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Bridging College-Readiness Disparities Within Historically Underrepresented High School Students

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Bridging College-Readiness Disparities Within Historically Underrepresented High School

Students

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Abstract

The program implementing this project is CSUMB- GEAR UP, a federal program that serves underrepresented youth. GEAR UP aims to increase the number of low-income students be better prepared and succeed in post-secondary education. More specifically, this project will attempt to bridge the college readiness gap between first-generation students and continuing generation students. Through the use of multiple in-class sessions, students will develop and sharpen their hard and soft skills necessary to thrive in post-secondary education and redefine labels that have historically discouraged retention. Results from the project included student Future plans for the agency to adopt in the future is to focus on establishing camaraderie with each cohort, further cementing the importance of marginalized communities empowering one another and gain the confidence and skills needed for college.

Key Words: *GEAR-UP, education disparities, low-income, first-generation, college-readiness*

I. Agency and Communities Served

Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), is a federal college readiness program funded by the Department of Education that aims to increase the number of students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP has three national strategic goals: "(1) [increase] the postsecondary expectations and readiness of students; (2) [improve high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates; and (3) [raise] the knowledge of postsecondary options, preparation, and financing among students and families" (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, 2018). Every GEAR UP program across the country may have additional goals it wants to achieve. For example, a local goal CSUMB-GEAR UP wants to accomplish is to increase the number of student enrollment to CSUMB in particular. One way it is aiming to do is by providing the opportunity to get one UC or CSU application waived. If a student meets the requirements that are needed to be eligible for the fee waiver, they will be strongly encouraged to use it on CSUMB, but as to what school they ultimately choose to use it is up to their discretion.

The population of Seaside High School students that the agency works with are 268 ninth graders and 243 twelfth graders. For the purpose of this assignment, the focus will be solely on the 12th grade population. Of the 243 seniors, 151 are identified to be socioeconomically disadvantaged (MPUSD Illuminate, 2018). What this means is that those identified students are more likely to have "lower academic achievement and slower rates of academic progress", as well as "learning disabilities or other negative psychological outcomes that affect academic achievement" and have more influence in "career aspirations, trajectory and achievement" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This does not mean that the other students who are

not identified as being socioeconomically disadvantaged are not served, it simply means that

those who are are looked at more closely.

Race	Total Number of Students	SED	N-SED
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0	0
Asian	11	8	3
Black or African American	16	8	8
Filipino	12	4	8
Hispanic	166	114	52
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	11	7	4
Two or More Races	9	3	6
White	18	7	11
Total	243	151	92

Distribution of Students by State Reported Race (2018-2019)

Above is the distribution of demographics within the 12th grade students at Seaside High

School. The column "SED" and "N-SED" refers to a student either being socioeconomically

disadvantaged or not being socioeconomically disadvantaged. Roughly 62% of the students fall

under the category that negatively impacts them. As mentioned earlier, GEAR UP works to

ensure that both of these groups of students are prepared for postsecondary education.

II.   **Problem Description**

An issue that is currently affecting the country is that the number of low-income students

eligible for competitive post-secondary institutions are too low. On a more local level, the issue

that is currently affecting the agency is the level of preparedness on personal and professional

skills needed for college is low within low-income students. For some students, having the skills

necessary to succeed in college is not the issue, instead, it is not having enough money to pay for

college. Many high school students who are low-income may rely on working after their classes

to help pay off some costs. However, "the collapse in higher-quality occupations in the youth labor market has had several interrelated effects. It has closed off youth earnings sufficient to afford college, thereby contributing to the growing youth education gap" (Carnevale & Smith, 2018, p. 2).

These issues, whether it be on a macro or micro level, have a long-lasting impact among those it affects. Although the high school graduation rate within the MPUSD high schools for the 2017-2018 academic year was 90.7%, the percentage of students eligible for UC and CSU institutions was only 64.3% (DataQuest, n.d.).

