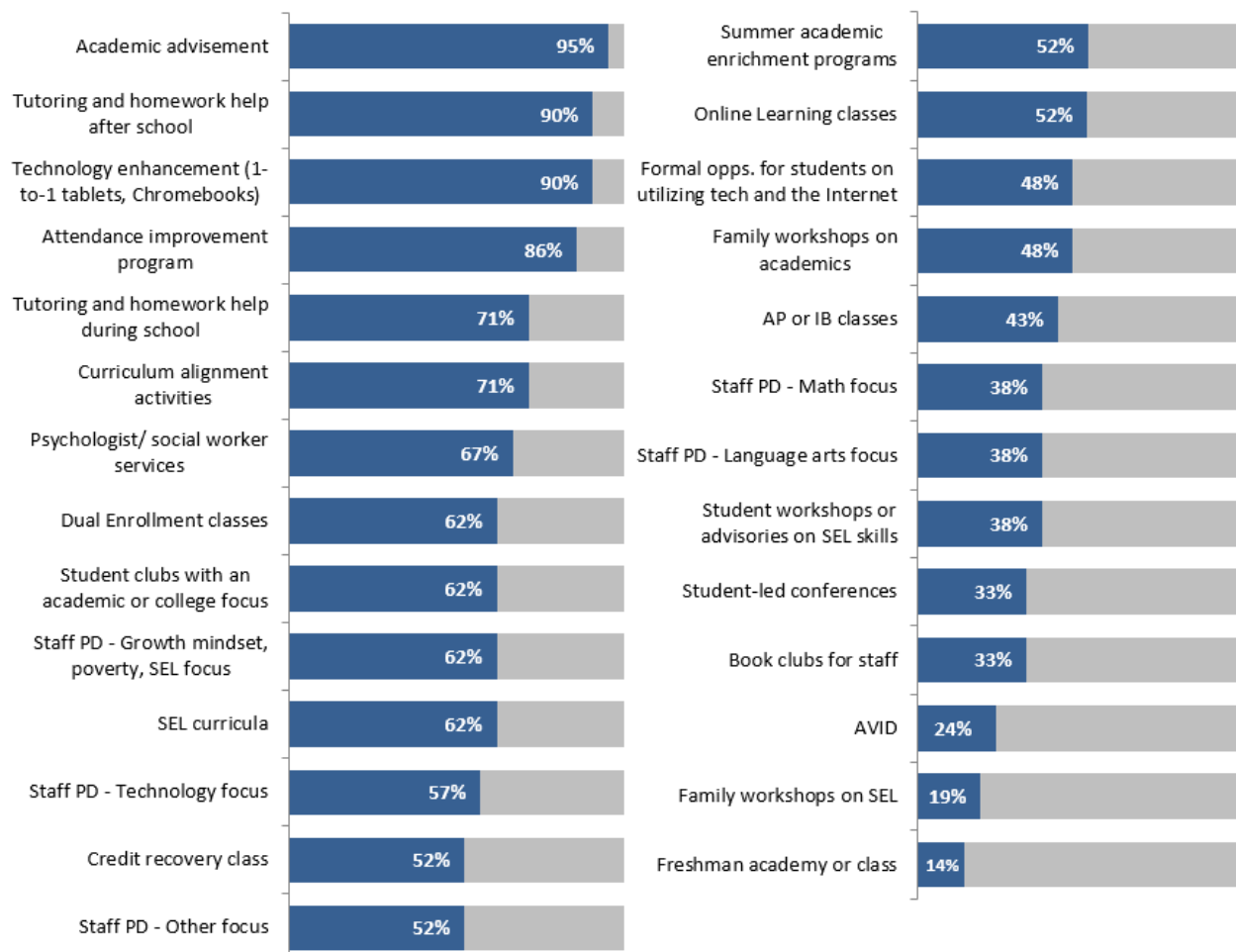
The Umatilla robotics team qualifying for state championships
(Credit: Umatilla High School Facebook page)

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

- Increasing the rigor of instruction, students' academic readiness, and students' access and ability to complete a college prep curriculum continue to be a challenge in many GEAR UP schools.
- Schools, including those that participated in virtual visits, have been implementing a number of initiatives and promising practices to address these challenges.

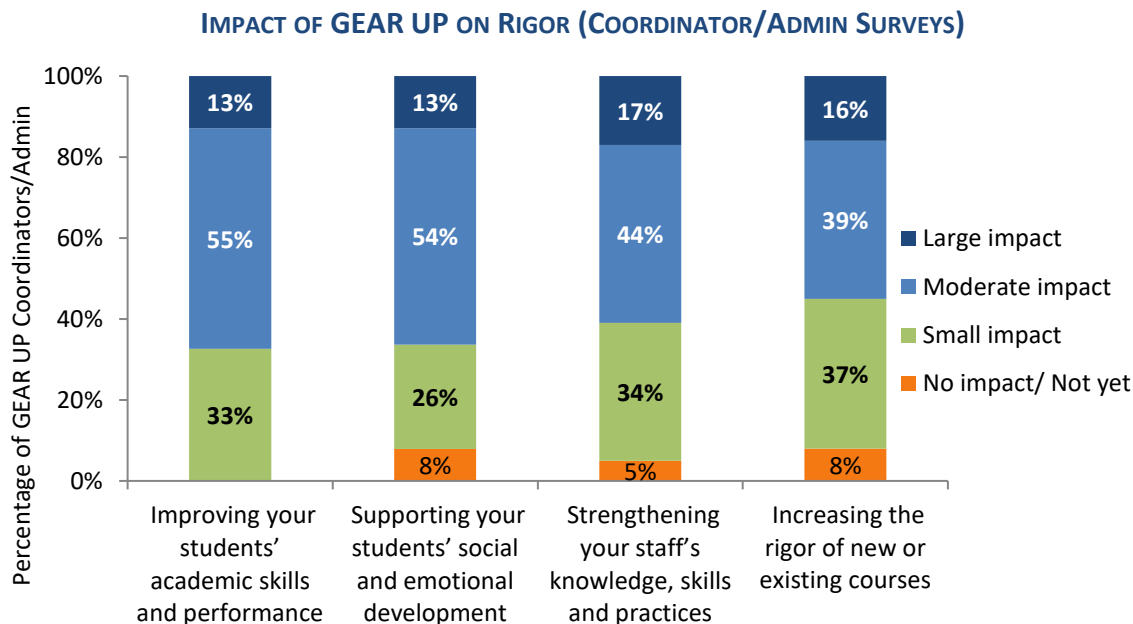
A vast majority of GEAR UP clusters offered academic advisement (95%) and afterschool tutoring (90%), leveraged technology (90%), and implemented an attendance improvement program (86%) to support students' academic success. Other activities that a majority of clusters implemented in 2019–20 to support students included those focused on their social-emotional learning (SEL) and health, such as offering psychologist or social worker services (67%), implementing an SEL curriculum (62%), and providing professional development to staff on SEL or growth-mindset (62%). In addition, a majority of GEAR UP clusters also focused on improving academic rigor in their schools by undertaking curriculum alignment activities (71%).

RIGOR: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



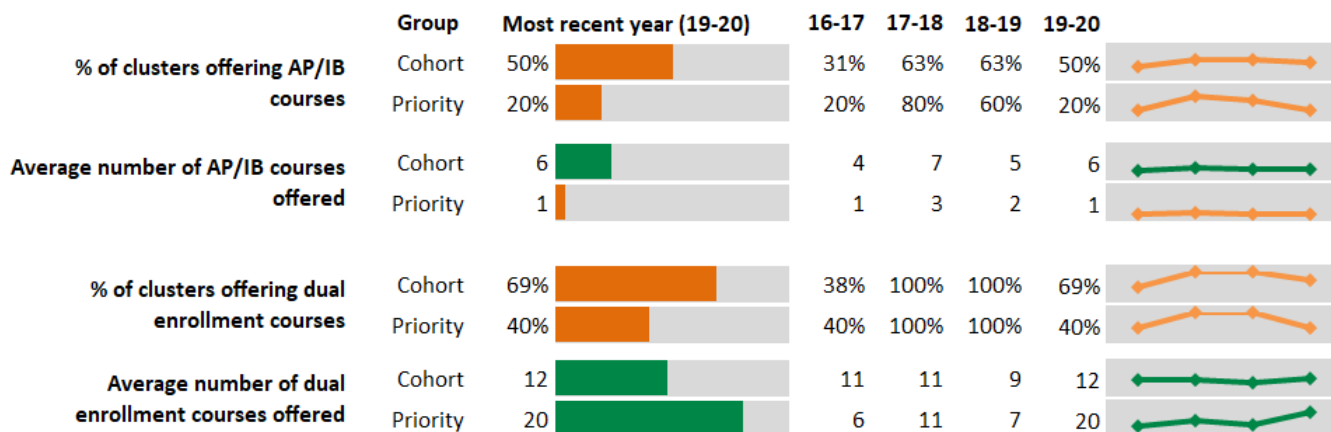
A majority of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators said GEAR UP had a *large or moderate impact* on increasing rigor, however, the proportions were lower than those who reported impacts in other areas.

Specifically, in 2019–20, over two-thirds of coordinators and administrators believe their program had a *large or moderate* impact on improving students' academic skills and performance (68%) and supporting their social-emotional development (67%). A smaller percentage, but still a majority, said so about strengthening staff capacity (61%) and increasing rigor of courses offered (55%).



