UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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The College-Going Niche: Investigating Students' Experiences with College Readiness and GEAR UP

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Education

by

Ashlee Bre-Anna Belgrave

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Andres Sebastian Bustamante, Chair
Associate Professor Drew H. Bailey
Associate Professor Emily K. Penner
Assistant Professor Adriana Villavicencio

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DEDICATION

To

my parents, family, loved ones, and eighth grade self who aspired to obtain a PhD,

in recognition of their prayers, love, support, and dreams for my future.

He who seeks knowledge begins with humbleness.
–Buju Banton

I hope we all catch our dreams.
–Shane Redway

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VITA

Ashlee Bre-Anna Belgrave

2015	B.A. in Psychology, Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey- New Brunswick
2019-24	Research Assistant, Orange County Educational Advancement Network, University of California, Irvine
2022	MA in Education, University of California, Irvine
2024	Ph.D. in Education, University of California, Irvine

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Ashlee Bre-Anna Belgrave

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Assistant Professor Andres Sebastian Bustamante, Chair

College is considered to be one of the best options for increasing social mobility; however, college access and completion rates are lower for low-income, African American, Latine, and Native American/Indigenous students. The GEAR UP program supports low-income students' college awareness and readiness through a large intervention system including student and family services. This study uses a mixed-methods approach to understand GEAR UP's impact on students' college-readiness indicators, the role parents/families have within students' college-going process, the college competencies and/or indicators students believe colleges and universities should focus on, and how students from an urban school district within a low-income community perceive the college-going culture at their school. Through rigorous research involving difference-in-difference inspired analysis, rich descriptive analyses, and in-depth students focus groups, the recommendations from students based on their needs, are clear: the college field needs to be more student centered focused on the information and resources that are useful to students, maintaining strong relationships between students and staff and to involve student feedback in decision making.

INTRODUCTION

College is considered to be one of the best options for increasing social mobility and produces societal benefits such as a productive workforce with higher revenue (Barnes & Slate, 2013); however, college access and completion rates differ across student populations and are lower for low-income, African-American, Latine, and Native American/Indigenous students (Baum et al., 2013; Contreras, 2011; Duncheon, 2020; Franklin, 2002). It is important that students graduate high school with the abilities needed to pursue their postsecondary goals; however, educational stakeholders are concerned that students are meeting high school requirements for graduation but leaving high school without the knowledge necessary to succeed (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Duncheon, 2015).

The push to get students "college-ready " first occurred during the presidency of Ronald Reagan who was concerned about the nation's ability to compete in a changing world (Barnes et al., 2010). The Reagan administration commissioned a report to assess student achievement and opportunities for academic success, but findings demonstrated that students were underperforming, and new standards and assessment of success were necessary (Barnes et al., 2010). In response, the Office of Postsecondary Education houses a number of student service programs such as TRIO (Educational Opportunity Centers, the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, Student Support Services, Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math/Science, Veterans Upward Bound), and later the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) programs to name a few.

The GEAR UP program was established in 1998 under the Clinton administration and awards six- or seven-year grants focused on servicing middle and high schools with high levels

of poverty beginning no later than seventh grade (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022; The Clinton-Gore administration: Helping every child stay on the path to college through GEAR UP and after-school, 2000). GEAR UP is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and graduate college through state level grants or partnership grants (e.g., between universities, colleges, or community organizations with schools) providing comprehensive programming to support low-income students' college awareness and readiness to serve a cohort of students and their families over time parameters set by each grant (Cabrera et al., 2006; Contreras, 2011; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022). GEAR UP's cohort service model is unique because grants provide services to whole grade levels of students and their families rather than having entrance requirements like other college-preparation programs that can prevent students from participating (Cabrera et al., 2006; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

Education scholars in recent years have evaluated the effects of GEAR UP on student outcomes such as its positive effect on student graduation rates (Fogg & Harrington, 2015; Morgan et al., 2015; Sondergeld et al., 2013), and impacts on college enrollment and persistence (Fogg & Harrington, 2015; Knaggs et al., 2015; Lunceford et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2018; Sondergeld et al., 2013). Two national level evaluations of GEAR UP funded by the United States Department of Education include a 2003 study by Muraskin and a 2008 study by Standing and colleagues; twenty partnership sites participated in the 2003 study, and 18 of those sites remained in the 2008 study. Results from the 2003 study by Muraskin and colleagues demonstrated the importance of evaluation timing. In the 2003 study as researchers had GEAR UP programming data (e.g., hours of tutoring, professional development, and workshops), but the study did not show positive impacts of GEAR UP, and the authors hypothesized that the timing of the analysis was too early to demonstrate long-term student outcomes as the grant had

only been in its second year (Bausmith & France, 2012; Muraskin, 2003). Results from the follow up national 2008 study by Standing and colleagues in which 18 GEAR UP schools were compared to 18 non-GEAR UP schools suggested that school level participation in GEAR UP was positively associated with students' knowledge regarding college opportunities, science course taking, and parent's involvement in their child's college process, but evidence supporting the notion that GEAR UP supported students' intentions to attend college was not found (Bausmith & France, 2012).

GEAR UP is serving roughly 560,000+ students in the nation through a budget of $365 million across partnership sites in forty-two states (Leuwerke et al., 2021). While each GEAR UP grant may have different guidelines; the goal is to share college information with students and families, provide counseling (academic and social emotional) to students, support parental involvement, and promote educational excellence and students participating in advanced courses (Muraskin, 2003). Documentation and dissemination of research regarding the impacts of the GEAR UP program are useful for sustaining and improving the program. Although GEAR UP has been implemented across the United States for quite some time, lack of evaluation of such a large intervention system limits our understanding of the program's effectiveness (Cabrera et al., 2006; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2021). Because implementation for GEAR UP grants vary by site (Bausmith & France, 2012) it is important to understand aspects of programming that support students in efforts to generalize knowledge regarding best practices for GEAR UP practitioners and demonstrate to policymakers the importance of funding for the grant program.

This study contributes to the body of literature examining the impacts of GEAR UP programming on students' college readiness indicators prior to high school, the role parents and families have within students' college-going processes, the college competencies and indicators

students believe should be focused on, and how students perceive the college-going culture at their school.

This study evaluates a single GEAR UP grant and seeks to address the following questions:

1) What is the impact of GEAR UP on students' college-readiness indicators?
2) What roles do parents/families have within students' college-going process, and how do they communicate and/or demonstrate their college-going expectations, if any, to students?
3) What college competencies and/or indicators do students believe colleges and universities should be focused on to understand if a student is college-ready?
4) How do students from an urban school district within a low-income community perceive the college-going culture at their school?

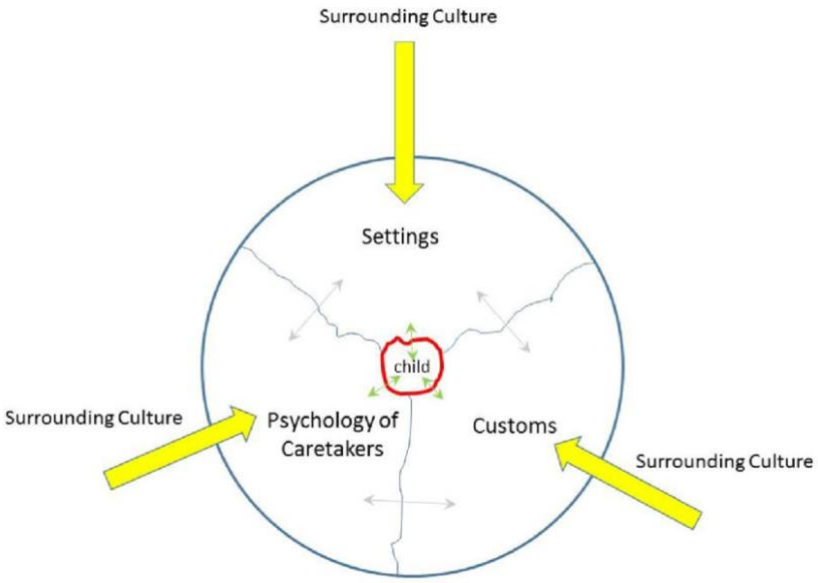
CHAPTER ONE: THE COLLEGE-GOING NICHE

What I am calling The College-Going Niche is a useful tool for understanding students' college-going experiences from a developmental perspective. The college-going niche takes into account students' college-going settings in totality (not just regulating college-going to schools), the beliefs of the adults around them pertaining to their college-going abilities, college-going customs, the societal surrounding college-going culture, and individual students' beliefs and experiences with college-going expanding on the developmental niche (Harkness and Super, 1994) to understand the college-going culture surrounding students from low-income communities. Harkness' and Super's Developmental Niche is an interdisciplinary model of child development that examines children's experiences relative to their characteristics all within their cultural context but has not been used within the college access field (Harkness & Super, 1994;

Harkness & Super, 2021). The Developmental Niche accounts for children's contexts, environments, and the overall culture of these spaces, and is informed by the following principles: children's environments are arbitrarily organized in a cultural system, and children's attitudes, dispositions, temperament, and other individual characteristics can affect their own development (Harkness & Super, 2021). The developmental niche model (Figure 1) is an open system model (van Bertalanffy, 1968), and depicts the interactions between a child's surrounding culture, their physical and social settings, the customs and practices of care a child encounters, a child's caretaker's psychology, and the child themself. A stable internal environment is one in which aspects of the developmental niche all support one another (i.e., the culture a child is in supports their caretaker's views and vice versa); however, it is important to note that this is not typical. Children can receive messages about their community via their experiences throughout their developmental period that help shape the view of their word, and when children receive the same message repeatedly this is called "contemporary redundancy" (Mead, 1972; Harkness & Super, 2021; Super & Harkness, 2002). The surrounding culture, settings a child is in, the customs and practices they encounter, and the beliefs of their caregivers interact within a child's daily life (Harkness & Super, 2021) and college-going processes.