The consequences of not having enough students graduate with UC/CSU eligibility are both personal and societal. On a more personal level, the income gap in Monterey County between bachelor's degree recipients, $53,754, those with some college or associate's degree, $36,460, and just high school degree, $28,122, is significant (American Community Survey, 2017). According to the same survey, 23.9% of the community members hold a bachelor's degree, lower than the national average, 30.9%. On a more holistic perspective, there is a difference of impact a bachelor's degree can have on a community. "Descriptive statistics showed that associate's degree holders exhibited higher rates of civic engagement than high school graduates but lower rates than bachelor's degree holders…" (Newell, 2014). With lower levels of civic engagement, the change that is necessary for community members to have access to a higher level of education will not come, further perpetuating the cycle.

With less students being able to attend more competitive schools to attain a bachelor's degree, the amount of money earned annually is significantly less. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 who had a full-time job, those with a bachelor's degree earned more, on average, than those with a high school diploma

($48,500 vs. $30,000)" (2017). This gap in wages perpetuates the cycle of students from lower-income families having less representation in post-secondary institutions. Although a college degree may close the gap within first-generation college students and continuing-generation, questions still remain whether it actually does. "A wage gap may result from first- and continuing-generation students earning degrees at different universities, in different majors, and with different levels of achievement, but it may also result from first- and continuing-generation students receiving unequal earnings despite sharing the same credentials and grades" (Manzoni & Streib, 2018).

Key findings among high school sophomores in 2002 who went on to apply to postsecondary schools found that first-generation students made up a larger percentage of low-income households than continuing-generation students. At $20,000 the difference between first-generation and continuing-generation were 27% vs. 6%; at $20,001 - $50,000, 50% vs. 23%. The study also found that 24% were first-generation students, meanwhile continuing-generation students made up 42%. One final key finding from this study was among the students who were identified as not being college-ready, first-generation students were less likely to return to school after their first year than their continuing-generation counterparts. This led to a reported 20% vs. 42% among first-gen and continuing-gen students attaining a bachelor's degree. (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, "first-generation students who are not college-ready will drop out after their first year at a greater rate than equally un-college-ready non-first-generations" (2019).

The issues that can be seen on a macro and micro level stem from various contributors. Not being prepared for college is a reason many students struggle to be eligible for such schools as well as maintain enrollment in those schools. College readiness is the intersectionality of both

academic and practical knowledge that a student needs in order to be successful in postsecondary institutions. However, these students and the schools they attend cannot simply conjure up resources needed to be prepared. Due to lack of funding from schools, tangible and intangible resources are limited, leaving students with little to no support for college applications, financial aid, and academic exams. Another contributor to the problem is lack of familial support. Many students who may struggle to become eligible for more competitive institutions may come from backgrounds that have little to no experience with the college-going culture. The influence a family may have on their students may be detrimental to the latter's motivation to achieve an education higher than a high school diploma (Falcon, n.d.). "When family support is discussed in the prior literature in relation to socioeconomically disadvantaged students, their families are often described as lacking the ability to support them on the path to success" (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). When various religious, cultural, or other beliefs are factored in, a student may feel pressured to pursue a different path such as the workforce or military.

Alternative forms of addressing these issues would be more outreach to parents during a student's earlier high school years. This would allow parents to be more knowledgeable about the process of the college-going culture and provide their students with support outside of schools. This may also assist in breaking down the barriers they may hold and demystify any misconceptions about college, which can affect a student's motivation. Another alternate would be the encouragement of dual-enrollment. A dual-enrolled student is one who is enrolled in a college-level class concurrently with their high school classes.

III.   Project Description and Justification

A. Project Title

College-Readiness Beyond the Classroom

B. Project Description

The project that is intended to be implemented in the agency, as defined by the project

typed provided by CHHS, is the development of a training/educational intervention. The project,

to be more specific, will be addressing the college-readiness level of seniors. There are multiple

components to the project. There will be an initial intake survey to gauge where students fall

under the college-readiness spectrum, as defined in collaboration with the GEAR UP field

mentor, Yadira Moreno, and mentors outside of the agency. After the survey is completed,

workshops and presentations pertaining to the questions will be created and presented to the

students. There will then be an exit survey to gauge where the students stand after the series of

workshops and presentations. I will be responsible with the creation of the initial and exit

surveys. I will also be responsible of creating the workshops and presentations of the skills that

will be addressed. However, there will be assistance with both my field mentor and mentors from

a non-profit in Los Angeles, Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA). There will also be a level of support

from college support programs (CSP) at CSUMB such as the Educational Opportunity Program

(EOP) and the TRiO program.