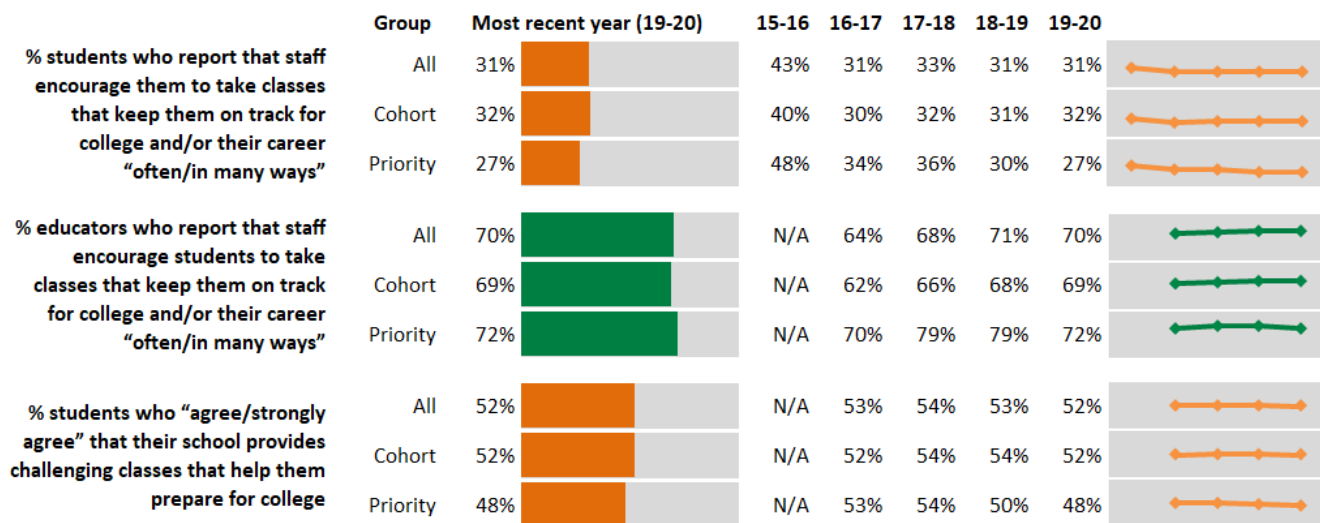
The percentage of GEAR UP clusters offering AP or IB and/or dual enrollment courses has fluctuated over the years. Clusters providing those courses in 2019–20 increased the average number of courses offered. In 2019–20, 50% of cohort clusters and 20% of priority clusters offered AP or IB courses, and 69% of cohort and 40% of priority clusters offered dual enrollment courses, fewer compared with previous years. However, the average number of courses offered increased in many cases, including cohort clusters offering an average of six AP or IB courses and 12 dual enrollment courses, and priority clusters offering an average of 20 dual enrollment courses.

SCHOOLS' COURSE OFFERINGS (CCRI)



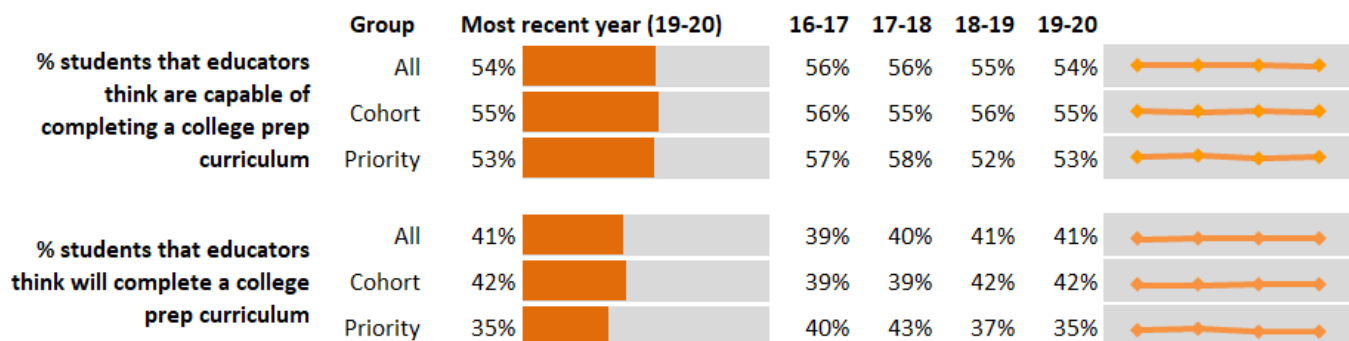
While the percentage of educators who report that staff encourage students to take classes that keep them on track for college and/or their career has steadily increased, the percentage of students saying so has declined. In 2019–20, 70% of educators said staff encourage students to take these courses, which represents an increase of six percentage points since 2016–17. Whereas the proportion of students who reported this (31%) decreased by 12 percentage points since 2015–16 (the earliest year with available data). A higher percentage of students (52%) overall said that their school *provides* challenging courses that help prepare them for college.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS AROUND RIGOR (SURVEYS)



Educator expectations of the percentage of their students who are capable of completing and who will complete a college prep curriculum have also remained fairly consistent. In 2019–20, educators reported that just over half (54%) of their students are capable of completing a college prep curriculum, and they expected that fewer (41%) will complete it. Among educators at priority schools, there was a slight decline compared with 2016–17.

EDUCATOR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT STUDENTS COMPLETING A COLLEGE PREP CURRICULUM (SURVEYS)



During site visits, school staff talked about a number of successful GEAR UP-supported academic and social-emotional initiatives for students.

- **Academic counseling** was highlighted in one school as a strength last year when the school replaced all group counseling sessions with individual student sessions. The school also created an official academic counseling office located in the back of the library, where two staff members provided academic counseling. During the sessions, students and staff reviewed expectations and requirements for high school graduation, discussed student's future plans and dreams, and examined how college can fit into those plans. Students made SMART goals and received college-related information, such as resources to help pay for college and how to do virtual college visits. As one staff member said, these sessions helped students learn "they don't have to be afraid to go to college."
- This school also incorporated other successful academic-based opportunities throughout the years, including **afterschool tutoring, SAT school days, and dual enrollment classes**. GEAR UP helped create afterschool tutoring opportunities for students by paying for a teacher to stay an hour after school every school day. This gave students a chance to get help with their work and opportunities to use the school's Internet and devices if they did not have access to technology at home. SAT school days were established for students to take the test during the day, rather than the weekend and to have test fees paid for by the school. Stakeholders indicated that these days were a great help because "it's not as difficult to register for it now—in the past, it was really hard to find a day that they weren't playing sports. Our teams were always playing on the weekend, so having set days has made it wonderful." The school also offered numerous dual-enrollment opportunities for both core and elective courses, such as Business Ed and CTE, and paid for students' course fees if they could not afford them.

Educators also provided very positive feedback about **the impact of GEAR UP-sponsored professional development on their knowledge, skills, and practices**. For some, these experiences were invigorating and rekindled their passion for education. One staff member commented, "Last summer was the curriculum alignment, and that was amazing, so much fun and well-informed. This summer was about trauma-informed learning, and again, very well worth our time." Another educator indicated, "I also participated in the trauma impacted youth workshop that was put on in the summer, that kind of very quickly had to move to all digital format. And I thought that it was just lovely, ...it was really fantastic and have used several of the tools that I learned in that workshop even in distance learning."

Yet, educators in all three schools identified academic rigor and students' academic underperformance as challenges in their schools. For example, at one school, staff shared that they struggle with having their graduates going on to 4-year universities and "not doing well because they weren't challenged [academically] enough here." At another school, implementing rigorous academic supports has also been a challenge. As one staff member explained, their dual credit offerings are "bound" by the limited number of nearby colleges, and their school has "lost some opportunities for our kids that have been there in the past." Staff shared that they wish more students would utilize the dual-enrollment offerings. Furthermore, low academic performance and low school attendance were also seen as obstacles at this school, and students may be "shock[ed]" by and underprepared for the "rigor that is required of them" in college, as one staff member worried.

“

I attended the Oregon writing project event that we sponsor through GEAR UP, and as an English teacher, it was pretty phenomenal. It was one of mountaintop experiences where you make it to the end of the school year and you're really run down and you're starting to question why you ever started doing this in the first place, and that week really kind of re-lit my fire and reminded me why I love doing this.

—GEAR UP Educator



PROMOTING RELEVANCE AND CAREER AWARENESS



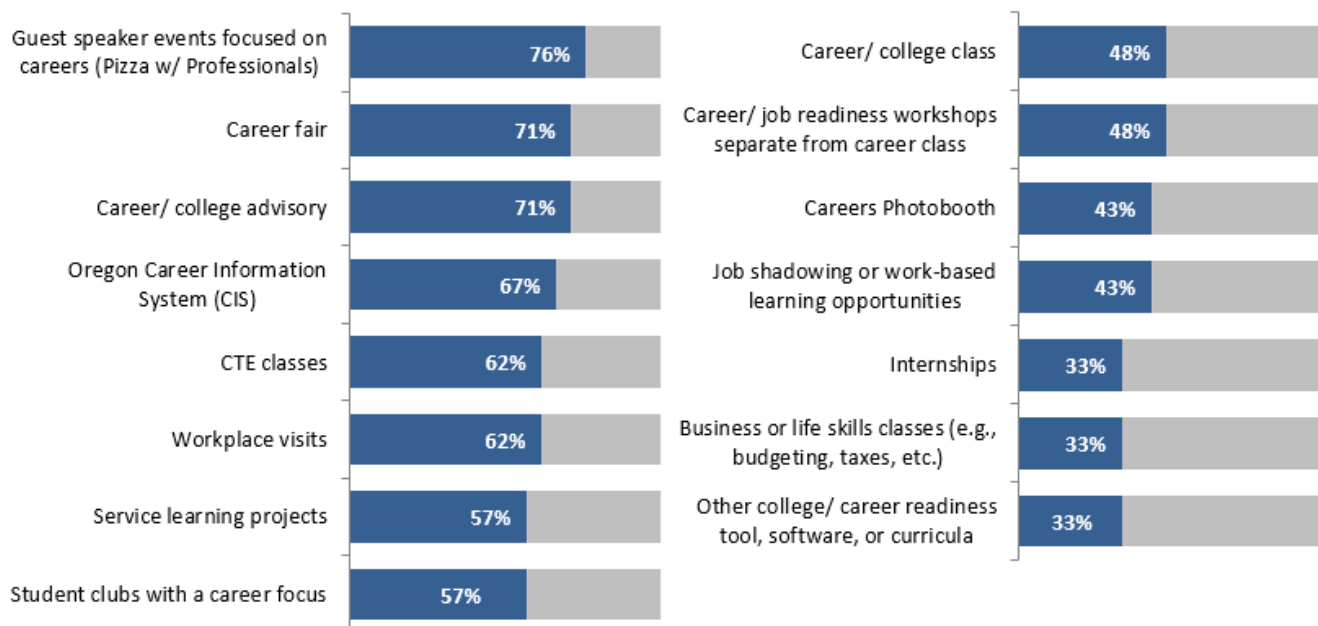
Bandon students and their science teacher aboard an Oregon State University research vessel (Credit: Bandon High School Facebook Page)

