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# Gearing Up to GEAR UP: Four Perspectives on Early Implementation Considerations for GEAR UP

Sousan Arafeh

*Southern Connecticut State University, arafehs1@southernct.edu*

Joy Fopiano

*Southern Connecticut State University, fopianoj1@southernct.edu*

Deb Risisky

*Southern Connecticut State University, risiskyd11@southernct.edu*

Norris Haynes

*Southern Connecticut State University, haynesn1@southernct.edu*

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**Gearing Up to GEAR UP:  
Four-Perspectives on Early Implementation Considerations for GEAR UP<sup>1</sup>**

**Sousan Arafah, Ph.D., Southern Connecticut State University  
Joy Fopiano, Ph.D., Southern Connecticut State University  
Deb Risisky, Ph.D., Southern Connecticut State University  
Norris Haynes, Ph.D., Southern Connecticut State University**

**Paper presented at the Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA)  
October 19, 2012, Rocky Hill, CT**

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**Gearing Up to GEAR UP:  
Four-Perspectives on Early Implementation Considerations for GEAR UP<sup>2</sup>**

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Sousan Arafeh, Ph.D., Joy Fopiano, Ph.D., Deb Risisky, Ph.D., and Norris Haynes, Ph.D.  
Southern Connecticut State University

**Abstract:**

GEAR UP, a federally-funded pre-college outreach program, strives to provide academic and other supports to middle and high school students and their families to help them prepare for, and pursue, higher education. GEAR UP was established in 1998 by President Clinton through Title IV of the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). This competitive grant program consists of State and Partnership grants and has helped well over 1.5 million students and families in 534 Partnership and State grant programs throughout the United States and its territories (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP), 2011).

This paper utilizes a phenomenological frame to explore certain key considerations involved in the initial implementation phases of a GEAR UP grant. Four distinct qualitative phenomenological perspectives from Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) faculty members involved in a current State of Connecticut GEAR UP grant Alliance are shared. Through these four accounts, qualitative, descriptive information about specific systemic, organizational, content, and procedural factors to consider when beginning implementation and planning for a 6-year university-school district partnership like GEAR UP are considered. Specific areas of focus are social emotional learning, evaluation, inter-systemic administration and organization, and professional development. The information here is preliminary and intended to contribute in-depth program content and process information to assist with program building and collaborative team building in the kinds of inter-systemic and inter- and intra-organizational partnerships that multiple year programs such as GEAR UP require. The insights are not necessarily limited to GEAR UP, however, and may be applicable to other partnership initiatives and/or other large-scale program implementation efforts.

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## **Gearing Up to GEAR UP:**

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#### **Introduction:**

GEAR UP, a federally-funded pre-college outreach program, strives to provide academic and other supports to middle and high school students and their families to help them prepare for, and pursue, higher education. GEAR UP was established in 1998 by President Clinton through Title IV of the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). This competitive grant program consists of State and Partnership grants and has helped well over 1.5 million students and families in 534 Partnership and State grant programs throughout the United States and its territories (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP), 2011). Mentors and tutors supporting student academic progress, student and family college and financial literacy awareness and logistical support, teacher professional development, improved longitudinal data systems, and sustained academic and enrichment opportunities for students to develop their postsecondary readiness and interest are key features of the GEAR UP program. The grant also seeks to assist with district of curricular alignment (Common Core) regarding content, scope, sequence, and difficulty.

#### **The Context**

The GEAR UP partnership that forms the basis of these perspectives is a \$31.5 million dollar Statewide grant to the Connecticut Board of Regents (BoR) that will fund three regional Alliances between an institution of higher education and a local school district over a period of 6 years. Fully half of these funds are set aside for scholarships for GEAR UP 7th graders who ultimately graduate from high school and enter into college. The rest of the money is divided among the Alliances based on the number of students they serve and the types of services and supports that they offer. As noted, the grants are for 6 years, the services span the academic year and the summer, and there are multiple audiences: students, teachers, parents, and, often, community organizations and collaborators. In effect, GEAR UP grants are school reform grants (Ward, 2006). The CT State GEAR UP grant was awarded in April 2012. Since that time, the BoR and Alliances have begun the task of planning and implementing GEAR UP in their respective districts.

This paper is developed and presented by university faculty members of the Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU)/New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) Alliance. It explores issues of interest raised for these particular university team members as they work to establish the structures, relationships, foci, and approaches for implementation in Year 1 and planning for the subsequent 5 years. The purpose of this initial perspectival approach is to provide qualitative, descriptive information about what systemic, organizational, and inter-/intra-personal issues feature in certain GEAR UP participants' attempts to develop an alliance and implement this first phase of the GEAR UP grant between the respective organizations and systems involved.

In contrast to the significant quantitative and primarily evaluation-focused GEAR UP literature, our interests are in learning from, and contributing to, qualitative research on the effectiveness of

GEAR UP organizational collaborations and partnerships and, specifically, key process aspects of partnering for implementation (e.g., Chapman, Donnelly & McGraner, 2008; Domina & Ruzek, 2012; Kezar, 2011; Kezar, 2007; Mize, 2010; Muraskin, 2010; Pavel, Inglebret, Sievers, & Krebill- Nunez & Oliva, 2009; Ward, 2006). Even in these treatments, focus on the micro-dynamics of “soft” systemic and organizational structures, relationships, and practices to best facilitate successful GEAR UP projects in their early days is not a strong feature. It is in this space that we offer our first experiences and preliminary insights.