C. Project Justification

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), "the school systems in

low-SES communities are often underresourced, negatively affecting students' academic

progress and outcomes" (n.d.). After looking at the data describing the 12th grade students

currently enrolled at Seaside High School, it is clear that the majority of students are

socioeconomically disadvantaged. Compared to other schools in the Monterey County such as

Carmel High School, Seaside High School is vastly underfunded. The indicator for the

socioeconomically disadvantage measurement is income, family education and whether the

student is living with multiple families in the household. However, a student does not have to meet all three, instead it can be a combination of any (Personal Communication, Yadira Moreno, December 13, 2018). The sole fact that GEAR UP has been implemented within the school shows that there is a lack of resources. There are no other departments or teachers that are able to provide the services that GEAR UP provides. The gap in equity between the students at Seaside High School and those in better funded schools justifies the work that GEAR UP does. With this same mentality, any service or assistance this project will provide will be beneficial to the students. It is important, however, that the information that is being relayed to the students is accurate and done so in a way that can be effectively processed.

Similar groups have shown that if disadvantaged students were provided with the extra support that cannot be attained elsewhere, then they will be more likely to be eligible for 4-year institutions and enroll in them. The study done by the American Institutes for Research analyzed the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) impact on students with disadvantaged backgrounds. The goal of this initiative is to increase the access an underrepresented student has to college attainment through provided support from high school staff and concurrent enrollment in college classes. The found that graduation rates among these students were higher, students were more likely to enroll in college, both 2-year and 4-year institutions. "Early Colleges appeared to mitigate the traditional educational attainment gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students" (American Institutes for Research, 2013).

With that said, the primary purpose of this project is to meet a need that is blatantly present within the school, preparing students for college. Often, when people talk about college-readiness, they are referring to the academic aspect of college. A student's GPA and SAT/ACT scores are the usual measurements for college-readiness. The higher the both are, the more

prepared a student is. Although there is a degree of truth to the importance being academically

prepared for college, I believe there is an aspect to college-readiness that does not get recognized

as much. This aspect being the skills and knowledge vital to thrive in a college environment.

When these skills are ignored, students go into higher education underprepared, which can lead

to a meaningless, or at the very least, unfulfilling experience. Research has shown that "social

background characteristics influence students' interaction within their institutional environments,

their level of integration into the college system and commitment, and ultimately their decision

to drop out (Zarifa, Kim, Seward & Walters, 2018).

   The agency aims to identify what skills those students are lacking the most and ensure

that they are sharpened in preparation for postsecondary education. This project will hopefully

change the mentality as to how the agency prepares students in the future. There can be a shift in

focus during the second semester for seniors to implement this idea instead simply doing

advising. This can also be used for the benefit of the younger cohort, so that there isn't a large

portion of students who feel unprepared as they enter their final year of high school.

   To reiterate what need will be addressed, this project will aim to ensure that students are

ready for college through the means of workshops and presentations. Types of skills and

knowledge that will be presented to the students include but are not limited to: financial literacy,

self-advocacy, time management, study skills, adapting to new environments, self-care skills,

and communication skills. The areas that have been determined to be addressed to the students

include skills and knowledge professional staff at GEAR UP would have wanted when entering

college. However, the current students' needs may differ, so it is important to not assume these

are the same skills they need. For this reason, it will be important to ask students what they feel

are areas that need to be worked on as they prepare to enter post-secondary institutions.

D. Benefits

Since most students are first-generation, meaning they are the first in their families to go to college of any institution level, they are unaware what the future holds for them. This can be stressful and make it so that they struggle in college. Benefits this project will have on them is it may settle their nerves by preparing for both the expected and the unexpected. Whether it be preparing for an interview, being fit enough to play a full match of soccer, or heading off to college, being prepared helps an individual feel more confident with themselves.