Figure 1

The Developmental Niche



Note. This figure was published in Harkness and Super, 2021

The surrounding culture of the developmental niche encompasses external forces (e.g., societal level changes) that can impact a subsystem or multiple subsystems of the niche. There is a surrounding culture and general beliefs regarding college going that is mainly based on capitalist theories such as human, economic, and social capital. Human capital theory is evident in the surrounding college going culture for low-income students supporting a pro-college narrative promoting that a college degree increases educational and economic opportunities across education stakeholders (i.e., researchers, educators, policymakers; Cox, 2016). Some of the leading arguments promoting college-readiness are centered on the monetary or economic capital benefits of a college degree including residential mobility which is the ability to move freely from one place to another (Abad, 2020; Barton, 2008; Cox, 2016); however, researchers have also noted that educational opportunities may not actually lead to social mobility for working class students and students of color as access to postsecondary education does not

automatically equate to access for job opportunity and social mobility (Dumas, 2014; Suizzo et al., 2016). Social capital theory within the field of education emphasizes access to resources and personnel that support individuals' achievements that support the gain of human capital and workforce productivity (Bourdieu, 1986; Bowman et al., 2018; Coleman 1988).There is a large difference between the societal expectations for students' postsecondary educational attainment and the number of students who get their degrees; especially for low-income, Black, Latine, and other students of color who are categorized as historically underrepresented students (Cox, 2016; Duncheon, 2015). Societal narratives regarding college choice emphasize stages of decision making such as searching for information regarding college, considering which colleges to apply to, and deciding where to apply to and attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987); however, this path becomes complex for underrepresented students. Research has demonstrated that, on average, underrepresented students experience challenges paying for college, lack access to rigorous college preparation materials during high school, and are less aware of the ways of navigating the college sphere (e.g., entrance exams/requirements, financial aid) (Cox, 2016). Not interrogating the systems and contexts at play within students' college-going niches can cause educational stakeholders to incorrectly attribute unfavored outcomes (i.e., lack of college completion) to individual students' shortcomings (Cox, 2016) or lack of being college-ready.

Additionally, it is important to have an asset-based view of connections with family and the need for guidance from school staff when discussing college-going for underrepresented students (Boden, 2011) as coupling the knowledge from family members and school personnel can bring together social, familial, aspirational, and navigational capital. Yosso (2005) offers the Community Cultural Wealth model to emphasize nuanced facets of community assets that people of color gain and use. The community cultural wealth framework interrogates the sources of

knowledge that are considered valuable by society, rejecting the notion that the knowledge of upper- and middle-class individuals are most valuable (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2005). Yosso highlights aspirational (dreams and hopes for achievement), familial (cultural knowledge shared in families), linguistic (skills learned through speaking multiple languages), navigational (maneuvering through institutions), resistant (knowledge gained through opposition), and social (networks of community resources) forms of capital to fully grasp the experiences and knowledge of minoritized communities. Societal forces influencing the surrounding culture regarding college-going for low-income students (i.e., policy makers, researchers, and other educational stakeholders) should seek to understand students' college-going processes from a cultural perspective by considering students' interactions with their families, communities, and broader everyday contexts (Cox, 2016; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

The settings in which children are in provide a structure that includes the individuals they interact with, where these interactions take place, and the different activities children engage in (Harkness & Super, 2021). Students' ideas about college are formed within their different contexts such as their family, school, and community, and resources and information offered at school are particularly important for students whose parents did not attend college (Bowman et al., 2018; Cabrera & La Nasa 2001; Duncheon, 2021; Venegas, 2006). Schools are also sites of academic socialization as they are contexts with expectations that can be influenced by things such as a college-going culture where students are expected to achieve (Crisogen, 2015; MacDonald, 2006). Understanding the school setting where students face college messaging is important as this research has typically focused on individual achievement or failure instead of understanding students' schooling contexts (Castro, 2013; Duncheon, 2021). Students' relationships to school have been described in a multitude of ways across social sciences fields:

connectedness, engagement, attachment, involvement, liking, identification, bonding, and climate, and more information is needed regarding secondary students' relationships to school settings (Bryan et al., 2012).

The definition of a caretaker is not limited to parents; teachers are also considered as caretakers. Caretaker psychology addresses the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of adults in children's lives. Caretakers can introduce students to behaviors, skills, and values they believe are needed to function within a college-going context; this is known as socialization (Maccoby, 2007). Primary socialization occurs in contexts closest to individuals (e.g., within families) and secondary socialization occurs in social environments outside the family that students have interactions in such as school (Crisogen, 2015). Academic socialization is the practice of being indoctrinated into school-based norms and culture such as meeting expectations for educational success and viewing school as important for future goals (Gonzalves, 2020; Cross et al., 2019). Parents and staff can socialize children academically by sharing their expectations and aspirations for their students' future educational plans which have the potential to support adolescent students' performance greater than typical school-based involvement practices (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Cross et al., 2019; Hill, 2001; Suizzo et al., 2016). Parents support with homework, set expectations for students' performance, and share messages regarding the importance of education which is typically used for adolescent students (Cross et al., 2019). Harkness & Super (2021) make note that meshing of the subsystems of the niche is more nuanced for immigrant parents as they encounter circumstances and cultures in their new surroundings that may not align with their home cultures and practices (de Haan et al., 2020; Raghavan et al., 2010). Parents and caregivers play an important role in adolescents' academic socialization by scaffolding students through their beliefs and behaviors regarding schooling and

providing monitoring for their children either embedding themselves within the school building or building relationships with staff who can monitor their children while parents are not present (Cooper & Smalls, 2010; Huguley et al., 2020). Parents and caregivers can influence students' motivation which is necessary for school success, support students' educational aspirations, and help students prepare for the future (e.g., going to college) (Bempechat et al., 1999; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Teachers play a role in students' socialization through focused support to students (Bryce et al., 2019). Students receive a myriad of academic messages; however, socialization is not a one-directional process (Kuczynski et al., 1997), and students' own beliefs and experiences can also shape how they are socialized academically.

Customs and practices of care are frequent activities that are repeated and become part of a community's culture and can be observed through studying the contexts that children are in (Harkness & Super, 1994). For example, the GEAR UP program can support schools' college-going culture through resources that are accessible and inclusive of all students; not just those deemed gifted and/or in special programs (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). McClafferty & colleagues (2002) and MacDonald & Dorr (2006) outline nine principles of a college-going culture. An environment with a strong college-going culture will have college talk, clear expectations for students and families, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, testing and curriculum, faculty involvement, family involvement, college partnerships, and articulation. College talk encompasses clear college-oriented communication and is closely related to the principle of clear expectations which are explicit college preparation goals shared across all stakeholders such as students, families, and school staff (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty et al., 2002). Schools and institutions should also have up-to-date information, resources, and infrastructure to support a college-going culture including a counseling model in which school

counselors who typically handle high school level issues (e.g. scheduling, and student conflicts) also advise students regarding college-going. Within a strong college-going culture students are also provided with testing and curriculum and related information (i.e., standardized test scores required for college entrance), information regarding financial resources, and engage with faculty who are actively involved in partnerships with counselors, families, and students. Lastly, partnerships and connections between K-12 schools and universities can foster a strong college-going culture as well as students should receive ongoing communication and support from the partnering school and university (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty et al., 2002). The services offered by GEAR UP contribute to the overall culture of a school, even though there is a possibility that students may be unaware of the presence and/or purpose of these services as frequently repeated practices may be overlooked (Harkness & Super, 2021).

Although the developmental niche model above states "child" as in an individual, the model can also be generalized to children in similar settings such as students in an urban district within a low-income community (Harkness & Super, 1994; Harkness & Super, 2021). Students' own attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions affect how they interact and exist within their own niche and influence their own development (Harkness & Super, 1994). For example, students may push back on the norms and surrounding cultural niche that they are in. For example, in a study by Abad in 2020, Latine students heavily critiqued the purposes of a college degree explaining that degree attainment produced economic signaling (demonstrating skills through their educational credentials) and contented with the norms of professionalism and respectability throughout their college and career journeys. Students' thoughts regarding their ability to succeed may also influence their college-going experience; academic self-concept is an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding their academic oriented skills and

performance and can be influenced by the ways in which students are academically socialized (Awad, 2007; Cross et al., 2019). It is important to understand how diverse student populations are processing college-going messaging from different contexts as college readiness literature has included the perspectives of researchers and educational policy stakeholders, but student perspectives are less likely to be a part of the discourse (Duncheon, 2021). Additionally, when students are included in the college readiness literature, they are often first-generation college students who are already enrolled in college (see Byrd & Macdonald, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Duncheon, 2021; Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jimenez, 2012; Reid & Moore, 2008); therefore, the perspectives of younger students is needed.

CHAPTER TWO: AUTHOR POSITIONALITY

My research interests are rooted in my desire to advocate for equitable schools and schooling environments for students pushing for students to have the same access, support, and care that I had. How I came to understand what equitable schooling environments look like for students shifts depending on the context in which I find myself. My primary school experience took place in Brooklyn, New York at a school in an urban area where all students, except for maybe one, were Black and Latine with a majority White school staff. I loved my school, felt safe, cared for, and had my identity celebrated. When my family moved more educational opportunities to the suburbs of central New Jersey I found myself with access to more resources at school, but questioning how I would be perceived as a Black student from an “urban” area in a mostly White school and I relied heavily on the support of my parents, grandparents, and family to combat stereotypes.

I have been heavily socialized regarding the importance of education and educational equity across racial and class contexts. My mother described the importance of Norman

Manley's policies that brought forth education for all in Jamaica, my dad talked about his experience having been bussed to schools in White neighborhoods in Brooklyn, my maternal grandmother entered the workforce at an early age to take care of her children, my paternal grandmother was a nurse and immigrated to the United States leading a fruitful career, and while my paternal grandfather did not attend school past primary school in Barbados due to economic barriers, he taught himself math, gained his general education diploma, and embedded learning into every interaction with his young grandchildren: I would not be pursuing this degree without the familial, cultural, aspirational, resistant, and navigational capital brokered by my family. Across conversations with parents, grandparents, aunts, and other family members was the message that education is the key to many opportunities and education is something that nobody can take from you. I recognize my societal privilege being a young Black woman in a doctoral education program with two parents that graduated college, and one having a Master's degree. I maintain my commitments to service and community through research while understanding that doctoral spaces are not easily accessed.