The following reflective question has guided this emergent work:

- 1) What are the stated goals, objectives, and tasks relevant to this first phase of GEAR UP implementation, and what program and process features do NHPS and SCSU team participants report as having particular salience for GEAR UP’s implementation success? How? Why?

### **Theoretical and Methodological Approach:**

This initial treatment of the topic is preliminary and emergent. Loosely employing an intrinsic, descriptive case study method (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), it gathers initial phenomenological data regarding the GEAR UP implementation process from a very few actors involved in a particular case: the SCSU/NHPS GEAR UP Alliance. The sample subjects consist of four academics involved in the leadership of the SCSU GEAR UP Team: a co-PI, a lead evaluator, a content-specialist focused on social-emotional learning (SEL), and a content-specialist focusing on professional development and curricular alignment. Participants were asked to reflect on the study’s reflective question (above) and contribute a written account of their insights. These four accounts have been reviewed to determine cross-cutting themes and other salient points for consideration.

Through this treatment, the intent is to unearth key issues, determined from the particular perspectives brought to bear, which emerge as such projects ramp up. Drawing out these key issues makes it possible to consider whether they may or should be addressed more robustly as this specific project advances or, possibly, in US Department of Education, CT Board of Regents, or Alliance-specific training for this and/or other GEAR UP projects going forward. Because this is not a formal research study, the work is guided more by theory than method. That being said, Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Phenomenology (Husserl, 2001 & 1964) are frameworks that have informed our approach and have resulted in four individual perspectival accounts that have then undergone a first-pass review for cross-cutting themes and key concepts.

The themes and concepts that emerge here should contribute to the design, implementation, and sustained capacity building of longitudinal student/family support and pre-college outreach programs like GEAR UP. It is hoped that these findings will combine to offer a unique contribution regarding the dynamics and mechanics of successful partnerships for program implementation.

## **An Emerging Perspective for Developing Collaborative Professional Development: GEAR UP Across Teams and Disciplines -- Joy Fopiano, Ph.D.**

Joining the partnership between our university and our local public school district to collaboratively develop expanded opportunities for youth to graduate from high school prepared to enter and succeed in college is a distinct privilege. Having previously supervised graduate interns in training in this diverse school district, this university partner – tasked with shepherding professional development in this GEAR UP project -- was aware of strengths of the school-based professional staff and the district’s commitment to educating students across all pathways of learning and development. To support this initiative, the charge has expanded to compliment each of the schools individual success plans already in place and further promote the professional teams to engage all seventh grade learners, teachers, specialists and families to achieve preparedness for a successful postsecondary experience.

Planning meetings for professional development began very early with meeting all team members from the district and from across the university and its multiple disciplines. Meeting separately with all faculty membership involved in GEAR UP, without the school partners proved informative. In many instances there were faculty present whom had never been introduced to each other. While this was exciting and valuable to the membership team, joining together faculty scholar members from multiple disciplines within student and academic affairs and asked to collaborate on the shared mission of GEAR UP proved that there may not be a consistent understanding of children’s immediate and even long-range needs. That bridge may need to be co-crafted across the disciplines -- co-crafted because those who have worked with children, youth and families, and those who have never done so, each bring an important and highly valued set of expectations to the shared project. This early sharing, then, may be the beginning of professional development.

Together in one room, each with a unique and critical specialty area, it seemed clear that while each scholar brought a necessary and defined resource to the table fundamental to the success of GEAR UP; each partner member also had a perspective vision on how their information should be delivered and accepted by the student recipients. Consider that most scholar members around the table had not directly engaged professionally with children or families thought to be high risk and potentially vulnerable to school failure. Academics themselves tend to be successful and, as a varied group from diverse disciplines, may have ranging perspectives as to how and why children may not always succeed well in school. Contrastingly, career educators may have assumed that across a university “everybody understands what they know,” but indeed that may not be certain. For some, learning the perspectives others shared at the whole group meetings proved eye-opening and had far-reaching implications for planning professional development opportunities to come. The following questions arise: How will it become rapidly possible for these talented specialist experts to make accessible to families and developing youth their knowledge for success? How will a team of professional development partner members collaborate to support professionals who had never worked previously with families, children and high- risk high-need youth? How will scholar experts break down their area and teach it to youth who are cognitively capable, but may endure wide gaps in their foundational skill-set? Indeed, how may scholars teach at all to those who come to the table perhaps less willing, able,

excited or confident than those late teen undergraduate youth who may typically sit in their auditoriums highly motivated to produce and achieve for “a grade?”

For example, university scholars shared in the membership meeting that they had in some cases themselves overcome very great obstacles in the United States and abroad to achieve and obtain their own academic and professional goals. Some had to learn English, overcome impoverished conditions, flee a country, suffer parental loss. Each overcame those obstacles and achieved. Their marked resiliency and subsequent perception(s) flavored their expectation(s) toward how GEAR UP students might receive help and support from the university and this came through in early cross-disciplinary discussions. In other words, to those who had already achieved, their expectations for children and the families of GEAR UP was that this cohort of youth who have been provided this wonderful opportunity would approach the GEAR UP team with enthusiasm and vigor. The expectation the scholars shared suggested the youth served would work diligently to follow guidance offered -- financial, academic and otherwise -- to seize the opportunities presented.