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

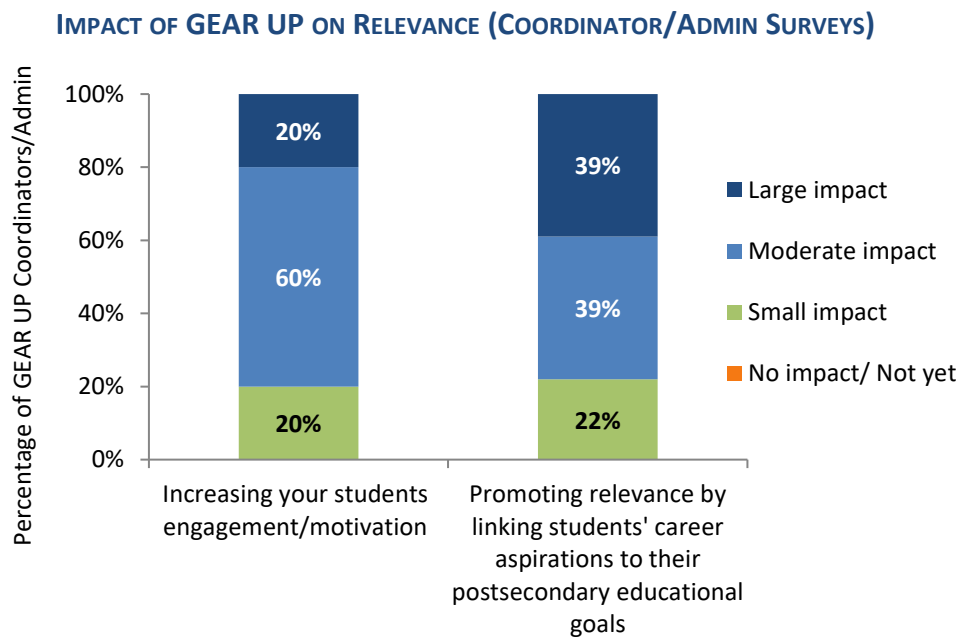
- GEAR UP schools are implementing a varied portfolio of career awareness/readiness activities, including guest speaker events, career fairs and college and career advisories, and all coordinators and administrators believe GEAR UP has had a positive impact in promoting relevance.
- However, just under half of the students and a considerable proportion of educators failed to recognize the schools' efforts in promoting career awareness and relevance; thus, indicating room for growth in this area.

GEAR UP clusters implemented various activities focused on promoting relevance and career awareness in 2019–20, with the largest percentage of clusters offering guest speaker events (76%), career fairs (71%), career or college advisories (91%), and Oregon Career Information System (CIS) activities (67%). Most clusters also offered career and technical education courses (CTE) to students (62), held workplace visits (62%), incorporated service learning projects (57%), and offered career-focused student clubs (57%).

RELEVANCE: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



All GEAR UP coordinators and administrators indicated that GEAR UP has had at least some impact on promoting relevance and career awareness. Specifically, in 2019–20, 80% of coordinators and administrators saw a *large* or *moderate* impact of GEAR UP on increasing students’ engagement and motivation, and 78% reported a similar impact of GEAR UP on linking students’ career aspirations to their postsecondary educational goals. The remainder reported a *small* impact.

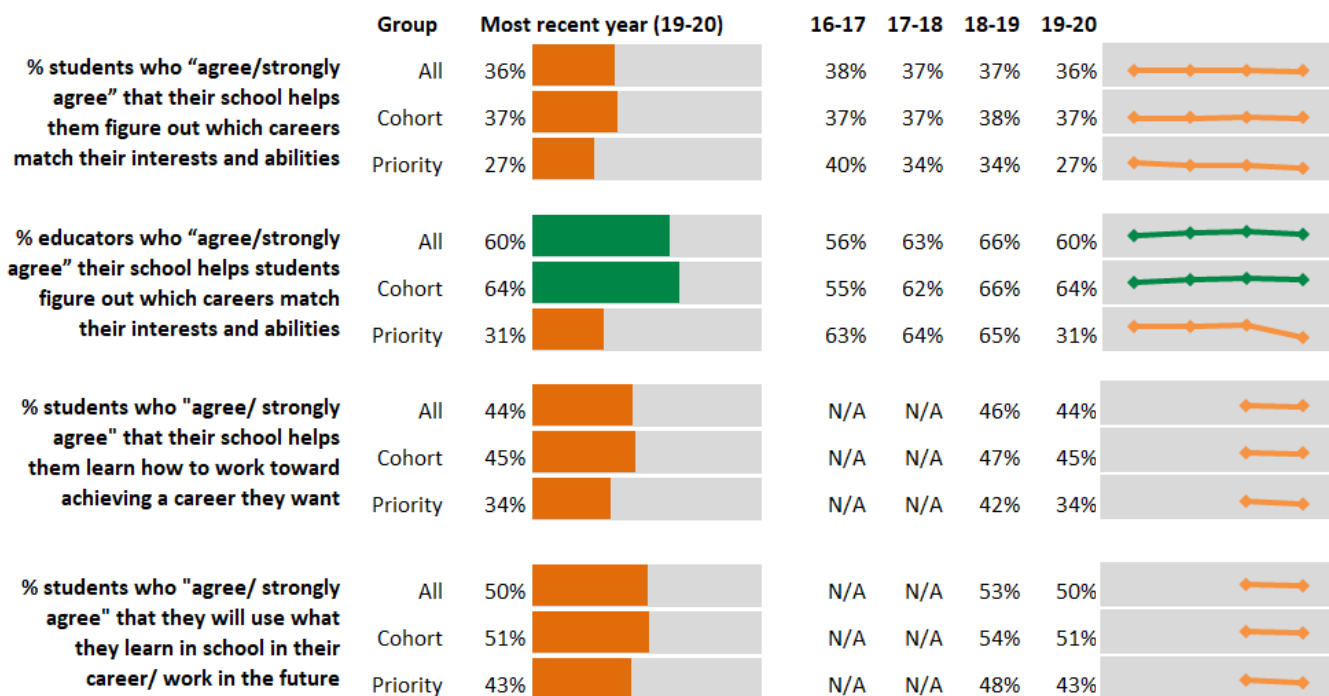


During school visits, school staff talked about a number of successful initiatives their schools have implemented to increase students’ career awareness and readiness, including alumni events, the use of CIS and locally-developed curricula, and hands-on experiences such as job shadowing and internships.

- For example, one school reported that GEAR UP has enabled them to bring in guest speakers through events such as Meet with a Professional and Roundtable with Alumni. These events exposed students to different life and career paths by introducing them to alumni and other professionals working in a variety of fields, including forestry, fisheries, and wildlife; medical; financial advising; human resources; judicial; public administration; and more. With two mills as major employers in town, these opportunities provided students with new options pursued by people like them, which gave “validity” to the idea they can pursue something different. Stakeholders described the Alumni Roundtables as “strong events” with a lot of student questions, and staff indicated that they were “really big fan[s] of the guest speakers.” Stakeholders also mentioned that their school has taken students on business place tours. These helped with introducing students to other possibilities, and, as one staff member said, “having tangible experiences really impacts our kids.”
- This school also established two career-focused curriculum projects. The My Story Project, which officially begins in 9th grade and spans several years, requires students to “look into what they plan to do and the steps it takes to get there, and where they need to go.” The activity is informed by an extensive career exploration unit from 8th grade and helps guide students when doing college prep research in senior year classes and when selecting a career for their Senior Job Shadow project. The Senior Job Shadow is a graduation requirement for which students complete a minimum of 30 hours of job shadowing, a research notebook, a journal and job log, a final paper, and a 20 to 30-minute presentation for a panel of judges and other audience members. The entire process is overseen by a teacher panel that decides if they meet the criteria.

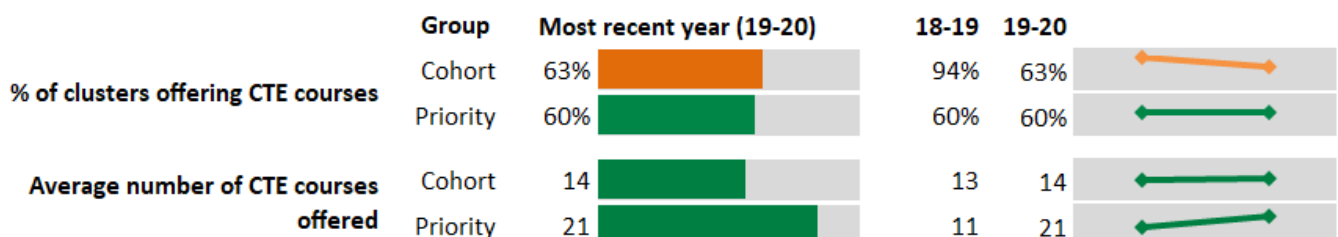
Yet, students' perceptions of their schools' efforts to promote relevance remained low. Additionally, although educators generally had positive perceptions of their schools' ability to help students connect with careers, those perceptions declined in 2019–20 for priority schools. As in previous years, the percentage of students who *agree* or *strongly agree* that their schools help them figure out which careers match their interests and abilities remained relatively low (36%). A slightly higher, although still relatively low, percentage of students said they *agree* or *strongly agree* their school helped them learn how to work toward achieving a career they want (44%) and said they will use what they learn in school for their career or work in the future (50%). Among educators overall, as in previous years, a majority (60%) said they *agree* or *strongly agree* their school helps students figure out which careers match their interests and abilities. However, this year, only 31% of educators in priority clusters said so—a significant decline compared with previous years. (As noted in the methodology, changes in priority schools could be due to a number of factors, including the sharp decline in response rates over the last year, and the fact that priority schools focused mainly on serving first-year college students in 2019-20.)

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS AROUND RELEVANCE (SURVEYS)



The average number of CTE courses offered by GEAR UP schools increased in 2019–20; however, fewer clusters offered them. The same percentage of priority clusters offered CTE courses in 2019–20 compared with the previous year. However, the proportion of cohort clusters that offered them dropped to 63% in 2019–20 compared with 94% in the previous year. However, among clusters offering CTE courses, the average number of courses offered increased for both priority (from 11 to 21) and cohort (from 13 to 14) clusters.