My college-going niche has always been stable: my family expected me to go to college, I expected myself to go to college, my high school constantly spoke about its goals of academic excellence and celebrated students' collegiate success, I had access to college resources and information at home and at school, and the societal expectation was that I would succeed as a high school student from a middle to upper middle class area, but I know my experience is not universal. As a researcher I am interested in understanding how programs designed for educational equity support student achievement and how the systems students find themselves within are uplifting students' goals for their own success. I began working with the GEAR UP team in August of 2020 seeking the opportunity to serve underrepresented students and had

conversations with the program director and staff about my experience working with diverse student groups, commitments to serving students, as well as my personal and professional goals before I was granted access to the program. My title was officially a graduate student researcher, but I fulfilled the role of program coordinator to embed myself within the work and system of GEAR UP working alongside the partner school district to service students and families before working with the Research and Evaluation team to analyze data regarding the GEAR UP program.

My interest in program evaluation grew through working with the GEAR UP program. While this dissertation examines data evidence of GEAR UP's effectiveness, I could not forget students' voices. Research on urban education can take a deficit perspective pointing out all the way our schools are failing students, and these critiques are valid, but hearing directly from students provides the opportunity for researchers committed to educational equity to find opportunities for change that students want to see. The students I interacted with were mostly Black and Brown, like me, and we had many conversations about college-going that were insightful, riveting, and hilarious at times. I want to contribute to how we (educational stakeholders) contribute to students' college-going niche through hearing their experiences and perspectives. I believe that students, especially those within communities that are often overlooked (i.e., low-income and urban, underrepresented) are not presented with the opportunity to share their perspectives regarding their educational experience.

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY CONTEXT

The University of California, Irvine has a history of receiving GEAR UP grants to serve surrounding communities alongside local school districts. The current study offers an evaluation of a seven-year GEAR UP grant that began in the 2018-2019 school year supporting two cohorts

of students when they were in sixth and seventh grades. The GEAR UP grant of focus for this dissertation services a school district within a large urban community in Southern California with a population estimate of 91,988 (United States Census Bureau, 2023). The population demographics for this community are reported by the Census as race and Hispanic Origin: 18.6% of the population is White, 25.4% of the population is Black or African American, 1.1% of the population is Asian American or Pacific Islander, 1% of the population is American Indian and Alaskan native, 20.5% of the population is two or more races, and 71.2% of the population is Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2023). The school district of focus is composed of 36 schools, and roughly 24,000 students whose race and ethnicity characteristics mirror that of the city. Roughly 65.9% of students in the district qualified for federal free and reduced lunch and 28.6% were classified as English language learners at the start of the grant period. The students serviced by this grant attended five middle schools and later fed into three high schools, one of which is an early college high school where students are dually enrolled in high school and college level courses at the local community college. The population serviced by the GEAR UP program in the context of this study steadily increased over the years as district enrollment rates changed resulting in an average of serviced an average of 1,405 serviced students from the 2018-2019 to 2021-2022 school year with a majority of students at each individual school site receiving some level of support (see Table 1 below for GEAR UP service data aggregated by school and year):

Table 1

GEAR UP Service Data by School and Year

School Year	School Name	% Serviced
2018-2019	Middle School Site One	75%
N = 1,072	Middle School Site Two	56%
	Middle School Site Three	74%
	Middle School Site Four	79%
	Middle School Site Five	72%

School Year	School Name	% Serviced
2019-2020	Middle School Site One	98%
N = 1,329	Middle School Site Two	100%
	Middle School Site Three	98%
	Middle School Site Four	96%
	Middle School Site Five	100%
	Additional Program	84%
2020-2021	Middle School Site One	7%
N = 1,589	Middle School Site Two	100%
	Middle School Site Three	13%
	Middle School Site Four	10%

	Middle School Site Five	43%
	High School Site One	100%
	High School Site Two	26%
	High School Site Three	3%
2021-2022	High School Site One	100%
N = 1,630	High School Site Two	85%
	High School Site Three	62%

The analysis for this study will focus on the 2018-2019 to the 2021-2022 school year; however, the current grant cycle is ongoing and will continue until the year 2025. GEAR UP program staff aim to service all students during each year of the grant through a number of services provided directly/ in-person, and virtually (synchronously or asynchronously). Students in the GEAR UP can opt into certain services at the individual level such as field trips, college visits, and job site visits/ job shadowing; however, most students receive services at cohort or grade level through in-class workshops and one-on-one mentoring with GEAR UP coordinators. Additionally, teachers, counselors, or other school staff can refer students to GEAR UP for supplemental services based on need such as tutoring and homework assistance, as well as funds for student scholarships. The College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium subdivision of the National Council for Community and Education partnerships, known as "CCREC," has developed a complete list of service definitions in recent years (see Table 2 below) (CCREC, 2020; Office of Postsecondary Education, 2022).

Table 2
GEAR UP Services and Definitions

GEAR UP student service definitions	
College Visit	"student's visit to a college campus that is facilitated/supervised/led by GEAR UP staff, teachers, other school staff, or college representatives"
Counseling/ Advising	"activities with individual or small groups of students… [includes] discussing personal growth issues such as decision making, problem solving, goal setting, attendance, behavior concerns, or family issues; providing assistance on college and/or career choices/planning/interests, internships, or college planning; and/or providing assistance on coursework selection (secondary or postsecondary), course of study choices, college major selection, standardized and pre-college assessment advising and/or interpretation of scores"
Educational Field Trips	"students leave their school and travel to another location and [participate in] an academic component that is linked to classroom activities"
Financial Aid Counseling/ Advising	To "assist students in understanding and navigating the complexities of financial aid…providing hands-on assistance with the Federal Student Aid ID, FAFSA and scholarship applications; presentations on financial aid or literacy; using financial aid or literacy curriculum; understanding and comparing financial aid award letters; and the benefits of and information on participation in college savings plans…may be provided one-on-one, in small or large groups, and during or outside of the school day"
Job Site Visit/ Job Shadowing	"offer students exposure to the workplace in an occupational area of interest and reinforces the link between classroom learning, work requirements, and the need for postsecondary education" Job site: "physical visit to a local business/work environment facilitated/supervised/led by GEAR UP staff, teachers, or other school staff" Job shadowing: "one-on-one experience in which a student spends time at a business or work environment with an employee, observing typical job duties"
Mentoring	"actions of GEAR UP staff, teachers, or other school staff to identify students who would benefit from an ongoing supportive relationship with a trained, caring adult or other student(s), i.e., 'mentor'"

Student Workshops	"interactive informational classroom-level or large- or small-group sessions that involve hands-on experiences for each student in the workshop"
Summer Programs	"activities that include an experience over the course of one or multiple days during the summer and can serve to bridge knowledge between school years"
Tutoring/ Homework Assistance	"supplementary academic instruction designed to increase the academic achievement of students"

GEAR UP family services definitions

Family College Visit	"a family member's visit to a college campus, with or without a student, facilitated/supervised/led by GEAR UP staff, teachers, other school staff, or college representatives"
Family Counseling/ Advising	"one-on-one or small group advising designed to meet the specific needs of the individuals engaged in the activity… [can] include meeting with the GEAR UP staff, with or without a student, to discuss the student's academic goals and progress, college planning, financial aid, career readiness, and/or other related topics"
Family Workshops	"attendance with or without GEAR UP students at a workshop that supports academic success, helps students to be successful in middle and high school, demonstrates how to navigate the K-12 education system, and assists their student with college preparation or financial aid processes"

CHAPTER FOUR: THE IMPACT OF GEAR UP ON STUDENTS' COLLEGE READINESS INDICATORS

College Readiness

Frameworks such as Conley's College Readiness and the College Readiness Indicator System were developed to respond to the call for high schools to ensure that students are college ready and not just college eligible which was viewed as schools' responsibility in the past (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Conley, 2010; Duncheon, 2021; McAlister & Mevs, 2012). Scholars have described college readiness as a student's ability to demonstrate that they have the skills necessary to succeed in college through their standardized test scores, high school courses, and grades; additionally, students who are considered college-ready should not need to take remedial college courses and can proceed through the course sequence determined by their school of choice (Moore et al., 2010; Conley, 2011; Bausmith & France, 2012; Contreras & Fujimoto, 2019). Many low-income students enter college without being ready, and attempting to intervene and improve college readiness towards the end of high school may be too late to change student outcomes (Cabrera et al., 2006). It is important to understand students' academic trajectories over time; even too many absences or failed classes as early as sixth grade can have long term effects on students' chances of graduating high school (Balfanz, 2009; Johnson et al., 2021). Additionally, early intervention is important for college preparation programs as students begin the process of college decision making as early as seventh grade (Cabrera et al., 2006). There have been several studies attempting to examine the impact of the GEAR UP program on student outcomes before high school graduation, but this task has proven difficult; the timing of analyses as well as the types of data collected are crucial for understanding the impact of programming (Bausmith & France, 2012). Investigating college readiness beginning in middle school provides

a longitudinal view of students' educational trajectories; however, little is known about college readiness in middle school (Boden, 2011). This study examines GEAR UP's effect on academic outcomes (gpa) in middle school and advances literature examining GEAR UP's effects on students' early academic outcomes, which is less commonly assessed.

This study addressed the following questions:

1) What is the impact of involvement in student support programming activities on students' college-readiness indicators in middle school?

Methods

Data use was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine. Student level data obtained included demographic and performance data for three cohorts: a control group who did not receive GEAR UP, a treatment group that began GEAR UP in sixth grade, and another treatment group that began GEAR UP in seventh grade for the year prior to the grant and the first two years of the grant.