Since many of the scholars had university experience working with students from at-risk or first generation backgrounds, but not necessarily middle school students and families in their specialty area, they brainstormed a syllabus or schedule of how services could be delivered by them to the GEAR UP recipients. As discussions moved forward in the whole group meetings, the university team members generously considered that perhaps more structure and direct contact and outreach could be beneficial. They began to consider some of the potential barriers to come: perhaps English was not a first language, perhaps attending group meetings would be intimidating or not readily possible with work schedules or because of transportation issues or family commitments, etc. This resulted in university team members thinking that more structure to the deliverables might be required. Teamwork and collaboration and support across disciplines then, is essential to create a shared model for the structure of GEAR UP delivery.

We may be modeling together a mechanism for collaboration that may forever expand our professional world-view -- each of the other. Collaboration is not simply necessary for those who have not worked in schools or with families, but is equally critical for education and psychologist scholars who may benefit from refreshers that high goals coupled with high expectations combined with support can yield very high achievement. This frame for professional development is a perspective to bring to families: high goals, high expectations for achievement, and the possibilities that may await youth who strive are well-supported in the GEAR UP mission.

Preliminary planning discussions with district and university partners revealed questions in determining a structure with parameters for professional development. For example, where faculty are provided with opportunities, the team began to consider whether similar opportunities may also be considered for families of GEAR UP students, and even topic-relevant training for the youth themselves. Cohesive learning across the schools, with the families and with the youth membership had significant appeal. Especially in the areas of social and emotional learning it seemed significant to support faculty partners with students and families to be included and empowered to share in learning that may serve to support academic success and individual long term goals.

Social and emotional learning, already determined by the district to be essential for school success for students, seemed to be valued equally for advanced training for faculty across grades, disciplines and specialty areas. Indeed, it seemed that in preliminary discussions in pursuit of outlining early stages of the GEAR UP initiative, that the emotional and social learning area was inextricably linked to each area of potential exploration for advanced training. Faculty would need to acknowledge that social/emotional factors unaddressed could put a barrier to academic success.

For in-house university scholars, expanding their knowledge base around social and emotional impact toward learning will be as essential for receiving freshman students as it is for the faculty of the public schools who work with teens and youth daily. Professional development opportunities around how social and emotional needs may surface behaviorally in classrooms with teachers and/or students, in homes with parents and families, and socially among cohorts of youth and teens is one area to be considered for advanced training. Behaviors that appear and are perceived in one way, may, indeed, prove to suggest something very different. How, then, do we pool resources to provide professional development that supports those emotional needs so that individual students can bring full energies and engagement to academic goals?

This leads to questions about the scope of professional development. If the premise is accepted that social and emotional needs impact learning – that we need strategies for effective intervention to support youth who may struggle with social and emotional needs so that they can become more resilient and successfully engage in the classroom – who then needs to receive such training? Faculty across the school district and the University are readily identified. However, are there others who should be considered to be included in professional development training?

There are paraprofessionals in schools who work currently with children and youth who may benefit from professional development. There are tutors and mentors who will be contracted with to work individually with student recipients of GEAR UP who may benefit from such professional development. Families often have questions and concerns about student behaviors, managing those behaviors at home, and how to support exaggerated looking behaviors more effectively. Finally, but hardly least, the cohort of youth itself may benefit from increased self understanding and learning strategies for effective self-management of their behaviors, their emotional regulation, and how to cope with stress more successfully.

What we have learned already -- before starting any direct services -- is that we have a widely diverse collaborative team who offers a myriad of resources to strengthen the mission of GEAR UP. Bringing the team together at one table early on is viewed as a significant strength. There each could begin to understand the breadth of the diversity and how to collectively organize to team together for the sake of supporting the cohort of high risk youth. Bridging cross-disciplinary scholars is perhaps too seldom accomplished and it is because we did that we were confronted so early on with our differences. How exciting to consider that we have seized this opportunity to grasp that our diversity is our strength and that it is what we can work to share through the lens of the professional development series that we will co-create.

## **Infusing Social and Emotional Learning In GEAR UP: An Academic Collaborator's Perspective – Norris Haynes, Ph.D.**

### **Introduction**

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) may be thought of as a proactive intervention to motivate and support middle school students to do what it takes to successfully pursue post secondary education. The combination of academic support services, financial incentives in the form of promised scholarships, and parental awareness and involvement comprise a compelling web of support services that may purportedly help to construct a path toward choosing and accessing higher education for many students who may not otherwise choose that path. Indeed there is some evidence that GEAR UP has succeeded in raising the post secondary expectations of students. Many of these students in targeted middle schools face significant challenges many of which may manifest themselves in low academic motivation and achievement but may be rooted more deeply not just in the demographic contexts in which they live and learn daily but also in their related social and emotional development and skills.

The GEAR UP collaborative initiative in which I am involved from the university partner's perspective addresses the academic mandates of the GEAR UP legislation and also includes attention to the social and emotional competencies not mandated but that students need to be able to take full advantage of the academic support services that are available to them through GEAR UP. The focusing of GEAR UP exclusively on academic skills and career goals and not focusing simultaneously on social and emotional competencies is a characteristic of most GEAR UP initiatives and represents missed opportunities to address critical developmental areas. A review of several GEAR UP evaluation studies indicates that most outcomes of GEAR UP programs have not included measures of social and emotional competencies. Emphasis on social, emotional and academic learning competencies distinguishes the GEAR UP collaboration of which I am a part from many other GEAR UP initiatives.

### **Overview of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become a significant and perhaps essential concept in any serious discourse about improving children's overall development, including their academic development. SEL grew out of the groundbreaking work by Goleman (1995) on emotional intelligence or EQ. Goleman asked and answered two basic and compelling questions about the most essential factors that contribute to success in school and in life.