SCHOOLS' CTE COURSE OFFERINGS (CCRI)



FOSTERING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS



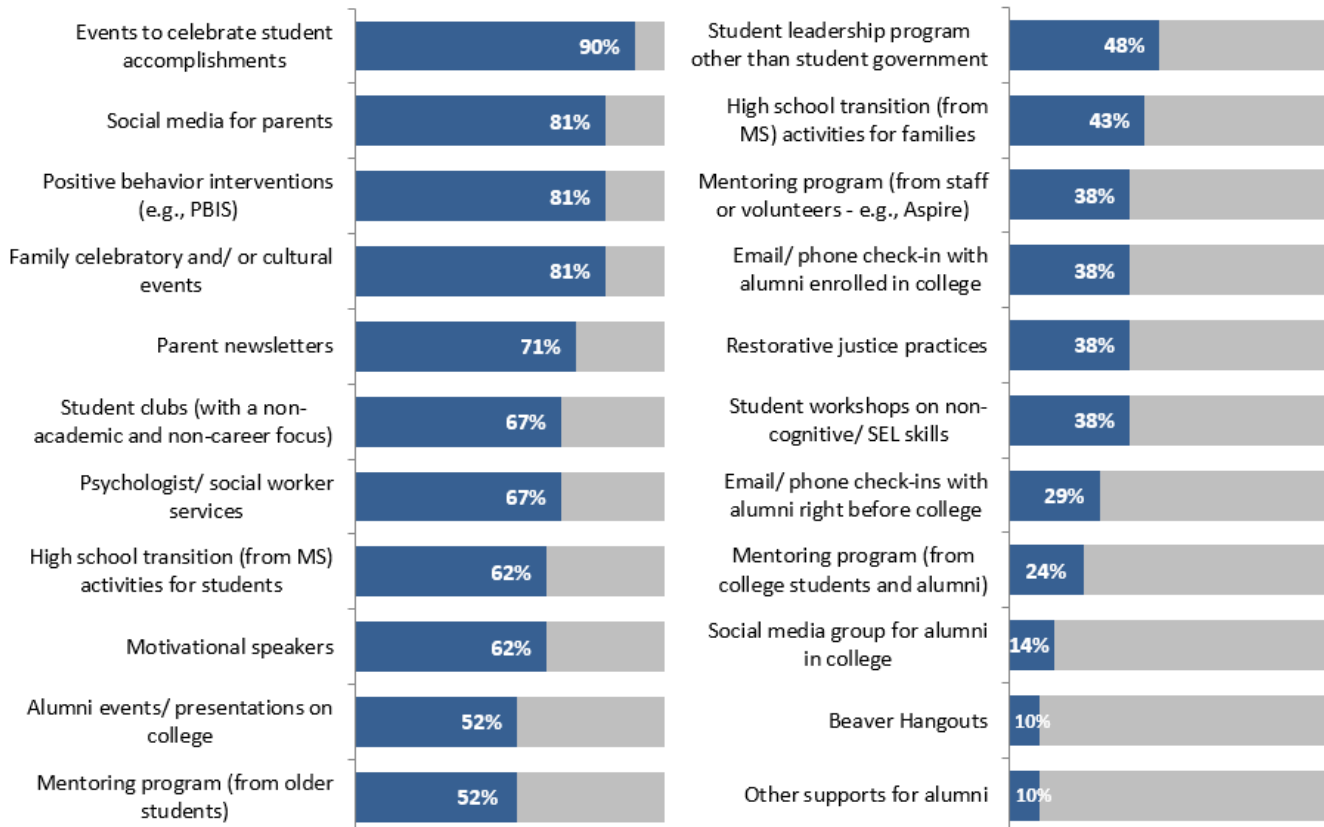
A Newport student works with the ASPIRE coordinator (Credit: Oregon GEAR UP website hosted by Oregon State University)

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

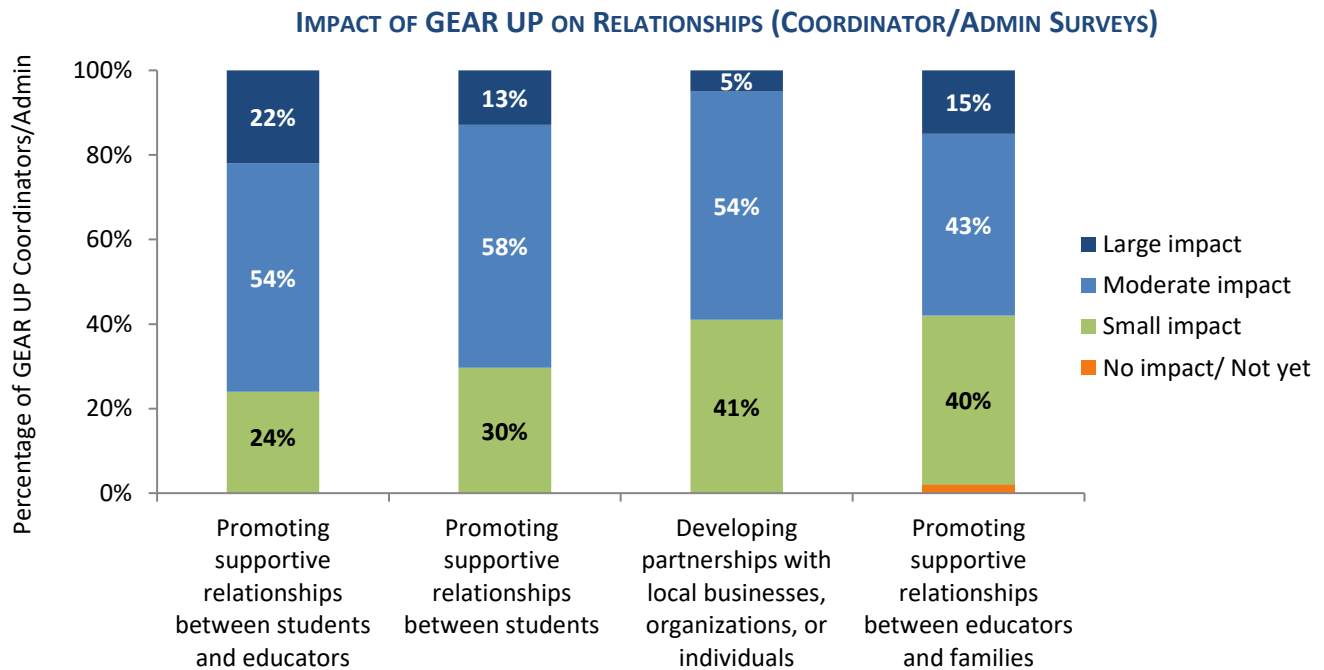
- All GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported a positive impact of GEAR UP in promoting supportive relationships in their schools, and many schools were implementing varied activities in that area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were struggling and redoubled their efforts to maintain and nurture those relationships in a virtual setting.
- There has been an upward trend in educator involvement in college and career readiness.

In 2019–20, almost all GEAR UP clusters held events to celebrate student accomplishments, and a majority offered various other activities, events, and programming focused on fostering supportive relationships between school staff and students, as well as with parents and families. Notably, 81% of GEAR UP clusters implemented positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), which they were asked to document for the first time this year. To foster relationships with parents and families, 81% of clusters also held family celebratory and/or cultural events and connected with parents and families on social media.

RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



A majority of GEAR UP coordinators and administrators said that their programs had a *large or moderate impact on all types of relationships in their school communities*. The highest percentage of coordinators and administrators reported this about their program’s impact on student-educator relationships (76%), followed by their impact on peer-to-peer relationships (71%). Smaller percentages, but still a majority, said their programs had a *large or moderate impact* on developing partnerships with local businesses and organizations (59%) and on educator-family relationships (58%).



During the site visits, school stakeholders in each of the three schools described ways in which GEAR UP—either through the coordinator or the implementation of a number of specific activities—has promoted positive school environments and supportive relationships among students, staff, and families.

- At one school, for example, the PBIS relationship building socials have been very successful in fostering connections and trust between staff and students. The socials were scheduled immediately before school breaks, bringing the school community together around snacks and music to talk and “be human.” At the high school, staff said “they’re our favorite thing,” and a student said they were “great fun” when she was in middle school. The student leadership conference was also singled out as a rewarding and transformative event for the students who attended.
- At two of the schools, staff identified the GEAR UP coordinator as playing a key role in building strong relationships with the students. At one school, stakeholders described her as “amazing,” “a rock star,” “gifted educator,” and “does a great job.” Furthermore, in addition to teaching a GEAR UP class, the coordinator has several other touch points with students (including teaching a dual credit writing course), which has allowed her to build strong connections with students. Students viewed as a

“

We have started to really focus on relationships in both the middle and high schools. We have had successful GEAR UP Socials several times a year (starting last year, and one this year with the early school closure) and received hugely positive feedback from staff and students. We have recognized that building positive relationships is the foundation for building academic success.