Participants

The original sample (n = 5,790 observations) was reduced to only include students whose data appeared at each time point resulting in a smaller sample (n = 3,129 observations with 1,361 unique observations) of which longitudinal analyses could be conducted. The purpose of restricting the sample to students who began and remained within the district during all time points is to attempt to control for unobservable biases that could affect student performance and support the parallel trend assumption of difference-in-difference regression (see Analytic Strategies below). The graduating class of 2023, the comparison group, had the largest sample (n = 577) followed by the class of 2024 (n = 407), and the class of 2025 (n = 377). Students are not randomly assigned into GEAR UP; federal mandates require that GEAR UP partnership grants

serve whole grade levels (Muraskin, 2003). The graduating classes of 2024 (n = 407) and 2025 (n = 377) are GEAR UP students; the class of 2024 began GEAR UP in grade seven and the class of 2025 began GEAR UP in grade six. Additionally, analyzing data from a single location may support causal inference as any changes to school district policy or policies within the local context would occur across the sample (Bowman, 2018).

Demographic categories were set by the district partner. The samples used for this study were primarily Hispanic students (n = 2,594) and male (n = 1,642 ± 1, female n = 1,487 ± 1; (one student was listed as male then as female in the following year) across five school sites. Data was also aggregated by race with 506 Native American or Alaskan Native, American Indian or Alaskan native students, 18 Asian, Filipino, or other Asian students, 20 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or Samoan students, 507 Black or African American students, 18 White non-Hispanic students, and 1,504 White & Hispanic students, and roughly 556 students had missing race data (some were unknown, some chose not to provide this information)(see Table 1 below for demographics aggregated by graduating class and grade level). When students were in sixth grade their ages (how old the student was turning at the end of the calendar year and was calculated using student birthdate) ranged from 11 to 14 (M = 12.24), in seventh grade their ages ranged from 12 to 15 (M = 13.24), and in eighth grade their ages ranged from 13 to 16 (M = 14.24). In this sample 1,578 students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch addressing the grant objectives of serving schools with higher numbers of students from low-income communities. Other demographic information includes English Language Fluency, Individualized Education Plan Status, homelessness status (sometimes denoted “No Child Left Behind Title X McKinney-Vento Homeless program” as opposed to a general categorization of “homeless”), and student foster status.

Table 4.1

Demographic Data Aggregated by Graduating Class and Grade

		Gender		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Male		52%	53%	~51%
Female		48%	47%	~49%
		Age (Average)		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6		-	12	12
Grade 7		13	13	13
Grade 8		14	14	-
		Race		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Native American, Alaskan Native, or American Indian		12%	17%	20%
Asian, Filipino, Other Asian		0.7%	0.5%	0.5%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Samoan		0.3%	1%	0.5%
Black or African American		~19%	~14%	15%
White (Not Hispanic)		0.5%	0.5%	0.8%
White & Hispanic		34%	57%	54%
Unknown		~33%	~9%	9%
		Ethnicity		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Hispanic		~81%	~84%	84%
Not Hispanic		~19%	~14%	15%
Unknown		~3%	~0.5%	0.3%
		Free/ Reduced Lunch Status		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	Free/Reduced Lunch	-	91%	36%
	Regular Priced Lunch	-	9%	64%
Grade 7	Free/Reduced Lunch	87%	31%	36%
	Regular Priced Lunch	10%	69%	64%
Grade 8	Free/Reduced Lunch	28%	32%	-
	Regular Priced Lunch	72%	68%	-
		English Language Fluency		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	English Only	-	26%	32%

	Initial Fluent English Proficient	-	2%	3%
	Limited English Proficient	-	29%	25%
	Redesignated	-	42%	40%
Grade 7	English Only	32%	26%	32%
	Initial Fluent English Proficient	2%	2%	3%
	Limited English Proficient	25%	27%	22%
	Redesignated	42%	44%	43%
Grade 8	English Only	32%	26%	-
	Initial Fluent English Proficient	2%	2%	-
	Limited English Proficient	21%	27%	-
	Redesignated	46%	44%	-

		Individualized Education Plan		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	Yes	-	11%	5%
	No	-	89%	95%
Grade 7	Yes	13%	3%	16%
	No	87%	97%	84%
Grade 8	Yes	8%	12%	-
	No	92%	88%	-

		Homelessness Status		
		Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	Yes	-	4.4%	4%
	No	-	96%	96%
Grade 7	Yes	5%	5%	3%
	No	95%	95%	97%
Grade 8	Yes	4%	5%	-
	No	96%	95%	-

	Unexcused Absences (Average)		
	Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	-	1	3
Grade 7	2	3	2
Grade 8	4	2	-
Total *N*	577	407	377

Note. This table describes student demographic data as obtained by the school district partner. Data with ± values denote changes in district demographic data.

Measures

Grade Point Average

Grade point average (GPA) was used as students' college readiness indicator for this study and was measured as a continuous variable on a 4.0 scale with opportunity for weighted grade point averages up to 4.5.

Table 4.2

Academic Performance Data Aggregated by Graduating Class and Grade

	GPA *M* (*SD*)		
	Class of 2023	Class of 2024	Class of 2025
Grade 6	-	2.36 (0.84)	2.66 (1.04)
Grade 7	2.56 (0.81)	2.47 (0.83)	2.65 (0.98)
Grade 8	2.54 (0.80)	2.47 (0.89)	-

Note. Data highlighted in gray indicate when each cohort was serviced by GEAR UP.

Covariates

Binary variables were created to denote gender (1 = male, 2 = female), ethnicity (1 = Hispanic, 0 = not Hispanic), free and/or reduced lunch status (0 = regular priced lunch, 1 = free/reduced price lunch), iep (0 = no iep, 1 = student has an iep; original data delineated type of disability including autism, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, other hearing impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, multiple disabilities, hard of hearing, orthopedic impairment, or visual impairment), homelessness (0 = student is not homeless, 1 = student is homeless), and foster status (0 = student is not a foster student, 1 = student is in foster care). English language fluency was coded as a categorical variable: 4 = English Only, 3 = Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP), 2 = Limited English Proficient (LEP), and 1 = Redesignated. Student attendance was measured as a numeric variable representing the number of unexcused absences per student. School identification was a code

created using a categorical variable ranging from one to four for each school (i.e., ms1, ms2, ms3, ms4, and ms5; ms standing for "middle school"). Treatment was coded as 1 for students who were in GEAR UP during that particular school year whereas the categorical variable gucohort has three values (0 = non-GEAR UP student, 1 = GEAR UP class of 2024, 2 = GEAR UP class of 2025).

Analytic Strategy

A difference-in-difference analysis inspired approach was used for this study and was conducted using STATA statistical software to predict the impact of involvement in GEAR UP on students' GPA using the model below:

$$Y_{(i,t)} = \alpha + \beta \text{ Gear Up}_{it} + X_i + Y_{it} + f + \pi_g + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where i is the individual student, t is time, X_i are the static individual variables (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity), Y_{it} are individual varying variables per year (e.g., age, esl status, foster status, homeless status, iep status), f is the school fixed effects, π_g is grade effect, λ_t is year effects, and ε_{it} is the sum of error.

One assumption of difference-in-difference analyses is that of parallel trends, meaning that student outcomes would have been similar if treatment was not implemented; however, this counterfactual cannot be observed (Bowman, 2018), and in this case, there were differences in student free/reduced lunch status due to the implementation of a district policy. The sample for this study was controlled to only include students who started grade six within the district and remained within the district until grade eight, and gpa was z-scored prior to analyses. Standard errors were clustered at the individual error to account for repeated individuals over time.

Results

The GEAR UP program had a positive impact for students who began the program in sixth grade with an average effect of 0.163, $p < 0.001$ on students' gpa meaning that their grade point averages were 0.163 units higher than students who did not receive GEAR UP services within the first year of the grant (see Table 4, see appendix A for standardized regression results) as the covariates of ethnicity, subgroups of English language fluency, and the third year panel were omitted due to collinearity. Additionally, all racial categories except for Black or African American and White & Hispanic were omitted due to collinearity which was caused by the small sample size of the other racial groups.

Table 4.3

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' GPA

		Unstandardized GPA
ATET	treatment (1 vs 0)	0.163***
Robust Standard Error		0.031
95% Confidence Interval		[0.105, 0.223]

Note. ATET (average treatment effect on the treated) adjusted for covariates, panel effects, and time effects.

Discussion

Overall, GEAR UP had a positive impact on the gpa of GEAR UP students in comparison to non-GEAR UP students. It is important to note the positive effect of GEAR UP on student gpa early in students' academic career as evaluative studies of GEAR UP typically focus on high school academic outcomes which is important for understanding the strength of students' college readiness indicators but is too late for trying to make changes in student performance. This study contributes to literature examining GEAR UP academic effects beginning in students' formative

middle school years by assessing the effect of treatment on student outcomes. Past research has determined that it is better for programming evaluation to take place two or more years post implementation to capture the effect of programming, and mitigate any null effects, which is contrary to analyses conducted in this study; however, this study demonstrates a statistically significant impact of GEAR UP early during the grant cycle. Early identification of students who are considered off track academically for college is important for understanding which students may benefit the most from intervention efforts (Johnson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021). If GEAR UP can support students gpa prior to students entering high school, then this programming is a wise investment that is better made sooner rather than later. Recent discussions surrounding student gpa have debated its effectiveness as a college readiness marker as scholars have argued that grade inflation due to the COVID-19 pandemic has skewed students' gpas higher than their knowledge of academic content (Alishev et al., 2022; Sanchez & Moore, 2022); however, this analysis utilized data prior to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrating GEAR UP's effectiveness of supporting students' academic achievement via their grade point average.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that must be addressed. A complete difference-in-difference analysis could not be conducted due to constraints within the data. First, the graduating class of 2023 panel data was dropped from analyses once the data was balanced by statistical software. Second, major fluctuations in students' qualifications for free and reduced lunch occurred at different grade levels for each graduating class. Additionally, an ideal difference-in-difference design would allow for the comparison between a treatment and control group; however, this study examined the differences between GEAR UP groups who started programming at different times. Third, quantitative data supporting the impact of the GEAR UP

program on student college-readiness outcomes longitudinally is ideal; however, analyses were not conducted throughout the grant cycle due to the precarious nature of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on student outcomes. Lastly, findings could be bolstered with analyses regarding standardized test data such as SBAC scores. I attempted to assess the impact of GEAR UP on students' SBAC scores; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic there were years when students did not take the SBAC resulting in large amounts of missing data within the SBAC score variable.