“What can we change that will make our children fare better in life? What factors are at play, for example when people of high IQ flounder and those of modest IQ do surprisingly well? I would argue that the difference quite often lies in the abilities called here emotional intelligence which include self-control, zeal, and persistence and the ability to motivate oneself. And these skills, as we shall see can be taught to children giving them a better chance to use whatever potential the genetic lottery may have given them” (Goleman, 1995, p.xii).

The notion that EQ is related to school and life success and that there are teachable and learnable social and emotional skills influenced the formation of the Collaborative for Academic Social

and Emotional learning (CASEL) that, under the leadership of Roger Weissberg and colleagues, has overseen the development and prominence of SEL as a significant focus among educators in addressing student development and student achievement. Elias, Arnold & Hussey (2003) noted:

“If IQ represents the intellectual raw material of student success, EQ is the set of social-emotional skills that enables intellect to turn into action and accomplishment. Without EQ, IQ consists more of potential than actuality. It is confined more to performance on certain kinds of tests than to expression in the many tests of everyday life in school, at home, at the workplace, in the community.”(p.4)

Some research also indicates that EQ can be equal to or a better indicator of life success than IQ (Ross, Powell, Elias 2002). SEL then may be viewed as the actuation or activation of EQ in measurable and teachable skill sets that “enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (Elias, Zins, Weissberg et al. 1997, p.2).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and others have identified five groups of inter-related core social and emotional competencies that SEL programs should address and that can and should inform the strengthening and development of more robust assessment tools. The SEL competencies are:

- Self awareness
- Self management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision making

**Self-Awareness:** involves being able to identify and describe one’s feelings, needs, desires and motivations. For example, a student who is being called names and is being picked on by his peers is able to recognize his feelings of sadness and describe what it feels like to be picked on and called names. He will also be able to think about and express a different narrative about himself that reflects who he truly is as a person.

**Self- Management:** involves the ability to monitor and regulate one’s feelings and one’s behavior. A student who practices effective self-management is able to monitor and regulate her emotions and impulses and demonstrate self-regulatory behaviors. These self-regulatory practices may include but are not limited to: good anger management, effective time-management skills, the ability to establish short and longer-term goals, delay gratification and show the self- control and self-discipline needed to succeed academically.

**Social Awareness:** involves sensitivity to one’s social environment and knowledge of how to recognize, empathize with and respond appropriately to the feelings and behaviors of others.

**Relationship Skills:** involves the ability to interact effectively and establish health reciprocal relationships with others. Relationship skills help elementary students learn how to cooperate with others, which helps them establish and develop friendships. In high school, relationship

skills are critical to gaining acceptance, influencing and leading others and building the kinds of networks that can be very useful beyond high school.

**Responsible Decision Making:** involves students' making thoughtful, constructive and healthy decisions based on careful consideration and analysis of information. It is believed that if these five basic principles of social and emotional learning are integrated effectively into a student's life, it could greatly benefit the student's development and increase the probability that the student will succeed academically.

CASEL's work on SEL has been multifaceted, focusing on curriculum, instruction, assessment and educational policy. CASEL's work on assessment has helped to guide the field into developing and promoting more robust ways of assessing SEL competencies, linking these competencies to academic outcomes and providing empirical bases for statewide and national standards for assessing school environments, teaching and learning in schools. Social-emotional learning was shown to help students in multiple ways, for example, in a Loyola University and the University of Illinois study of over 2333,000 students nationwide. Goleman (2008) discusses this study:

“[S]tudents receiving lessons in social and emotional skills improved on every measure of positive behavior; such as classroom discipline, attendance, and liking school—and were less likely to engage in anti-social behavior, from bullying and fights to substance abuse. Among these students, there was also a drop in the number of students who were depressed, anxious, and alienated. What's more, the study showed that the positive gains were biggest among “at-risk” kids, who are most likely to fail in their education. In the era of No Child Left Behind, where schools are rated on how well students score on standardized tests, that's a huge advantage for individual students and schools alike....”

## **Proposed Implementation Mechanisms**

### ***Student Success Plans (SSPs)***

The approach that I have suggested to integrate SEL into the GEAR UP work with the 7<sup>th</sup> graders with whom we are working is to use the existing vehicles that each of the eight participating schools already has to so. Each school has a school success plan that sets out academic, social and behavioral goals and the specific activities to achieve these goals at each grade level, including for seventh graders who are the participating students in this GEAR UP initiative. . These plans were developed by stakeholders in each school with full participation of staff and parents. Using each school's student success plan template as a basis for infusing SEL competencies in GEAR UP provides a sense of ownership and empowerment to staff, parents and students in setting SEL goals and designing in SEL-related activities that support the aspirations and academic engagement of students. A fact that has already begun to make this SEL infusion possible and effective is that the director of guidance and counseling for the school system is actively supporting and facilitating this implementation process. Her deep understanding of the importance of SEL and her very strong commitment to provide the GEAR UP students with essential SEL competencies are indispensable to the successful and effective infusion of SEL that is so distinctive about this GEAR UP initiative.

***SEL Professional Development***

School staffs in the participating GEAR UP schools are already supportive of the idea that attending to students’ social and emotional development and promoting and supporting SEL competencies are important to successful GEAR UP outcomes. This is evident, as mentioned earlier, in each school’s success plan. SEL Professional development then will center on identifying specific strategies for teaching, monitoring and assessing the demonstration of SEL competencies in classrooms and throughout the school.