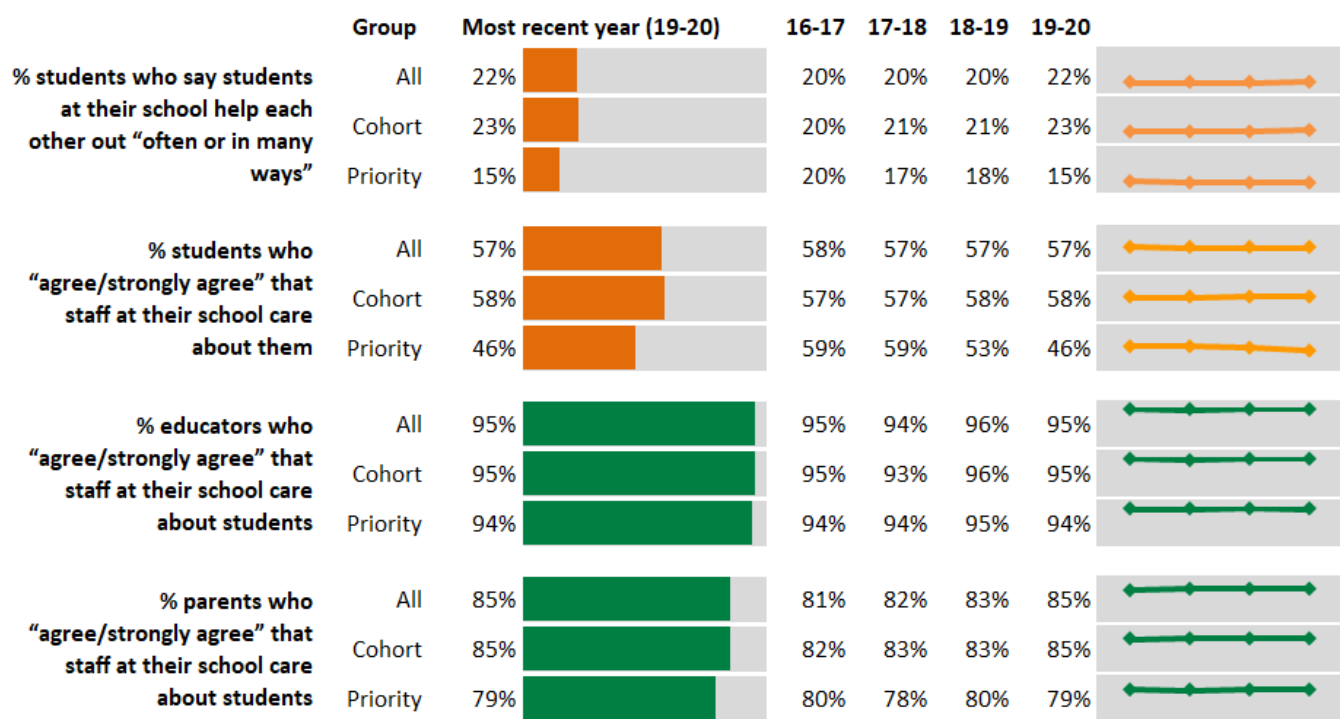
—GEAR UP Educator

critical resource for getting the information they needed to pursue postsecondary plans. One student commented on the invaluable support she has received from the coordinator, stating that “she is honestly the most amazing, positive, and efficient teacher, who scares me to death ...because she knows what you’re capable of...and if she sees that you’re plateauing, if she sees that your writing abilities are faltering, she takes note of it and she will approach you and talk to you and make you see that you need to kind of get back on track and she helps you to do it.”

- At another school, students we spoke with said they knew that the GEAR UP coordinator would always be there for them and support any plans they had and would nudge them toward opportunities and resources she didn’t want them to miss. “Her room was always open—questions, scholarships, all that stuff,” one student shared, “[and] she was very supportive and very giving with her time.” Students also seemed to have this perception of their teachers more broadly; the same student also shared “it was a connected feeling...our teachers were open. I could ask for any of my teachers’ help on scholarships, and they told me their experiences and what they think I should do.” Staff attributed these impacts in large part to the PBIS relationship building socials (discussed above).

Survey results suggest that educators and parents continue to have more positive impressions than students, whose perceptions declined in 2019–20, about the extent to which GEAR UP schools have created caring environments for students. Almost all educators (95%), and a large majority of parents (85%), *agree or strongly agree* that staff at their school care about students—representing slight steady increases across the years. Although still a majority, a smaller percentage of students (57%) said the same about the staff in their school. However, very few students (22%) said their fellow students help one another out *often or in many ways*. Among students in priority schools, there was a decline of seven percentage points compared with the previous year (13 percentage points since 2016–17) of students *agreeing or strongly agreeing* that staff in their school cared about them and a decline of three percentage points compared with the previous year (five since 2016–17) of students saying their peers helped them out *often or in many ways*.

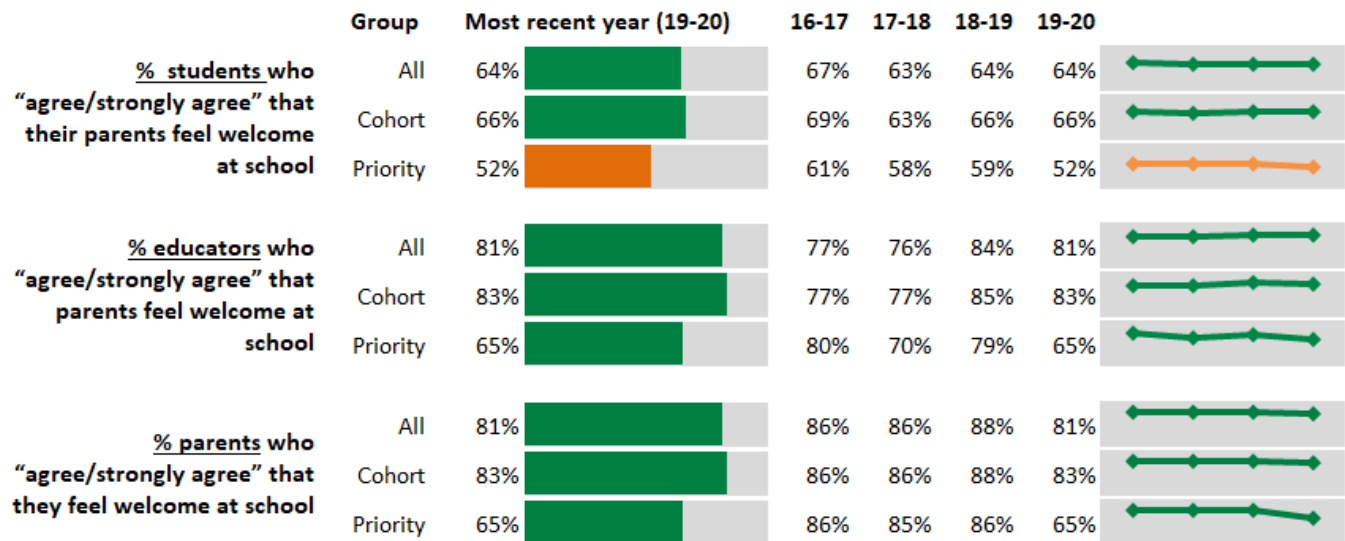
PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS (SURVEYS)



As noted in earlier reports, it is possible the disconnection between the perception of students, parents, and educators may exist because students are considering the larger picture at school—including teachers and students they are not necessarily connected to—when responding to surveys, more so than the treasured relationships they share with individual staff at their school.

Overall, majorities of parents, educators, and students continued to report that their school provides a welcoming environment for families, however, at priority schools, the perceptions of all groups declined. In 2019–20, 81% of educators and parents, and 64% of students said they *agree* or *strongly agree* that parents feel welcome at their school. In priority schools, these percentages were lower for all groups and declined from the previous year and since 2016–17.

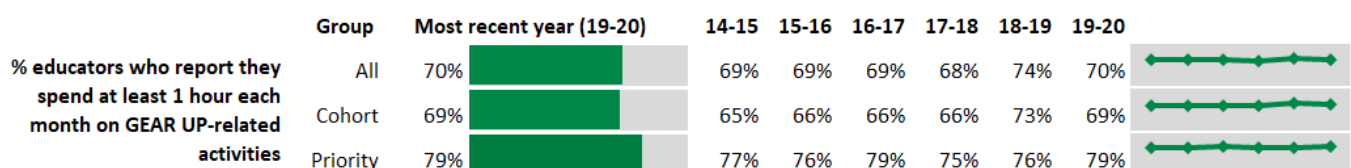
PERCEPTIONS OF HOW WELCOME PARENTS FEEL AT CHILD’S SCHOOL (SURVEYS)



During site visits, educators reported that parent engagement has continued to be a challenge, despite GEAR UP providing valuable supports in this area. At one school, for example, the GEAR UP program and the weekly newsletters have improved communication with families and led to increased family engagement and connection. According to school staff, more parents follow up directly with staff to ask questions, such as “Can you check to make sure we did our FAFSA right? Can you help us apply for the Oregon Promise Grant?” This staff member added that “parents are more invested in making sure their kids are staying on track to apply for financial aid, for scholarships, and schools.”

Across the years, there has been an increase in educator involvement in GEAR UP activities; in 2019–20, there was another slight increase among educators in priority clusters but a slight decline among educators in cohort schools. Overall, 70% of educators said they spent at least one hour per month on GEAR UP-related activities, including 79% of educators in priority clusters and 69% of educators in cohort clusters.

EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE/CAREER READINESS (SURVEYS)



RAISING AWARENESS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION OPTIONS, AND THE APPLICATION AND FINANCING PROCESS



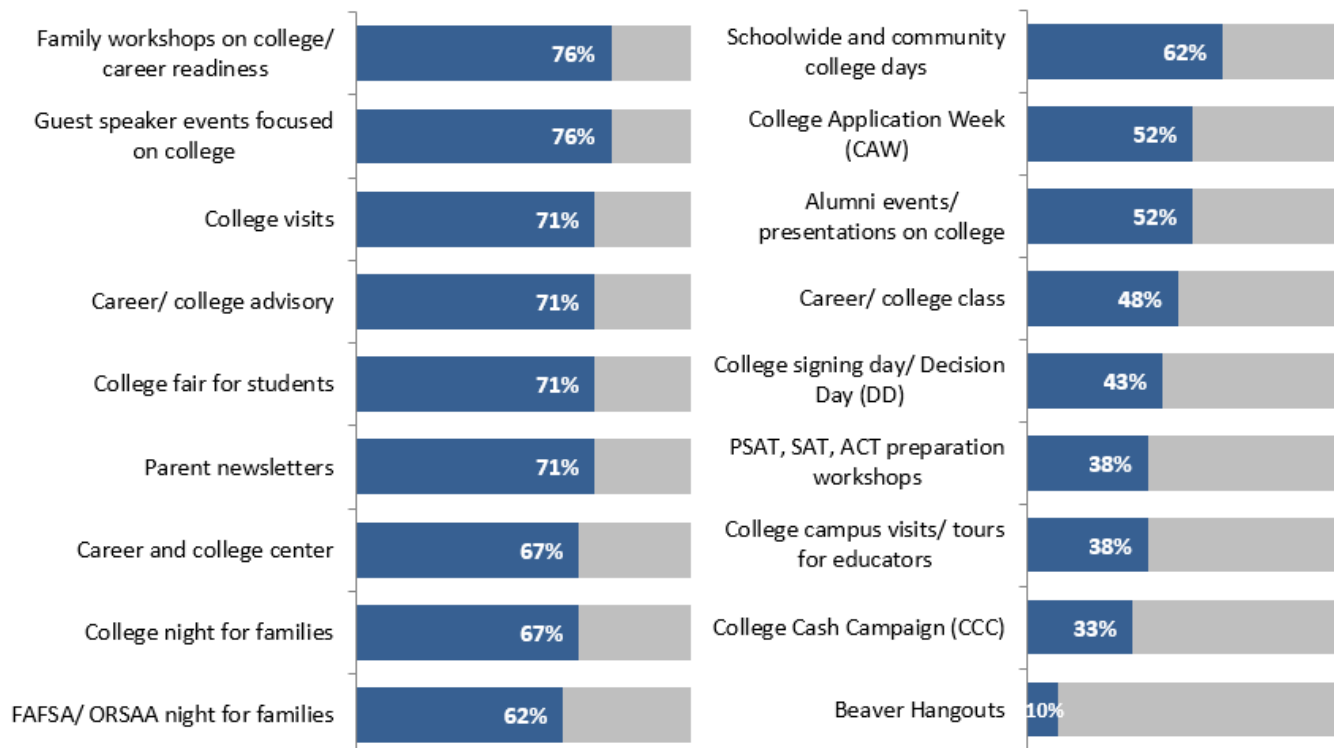
Lebanon High School's "Scholarship Station" (Credit: Oregon GEAR UP website hosted by Oregon State University)