Sensitivity checks including removing free/reduced lunch status and including math and science gpa (see appendices B & C) were conducted all resulting in statistically significant findings supporting evidence that GEAR UP had a positive impact on students' gpa. The most conservative sensitivity check examining if math and science gpa were the main drivers of effects on overall gpa demonstrate that involvement in GEAR UP produced, at a minimum, and increase in gpa by 0.129 units ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion

While it is typically difficult to see programmatic impacts early on (Bausmith & France, 2012; Muraskin, 2003), this study demonstrates the positive impact of GEAR UP on students' middle school grade point average in the earlier years of programming. Additionally, it is important to note that students in the earlier GEAR UP cohort included in this GEAR UP study began the program in sixth grade while typically GEAR UP programs begin in seventh grade (Kim et al., 2024). The findings of this study with students beginning GEAR UP in sixth grade support the notion that early intervention is beneficial for changes in students' grade point averages. Sensitivity checks demonstrate that course specific grade point averages may also contribute to the impact that GEAR UP has on students' gpa; therefore, future studies should

examine if specific types of tutoring services have an impact on students' grade point averages; however, a large sample size within this specific service may be difficult to obtain. Future studies investigating GEAR UP's effects in middle school should also examine student test score data as past research (Cabrera et al., 2006) supports the notion that GEAR UP can support students' performance on standardized tests in comparison to a control group.

CHAPTER FIVE: STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THEIR COLLEGE-GOING NICHE

At a societal level, a complete and clear-cut definition of college-readiness remains unsettled. Even though college-readiness is a concept referenced in policy, practice, and research, each state can develop its own standards for college readiness such as California's A-G requirements or the University of California's Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) (Duncheon, 2015). Current conceptualizations of college readiness are heavily focused on academic outcomes which do not fully capture what it means to be ready for college (Barnes et al., 2010; Roderick et al., 2009). Past research has demonstrated that academic preparation may support students in meeting the societal demand of successfully completing a postsecondary degree; however, academic success through graduation requirements, test scores, and grades may not fully provide students with cognitive strategies or environments that support college readiness (Barnes et al., 2010; Barnes & Slate,. 2013) meaning that students can be academically ready for college, but maybe not socially ready for college.

Scholars who study college-readiness have delved deeper into describing its intricacies by describing college readiness indicators and competencies (Duncheon, 2021). College readiness indicators are academic markers that students are prepared for college such as grade point average, the number of college-preparatory classes a student takes during high school,

standardized test scores, and advanced placement courses (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; DesJardins & Lindsay, 2008; Duncheon, 2021; Iatarola et al., 2011). Researchers in the past have described baseline standardized test scores that would signal a students' readiness for college; however, these tests are less predictive of the success of underrepresented students (Duncheon, 2021; Maruyama, 2012; Niu & Tienda, 2010; Wiley et al., 2010). Research by Barns and colleagues (2010) and Hooker and Brand in the same year argue that college-knowledge (understanding of college admissions processes, selection processes, and other practical college-based information) is also important in supporting students' college readiness through ensuring students can adjust to the differences in post-secondary educational environments (Barnes et al., 2010; Hooker & Brand, 2010). College readiness competencies are cognitively based (e.g., the ability to pass entry level coursework), noncognitive (i.e., characteristic and behaviors that support success such as motivation), and knowledge based (i.e., knowing the expectations and norms of postsecondary education) (Achieve, 2004; Conley, 2003; Duncheon, 2021; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Kitsanta, et al., 2008; Sullivan & Guerra, 2007). College-knowledge encompasses additional skills and strategies (e.g., time management) that can support students' management of coursework and other college-oriented responsibilities, and these skills can be fostered early in settings with a strong college-going culture (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty et al., 2002).

At a school level, building a college-going culture is important for supporting and cultivating students' collegiate goals by making college preparation, application, and enrollment steps explicit through college-oriented discussions (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). A school college-culture can be defined as an overall school culture in which all students are encouraged and adequately prepared to consider going to

college as a future option after high school (McClafferty et al., 2002). A strong college-going culture has been demonstrated to improve outcomes for underrepresented high school students (Aldana, 2014; Allen et al., 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Middle and high schools' college-going cultures can be supported through collaborations between universities and schools (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006) such as the GEAR UP program which shares key information and knowledge regarding college-going to students and families through the services they provide (Bausmith & France, 2012). Research examining student service programs demonstrates their effectiveness. A study by Ward et al., 2013 found that services such as tutoring, social-emotional classroom workshops, college visits, and advising were positively associated with GPA at the end of students' sophomore year of high school. A 2021 study by Kim and colleagues linked tutoring, college visits, and standardized test preparation to an increased likelihood of students' enrollment and persistence in college. What is missing from these studies are students' voices and thoughts specifically regarding their expectations and knowledge of college; additionally, there is a research need to understand and promote synergy between students' contexts (Duncheon, 2021). Getting student feedback and input regarding their perceptions of their experiences with their family's goals and their school's culture may provide insight and opportunity for school and program staff to address incoherence between the anticipated impact of college-going culture building practices and the experienced realities of students. To recognize the importance and value of particular structures – like a college-going culture – and their impact on students' college-going competencies, it is important to understand how diverse groups of youth respond to these structures (Zaff et al., 2017).

This study addressed the following questions:

1) What role do parents/families have within students' college-going process, and how do they communicate and/or demonstrate their college-going expectations, if any, to students?
2) What college competencies and/or indicators do students believe colleges and universities should be focused on to understand if a student is college-ready?
3) How do students from an urban school district within a low-income community perceive the college-going culture at their school?

Method

Two studies were conducted to understand how GEAR UP students in an urban school district within a low-income community are perceiving their college-going niche. These studies used quantitative methods such as descriptive survey analysis and qualitative methods such as student focus groups. The findings from student focus groups were triangulated with student survey data longitudinal to establish trustworthiness (Mathison, 1988). Secondary data was obtained through a memorandum of understanding between the University of California, Irvine Center for Educational Partnerships and school district partner; data usage and additional data collection was approved through Institutional Review Board for Non-Human Subjects and Human Subjects.

Descriptive Survey Analysis

GEAR UP supports its partner district in developing and accessing students' perceptions of a college-going culture through surveys administered at the end of each grant year beginning in the 2018-2019 school year. The survey contains four conceptual domains of academic support, college awareness, college affordability, and college expectations as well as additional questions asking students about their postsecondary goals or questions added by staff to address students'

needs. This study assessed survey data longitudinally from the 2018-2019 through the 2021-2022 school years. The end of year college-going culture surveys administered were developed conceptually, addressing students' views of their college-readiness, college-going culture at their school, and the influence of their families and staff.

The 2018-2019 end of year survey had the most responses (n = 692) while students were in sixth (n = 297) and seventh (n = 395) grade. The 2020-2021 survey had the lowest response rate (n = 98 ninth graders) due to COVID-19 while students were in eighth and ninth grade and experienced challenges during the pandemic that needed to be captured. Lastly, 412 students completed the college-going culture survey in the 2021-2022 school year when students were in ninth (n = 226) and tenth (n = 167) grade. See appendices B, C, & D for students' demographic data aggregated by survey year and grade level and Appendices E, F, & G for the complete lists of survey questions.

End of year survey data was assessed for trends across students' responses and triangulated with data from student focus groups.

Student Focus Groups

Students who were eligible for the focus group study were eighth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students who were being serviced by a UCI GEAR UP grant. Recruitment occurred between November 2023 and February of 2024; the researcher collaborated with program staff to recruit eligible students, posted flyers, and participated in two in class presentations at a school site. Interested students were instructed to complete an interest form providing their parent/legal guardian contact information for parental consent to the study; 38 students expressed interest, and 34 students were eligible (four ninth grade students were not included in the protocol because they were being serviced by another GEAR UP grant through a different university).

Three eighth grade students from the middle school site, 11 eleventh grade students' (six from site one, one from site two, four from site three), and 20 twelfth grade students' (fifteen from site one, two from site two, three from site three) parents/guardians were emailed DocuSign consent forms, then GEAR UP staff followed up in person and electronically with students regarding their consent form. Six parents consented to the study, and two declined (only one parent consented at school site three which was not enough students for a focus group). Five female students, Ivette, Miranda, Marisol, Karlena, and Trinity (pseudonyms), participated in two semi-structured focus groups across two school sites. The focus group at the first site was conducted with one eleventh grader, Marisol, and two twelfth graders, Karlena and Trinity, while the focus group at the second site two was conducted with one 11th grader, Miranda, and one 12th grader, Ivette. Ivette, Marisol, Karlena are Latine, and Trinity and Miranda are Black. The middle school interview protocol was piloted with five students at a middle school partner site.

Measures

The high school focus group protocol and middle school focus group protocols contained 13 and 12 open-ended questions, respectively, with introduction and closing statements; additional questions and/or probes were added during each focus group to allow for probing and ensuring clarity and understanding of participants' responses (see appendices H & I). The high school interview protocol piloted with five students from one of the high school sites and the middle school interview protocol was piloted with five students from the middle school site; both protocols were adjusted based on conversation flow (see appendices J & K for post-pilot reflection memos).

Analytic Strategy

Focus groups were transcribed using an online transcription service and revised for clarity (i.e., the omission of incorrect words generated by the machine transcription service). Transcriptions were analyzed and deductively coded. The parent code “academic socialization” addressed school performance expectation and college messaging students heard. The parent code “capital” addressed notions of human, economic, and social capital as described by Bowman et al., 2018. The parent code “caretakers" was applied in instances where students referenced family/caregivers and school staff. The college-going culture customs and practices code was applied when students mentioned any tenants of a college-going culture described by MacDonald & Dorr, 2006. The code “college readiness” was applied when students referenced college readiness as described by Conley’s framework. Transcripts were coded for community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) if students described aspiration, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistance, or social capital. The code “programming” was applied when students mentioned the GEAR UP program, recommendations for college programming, and how they would design college-going programming. The “settings" code was applied when students described places such as school or their own community/neighborhood. (see appendix K for full codebook). The “surrounding culture” code was used when students referred to general sentiments or beliefs.