***Parent Involvement and Support***

The extent to which GEAR UP SEL-related teaching and implementation activities will be successful among the seventh grade students depends in large measure on parental involvement and support in reinforcing and validating the SEL competencies at home as school staffs do in school. An initial step in securing parents’ involvement and support is to provide parents with information about what SEL is, explain to them why SEL is important to student learning and success and offer practical suggestions that parents can use at home to help support their seventh grade children’s social, emotional and academic growth. At one informational meeting a single father embraced SEL and expressed his perception that the SEL competencies will help his son be more focused, confident and successful academically.

***Monitoring and Assessment***

The plan for making SEL an effective intervention in the GEAR UP initiative calls for regular monitoring of how the SEL activities including the teaching of SEL competencies are being implemented as well as the regular monitoring and assessment of student proximal and distal SEL outcomes in the five SEL competency domains as demonstrated in the Table below:

***Table 1: Alignment of SEL Competencies with Proximal and Distal Outcomes***

<b>SEL COMPETENCIES</b>	<b>PROXIMAL OUTCOMES</b> Achievement Attitudes & Behaviors	<b>DISTAL OUTCOMES</b> Summary of SEL Effects
<b>Self-Awareness</b>	Use Metacognitive Skills	Increase in student achievement. Decrease in antisocial behavior.
<b>Self-Management</b>	Practice Discipline Practice Control Practice Academic Engagement	Increase in school attendance, homework completion, and participation. Decrease in high-risk behaviors and in-school problem behaviors that interfere with learning.
<b>Social Awareness &amp; Relationship Skills</b>	Communicate Sensitively and Empathically Interact Effectively with Others	Increase in friendships and positive social and peer relationships. Decrease in fights & interactions that distract & affect learning negatively.
<b>Responsible Decision Making</b>	Use Good Judgment Acquire Knowledge Think Analytically	Achievement growth re percentile gains on standardized tests. Decrease in negative behaviors. Increase in positive pro-social behaviors that support learning & achievement.
<b>All Above Elements</b>	All Above Behaviors Affected	Attention drives achievement and emotion drives attention.

## **Perspectives from a GEAR UP Evaluation Team Leader -- Deb Risisky, Ph.D.**

The GEAR UP New Haven Evaluation Team is made up of four individuals: a team leader, a co-leader, a statistician, and a representative from the GEAR UP team with significant education and evaluation experience. The team works together as a cohesive unit with delineated roles. The GEAR UP representative is critical for bringing information to and from the Evaluation Team regarding the social and emotional development of the students and key school policies and procedures that may impact the evaluation. The statistician is responsible for setting up necessary databases to receive data and for providing analysis for reports. The leader and co-leader were part of the team that developed the grant application and are responsible for creating the GEAR UP evaluation plan. The co-leader is a university administrator with a strong background in education and research. His role has been to help with putting the evaluation plan into action by working with university administrators regarding technology needs for data gathering and working with the statistician to evaluate measures on potential instruments.

The leader of the team, whose perspectives are shared here, created the GEAR UP Evaluation Logic Model -- the roadmap for the project's evaluation activities over its 6-year span. In the University context, her role is to oversee the team and its members and relay information to the grant's Principal Investigators and other university administrators, as necessary. Since the statistician will be heavily involved in working with the data needed for most of the impact evaluation, the lead evaluator will be instrumental in guiding the process evaluation. Because this project is considered project implementation, not research intervention, the information collected will be used for two purposes: to provide outcomes to the federal government as required by the grant and to monitor the activities of the staff to ensure that mechanisms are in place for successful implementation.

In the last 30 years, program evaluation has grown in importance – particularly its role in providing assessment data about federal programs to inform agency and legislative decision making (See *New Directions in Program Evaluation* multiple years; Chelimsky, 1987; Torres & Preskill, 2001). While there is quite a bit of general program evaluation information available, and there is also specific evaluation guidance for GEAR UP (see NCCEP/GEAR UP Evaluation Project website), such guidance is typically “hard” guidance regarding appropriate indicators, data sharing, impact analyses, and other technical issues. Less available is program specific “soft” guidance to help new Evaluation Teams through the steps of their project; particularly those that pertain to process-related inter- and intra-organizational cultural matters involved in policy, roles, relationships, and needs (some examples are Chapman, Donnelly, McGraner, 2008; Mize, 2010; Muraskin, 2010; Pavel, Inglebret, Sievers, & Krebill-Prther, 2010). Such information has been instrumental in providing lessons learned to guide the development of the GEAR UP evaluation at SCSU. This information is valuable to the Evaluation Team, as no team member has been previously involved with starting a GEAR UP implementation.

The biggest challenge to the evaluation component of our GEAR UP project has been time. The grant notification came in April 2012, funding arrived in the summer, and the project was to begin with the start of school year. Data required for annual reports include information on student's school performance – grades, attendance, individual education plans (IEPs), and promotion to future grades. This is sensitive data and needs to be handled with care as it gets

transferred to the university. In addition, there are six required questions for both parents and students that must be asked as a requirement of the GEAR UP grant. Our partner school system requires strict adherence to its rules regarding outside surveying of students in school due to the high level of requests from the community.

Given these important-yet-sensitive data needs, a good relationship must be in place to be able to have this process go smoothly. This is where the constraint of time has had the largest impact. For a solid community partnership to occur, it can take time for both sides to be able to get to know each other, understand the other's motives, and begin to trust each other. Once that occurs, sharing of information and collaborative work moves smoothly. When the time frame for forging relationships is short, this process must be taken with extreme care. Pushing too fast can shut down one or another side and repairing the relationship can take even longer.