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

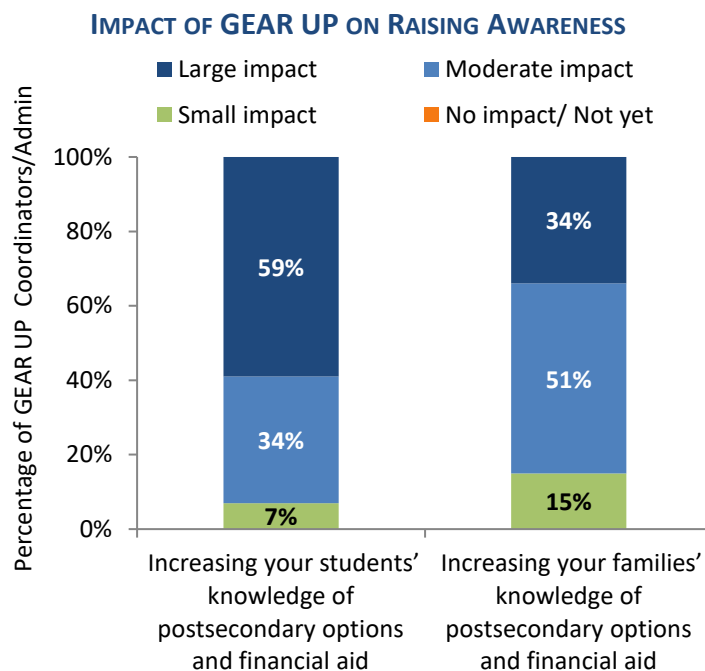
- GEAR UP has had its largest impact on raising student awareness of postsecondary options and financial aid, with most schools implementing a wide range of related activities and events.
- Students' self-reported knowledge of college entrance requirements has increased considerably over time, yet most students and parents do not know what the cost of college is (and those not knowing are more likely to think students cannot afford to attend college).

GEAR UP clusters implemented various activities focused on raising awareness among students and families of postsecondary options, applications, and financial aid in 2019–20, including guest speaker events and family workshops focused on college, among other topics. In addition to these activities and others mentioned in previous sections, most clusters also offered college fairs (71%), had a dedicated college and career center (67%) for students to get more information, and held a college night for families (67%). On average, GEAR UP clusters offered 10 activities focused on raising awareness.

RAISING AWARENESS: WHAT GEAR UP SCHOOLS ARE DOING (COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INVENTORY)



All GEAR UP coordinators and administrators said the GEAR UP program has had an impact on raising awareness among students and families. Specifically, in 2019–20, GEAR UP coordinators and administrators reported their programs had a *large* or *moderate* impact on increasing students' (93%) and families' (85%) knowledge of postsecondary options and financial aid.



“

Because of GEAR UP, we were able to open our College and Career Center, which has become a hub for post-high school planning. Students and parents know they can always get help, and their questions will be answered.

—GEAR UP Coordinator

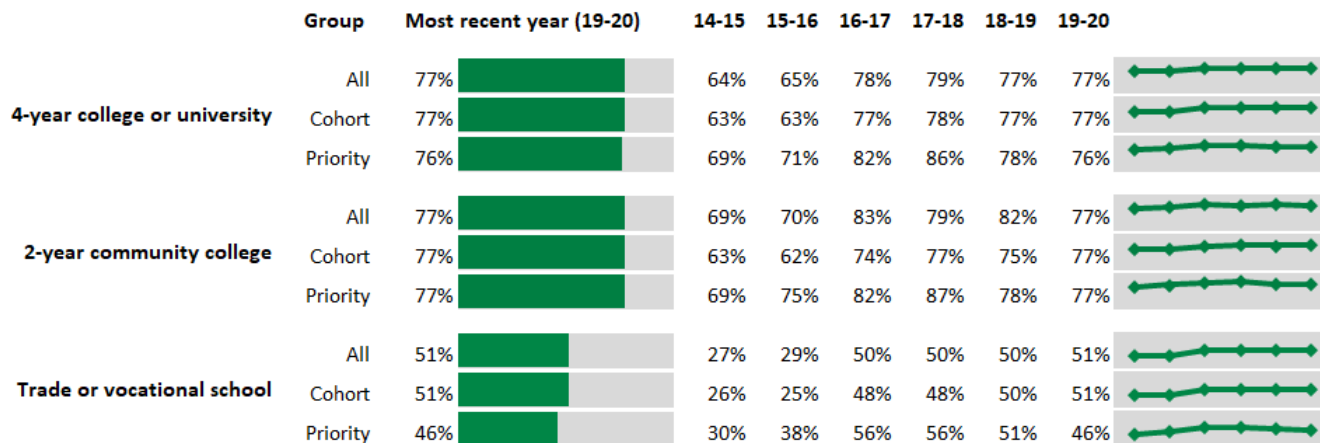
When we had parent nights to talk about GEAR UP topics, families were always grateful for the information and asked for more educational opportunities.

—GEAR UP Principal

Survey results show that students' self-reported knowledge of college requirements has increased significantly since 2014–15. In 2019–20, 77% of students said they knew *some* or *all* of the requirements to be accepted to a 4-year university, a 13 percentage-point increase compared with the first year of the grant; 77% said this about a 2-year community college, an eight percentage-point increase (although a decline compared with the previous year); and 51% said this about trade or vocational schools, which although the lowest percentage overall was the largest increase from baseline at 24 percentage points.

STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF COLLEGE REQUIREMENTS (SURVEYS)

% of STUDENTS who report they know “all” or “some” requirements to be accepted to...*



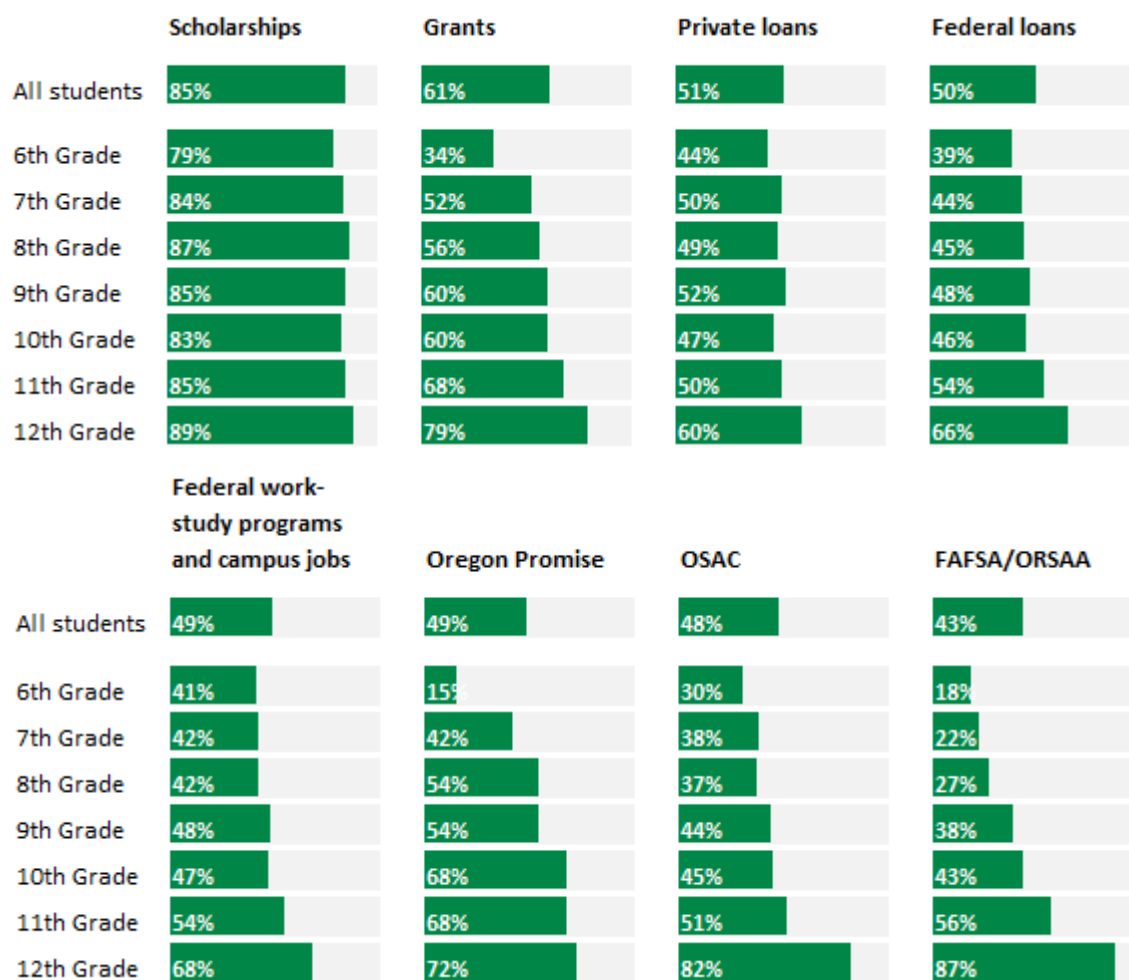
*The response scale for this question changed from 2015–16 (yes/no) to 2016–17 (all/some/none).