Results

Parents/ Family as Brokers of Aspirational Capital

Students were asked if they have easy access to information and resources about college at their school in the 2018-2019 survey to which roughly 82% of respondents (n = 566) agreed, and 91% of respondents (n = 376) agreed in the 2021-2022 survey; however, parents were not left out. Most students indicated that their school was working hard to provide information to their parents and family about preparing for college. In the 2018-2019 survey (n = 454, roughly

67% of students), and three years later 67% (n = 274) of students agreed that their school was providing college information to their parents.

Parents are an integral part of the college-going niche and students enter educational spaces from middle school aware of their families' goals, aspirations, and expectations. In the 2018-2019 survey students were asked if their parents or families expected them to go to college and 92% (*n* = 637) of students agreed that their parents and family expected them to go to college, and Roughly 94% of students (n = 376) indicated that their parents were influential at some level in their decision to apply to college in the 2021-2022 survey. Ivette talked about how her family motivated her:

> Well, for me, I would say like almost all my family has motivated me, especially, I think my parents, especially in elementary, to always do good, get good grades, so you could go to college and everything, but yeah, I think it's because of their motivation, especially from my parents and especially from my grandpa, that I've also like how she said, I self-motivated to always get good grades and always be on top, try to keep up with everything.

Here Ivette spoke about her family's support longitudinally, placing an emphasis on their support early in her educational career before she became self-motivated. Survey results complement Ivette's discussion of her family's early support. Over time families maintained their college going-expectations, and 86% of students (*n* = 356) reported that their parents/family expected them to go to college in the 2021-2022 survey. In the 2021-2022 survey roughly 69% (*n* = 476), reported that their parents/family regularly spoke to them about college, and Marisol shared some thoughts regarding what she experienced:

> [at] school, I find that sometimes [they try] to glorify college a lot where, 'oh, it's going to benefit you,' which it will benefit you, but a lot of people going into college don't have the knowledge that they need to, which ends up with them having bad experiences with it. So, when I talk to family members or I see people on social media, they give out their raw experiences, which is something that is completely different [from] the narrative we're told

Marisol highlighted a point of tension between the college-going messages she received at school in comparison to stories she hears at home or from social media and trusts these messages more; in this instance there were some stark differences within Marisol's college-going niche as she critiqued some messages in her school setting with her response gaining a few nods from the group.

Other students also critiqued subsystems of their college-going niche when it came to the perceived value of those who graduate from college in comparison to those who do not. Only 40% of students (n = 280) reported that a member of their immediate family (i.e., mother, father, sister, or brother) graduated from a 4-year college or university in the 2018-2019 school year which may provide reasoning as to why ratings of college talk between students and families were low, but college going expectations were high. Students were also asked if anyone in their extended family (i.e., aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent) had graduated from a 4-year college or university to which 66% of students (n = 454) responded 'yes.' The survey question asked if individuals had members of their family who had graduated from college; however, focus group participants were asked if they had any family members who attended college, even if they did not finish, and how that impacts their own goals to which Trinity, Marisol, and Karlena had similar responses as future first-generation college students. Trinity said:

> My sister went to college in Texas, and then after a while, she found something else to do, and then my mom and my other sister, they went to community colleges, and then I don't think they finished all the way, so I would say I want to be the person that goes through it all the way…. it makes me want to do it all the way through and actually have something to show.

Trinity has decided to forge her own path ahead, planning to finish her college degree using her family members' experiences to boost her own aspirations. Marisol had a similar experience with her parents and siblings:

> So, my parents and my sisters, they all dropped out of college, they didn't find it was for them. I feel that it doesn't really influence me, instead, what it does is it makes me very open minded. So I feel that there's a lot of prejudice with people who go to college and people who don't, and with having family members who haven't gone or didn't finish it I find that it doesn't make me feel any different about them, so I definitely carry that open mindedness that a person isn't lesser just because they went to college or not, but in that sense, it does like [Trinity] said, it does make me want to go to college and finish it, not just to have something behind my name, but it's for me, and it's what I want to do.

Here Marisol is responding to the surrounding culture and societal perceptions of college-going and is demonstrating the power of interdisciplinary and multi-system models like the developmental niche rejecting the social capitalist argument that her family does not have social capital while heavily leaning into notions of aspirational and resistant capital. Marisol's family are brokers of aspirational capital, and Marisol on her own is building resistant capital in response to how she believes society is negatively viewing her family. Marisol wants people to be open minded regarding why people do not finish college to which Karlena gave some insight:

> Well, me and my sister are both first-generation, so my parents didn't get the experience. My mom, she did say she loved school but didn't get the chance to [go], and then my dad didn't like school, but he didn't get the chance, rather, he liked it or not, but I do have cousins that have gone to school. One of my cousins actually went to a Cal State and then decided it was too hard for her, so she transferred to a community college, and, yeah, she did say it was hard, but she said she still wanted to learn, she still wanted to do a higher education.

Karlena, like many of her peers and even other first-generation students more broadly, understands that even the opportunity to try to go to college is not available to everyone. Karlena and her sister are building their own aspirational capital based on the recognition of their parents' experiences while also learning social and navigational capital regarding the different California college systems through their cousin's experience.

Important Academic Indicators

Students were asked to share their thoughts regarding the college competencies and indicators they wanted to be underscored, but they mainly discussed wanting to be humanized along their college-going journey. Karlena said that "grades are still a good thing to look at…[maybe] essays, like personal statements, are still good to look at…[to] get to know what that student has gone through." Students are shifting to an understanding of improvement in a student's grades as a marker that they are college ready whereas literature on college readiness does not typically focus on improvement, and the main cause of students' shift from grades as a focus to improvement as a focus is due to their experiences during COVID-19 as they transitioned from middle to high school. Trinity described her experience:

> Throughout the pandemic, I would say I had a horrible start of my high school. It was horrible, my grades was really bad, but I had finished 8th grade and I had moved and that's when it had just started and I had moved to somewhere like their whole academics is way higher, so I was on the computer, didn't get anything. I had changed high schools, and I was just on the computer and I was always distracted, and my grades was horrible because I didn't do the work, because I couldn't understand it really….When we came back, my grades had changed a lot for the better, actually, in 10th grade, that's when everything started coming up, and now I get A's and B's. I feel like I want the colleges to know, I know they understand like, when I was in 9th grade, it was COVID so that's not like me getting bad grades because I wanted to get bad grades; I wasn't used to it….[colleges] should be, of course, looking at… like the academic records, and I would also take in take in the factor that even if a student [had] bad grades before, but as they could kind of see that they have improved, I think they should also take that into factor because it shows growth, that they want to go to college and that they're ready and everything'

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the baseline year of GEAR UP and impacted student academic performance. The GEAR UP program implemented a virtual push in tutoring support program to support students' needs during the pandemic as students were struggling with course content while trying to balance their health, interpersonal, and technological needs. The response rate to the end of year survey in the 2020-2021 was low with only 98 student responses; however, these responses shed light on students' experiences during that time. Students experienced a decrease in motivation, feelings of disconnect, loss of family and friends, high amounts of stress and anxiety, negative impacts on their health, an increase of household

responsibilities, loss of family income, and struggles with virtual learning that impacted their academic performance. Students experienced unprecedented levels of stress during key developmental years transitioning from middle school to high school and their focus was on living, not school as Karlena said "[she's] a survivor. [She] was not the best student."

Because of students' struggles with virtual learning, their concerns regarding the strength of their college readiness indicators were evident as roughly a third (n = 32) of students reported in the 2020-2021 survey that they failed one or more classes, like Marisol:

> I don't work well on computers. I get easily distracted; that's why I started failing math. At one point I had Fs in my report card, which was not good, but it was because I wasn't getting that information, that knowledge, and I wasn't interested in it; if I'm not interested in something, I'm not going to want to do it.

Ivette, like other students, also faced challenges with technology, and engagement. In the 2020-2021 survey 56% of participants, *n* = 55, reported a decrease in engagement and motivation. Ivette discussed actively trying to stay motivated saying:

> I do remember online learning. I always I feel like it always repeated…and I guess to me it always felt so draining and like it was like, 'whatever' I guess you could kind of say….I always did make sure to do the work and everything; I [wasn't] like most kids where they just never showed up to zoom or they didn't do the assignments.

What Ivette and others want application readers to understand is that students whose grades declined during the pandemic were not simply because students did not care. Both Trinity and Ivette mentioned the draining nature of online learning, and Karlena made a point to highlight the non-school related aspects of life that impacted her schooling:

> I had personal problems with COVID, people were getting sick; I didn't want to just focus on myself anymore. I feel like I had to worry about being with family more, and then now I mean now my grades are good. I have them back to my A's and B's and my class rank is not where I want it to be, but I'm still in the top ten…even through the struggle going up and down grades, I'm still there, I never gave up just completely just, 'oh, forget about school, I'm going to just have straight F's.'

Karlena wants people to understand how hard it is to maintain grades, and even the desire to care about grades, considering the state of the world. Miranda on the other hand pointed to an issue that does not seem to be as readily discussed: the loss of actively enrolled and engaged students in schools. Miranda and other participants are aware of the term "learning loss," but Miranda discussed the reality of pupil loss:

> I do want to say I did well at my school, I did well in school, I did the work; I wasn't one of those students that just stopped— one of my friends actually dropped out, she didn't go to class, she ended up dropping out, and I think they moved to like somewhere crazy, but whatever. Anyways, I did my work.