In this respect, the project has been lucky that, even with a short time frame to build a collaborative relationship with the data representatives from the school system, it has gone relatively smoothly. Meetings were held during the summer with the two Evaluation Team leaders and the District's Data Director to discuss the needs and wants of the campus project, as well as the availability of data that the school system would be willing to share. Agreements have been put in place via a Memorandum of Understanding although, as should be expected, there are some continuing discussions to ensure student and teacher time for classroom learning is not impacted.

If possible, the SCSU Project Team would like to add a few additional questions to address information that would help explain the reasons for some of the outcomes; however, that has not been granted yet. Examples of this desired data would include understanding the amount of time spent on homework (overall and by some subjects), technology availability in the home, and cultural experiences. The school system has offered to share data on related topics from their surveys, which will certainly be helpful, but these data will likely be shared in aggregate form by school. Therefore, the Evaluation Team may be unable to determine which students are from the GEAR UP cohort and which are from comparison groups. It is hoped that as relationships solidify, opportunities will expand.

One of the beneficial aspects of the program evaluation is the ability to conduct an in-depth process evaluation of the implementation. Often overlooked in a long-term project such as this, process evaluation data is integral for ensuring that the project is moving forward as desired. For the Evaluation Team, this is important for helping guide project staff towards strategies that are effective and efficient in meeting the long-term outcomes of the project. Project staff members are engaged in providing key data that can be used to determine what activities are working and what can be adapted. For example, it has been requested that team members provide meeting notes to the Evaluation Team after meetings with other team members and/or community partners. This portion of the evaluation plan was written into the original grant, and therefore has full support for the activities by grant administrators and funders.

The collaborative working group that is the Evaluation Team is committed to providing the support needed to the main project grant staff. By having project team members who are providing feedback in terms of what is needed and being ready to participate and provide process

data in turn, there is a strong foundation for moving forward with the implementation. The relationship with the district school system is forming in a meaningful and collaborative spirit, which will help provide data needed to monitor student success over the course of the project. The team looks forward to helping to provide the information to guide the project towards success, which is to provide the best services and assistance to the students in the selected GEAR UP project schools.

**Leading, Administering and Managing GEAR UP:  
Perspectives from a New Academic Co-Principal Investigator<sup>3</sup> – Sousan Arafeh, Ph.D.**

In grants like GEAR UP, Principal Investigators (PIs) are tasked with ensuring that the work advances effectively, results in organizational capacity building and coordination, and produces results for its students. GEAR UP projects are complex, multi-faceted, and intricate. They involve skill and knowledge in a wide range of areas -- financial, managerial, instructional, organizational, and relational -- in which not all PIs may have experience. In this short account, I share some key considerations regarding early GEAR UP implementation from my perspective as a new Principal Investigator. Specifically, I share insights about what I call “micro-dynamics” of vision, organizational structure, team roles, action processes, and communication and reporting conventions that are integral for the effective implementation success of any project.

GEAR UP CT is administratively organized in a top-down, loosely articulated, fashion. A State GEAR UP Project Manager at the BoR is the primary grantee and administers the grant to/for the three university/district Alliances. Each Alliance autonomously administers GEAR UP and reports implementation progress, evaluation information, budget, matching and other accountability information to the State. Local GEAR UP Alliance's Principal Investigators (PIs) oversee local implementation and liaise between the State and the local projects.

To date, initial grant ramping up activities for our Alliance have been positive, albeit emergent and dynamic, as we have sought to co-construct how GEAR UP can best serve our students and the educational and familial/community systems in which they reside. We have initiated meetings with our district partners, assembled a cross-system executive team, conducted preliminary meetings with building principals and designees to determine individual school scheduling and needs, and are currently meeting with area supervisors to determine content foci. At the university, large team meetings have been held to orient members to the grant and parse out work and responsibilities to functional teams. Each team is planning and beginning the work which includes developing ELA, Mathematics, and college and career curriculum and training; evaluation; professional development; financial literacy; and other enrichment activities for students, parents and teachers during the school year and a summer session. Tutors and mentors are being recruited. Administrative team members have worked on contracts and memoranda of understanding, budgets, timesheets, match forms, hiring materials, and reimbursement forms. Collaborating and communicating across these tasks and roles is complex.

Guiding a large project like GEAR UP is an honor and – as evident from the treatment above -- a great responsibility. Luckily, it is one that comes with support. The U.S. Department of Education provides training and technical assistance for GEAR UP projects through the National Council for Community and Education Partnership (NCCEP) in two annual meetings one of which requires PI attendance. At this meeting, PIs and team members gather important information about key GEAR UP activities and requirements and can develop relationships with each other and GEAR UP staffs nationwide. The CT BoR Project Manager and her team have likewise facilitated intermittent cross-Alliance meetings focused on administrative logistics

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<sup>3</sup> Our GEAR UP grant is administered by two university co-PIs: one overseeing Academic Affairs and one overseeing Student Affairs. I have been serving as the former. Note that the insights presented here are mine alone and do not represent those of any individual or institution involved in this GEAR UP grant.

related, primarily, to fiscal and performance reporting. There has been an attempt to build community and collegiality among the PIs of the three Alliances so that we can operate as a community of practice and this has worked well.

