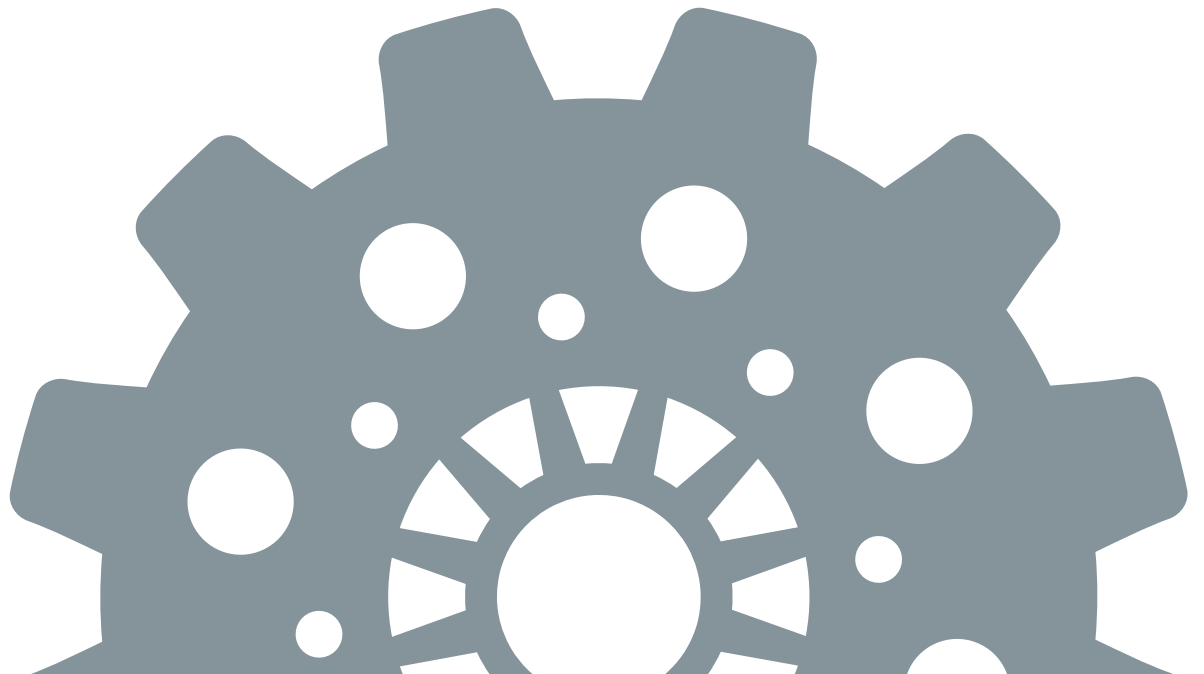




Family Engagement Toolkit

strategies and resources
to communicate with families



How GEAR UP Coordinators Can Use this Toolkit

Connection to developing COLLEGE READY Skills

- ⚙️ This toolkit serves as a set of resources to inform, guide, and empower your local GEAR UP program and UCAN committee as you plan for and implement GEAR UP programming.
- ⚙️ One of the GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership's COLLEGE READY priorities for local GEAR UP programs is **Family-Focused College Planning, College Match & Financial Aid Knowledge**.
- ⚙️ Prepare ALL students and their families as early as the 6th grade with family-focused college planning, college match, and financial aid knowledge through counseling/advising/academic planning/career counseling and parent workshop services.
- ⚙️ Ensure that the family-focused services empower families as leaders in their community to share this information.
- ⚙️ Provide resources that are accessible to families who speak Spanish.

Connection to building a COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

- ⚙️ Based on the baseline College-going Culture survey conducted during the first year of the grant, there is an identified need for the GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership to strengthen **Family Involvement** and **Information & Resources**.
- ⚙️ The **GEAR UP brochure** is a booklet intended to be distributed to GEAR UP families as they participate in GEAR UP services and are introduced to the program.
- ⚙️ Additional **GEAR UP COLLEGE READY Student & Family Resources** are one-page inserts that are designed for either students or families as they learn more about the academic preparation needed, college entrance requirements, applying to college, and paying for college. GEAR UP Coordinators can distribute these resources during GEAR UP services such as workshops, family events, counseling/advising, and college visits.