Miranda discussed a major issue of drop out and student retention in a swift statement that was not expanded on. Many students struggled to maintain their grades, or dropped out like Miranda's friend, but hoped that colleges and universities would consider their experiences and view their applications holistically while embracing their individuality in addition to their academics. Marisol argues that looking at students' grades does not give the full picture of students' experiences and capabilities:

> …times are changing, I'm sorry to say that it's so cliche to say, but times are changing with the rise of mental health and all of that. You can't just look at a person on paper and

> say, ‘oh, you're not good enough,’ you don't know what I've been through, you don't know my skill set, you don't know anything….because sometimes I'm not just my scores, I'm not just my grades, look at the stuff that I want to do, look at the stuff that I'm doing, such as volunteer work. I feel like that is something that's not advocated enough for in a lot of these applications

From a programmatic standpoint, many students struggled academically during the COVID-19 pandemic and could have benefited from academic services offered by GEAR UP. Students provided feedback regarding tutoring resources provided by GEAR UP which were advertised through flyers, messages to students and families, word of mouth, presentations, and coordinating with teachers to post information. In 2018-2019, 86% (*n* = 592) of respondents indicated on their survey that they agreed that they could get tutoring or help if needed at their school, but yet 79% (n = 467) – 65% (*n* = 304) of whom had a gpa under 2.5 – of these students did not participate in tutoring in the 2018-2019 school year. Roughly 89% (*n* = 367) of students who responded to the 2021-2022 survey agreed that they could receive tutoring and were also asked to indicate if they participated in any tutoring, homework assistance, academic counseling, academic advising, or mentorship provided by GEAR UP. Only 2% (*n* = 82) of students indicated they had participated in a service, but 83% of these students rated tutoring as helpful on a four-point scale (1 not helpful to 4 very helpful) with an average rating of 3.08, and 55% of students who did not participate in tutoring had a gpa of 2.5 or lower. It is evident that tutoring was helpful from students’ responses, but most students did not participate in tutoring even though their GPAs were lower than average, and they had tangible and perceived access to resources. Marisol discussed a reason for why program buy-in may be low:

> it's just that we've never been given these resources, and all of a sudden, we are provided with them, but we're not informed on them, or we don't want to pay attention to them, because, 'hey, they probably don't even want me.' I feel like a lot of people, and I struggle with this, too, undermine their abilities or undermine what they can accomplish so they don't go for things.

What Marisol is responding to is a research need to identify how to enact structural change in high schools serving underrepresented students (Zaff et al., 2017), and I argue that one structural change necessary (as evident by students' responses) are shifts in school culture regarding college-going that are responsive to their developmental needs.

The College-Going Culture: Personnel, Programming, & Recommendations

Students may have concerns regarding their ability to perform academically (i.e., their cognitive college competence), but their motivation (noncognitive college competence) and college knowledge can still be bolstered by interpersonal relationships with school staff such as teachers, counselors, and GEAR UP staff. Students are holding staff in high regard stating that "teachers or counselors or people like that, [are] like a second parent in a sense…they should have parental qualities, not specifically, but just guiding" (Marisol). Marisol is providing support for the notion that teachers and school staff are caregivers as argued in the theoretical section of this dissertation and she is seeking quality relationships with these individuals.

Students' responses demonstrate the importance of high-quality relationships within the college-going niche in which school staff know, support, and care for students. In the 2018-2019 school year, 69% of students (n = 480) agreed on some level that a teacher knew about their goals for the future, and in the 2021-2022 school year roughly 63% of students (n = 260) agreed that at least one of their teachers knew something about their goals for the future. Teachers were

also instrumental in supporting students' postsecondary education goals. At baseline students were asked to choose which adult at their school was most helpful in planning for college out of their teachers, principals, office staff members, coaches, counselors, or "other", and roughly 60% of students (n = 471) selected "teacher." Across grant years, roughly 89% (n = 608) of students in the 2018-2019 school year agreed that they were encouraged, by their teachers, to consider further education after high school, and 87% (n = 357) of students in the 2021-2022 school year agreed that their teachers encouraged them to consider education after high school. Students were also asked in the 2021-2022 survey to rate how influential staff were in their decision to apply to college, and out of the 387 students who rated their teachers' influence on their decision to go to college, 72% of these students (*n* = 280) agreed on some level that their teachers were influential in their decision to apply to college. Teachers handle a lot from classroom management, teaching, administrative tasks and more, but Marisol talked about how easily her teacher would infuse college talk into his classroom and ultimately build a college-going culture:

> [my] teacher, [is] very heavy on college, trade school, your paths of life, and [talks] about what he's gone through at certain points, and it just makes it feel, makes me feel a bit better because it shows that, 'hey, I'm not alone, or if I go through this, I'm not the only person who has.'

Marisol appreciated hearing her teacher's honest experience and reflections as it helps her feel supported. Focus group participants underscored the value of supportive adults at their school and their role in students' college-going decisions via strong interpersonal relationships. At baseline students were asked to indicate if they had at least 1 adult at their school who they could go to for help and personal support, and roughly 77% (n = 535) of students agreed. Students felt that teachers and school staff should be more involved in getting to know each

student and providing them with help and support in a caring role; Marisol stated the following which other students in the group agreed with:

> I feel that a lot of people, they think teenagers are young adults, which we are, but we're young adults who are pushed to be young adults. We still don't know the ways of life. We still don't know how to do certain things, how to handle it, and so sometimes we want our hands to be held through a process. We're still learning, we're not going to know everything, and so it makes me feel accepted or valued when they're going through these experiences with me, and again, they don't make me feel like I'm lesser for not knowing because honestly, I hear a lot of comments of, 'oh, you should already know that, or, why don't you do that,' and it's like, you know what, 'I've never done this before and you expect me to know it,' so just having them there is just, you know what? It just makes me feel like, 'hey, now I know how to do it,' and it just encourages you to push yourself more.

Students discussed how they are expected to build their own navigational and social capital during the college-going process but are requesting more support from their school community. The responsibility of building close relationships with students at school is not solely on teachers as students also described the importance of school counseling staff and indicated that counselors were influential in their decision to apply to college in the 2021-2022 survey (roughly 75% of students, n = 286). Counselors were instrumental in helping students gain college knowledge, particularly during the application process for Ivette:

> I think because of the help from the school, the counselors, [applications were] easier because I'm pretty sure if I was doing it by myself I would be very lost, but I also feel that I do know two people who went to college who applied, so I feel like I would definitely

> get their support if I didn't have support from the school, but overall, I'm really happy that the school was really, like, I guess you could say, honest about the applications, because I feel like it just helped out a lot

The district that these students are in is unique because not only do high school students have accessible counseling staff, but also college preparation staff and centers dedicated to college and career services at their schools. Students found support within their school's college and career center in which the GEAR UP program operates and rated their GEAR UP coordinator's influence on their decision to apply to college. Out of 354 students, 70% of students (n = 240) agreed that their GEAR UP coordinator had an influence on their decision to go to college. Students who had higher ratings of their GEAR UP coordinator's influence on their decision to go to college reported more interactions with their GEAR UP coordinator than those who had lower ratings of their GEAR UP coordinator's influence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students who agreed and strongly agreed that their GEAR UP coordinator was influential in their decision to go to college were the students who met with their coordinator the most. One concern of program evaluation is the amount of dosage necessary to produce programmatic impact; however, a majority of students who agreed that their GEAR UP coordinator had influence on their decision to go to college met with their coordinator two to three times (n = 71) demonstrating that frequency of interactions with GEAR UP personnel may not be as important as the quality of interactions; however, as Miranda commented, the more students interact with staff the better:

> you can find somebody available in [the college center], somebody will give you something, sometimes you can go somewhere and nobody will give you anything, and it's kind of like, if you go in [the college center], there's at least one person that can tell you,

> ‘no, she's not here, come back,’ or ‘she's here;’ just like, somebody can give you something, and I think that happening repeatedly maybe makes me want to go there more because I know that I can at least talk to somebody and get an idea of getting my question answered or they can’t answer my question. I just think it's like a thing of trust that builds up as you meet or as you go there or meet with those people.

Trinity, who attended a different school from Miranda, mentioned similar appreciation of the college center staff for their helpful nature:

> I didn't know much about where I [could] go and actually talk to people, here they actually have the college center, and the kids are way comfortable going in there, and I never actually had an experience like that. Also, you can go in there to ask any questions about anything, [and] they'll give you, like [Marisol] said, they'll give you a one-on-one explanation, or anything that you need to know. It makes you feel like when you do have questions about stuff, you go, and they'll tell you what you need to know.”

Miranda and Trinity emphasized repeated quality interactions with staff that made them trust the college and career center staff more. One of the ways students had quality interactions with GEAR UP staff was through mentoring in which students routinely engaged with GEAR UP staff. In the 2021-2022 school year students were asked to indicate if they participated in tutoring, homework help, academic counseling/advising, or mentorship through GEAR UP. Out of the 82 students who reported participating in mentorship in the 2021-2022 school year, 98% of students rated mentoring as helpful in some way (n = 64). Students were asked about the specific characteristics and qualities that they appreciated when interacting with GEAR UP staff to which Marisol responded:

> I honestly think my favorite thing about this school, because as much as you can trash on this school, like, ‘oh, we don't have such good education systems,’ which are all fair comments to make, my favorite thing about the school...was the college center primarily because I feel like in movies we see, and social media, we see a lot of teachers just be like one, just one mindset or ‘just college is good, college is good, college is good,’ but something that I love about this school is that the college center .... [it] is a place where you get raw experiences. If you sit and you talk to [GEAR UP coordinator] or if you sit and talk to, sometimes when [GEAR UP community coordinator] is here, I talk to her or [staff] or just anyone in that room, they'll tell you their experience, like, ‘hey, transferring is hard, like, yeah, it's a pain in the butt,’ or ‘I signed up for this major, but I didn't like it so I transferred to this major,’ and they just give you such a raw experience where you feel like you're with that person, and it's, they make it they make it, it’s a safe space for you to ask questions, and you don't feel dumb for asking those questions, which is something I really value and appreciate because I know that a lot of people suffer from anxiety or just talking to people in general, and it's because of past experiences where they don't feel safe.