These efforts at leader orientation and communication of logistics and requirements are crucial for effective grant administration and program implementation. And GEAR UP grant teams on both the postsecondary and district sides typically have staff to which particular tasks naturally fall (e.g., finance, human resources, payroll, etc.). Yet there is little in this training and support structure to prepare PIs, and their teams, in effectively engaging with some of the more complex and nuanced micro-dynamic aspects of administrative, organizational/inter-organizational and inter-personal tasks. Can members – together and apart – advance a united vision? Are they able to develop, and work well within, an organizational structure specific to the project? Can they adopt the specific roles and responsibilities required? Can they develop and adopt communication and reporting conventions that are necessary for effective implementation? How can they learn to do this? Who is responsible for such training and continuous feedback? These are the “soft,” processual implementation questions that are of interest to me.

We know, from research in business, leadership, and organizational management (e.g., Cooke-Davies, 2002; Morris, Pinto, & Söderlund, 2010) that system or organization culture and structure, staffing, resources, and variable understandings of a task at hand may produce indeterminacy of role, purpose and/or processes among teams and team members. Such indeterminacy can negatively affect a team’s or organization’s project execution and performance. This is an issue faced by any organizational leader/project manager and there are approaches to developing capacity along these lines: materials, training, coaching, etc. But where do GEAR UP leaders learn about “soft” systems, organization, and staff capacity building practices across universities and districts and, especially, those that have been successful for GEAR UP projects? Let us consider a broad, initial scan of key GEAR UP information, and then some very specific works, as a heuristic. Further research is warranted.

If one looks to GEAR UP evaluation and other reports to the U.S. Department of Education, they tend to focus on hard outcome and impact data, even in formative accounts (See research and evaluation studies on the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships GEAR UP Data and Evaluation Page, 2012). Much of the peer-reviewed GEAR UP literature likewise tends to focus on outcomes and impacts. In articles that do discuss, or allude to, “soft” issues of organizational structure, culture, role and responsibility clarification, and communication; the focus is often on structural issues that need to be further specified and operationalized.

For example, in their excellent article about creating conditions for a P-20 framework to promote college access, of which GEAR UP programs are an integral part, Nuñez and Oliva (2009) draw attention to the complex interactions involved in various collaborations among the federal government, states, postsecondary institutions, and schools but, specifically, district-level partnerships. “This literature [surrounding district-level K-16 partnerships] indicates that the stakeholders in effective partnerships must have a joint vision and shared set of goals, derive mutual benefits, have clearly understood obligations, intellectually engage in the current and future direction of the partnerships (and decision making) and have shared accountability and ownership (Winkler and Frechtling, 2005).” (p. 248).

Inasmuch as these are key aspects of effective partnerships, they are broad and conceptual. If we drill down to research that explores how unique organizational cultural differences can affect the success of partnerships forged to support low-income students' college attendance some, like Kezar (2010, 2007), suggest postsecondary and K-12 partners may need to create a “third culture” that allows them to effectively communicate and collaborate. But, as my question earlier asks: what are the logistics and mechanics of doing this? Adelman and Taylor (2000) draw attention to how organizational and inter-organizational (re)focusing (i.e., capacity building) of this kind requires support for (re)training of leadership and staff members. “All who worked to address barriers to student learning must participate in capacity building activity that allows them to carry out new roles and functions effectively. This means time that must be made available for personnel retraining and continuing education.” (p. 24). Ward (2006) suggests more research along these lines is critical. “Equally salient [to the need for evaluation and continuous progress monitoring in GEAR UP and similar programs] is the need to chronicle how school reform initiatives become institutionalized. Regrettably, this critical component is often the most underfunded aspect of the work.” (p. 66).

My point is that these micro-dynamic organizational and inter-relational issues are identified as crucial for effective implementation of projects – and projects like GEAR UP – but a greater understanding of their specifics is necessary. As a way to encourage focus on, and critical discussion and guidance about, these micro-dynamics important for building both individual and organizational understanding and buy in of a project like GEAR UP, I offer the following brief examples of some of the micro-processes for building individual capacity that seem particularly important and for which leaders and team members might benefit from explicit guidance. Building their individual capacity should, in turn, build inter-personal, organizational, inter-organizational and systemic capacity.

**Vision & Tasks:** Sharing the general vision and mission of the GEAR UP project is fairly easy – who can argue with supporting at-risk students and their families in envisioning and achieving a brighter future that includes college? However, co-constructing an operationalized and implementable vision and mission for doing so is much more difficult. Vision and mission statements can be developed, but they must then be put in practice. In addition to asking University team members to review the RFP and identify both overarching commitments and tasks and ones related to their specific area of expertise, we created “digested” guidance regarding the grant’s specific goals and objectives, performance measures, and deliverables in the format of handouts and a PowerPoint presentation. These two tangible documents guided a shared understanding of the project’s key commitments. Those team members who engaged with the guidance and drew upon it regularly seemed to exhibit a clearer understanding of vision, mission, and purpose. Those who did not use the guidance as a continued point of reference often asked redundant questions and seemed unclear of the project and its goals.

**Organizational Structure:** Early in the project, hand-drawn charts of the university, district, and cross-organizational structure of our GEAR UP Alliance were created. Because the project experienced organizational and personnel flux, a formal, graphically drawn organizational chart was not created until the end of the first quarter of operation. The lack of this visual representation of our two collaborating organizations – and with which roles and responsibilities

specific actors were tasked – made it difficult for members of both Alliance teams to envision themselves and each other within the structure of the grant. Not only would the organizational chart have made functional teams and roles more clear, it would also have made reporting and collaboration structures more clear, improving interactions and communication overall. It may have been beneficial to create an organizational chart early and reflect changes as they took place in successive versions. This might have resulted in more expedient resolution of any organizational and/or role indeterminacies.