Dream It. Plan It. Do It.
COLLEGE



A COLLEGE READY Program that Works




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What is Family Engagement?

Families include parents, guardians, and dedicated adults who care for the GEAR UP student which may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings. As a result, families come in all shapes and sizes. Many families may have students who will be the first in their family to go to or finish college so it is important for the GEAR UP Coordinator to be aware of this diversity when planning and communicating GEAR UP services.

Engaging families is more than providing a GEAR UP service, or sharing overall information about the importance of going to college. The GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership sees engagement as:

-  **Involving** families through leadership opportunities to share information about college options, and how to plan, apply, pay, and save for college
-  **Creating a conversation** about career paths, the benefits of going to college, and academic requirements to enroll and succeed in college
-  **Establishing meaningful connections** with other families in regards to their college-going journey, questions, apprehensions, and more to create a college-going community

Research

What does it tell us?



Research on GEAR UP programs shows that students who have a family member participate in at least one GEAR UP college visit are **nearly three times as likely** to enroll in college, and students who have a family member participate in at least one GEAR UP workshop are **one and a half times as likely** to enroll in college (Tillery, 2009).

The challenge is how to engage and involve families in GEAR UP and the college planning process. Adapted from the [National Network of Partnership Schools](#) and the extensive research of Dr. Joyce Epstein, here is an overview of how your GEAR UP program can foster school-family-community partnerships when preparing students and families for college.

Epstein's Six Types of Family Involvement & Connection to GEAR UP College Planning

Type	Description	GEAR UP and College Planning
1. Parenting	Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⚙️ Develop partnerships with local organizations and services, and refer families, as needed⚙️ Host workshops led by local organizations and incorporate college planning information, including the CFNC Parent Curriculum⚙️ Create a GEAR UP family ambassador pipeline of engaged families to organize and share input on behalf of families to the school (like GEAR UP Club for families)
2. Communicating	Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⚙️ Attend and share GEAR UP information at a wide variety of school and community events to create face-to-face dialogue about the variety of GEAR UP programs and student successes⚙️ Use a wide variety of phone, email, website, and social media⚙️ Post fliers around the community – at grocery stores, banks, restaurants, libraries, community colleges, government offices

Type	Description	GEAR UP and College Planning
<h1>3.</h1> <h2>Volunteering</h2>	<p>Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚙️ Make the requirements for volunteering very clear to parents very early in the school year and share this information widely ⚙️ Set goals for volunteer participation and measure progress, especially with family participation in college visits ⚙️ Organize student and family-led programs during out-of-school times (such as “Friday Night PJs Book Party” or “Saturday College & Career Day” programs) for families to participate and/or serve
<h1>4.</h1> <h2>Learning at Home</h2>	<p>Involve families with their children in learning activities at home including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚙️ Develop a “College book-it” program where students and families read together and work towards incentives or college visits ⚙️ Host a family science fair that includes applications to the real world ⚙️ Provide project-based homework with information sheets for parents on background info to help them assist their child
<h1>5.</h1> <h2>Decision Making</h2>	<p>Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚙️ Create a GEAR UP family ambassador group to share family input with school leaders, serve on committees, host events, spread the word about GEAR UP services and events ⚙️ Allow a GEAR UP family ambassador to attend and/or lead a UCAN meeting ⚙️ Consider inviting family ambassador to attend non-GEAR UP meeting if GEAR UP can or will be discussed
<h1>6.</h1> <h2>Collaborating with the Community</h2>	<p>Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups that provide services to the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚙️ Identify businesses and organizations that support family engagement in a variety of ways including employment, training, informational, etc. ⚙️ Incorporate these businesses and organizations into GEAR UP programming, through career exploration, mentoring, and workshops ⚙️ Capture matching resources such as donated space, food, or services that can enhance GEAR UP programs and events

Case Study

Family Voices



Craig is Bryan's father and has never been to college. In this interview, learn about Craig's motivation to participate in GEAR UP events.