Out of all financial resources to help pay for postsecondary education, students' self-reported knowledge of scholarships is the highest. In 2019–20, a vast majority (85%) of students reported knowing *a little* or *a lot* about scholarships, and over half (61%) said so about grants. Just around half of students said they knew *a little* or *a lot* about most other resources, such as 49% who said so about Oregon Promise (asked for the first time this year), and only 43% said so about the FAFSA/ORSAA.

When looking at these data by grade level, results suggest that as students get older they learn (and self-report knowing) more about each of these sources. For example, in 2019–20, seniors reported knowing the most, with 60% or more indicating they are aware of scholarships (89%), FAFSA/ORSAA (87%), Oregon Promise (85%), OSAC (82%), grants (79%), federal work-study programs and campus job opportunities (68%), federal loans (66%), and private loans (60%).

STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF FINANCIAL SOURCES BY GRADE LEVEL (2019-20 SURVEYS)

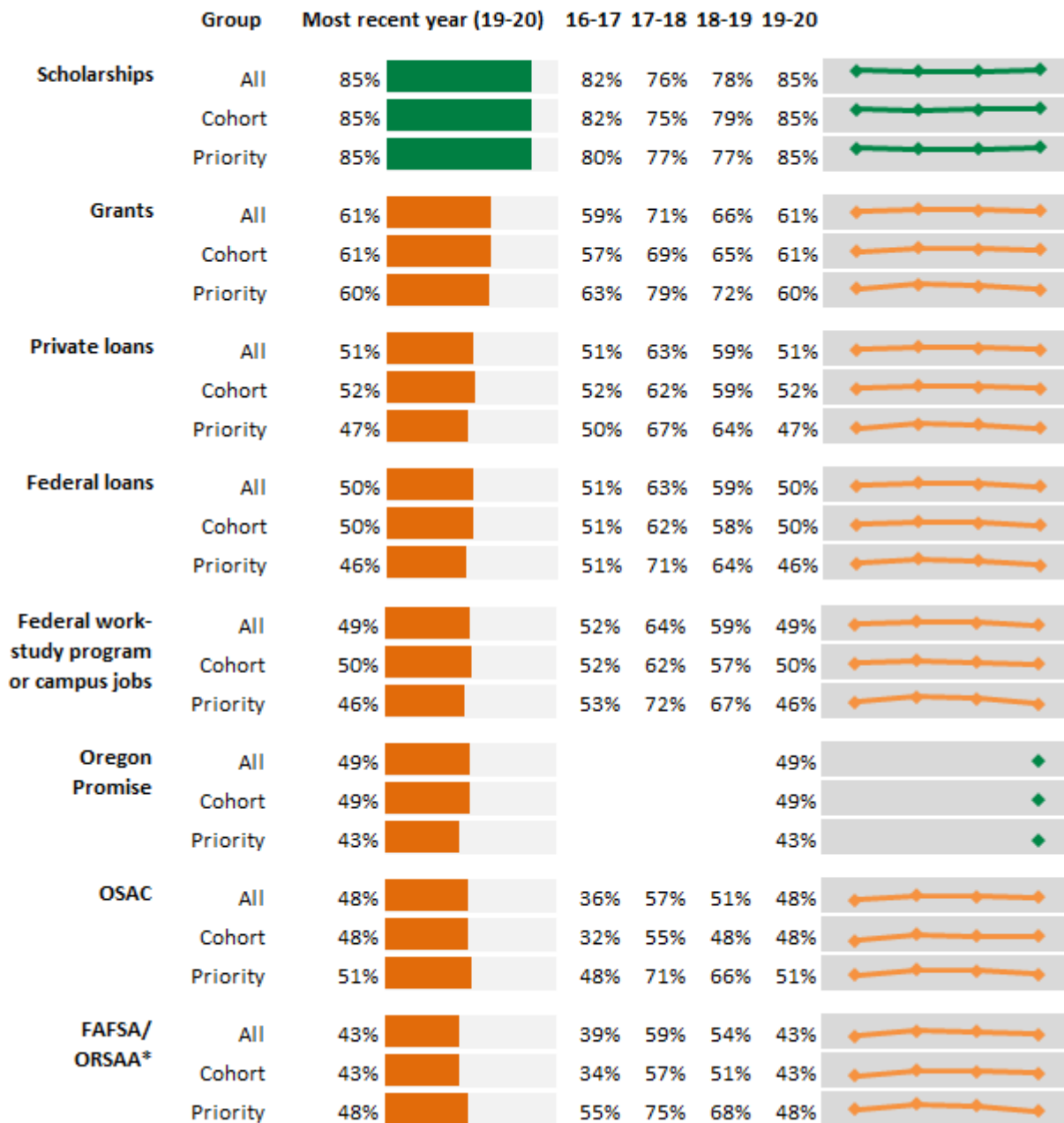
% of STUDENTS who report they know "a little" or "a lot" about...



Longitudinal data presented in the graph below show gains from 2016-17 to 2017-18, and subsequent declines, for most resources listed in the survey.

STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF FINANCIAL SOURCES BY YEAR (SURVEYS)

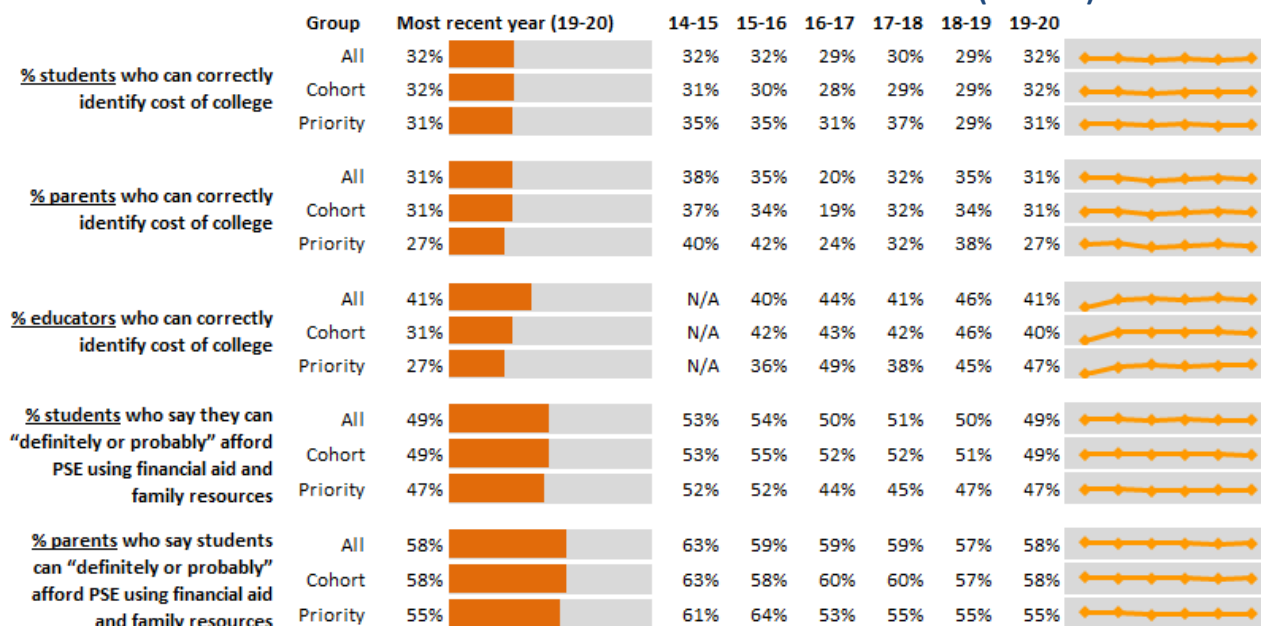
% of STUDENTS who report they know "a little" or "a lot" about...



*The question was changed in 2018–19 from "FAFSA" to "FAFSA/ORSAA".

Survey data also indicates that only about one-third of students and parents can correctly identify the cost of college; and just about half of students and parents feel confident in their ability to pay for postsecondary education. The percentage of students who can correctly identify college costs increased slightly for students in 2019–20 but decreased for parents, especially among parents at priority schools (from 38% last year to 27%). The percentage of students and parents who say they can *definitely* or *probably* afford a postsecondary education is about the same compared with last year, although both have slightly declined since 2014–15.

STUDENT AND PARENT PERCEPTIONS ON COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY (SURVEYS)



Additional analyses show that students who can correctly identify the cost of college were more likely to report that they can definitely or probably afford to attend a 4-year college/university (57% compared to 45%), consistent with findings from the previous year. A slightly smaller proportion of students who can correctly identify the cost of college said "cost" would be their main barrier (35%) compared with other students (37%).

During virtual visits, there was strong agreement among school staff and students that, **as a result of GEAR UP, students are more knowledgeable about careers and postsecondary options, including a variety of colleges and universities.** As explained by a staff member, "Another benefit [of GEAR UP] is just the awareness, and I have tried really hard over the last few years to emphasize trade schools, not just colleges—military, trade, workforce—to try to help the kids see the options out there that they should be looking at. ...the virtual college visits have also been really beneficial to the kids. One of them actually told me, 'I'm so glad you made me attend this because I would not have even had that school on my radar if I hadn't attended this.'" A senior also commented, "the first thing we did at the start of the year was narrow down career opportunities that we feel we would best fit in and careers that we would like to do and how we would go about getting the education for it."

“

The GEAR UP Team has created many sustainable events for students, families, and the community. ... High school students have the opportunity to learn their pathways and gain real life perspective about post-secondary options. The GEAR UP program is helping students and families gain the knowledge and tools they will need to continue after grade 12.

—GEAR UP Coordinator

Furthermore, at least two of the schools have GEAR UP classes for seniors, and these were identified as some of the most impactful activities. Through these classes, students have **dedicated class time to complete their college and scholarship applications**, which according to one stakeholder "is one of the biggest things kids say." Another stakeholder commented, "I know this student population that is taking the GEAR UP class is extremely thankful, and they do a lot of great work when it comes to understanding what it takes to fill out college applications, what it takes to go into that field, and then with the scholarships and all those type of things." Echoing these comments, one student commented, "I am extremely grateful for the class. Mrs. [NAME] is my teacher and advisor in the program, she helps me out with preparing for moving on to further my education through college applications and scholarship applications."