IV.   Project Implementation Plan

A. Implementation Method

The project initially consisted of a pre-survey to determine what areas students had questions on and a planned post-survey to determine the growth in those areas. However, after a lack of initial responses, there will be pre-post surveys for every session. This project will be a mix between lecturing and engaging with the participants.

B. Participants

There will be two different types of participants. The first set are the educators, which include Yadira and me. We will be facilitating the workshops and running the presentations along with answering any questions students have or need more clarification on. The other group of participants include the students we will be presenting the information to and the teachers who allow us to come into their classes during the day. More specifically, 26 students from the AVID 12 class will be the targeted population. Teachers are on board with these presentations taking place during their class time because they recognize the value it can have for the student.

C. Resources

As it stands, this project will not be reliant on monetary resources. Instead, the resources that are vital for the success of the project is accurate information about the various skills that will be discussed. Along with the content, knowing the proper way and the most efficient way on delivering the information will be important. Finding a location for these events will not be a problem. For shorter presentations, we can utilize the classrooms that teachers are more than glad to provide us. For longer, more engaging workshops, the College and Career Center, where GEAR UP operates, is available. Time is another resource that will be needed in heaps for this project. Researching each topic, making presentations out of them and having them looked at by Yadira will take some time.

D. Potential Challenges

Some challenges that have come across this project is timing of college applications. Ideally, this project would have been started this semester, but because the first semester is dedicated to completing college application, financial aid application, and other relevant applications or workshops, there is no time for it. With that said, the project will have to be implemented during the second semester, when the students have less responsibilities other than classes during school hours. Another challenge that may be encountered are wandering eyes. In past presentations, students tend to lose interest and concentration at a certain point. There must be a way to blend presentations and student engagement to maintain their attention throughout the class. One last challenge to be faced is the creation of the presentations and surveys. Too many presentations may be too ambitious for one individual.

V.   Assessment Plan

A. Expected Outcome

Through this project, we expect students to feel more prepared for their new journeys in their respective schools next year. Due to the project discussing a wide range of topics, it is difficult to determine whether or not it will be successful. Some information may pertain and be relevant to certain students than it may for other students. With this in mind, we do not expect every student to become experts on every topic. Instead, through student engagement with the topics that most interest them, we expect them to become more competent in those areas. Ideally, through the pre-survey sent out earlier in the semester, students will indicate what types of presentations they would like to get more information on. Another expectation is for the agency at this site to use these presentations in years to come, preferably with younger students so by the time they are in their final year of high school, they are competent in the various areas.

B. Assessment Plan

This project will utilize a pre- and a post-survey to measure the progress the participants have made. For this reason, it will be important that the same people who answer the first survey answer the second survey. Asking students after each presentation whether they felt engaged will be another method to determine the success of the project. Changes will be made accordingly to ensure that they get the most out of our time. A set of pre- and post-surveys will accompany every presentation as well. Another method to determine the success of the project will be done by my primary mentor the following year. GEAR UP follows students during their first year of their college careers, therefore, the staff keeping tabs will be able to identify whether the skills learned through the presentations were retained.

VI.   Findings and Results of Assessment Process

A. Findings

Upon implementing the project during the second semester of the academic school year, various conclusions were made. To begin, the number of sessions that were had in class were reduced from the planned twelve to seven. This was because there were various overlooked conflicting agendas. During certain dates that were determined to be reserved for in class presentations, there were school testing, or off-site meetings. The challenges that were predicated such as lack of student engagement came about. Whether it was students talking amongst each other or students being on their phone, there were always a few students who were not fully present with the material that was being presented. For the most part however, most students were engaged with the material and even participated in exercises and opportunities to share out-loud. There was praise from staff such as the college counselor and the AVID teacher that only reinforced the need for more sessions for students. One change that did happen was the implementation of surveys throughout the course of the project. What started as a plan for one pre-survey and one post-survey turned into a series of multiple pre-post surveys for each session. For the first few sessions, this was the method used to collect data from students. However, this method was also discarded when there was a lack of responses from students in class with every passing presentation.