GEAR UP: Tell us about Bryan.

CRAIG: He loves science, video games – a whole lot of video games – baseball, plays soccer for Eastern MS, plays trumpet for the school band. He's in the National Junior Honor Society. He is very courteous. He's always willing to help, that's a big thing. He does it a whole lot away from home and that's something I've always wanted him to do. He is a very conscientious person. He loves to help out and be a part of things.

GEAR UP: What made you attend the first GEAR UP Meeting? Why did you continue to attend?

CRAIG: My wife attended the first meeting and told me that it was to benefit Bryan as far as college goes, to get his priorities straight and show him what he needed to do. I myself have never attended a college. Because I haven't attended college (my wife went to college and got a degree), I'm a firm believer in my two children going. Whatever I've got to do, they are going to go to college. When she told me that, I was more interested so I started attending the meetings because I needed to know in order to help him.

STACY: We needed to know what track he needs to be on, what sort of classes he needs to begin now and in the 9th grade.

CRAIG: The earlier, the better – that way you're more prepared. And I want him to be prepared. I have been in things before and not been prepared and it's a big struggle. I don't want him to have to struggle, so the more we can learn now to benefit him when he graduates and goes to a college, the better. And actually it's helping me because there are a whole lot of things I didn't know about college that you need to know. I wouldn't know the classes you have to have, I would have taken all the wrong classes and wasted a whole lot of time, and I don't want him to waste time. So, I think it's going to benefit him as well as myself.

STACY: I just feel like now we know we're on the right track, we're doing what we need to do for him.

CRAIG: Like the CFNC account that Bryan signed up for – I wouldn't have known anything about that. Without the GEAR UP meetings, I wouldn't have known any of these things.

CONTINUED...

Family Voices

GEAR UP: What have you learned through GEAR UP that has been helpful to you?

CRAIG: I didn't understand majors and picking the right classes for that major – I would have taken all kinds of classes that weren't right or gone to the wrong school. At the last meeting, we learned how to use CFNC to find majors and get an idea of what you want. And taking students to the colleges because it gives them an idea of what it's like, so when he does go he doesn't just fall into something.

STACY: And realizing it's not too early now to start thinking about college. I wouldn't have started thinking about it until 9th grade and he would have already chosen some of those classes.

GEAR UP: Craig, what have you learned so far through the GEAR UP program?

CRAIG: I've learned a lot of stuff. I learned that it can help you prepare for college and take some of the money off the big bill. We take field trips [college visits] to schools [colleges and universities].

GEAR UP: What will you tell other parents about GEAR UP?

CRAIG: I think it's well worthwhile. Some parents know a whole lot more about applying to college than I do about it, so it might be a refresher, but for the ones that don't know, I think it's a good thing and they need to come. Because this is the future and if we don't do something with them now – I see plenty that don't go to college and just fall by the wayside, and I don't want mine to do that and I know other parents don't want that either.

STACY: It gets your child excited about college, thinking about it, and prepared for it.

“Strong encouragement and support from parents is the most significant factor affecting whether students aspire to and enroll in college.”

(Hossler, 1999)

“Rural Appalachian high school students were more likely to expect to attend college if they felt they had parental support.”

(Ali and Saunders, 2006)

“Parents may lack pertinent information or have misperceptions about the college-going process, particularly about college costs and financial aid, which may lead them to discourage their children from pursuing postsecondary education.”