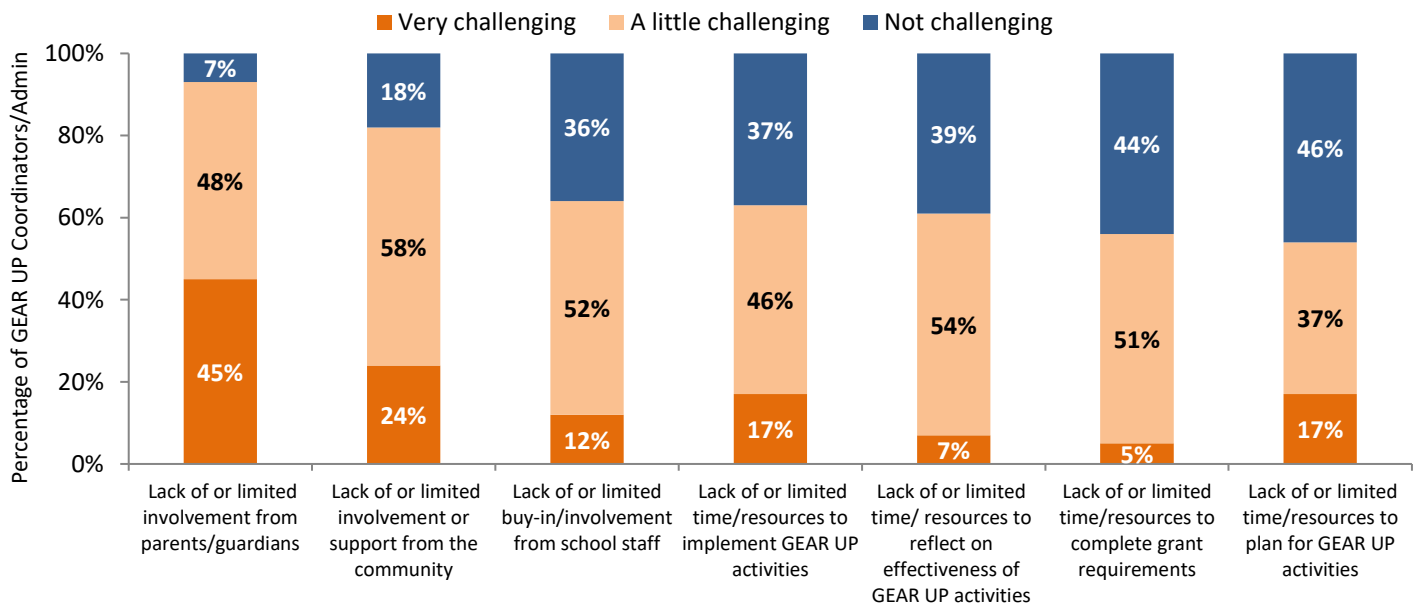


IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, GEAR UP schools were forced to eliminate many college and career readiness activities offered in the spring. However, schools modified their GEAR UP plans by replacing these activities with other supports and events that they were able to offer virtually. For example, at one of the schools, college visits in the spring were cancelled but were replaced with virtual visits, which were described as extremely successful. Furthermore, budget resources were redirected to prepare care packages and boxes for high school graduates and for alumni, which were “incredibly loved,” and much “appreciated.”

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic and related challenges, the lack of or limited involvement from parents/guardians and the community continued to be the top challenges cited by GEAR UP coordinators and administrators in 2019–20. Yet, fewer reported that lack of time or resources for implementation was a challenge compared with previous years. Overall, most coordinators and administrators said family involvement (93%) was a little or very challenging, and a majority said the same about community involvement or support (82%). These proportions were slightly lower compared with the previous year. Notably, there was also a downward trend in coordinators and administrators citing lack of resources and time as challenges to assessing the program’s effectiveness (61% compared to 78%), completing grant requirements (56% compared to 71%), and planning for activities (54% compared to 68%).

CHALLENGES TO GEAR UP IMPLEMENTATION (COORDINATOR/ADMIN SURVEYS)



Site visit data confirmed these findings. Stakeholders in all of the schools mentioned that engaging parents was challenging, in general, and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff buy-in was also discussed as a challenge in these schools. As it was explained in the interviews, “I feel like there isn’t enough time in the day for everything they [the teachers] already have on their plates, so the buy-in isn’t as strong as it could be, but... [they] always want the kids to go to college and achieve success in their classrooms and try many teaching techniques to achieve that.” Another staff shared, “I think that buy-in for [middle school] staff sometimes seems like ‘why are we doing this now, it’s so far away,’ or ‘we just have to focus on academics, who cares where [students] see themselves after high school.’” At the same time, it was also noted that teachers are “trying to do what they can to help kids be successful” and, as a result of GEAR UP, they are more likely to engage in activities such as discussing their own college experiences with their students.

SUSTAINABILITY

In surveys, **GEAR UP coordinators and administrators were asked to identify the most effective and impactful activities** they have implemented through GEAR UP, which included:

- ✓ College visits
- ✓ Technology
- ✓ College and career center
- ✓ College and career fair
- ✓ FAFSA and college nights
- ✓ GEAR UP class and senior seminars
- ✓ Ongoing conversations about college
- ✓ College application week
- ✓ Decision day
- ✓ Using Career Information System (CIS)
- ✓ Freshmen class
- ✓ GEAR UP planning retreats
- ✓ GEAR UP Toolkits

“

I have been an educator/administrator for just over 30 year and have been very involved in various grants over the years. GEAR UP is by far the best grant I have worked with due to its focus on improvement and sustainability. I love that the grant always made us focus on how we could sustain our improvements. The grant lasts long enough to institutionalize many improvements. Well done and thank you so much!

—GEAR UP Principal

Coordinators and administrators were fairly confident that most of these activities will be sustained (to some degree) after the grant ends. However, some administrators expressed concerns about the financial impact of COVID-19 on their schools and how that could impact sustainability. As one administrator stated, “Up until COVID 19, there really were not any programs that wouldn't have been sustained and maintain except possibly the GEAR UP celebration night. So, things sustained (hopefully because our state funding will be in decent shape) will be college visits, financial aid nights, FAFSA help, scholarship writing, upkeep to the college and career center, tutoring, summer school, and work to improve CTE programs.” Another principal went further and said, “With potential budget cuts coming, it’s going to be difficult to continue many of the GEAR UP programs that take a significant amount of financial commitment.”

During the site visits, school staff also noted they have begun discussing and developing a plan for sustainability.

- At one school, the district is committed to maintaining the coordinator’s position (with some modifications) and the GEAR UP elective class. Conversations have also begun to transfer some responsibilities from the coordinator to the newly-created “graduation coach” positions and identify how these two staff members can coordinate and align their efforts. In addition, borrowing the idea from another GEAR UP school, the high school bought a shirt press, and the sale of t-shirts will bring in much needed resources that can be used to help sustain GEAR UP activities such as trips and college visits.
- Another school’s approach to GEAR UP implementation is also supporting post-grant sustainability. The principal (who is also the district superintendent) was directly involved with creating GEAR UP activity plans and coordinating the GEAR UP budget. The principal noted that the grant has helped the school put a clear plan and purpose to activities. This empowered them “every year... to add a little bit more to that plate and make the activities a little bit more meaningful and not just something to take up time.”
- At a third school, staff reported they have begun sustainability discussions, but stakeholders shared concerns about the long-term financial impacts of COVID-19 for their school district. In particular, some concerns were shared that funding for things such as continued in-person college trips would be slow to return.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2019–20, Oregon GEAR UP entered the sixth and penultimate year of implementation. GEAR UP schools continued to demonstrate and share successes and promising practices they have implemented at their schools to support students' college and career readiness and prepare them for life after high school. Evaluation results indicate that GEAR UP has played an instrumental role in increasing students' expectations/aspirations, raising their awareness of postsecondary options and financial aid, and promoting school-wide college-going cultures.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures had a huge detrimental impact on schools, students, and families; schools transitioned to distance learning and modified their GEAR UP plans to meet the new, rising needs of students and families. In-person events were replaced by virtual programming, funds were used to increase students' access to technology, and schools used a variety of means—including phone calls, emails, Google classrooms, home visits, and social media—to disseminate key information on postsecondary options, financial aid, important deadlines, resources, and webinars and workshops available to students and families. Other (recurrent) challenges included students' low academic preparation and family engagement.

Preliminary data from senior exit surveys indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted seniors' post-high school plans, with almost a quarter of the students changing their plans as a result. College enrollment data were not available at the time this report was written. Once available, Metis will conduct a rigorous quasi-experimental design study to assess GEAR UP's impact on both high school graduation and college enrollment. Results will be reported in an addendum.

As Oregon GEAR UP enters the last year of the grant, Oregon GEAR UP and its network of schools should focus their efforts on devising effective strategies for schools to sustain the improvements, events, and activities spearheaded by GEAR UP over the course of the grant. Recommendations are included below.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OREGON GEAR UP:

- Disseminate information on sustainability and promising practices through social media and newsletters.
- Create a sustainability toolkit and/or compendium of resources schools could use for sustainability planning.
- Research effective sustainability strategies that other GEAR UP grants may have used.
- Facilitate sessions with school/district staff at GEAR UP retreats around sustainability.
- Facilitate (possibly virtual) school visits at current and past GEAR UP schools with innovative/effective sustainability practices.
- Create Do-It-Yourself (DIY) tools, such as surveys or “light” dashboards to visualize key data, so schools can continue make data-driven decisions when planning programming and supports.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GEAR UP SCHOOLS:

- Engage district leadership and GEAR UP teams in active sustainability planning.
- Continue to find ways and time for key staff to meet regularly, plan college and career readiness activities, and gather/review key data to inform programming decisions and efforts (for example, by administering DIY surveys).
- Document each school's process for planning, implementing and assessing the effectiveness of GEAR UP activities, so schools can replicate efforts and avoid the loss of institutional knowledge when there is staff turnover.
- Find new and creative ways to obtain additional funds that can be used for program sustainability (e.g., student-run businesses, grants, fundraising community events, etc.).
- Identify virtual opportunities for students (e.g., virtual college visits) and families that may be less costly and therefore easier to sustain.