B. Assessment Results

As far as reaching the expected outcomes, it is still yet to be determined within many students. Although there were some surveys that were not counted among the list, the reason being a lack of interest, many students genuinely responded. Based on the results students provided in the first set of surveys, it was determined that there was an immediate and significant increase of knowledge among the topics covered. Students were asked during advising sessions whether they had taken away anything from the presentations, to which many responded

positively based on the topic. For students who did not feel they had gained much, they were seen more frequently in the College & Career Center asking for assistance. Prior to the sessions many of these students were not seen in the office. Because GEAR UP follows students up until their first year of higher education, there will be follow ups with as many individuals to ensure they feel supported. During this evaluation period, students who were in the AVID 12 class will be asked whether the presentations were useful and if they have applied the information during their first year.

C. Strengths and Successes of Project

One of designs of the projects that resonated well not only with students but with teachers and counselors were the topics that were covered. It was mentioned that there was a need for presentations such as the ones that were given over the course of the semester, especially among the populations that were targeted. Providing the sessions during the students' shorter periods proved to be the ideal frame of time as it was not too short nor too long. The allotted time was just right for students to be able to stay engaged with the material and activities placed upon them.

D. Limitations or Challenges to Project

Challenges that were encountered when implementing this project were external and internal. By no means was the presenter of these presentations and workshops going to be an expert on every topic. This led to a constant struggle with imposter syndrome and the delegitimization of credibility. There were time constraints to getting to the total number of twelve presentations by one individual. Due to this and the overlook of various testing days that conflicted with presentation days, the implementation of the project was altered, reducing the number of presentations from twelve to seven.

VII.   Recommendations

What this project has surfaced is the lack of connection within the students themselves. During sessions, it felt as if the material was being transmitted to individuals and not a group. When students were given the opportunity to share what their opinion, many did not do so because they did not feel comfortable in the space they were in and the people who were in it. To address this, a recommendation for the agency is to start a cohort system that follows a select number of students through the four years of high school. Up until now, services that are provided to students are for the most part involuntary on the student's part. The Center for First-Generation Student Success found that "cohort-based programs offer effective, high-touch support for a subset of first-generation students…" (2018). This group of students would meet sometime after school and go through similar topics as the AVID students did, but on a larger scale. The topics that would be covered would vary on the grade level the students are in. For example, incoming high school students may learn about how to navigate high school, how to increase participation in the school and introduce opportunities to them Juniors, or third year students, may focus on professional development as well as SAT/ACT preparation to maximize scores and opportunities.

Another recommendation for the agency is the method in which they follow up with students who are in their first year of college. During the winter break, I suggest GEAR UP set up a conference where students will have the opportunity to network with professionals, attend various workshops throughout the day that focuses on their success as young professionals. This will also give them the opportunity to check-in with friends that are enrolled other schools across the state and with mentors from GEAR UP. It can give these first-generation students the space to openly talk about the struggles they may face their first year. "First generation students report

a higher frequency of feeling stressed, depressed, or upset compared with non-first-generation students" (Costello, Ballin, Diamond & Gao, 2018, p.59). Another topic that can be covered in this conference-like event is the topic of food insecurity and meeting "basic needs". "Many college students across the state experience food and housing insecurity…students facing housing and food insecurity are more likely to experience poor academic, health, and mental outcomes" (California Budget & Policy Center, 2018).

This project relates to the broader "macro-level" issue in that with the skills that students are taught, they can teach other family members what they need to do to get to more competitive universities. The agency should collaborate with more schools across the county to ensure that students are gaining skills off each other and networking before they go off to college.

A recommendation to future interns who come into the agency is to take a leap. There are always tasks to be worked on to address the "micro-level" issue. What can stop a student from taking the leap and becoming ingrained with the work is their own self-doubt. It is important to build rapport with students since they are the populations services are being provided to.

