Student Advisory Institute
Weekend Overview

In early 2023, the GEAR UP Student Advisory Committee gathered at Camp Arnold for a Student Advisory Institute meant for team building, focus group insights, and furthering our goal of authentic relationships. Through these relationships, insight into the student experience was rich and dynamic.

Throughout the weekend, opportunities to share structured insight about the student experience mainly existed in focus groups. However, we found that many of our insights were also collected in the authentic *in-between* moments – while walking to mealtimes, during snack breaks, and around the campfire before bed. Students engaged in *play with a purpose* throughout the weekend, which consisted of activities followed by group reflection and dialogue. Most often, students connected this team-building adjacent programming to their own college going journeys.

Figure 1: Students gather at Camp Arnold for a weekend of relationship building.

Weekend Take-Aways

1. **Relationships matter.** And so does an organizational plan.
   a. How are we thinking about both as we advise support staff that work with students?
   b. How are they accounting for the importance of relationships, as well as the dynamic nature of relationships, in their organizational plan?
   c. How do we support our school teams in understanding their team dynamics, strengths and weaknesses, and the way these effect roles and outcomes for students?
2. **People skills and system navigation skills should be recognized in programming.**
   a. How are we teaching our students self-advocacy, but also persistence? While often times we tell students "call the *xyz* office," reality tells us that one call is often just the beginning of the problem solving.
   b. How are we preparing students for the reality of navigating systems and solutions? Successful student programming should recognize people skills and system navigation skills as essential.
3. **Scholarship support needs more structure in our work plans.**
   a. Students are struggling to benefit from scholarships and finding local scholarship support may be most beneficial.
   b. Students are fearful of "taking" funding from other students that have greater need. It is important to remind students that while others may also be deserving of college funds,

financial need is often more complicated than what we perceive. Students should be encouraged to apply for scholarships and reminded that those reviewing scholarships are responsible for determining need.

c. Students are avoiding scholarship applications because they think that their writing isn't strong enough.

d. Staff that work with students in their senior year should develop and revisit a list of local and regional scholarships. Scholarship support could include inviting local scholarship providers into schools to connect with students, talking with students about the difference between local and national scholarship opportunities, as well as differences and expectations of different scholarships (for example, what they can be used for and whether or not they do need to be paid back for any reason), providing writing support and encouragement, and helping students understand the scholarship cycle so that they become aware of, and responsible for, the follow-up that is often necessary.

e. Scholarship support should become more structured and identifiable in our support services.

Figure 2: A video overview of the weekend can be found on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laDXo0NXwkc&list=PLWg-9DmEamIIw9rSjkRHVrvYKBVIT8Va9&index=29

Focus Group Insights – Senior Year Processes

Students were asked a series of questions connected to their journey through the senior year. For many of our students, college is the end goal. For some of our students, post-high school paths have yet to be decided.

How are you feeling overall about planning for life after high school?

Students reflected on their discomfort with completing tasks that involved phone calls. They also talked about fearing adulthood, feeling like they were in the process of wrapping up their childhood experience, and being uncomfortable about the potential of feeling like "just another student" on whatever campus they landed next year. Students also reflected on their personal lives, including their worries about family after leaving their homes for college. One student worried about their personal health and how that has impacted their college going process so far. Students engaged with each other about feelings of pressure – whether that be pressure to attend college, or pressure from people who aren't encouraging about their college going process.

Students talked about how rejection from certain schools has changed their plans or frozen them in their planning process. Worries about not having family close, the size of campus, and managing heavier course loads were top of mind for many students. Money, too, came up multiple times as both a worry and a point of confusion. Students talked about avoidance as a strategy in their senior year, and how pretending things weren't progressing was one way they coped with their fears and discomforts. Students also returned to conversations of their families and communities often. "My family isn't interested at all. I know they care, but I don't always feel it," and, "I'm worried about my family and how they will do without me at home."

What successes have you achieved?

Students did feel as though they were experiencing successes throughout the process of their senior year, though this conversation was much shorter than others. Students felt proud of their ability to figure out what options were available to them, to then weigh those options, and to ultimately know they have the choice to pursue them. Students expressed excitement and pride in receiving their admissions award letters. They also felt success in taking risks and knowing they would rather fail than remain without options. The ability to think through and solidify different plans was encouraging.

What barriers have you been experiencing?

When asked about barriers, students reflected mostly on finances and feelings of not being prepared. Many students talked about a lack of income, and not having a lot of experience with money. Students felt unprepared in knowing what college costs would look like. One student said they knew they would need a job and summer job but were already sad knowing that would mean missing out on some of the college fun available on campus.