(Vargas, 2004)

Top 10

Ways to Engage Families



GEAR UP Coordinator Voices

- 1. Go TO the families,** don't wait for them to come to you – especially since not everyone may feel comfortable (or able) to travel to the school. Going to the families may be performing home visits (follow your school policy), hosting events at places that have frequent traffic such as a popular restaurant on a Thursday evening, having a booth at a county fair or parade, or making phone calls to personally invite families to GEAR UP events.
- 2. Make it fun!** Don't be afraid to play music loud, have good food, and make it festive. You can always share college and financial aid knowledge over a potluck, by playing a game like college Jeopardy, or through art.
- 3. Create a Family Ambassador group** that is led by family members to spread the word about the importance of going to college and participating in GEAR UP services. Include members who serve on the GEAR UP UCAN committees and other decision-making groups within the school and community. This Family Ambassador group should share the message that ALL students can go to college and motivate and empower parents to champion this cause.
- 4. Use CFNC.org Regional Representatives** for financial aid workshops. These representatives are trained professionals who are very familiar and experienced with sharing up-to-date financial aid information with families. Oh, and be sure that all students and families who attend sets up a CFNC.org.
- 5. Be creative** with how you add a college-going message to everything. For example, you can have a college-going trivia contest during the halftime of sports events with businesses donating incentives for winners. After the contest, invite someone who has been touched by GEAR UP or has gone to college to share their story with the audience. Then, be sure to remind everyone about an upcoming GEAR UP program or initiative.

- 6.** **Always always always invite families to college visits** either as volunteers or participants. Be sure that you know your district policy for families serving as volunteers and riding bus transportation. Also, ask that in order for a student to attend the college visits, a parent or guardian to attend an informational workshop prior to the college visit. During this workshop, include information about college options, college matching, and financial aid.
- 7.** **Consider Hispanic families.** Reach out to your ASU GEAR UP Coordinator who serves on the regional Hispanic services committee. They can either support your programming or connect you to additional resources such as the CFNC Spanish Services Manager, Donna Weaver. There's a lot you can do to connect to all families, regardless of potential language barriers, but it is also really helpful to have materials translated into Spanish, and have someone you can reach out to if you need a Spanish speaker.
- 8.** **Create a family newsletter** that shares "family voices" on their experience with GEAR UP and aspects of a college-going culture. Keep in mind that many family members may not have attended college and that the best way to de-mystify is for people to hear from other people like themselves. So, be sure to have a "family voice" from a wide variety of people, including those who didn't go to college, but would like this opportunity for their child. The newsletter could be either print, electronic, or posted on a blog and shared through social media. And, be sure to create a GEAR UP calendar, or include GEAR UP events on the school or district calendar and website so that parents can plan ahead.
- 9.** **College knowledge and financial aid information** should be both cookie cutter and with unique decorations! Be aware of your audience and the types and style of information that they need. Be sure to always share the following standard information, since it's based on the grant's objectives (and research): benefits of attending college, how to support students in choosing an appropriate college, how to apply to college, how to pay for college, and the academic preparation required for college. For help, check out the GEAR UP Family Event 101 presentation template.
- 10.** **Use your GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership** community and resources for help and to bounce ideas around! The best way to increase engagement is to constantly adapt and grow your programs. You'll also benefit from planning your family GEAR UP programs and initiatives early during the annual GEAR UP Work Plan development process.

How do we Measure Progress with Family Engagement?

GEAR UP Services


Using a database designed specifically for the GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership, GEAR UP Coordinators enter GEAR UP service data for students, families, and professional development. These services are then compiled for school-wide, district-wide, and grant-wide analysis to better understand levels of involvement, or “dosage,” especially in relation to college enrollment and completion rates. GEAR UP family services are defined as:


Family Workshops of College Prep/Financial Aid

Include a parent/guardian or adult family member’s attendance with or without their child(ren) at a workshop that demonstrates how to assist their student with college preparation or financial aid information. These services include informational sessions for parents focusing on college entrance requirements and financial aid opportunities.