VII.   Conclusions and Personal Reflection

One of the most important takeaways from this experience and implementation of project is my development of professional skills. Coming into this internship I did not feel confident in my abilities to perform the tasks that mentors and other professional staff perform on a daily basis. Through the various sessions that I was able to lead and facilitate, I gained the confidence and the knowledge that is needed to increase students' knowledge. I now have the confidence to lead my own sessions and pitch new ideas that would benefit similar agencies I may work in and the populations they serve.

Having to lead sessions was what pushed me to get out of my comfort zones. Whether it be teaching students how to develop a resume or showing them how to properly write out an email, my confidence grew with each passing session. When I am inevitably successful in my career, I will look back at this moment and thank the opportunity GEAR UP and CHHS provided me.

A recommendation to future interns who come into the agency is to take a leap. There are always tasks to be worked on to address the "micro-level" issue. What can stop a student from taking the leap and becoming ingrained with the work is their own self-doubt. It is important to build rapport with students since they are the populations services are being provided to.

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IX.   Appendix

Scope of Work		
Goal: Prepare students for postsecondary education		
Primary objective of the project: Increase knowledge of skills integral for college success through the use of workshops and presentations		
Activities	**Deliverables**	**Timeline/deadlines**
1. Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor	1. Final capstone project idea approved	1. Oct 2018
2. Develop an initial survey to gauge what student needs are	2. Have survey checked by multiple mentors	2. Oct 2018
3. Send out survey to 12th grade students	3. Obtain responses from students	3. Oct - Nov 2018
4. Work with mentor to reach out to teachers	4. Set locations/dates for presentations	4. Nov-Dec 2018
5. Begin research on topics that will be discussed	5. Have an agenda of which topic to be presented for the following semester	5. Nov-Dec 2018
6. Develop workshops and presentations	6. Have presentations approved by mentor	6. Dec 2018 – Jan 2019
7. Complete agenda for workshops and presentations	7. Have agenda approved by mentor	7. Jan 2019
8. Implement various workshops and presentations	8. Students gain knowledge and learn how to apply skills	8. Feb – April 2019
9. Develop an exit survey to gauge what students have learned	9. Use data for capstone presentations	9. April 2019
10. Prepare capstone presentation in selected format	10. Instructor approval & Dress Rehearsal of final capstone presentation format (Panel?)	10. April 2019
11. Final preparation for Capstone Festival	11. Final presentation at Capstone Festival	11. May 2019

Project Title: Bridging College-Readiness Disparities Within Historically Underrepresented High School Students		
Problem Statement: The number of low-income students prepared for college and eligible for more competitive institutions is too low.		
CAUSES/RISK FACTORS TO BROADER HEALTH PROBLEM	**BROADER "MACRO-LEVEL" HEALTH/SOCIAL PROBLEM**	**CONSEQUENCES TO SOCIETY**
Lack of equitable support **Unjust enrollment process** **Lower access to information/resources** **Financial Disparities**	**The number of low-income students eligible for competitive post-secondary institutions are too low.**	**Low-wage jobs** **Future generation continue this cycle** **Increase wage gap** **Lower civic engagement**
CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM	**AGENCY-SPECIFIC "MICRO-LEVEL" PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PROJECT**	**CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY**
Lack of emphasis on skill development **Unbalanced student:GEAR UP faculty ratio** **Military influence in community** **Lack of student motivation**	**Student level of preparedness on personal and professional skills needed for college is low.**	**Lower high school graduation rates** **Lower college enrollment rates** **Higher rate of college dropout** **Student does not perform at potential**

Agency and Story Questionnaire

I am aware of my story
I am comfortable telling my story
1   2   3   4   5
I understand the concept of agency
1   2   3   4   5
I feel comfortable "claiming my space"
1   2   3   4   5

Email Etiquette Questionnaire

I check my email ____ times per week

I have trouble writing emails

SA A D SD

Writing practice emails would improve my

confidence in sending emails

SA A D SD

Resume Builder Questionnaire

I have an updated resume

        Yes   No

I need assistance writing my resume

        SA   A   D   SD

I know what a cover letter is

        Yes   No