Students again brought up rejection letters and the sting they felt in receiving them. While students who received rejection letters were mostly making new plans, they all recognized a feeling of their journey towards college "not feeling the same anymore." Similar notions of not feeling good enough came up in

these conversations. Students felt they weren't prepared, weren't ready to move, and did not feel motivated because of these things. They mentioned fears into the future, too, like having to talk to new people when they did not feel confident making new friends.

What support could be helpful to you?

To learn more about student needs, we also inquired about what help would be beneficial to them. Students felt they weren't well supported by offices on campus, and that every process was confusing and had too many steps. They wanted more communication, but communication that was simple and credible. Students expressed a desire to better understand what going to certain offices on campus should look like. Students also expressed a lack of knowledge around what support was available on college campuses, including wanting more info about how Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan-type support shows up in the college support realm. Students desired support that looks like someone "pushing them" and letting them know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. One student said they desired support that was "structural and identifiable" and that they had received that kind of support as a Running Start student, through the writing center, math center, and TRiO.

Focus Group Insights - Scholarships

Scholarship support is one of our most requested GEAR UP supports from students, so our weekend focus group engaged in dialogue around this topic. 11 out of the 12 students in attendance had submitted at least one scholarship application, and most students had completed three or more applications.

What is a scholarship? How is it different from financial aid?

Students described scholarships as someone paying for you to go to school for something specific, often based on merit or need, though sometimes based on academics or extracurriculars. They also defined them as money that didn't need to be paid back, unlike student loans. Students thought scholarships were mostly easier to complete than the financial aid application. However, students also shared that while financial aid was based on income and financial need, not all scholarships were – some were available based on how a specific group believes in supporting certain students – for example, students who do a certain craft or have a certain major.

Where do you find your scholarship opportunities?

Students listed a variety of ways they find and access scholarships. These ranged from staff support in the high school, to online sources, to locations they hang out with friends (virtually or physically):

- Bold.org, Niche.com, Fastweb.org, online sources
- GEAR UP coordinator
- Parents workplaces/unions
- Extra-curricular connected
- College and career specialist
- Newsletters and social media support, for a specific community

- Taco Bell scholarship
- Instagram
- High Schools and Beyond Plan

What barriers do you experience?

Students spent a lot of time talking about the credibility of scholarships and a distrust of many online platforms. They also mentioned feeling like submitting a scholarship application was like throwing something out into the abyss – they often don't hear back or they feel their chances of receiving a scholarship are low because of the number of applicants. Students also talked about the work required to apply, whether that meant gathering personal information or needing a parent's support. Some students emphasized a fear and discomfort around scholarship applications because of their personal writing struggles, suggesting the application process can bring up deep feelings of inadequacy, falling behind, or being compared to others. Some students said that scholarships were the last priority on their list because other steps in the college enrollment process were required, while scholarships were just a bonus.

What questions do you have about scholarships?

Students had several general questions about scholarships:

- How do we know which ones are scams?
- What do scholarships cover beyond what financial aid provides?
- What can I use scholarship money for?
- Can it be used for both tuition and cost of living?

Where do you go for scholarship help when you need it?

Some students mentioned reaching out to a school-connected support, like GEAR UP staff, or someone in their high school. One student also brought up calling a scholarship provider directly to receive specific support.

Any other questions or comments?

At the end of our conversation, we asked very generally if students had more questions or comments, and they had plenty more to share. Students asked why scholarships couldn't exist in a common app, so they didn't have to fill out "a million" applications and instead apply just once. Students mentioned feeling like they didn't have a lot of time for scholarships, and that staff in their school didn't either, because other college-going steps take precedent. Students also mentioned hardships around family members and parents not understanding college processes, or speaking different languages, or application questions feeling very personal, and how this increased their annoyance of the scholarship process.

One of the more interesting insights we gathered was that students feel bad about applying for scholarships because they thought other students might need them more. There was a collective fear about taking money away from another student who struggled more financially. Students wondered if it

was okay to apply for scholarships if they were going to a community college, which is often less expensive than other pathways. Students also expressed reservation in asking for scholarship help. While they needed the help, some students were still receiving support for college applications, or even graduating, and they felt that school staff should attend to those needs instead of the "less important work" of scholarships. Lastly, students mentioned that scholarships specific to a career or degree pathway either discouraged them from applying due to not yet knowing their plan or were hard to find for their specific pathway.

About the GEAR UP Student Advisory Committee

The GEAR UP Student Advisory Committee consists of 13 members from different schools and geographical locations across Washington state, and of different races and ethnicities, familial structures, languages spoken in the home, National origins, gender identities, and post-secondary plans.