Family Counseling/Advising

Services span a spectrum of activities that can include one-on-one or small group advising for parents/guardians or adult family members designed to meet the specific needs of the individuals engaged in the activity. These services include a parent/guardian or adult family member meeting with the GEAR UP school staff or counselor, with or without a student, to discuss student’s academic goals, college plans, school progress, etc.

 **Counseling:** Meeting with parents/guardians to discuss student’s personal growth issues such as decision making, goal setting, behavior concerns, family issues, home visits, etc.

 **Advising:** Providing individual assistance to parents/guardians on their student’s college choices, college planning, financial aid planning, etc.

Family College Visits

A physical visit to a college campus by a parent/guardian, with or without a student, facilitated/supervised/led by GEAR UP staff, teachers, college representatives, or other school staff. The primary objective of the event would be to conduct a college visit. Should include an official tour, presentation(s) by admissions, academic departments, athletics, student affairs, residence life, multicultural affairs, etc.

Family Events

Services in which parents or families participate. These services may or may not include GEAR UP students. Family events include GEAR UP activities that recognize the role of families in student success, and are not defined under a previous category.

How Do We Measure Progress?

GEAR UP Goals, Objectives & Performance Measures

The GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership grant project has the following goals, objectives, and performance indicators that relate to family engagement. GEAR UP services including workshops, family events, college visits, and more should be structured around providing information related to these performance indicators.

- ⚙️ GU families will report increased knowledge of postsecondary education options, preparation, and financing by 10% annually.
- ⚙️ 85% of families will report increased knowledge of:
 - ⚙️ Benefits of attending college
 - ⚙️ How to support students in choosing an appropriate college
 - ⚙️ How to apply to college
 - ⚙️ How to pay for college
 - ⚙️ The academic preparation required for college by the beginning of 9th grade

GEAR UP Parent Survey

Every two years, each GEAR UP grant is required by the U.S. Department of Education to administer a parent survey with the following questions. There is a requested 50% return rate for parent surveys for each grant. Data from these surveys are available to GEAR UP Coordinators to help inform their GEAR UP services.

- ⚙️ Has anyone from your child's school or GEAR UP ever spoken with you about **college entrance requirements**?
- ⚙️ Has anyone from your child's school or GEAR UP ever spoken with you about the **availability of financial aid** to help you pay for college?
- ⚙️ Are you knowledgeable about financial aid and the cost and **benefits of your child pursuing a postsecondary** education?
- ⚙️ Have you **talked with your child about attending college**?
- ⚙️ What is the highest level of education that **you think your child** will achieve?
 - ⚙️ High school or less
 - ⚙️ Some college but less than a 4-year college degree
 - ⚙️ 4-year college degree or higher
- ⚙️ Do you think that your child could **afford to attend a public 4-year college using financial aid, scholarships, and your family's resources**?

College-Going Culture Survey



Annually, the GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership will administer a research-based College-Going Culture Survey to teachers, counselors, school administrators, and family members to gauge the college-going culture based on nine measures. One of these is **family involvement** defined as:

- ⚙️ Active and regular. Families are informed partners in the process of supporting students through the college pathway. They have opportunities to gain knowledge about the college process and become aware that all students can be college bound. The school staff is available to answer questions and help make decisions about students' academic futures.

Guiding Questions






These are a few questions to ask of yourself and other school stakeholders to assist your local GEAR UP program and UCAN committees in increasing a college-going culture with parents:

- ⚙️ How are families involved in the sharing of information to support their students?
- ⚙️ How do families share their feedback/input with the school?
- ⚙️ What types of evening workshops or events are parents invited into the school for?
- ⚙️ Are there events for parents related to school/academics at other community-based locations?
- ⚙️ Are these events available in Spanish?
- ⚙️ How could GEAR UP help spread the word or empower families to spread the word about the benefits from attending these events?
- ⚙️ What types of college planning, matching, or financing info is shared by the district/school to students and their families?
- ⚙️ How could it be shared as a supplement to pre-existing school, district, or community events?
 - ⚙️ For example, how could GEAR UP be a part of a school-wide math night and share financial aid information?
- ⚙️ How could this information be shared through a workshop series just dedicated to building college knowledge?