**Team Roles and Responsibilities:** In general, the roles and responsibilities that particular teams and actors take within a project are a function of the tasks that must be completed and the structure that is determined to best accomplish those tasks. Both the University and the District had been in prior GEAR UP or other access/bridge program relationships. These prior experiences -- and the structures, roles and responsibilities that were advanced – tended to shape the individual visions and expectations of certain members. Many of these members have found it a bit difficult to engage in the development of new organizational structures, roles and responsibilities that could constitute, as Kezar (2007) suggests, a “third culture” of project organization, operation and success. Since our GEAR UP project is in its very early stages, it will develop new norms, roles and processes over time. Explicit and systematic ways team members could explore how their prior experiences and structures would be useful for a new project would improve cohesion and project ramp up time.

**Communication and Reporting Conventions:** In large, multi-faceted teams, communication and reporting conventions are always a challenge. It takes time to determine and internalize whom should be made aware of what communications and how. It also takes time to establish key norms around standard modes of communication and the rationale behind these (e.g., always email to ensure there is a “paper” trail). For organizations or project members who tend to operate in informal, interpersonal modes characterized by meetings, conversations and/or phone calls that are not documented in minutes or in other ways, the formality and time requirements of email or minutes can be daunting. The reverse is true. Guidance on how communicational expectations can be best expressed would benefit project leaders and their team members greatly.

Why should guidance on matters of general organizational dynamics and project management be of concern to GEAR UP project and feature in the GEAR UP training and literature – particularly when information about micro-dynamics of this kind can be found in research on organizational capacity building and project management generally? GEAR UP is a complex inter-system, inter- and intra-organizational, individual, and inter-personal endeavor that requires its leadership and teams work to effect buy-in, capacity building and, ultimately, program success. Yet, it operates within some very specific systemic, organizational, programmatic, and content constraints (e.g., university/district partnerships, individual team dynamics, school building collaboration, etc.) By further researching and providing guidance and technical assistance on how these key micro-dynamic interactions are addressed well in GEAR UP, and how they might be addressed better, even the most seasoned leaders and teams will benefit. At the very least, training on generic processes and procedures that facilitate collaboration and co-design would be helpful. Capacity building of this kind would seem to be important for continued project, organizational and network learning in service of our GEAR UP focus – at risk students and their families seeking support for college enrollment and success.

## Themes and Key Points

While the four distinct perspectives shared here are limited in their foci and scope, from them certain themes and key points emerge that are instructive for our GEAR UP project going forward and may warrant focused research attention as our GEAR UP project advances. We have identified the following two overarching themes:

- 1) that sharing personal, intra- and inter-team understandings through formal communications and meetings facilitate co-construction of effective conceptual and implementation norms; and
- 2) that learning/development is good practice for all GEAR UP project members – university and district partners; teachers and relevant school staff; and parents, students and other relevant community members.

Specific key points include the following:

- Children and adults will benefit from learning more about the social and organizational world around them and certain concepts and practices that can help them operate more successfully in this world.
- Such social and organizational learning can, and should, be made more explicit and systematic in the delivery of the GEAR UP project and in its organizational and administrative processes.
- Continual monitoring and assessment are positive aspects of program delivery and are necessary to ensure a clear task focus is maintained and that intended goals and objectives are attained or in progress.
- New teams mean new organizational and interpersonal relationships where explicit processes of group sharing and norming may be beneficial.
- Multi-organizational and/or multi-disciplinary team members may hold different understandings of the GEAR UP populations they will serve and may need, again, to group share and norm these understandings.
- Social and emotional learning (SEL) is essential for human functioning that results in school and life success.
- Time is an essential aspect of any project.
- There must be basic, generic project management knowledge about inter- and intra-organizational structures and functioning specific to GEAR UP projects that PIs and Project Managers can learn and apply make their projects a success.
- Explicit textual and/or visual representations of structures, roles, processes, etc. can support improved understanding, communication, and project effectiveness.

## Conclusions and Implications:

This short-turnaround, jump-start project gathers initial qualitative information about specific content, inter-personal or inter-organizational processes of one specific GEAR UP grant that 4 university staff members have experienced to be salient for the project's success. The two themes and nine key points extracted are not surprising, but they do direct attention to particular processes and areas of our GEAR UP project delivery that are crucial for success and potentially warrant focused research in the future.

We have argued that it is often soft skills and interactions that ultimately affect a project's success and ability to build capacity. But, as we have preliminarily demonstrated, the GEAR UP research has not typically turned its sites in this direction. By mining qualitative phenomenological perspectives of four of our university GEAR UP team members, we see that there are certain conceptual, structural, processual, and micro-dynamic things that occur within and among GEAR UP partners within their varying organizational structures that we might not see otherwise.

Here we have found that GEAR UP projects – particularly in their initial stages – would do well to ensure plans are in place for HOW participants at all levels will be oriented and engaged with certain aspects of the GEAR UP work and, then, processes for doing so initially and over time developed and implemented. In the future, we hope to undertake more focused research along these lines in the future which, we believe, will be of interest to GEAR UP and other grantees, grantors, evaluators, policy makers, researchers, and technical assistance providers who seek to understand best and promising practices in the development of interventions and collaborations for improved high school achievement/completion and postsecondary enrollment/persistence.

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