Potential GEAR UP Services



Ideas for services to engage families in the college planning process:

-  Host middle school college knowledge **workshops** that include financial aid planning by partnering with the local SECU, community college financial aid offices, and CFNC Regional Representatives and Spanish-language services
-  Identify and empower family members who have participated in GEAR UP services to lead the “Family U” **workshop** sessions and train each other on what they gained from the services they participated in, collect questions/input from other parents
-  Create a series of student showcases (evening **workshops**) connected to the classroom math and literacy with families invited and information shared about the importance of going to college
-  Host a Latino **Family Night** early in the school year, preferably with a Q&A dialogue and student showcase that aims to create an open and safe network for future information sharing sessions
-  Encourage families to participate in **college visits, counseling, and summer programming**

Topics to consider covering with parents:

Topic	Middle School	High School
Financial Aid	Types of financial aid; College savings plans; Financial Literacy	Types of financial aid; FAFSA application; Repayment; Financial Literacy
Career Planning	Career and Interest Inventories; Learning about your child’s interests	Career Inventory; Internship opportunities; Education requirements for desired career
College Planning	Benefits of attending college; The parent’s role in the child’s pathway to college; Choosing the right college; Campus visits; Importance of extracurricular and volunteering	College applications; Choosing the right college; College essay; Campus visits; College entrance requirements; Opportunities for students with disabilities
Academic Preparation	Transition to high school; Taking rigorous coursework; High school planning timeline	Coursework required for college; Choosing the right classes; Taking rigorous coursework
Standardized Test Prep	EOGs; How to help students prepare	ACT/SAT/PSAT/PLAN overview; Test prep classes; When and how to sign up; Fee waivers

Family Engagement Information & Resources



As a GEAR UP Coordinator, your biggest charge is to share as much college and financial aid knowledge with families as possible through GEAR UP services. The following are publications that you can share with families and students during workshops, family events, college visits, counseling, or through mailings:

GEAR UP Family Engagement 101 (Folder)

- ⚙️ Getting Involved in the College Journey
- ⚙️ Benefits of Attending College
- ⚙️ My Student is in Middle School, what can we do now to be COLLEGE READY?



GEAR UP COLLEGE READY Student and Family Resources (One-Page Inserts)

- ⚙️ Academic Preparation Needed for College
- ⚙️ College Entrance Requirements
- ⚙️ College Options & Match
- ⚙️ Applying to College
- ⚙️ Paying for College
- ⚙️ Resources in Spanish

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What Next?



Set goals and track progress:

- ⚙️ Review data on family participation with your district/school's GEAR UP program.
- ⚙️ Set goals on increasing the number of students who family members participate in a GEAR UP service.

Start or expand a GEAR UP Family Leadership group:

- ⚙️ Find 5 families to conduct a GEAR UP Q&A with you on how and why they got involved with GEAR UP (see example in this toolkit) and either record (video or audio) or take notes and type the interview to share with GEAR UP Appalachian Partnership.
- ⚙️ Develop a train the trainer series where these families can learn and share college planning and financial aid knowledge through formal workshops and/or informal word-of-mouth.
- ⚙️ Ensure that the leadership group is empowered to set their own agenda and evolve as a distinctly family-led initiative.

Develop a GEAR UP Family Engagement Plan:

- ⚙️ Develop a district and/or school GEAR UP Family Engagement Plan on how you are going to reach families through GEAR UP services, GEAR UP parent survey, and the College-Going Culture survey.
- ⚙️ Identify at least 3 forms of communication that you can use more to reach families — examples are a mass texting service, electronic newsletters emailed, Facebook, blog with online calendar, bulletin boards/posters at school and in the community.
- ⚙️ Find 2 spaces in the community you can use for a family event and/or workshops — examples are a community center, library, restaurant, community college, local business.