Marisol and her peers appreciated the non-judgmental nature of staff who were open to supporting students’ goals, college-oriented or otherwise. While Marisol’s perception of the quality of her education held critiques, she appreciated the access to college preparatory programs and staff. What was interesting to note, however, was that students were not able to describe the GEAR UP program but maintained that access to the program and its staff were important. Students could name GEAR UP staff, but described the program at surface level, for example, one student mentioned that they could only describe GEAR UP based on the IRB study

information sheet; even Karlena, a student who frequently interacted with GEAR UP staff, struggled to describe the program:

> we got added [to GEAR UP] in 8th grade, and the first person we met was, I don't know if you know him, but we called him [past coordinator]. So we met him first and we got pulled into a classroom and he was telling us everything about the program, but I don't remember anything he told me, and the thing is, we got asked this on our college applications when I put my extracurriculars or clubs that I'm in, they asked, 'what is GEAR UP,' and I was like, 'what is GEAR UP,' I'm like, what is it? I'm like, yeah, I know I come in here to the college center and I talk to [community coordinator] or I talk to [coordinator] about college and stuff, but I'm like, is that what they're supposed to be doing or am I just coming in here, and making them help me? I do understand they're here to help me if I want to join different programs .... but I know they're just here to offer us new opportunities, get us through school, just if we need any help in general.

From these students' perspective, they know they're just there to talk to someone who has been helping them, pointing back to a relationship that was cultivated over time with these students; these students described frequent interactions with GEAR UP staff by name, but still were hesitant to describe what the GEAR UP program was. Students talked about how comfortable they felt interacting with GEAR UP staff saying, **"**they don't make you feel dumb" (Marisol),"if they don't know [something] they'll look it up, they'll go talk with someone else, like you're going to go together with them...they go more personal, you feel comfortable asking them questions" (Karlena). Miranda also said that because GEAR UP staff are "closer to our age, they're easier to relate to. I know they're in college and I know they don't mind if I ask a certain

question about their experience; it seems very honest and genuine, and I can just kind of ask whatever questions are on my mind."

Students who were actively engaged in meetings with their GEAR UP coordinator benefited from those interactions, but there were still students who were not engaged for various reasons. In the 2021-2022 survey 28% of students (n = 44) said they did not meet with their GEAR Up coordinator because they were not aware that they had one, did not know where to find their coordinator, did not know meeting their coordinator outside of a classroom workshop was an option, or did not believe they were in GEAR UP. Another 28% of students (n = 44) said they did not meet with their GEAR UP coordinator, but they were not sure why. Only 14% of students (n = 23) responded that they did not meet with their GEAR UP coordinator because they actively chose not to; some of these students did not think they needed tutoring or extra, so they did not meet with their coordinator, other students said they were not going to college and did not need to meet with a coordinator. Marisol shed light on the disconnect between information and access, and students' perceptions of information and access:

> because everyone is automatically added [into GEAR UP], I feel like there's a lot of people who don't even know what GEAR UP does, or is, including myself to an extent. I know that you guys are here for college applications and applications to anything and to help us, and I also know that you guys come from UC Irvine, but I think that's the general information that everybody knows, and that's about the only information I know, which is kind of embarrassing to say

Discussion

Speaking with students about their experiences, values, and goals is important for fostering strong relationships that they are seeking and understanding how to value their families

as sources of cultural wealth. Understanding the components of strong relationships and healthy attachment for minoritized high school students from low-income communities to their caretakers (i.e., parents, teachers, and staff) is crucial as the risk for negative relationships is higher for older and minoritized students from low-income communities (McGrath & van Bergen, 2014). Students' experiences with attachment to their parents/guardians can impact future attachment with their teachers (McGrath & van Bergen, 2014); therefore, understanding students' connections to their homes and communities is important. For example, recall the student who suggested that staff guide students in a parental manner; this student has had a positive experience with their parents and is seeking the same at school. Though scholars in the past have discussed how first-generation Latine college students may not receive support from their families to attend college (Martinez, 2018; Thayer, 2000) this was not the case for participants in this study as these students discussed how their parents' expectations and aspirations helped them to frame their own desires.

Students were aware of college readiness indicators such as grades and test scores which is typical (Duncheon, 2021; Porter & Polikoff, 2012); however, students had several contentions with how grades and test scores are examined. While discussing the college readiness indicators students believed colleges and universities should focus on within students' applications, students raised conversation and concerns regarding the negative impact of COVID-19 and distance learning on their academic performance. Understanding how high school students view their academic readiness for college is important because negative perceptions of readiness can lead to self-doubt; however, research studies that examine high school students' perceptions of their readiness for college are limited (Boden, 2011; Duncheon, 2021). Ultimately, it is important to

understand how students are conceptualizing and thinking about college readiness because it can impact how they persist through undergraduate education (Duncheon; Nagaoka et al., 2013).

While prior academic achievement is related to future success, relationships between students and teachers can impact students' behavioral, social, and emotional development as well as their academic performance as students are more motivated academically and more engaged when they feel a sense of relatedness to their teachers (Beyooki et al., 2020; Bryan et al., 2012; McGrath & van Bergen, 2014). Interactions between students and teachers can foster students' sense of belonging and attachment to school (e.g., an individual's relationship to school) (Beyooki et al., 2020; de Castro & Pereria, 2019; Isik et al., 2018) as well as interactions between programmatic staff and students like students in the focus groups mentioned. Although high school students are at a developmental stage of increasing autonomy and dependence on peers, they still may seek guidance from school staff such as teachers for emotional support (McGrath & van Bergen, 2014). While scholars in the past have described how students felt the need to be on their own, or independent, during the college-process (Boden, 2011), these students wanted the opposite seeking closer relationships and more guidance.

In a strong college-going culture, MacDonald & Dorr, 2006 describe "comprehensive counseling" which is what GEAR UP students experienced even if they did not understand what specific type of service was provided. Students in this study knew they had staff available for support and guidance even if these college-going practices such as college talk, and mentoring seemed insignificant to students. This study supports the notion that deeply ingrained practices may seem mundane to the person embedded in the culture – in this case the college-going culture– but not to an outsider (Super & Harkness, 2021) such as a researcher analyzing data for themes using theoretical frameworks. Additionally, students viewed the role of counselors and

teachers as a caregiver citing that these individuals should have parental qualities which further reinforces that the developmental niche is a useful framework for understanding the college-going experiences of students from low-income communities because they view school staff in such an esteemed manner. A study by Boden in 2011 examined how students created their education plan to attend college and who these students included in making those plans. Students included family members and school staff in their education plans; however, whoever was included in the process "became part of the students' extended family" (Boden, 2011, pp. 102) pointing to the strong bonds between staff and students that can be created during the college-going process as part of students' college-going niche.

Limitations

Several limitations to these studies must be addressed. Discrepancies in survey sample sizes limited the ability for the analysis across whole cohorts over time or even individual students over time. Additionally, because survey data uses student reports, it may not be completely accurate as some students did not recall participating in GEAR UP services or being a student in the GEAR UP program. Lastly, survey results from the 2021-2022 are skewed due to lack of responses from a school site impacted by staff turnover, and low survey response rates may affect the generalizability of the survey data.

A small sample size within student focus groups minimizes the generalizability of findings; therefore, findings were presented in tandem with survey results. One possible explanation for small focus groups' sizes is recruitment. The recruitment call for this study (see appendix M) had the study title "Three Studies Regarding the Impact of GEAR UP Services" and invited students to give feedback regarding the program and notions of college readiness which could have

discouraged students from applying if, again, students do not know they are in the GEAR UP program, and if students do not want to go to college.

Conclusion

It is evident through students' responses that they care about how they are treated regardless of the information, resources, and personnel available to them; while this idea is not new, its importance cannot be understated. For example, students often recall stories about teachers who are caring and kind rather than the nuance of their curriculum (Robinson, 2022; Thompson et al., 2004). Research on the quality of relationships between students and school staff have typically focused on teachers; however, the warmth and closeness embedded within high quality student-teacher relationships (Robinson, 2002) is necessary for relationships between students and all school staff. Developing strong relationships with students is not easy (Sabol & Pianta, 2012): however, it is the duty of teachers and staff to build these relationships (Robinson, 2022). In this study students described the importance of relationships with school staff and what they want in those relationships: judgment-free conversations and guidance regardless of whether their plans included postsecondary education or not to foster a sense of trust between themselves and staff.

Schools can begin building college-going cultures even when students are in middle school and providing information to students *and* families about college is important for ensuring that knowledge is shared across the different settings students may find themselves in. To support students in being "ready" for college it is important that college access programs and personnel support students' development of navigational capital while fostering their aspirational and familial capital. Students are voicing the desire for more support and clarity regarding how to address a momentous undertaking such as attending college.

CHAPTER SIX: OVERALL DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the body of research evaluating GEAR UP through a research-practice partnership framework. Research-practice partnerships are long-term mutually beneficial collaborations between researchers and practitioners geared towards educational equity to improve outcomes and shift power dynamics in research (Farrell et al., 2021). This study contributes to a shift in research power dynamics by including the recommendations and voices of students regarding college readiness and college-access programming.

The GEAR UP program was designed to increase the number of students from low income communities that access undergraduate education, and in recent years, the National Council for Community and Educational Partnerships has redefined the set of GEAR UP goals such as raising postsecondary readiness and expectations of students, improving rates of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary institutions, and increasing student and family knowledge of postsecondary options, financing, and preparation (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, n.d.). Many students within the district, like most of those who participated in the focus groups, are first-generation students and the perspectives of these students have not been adequately captured through research even though they are most targeted by college-readiness reform and policy (Duncheon, 2021; Nagaoka et al., 2013). The results of this study have implications for theory, research, and practice providing an applied view of developmental theory and recommendations and considerations for college access staff and school staff seeking to immerse students in a college-going culture to support their college readiness.

Access and Knowledge of Resources

The GEAR UP program provides students with resources early on in their academic career to support students' college readiness. This study evaluated a seven year, ongoing, GEAR UP partnership program that positively impacted students' gpa. Students who graduate high school and are considered prepared for college take advantage of programs such as GEAR UP in addition to other extracurricular activities and maintaining good academic standing (Contreras & Fujimoto, 2019). The GEAR UP program provided academic support services such as tutoring; however, some students did not engage in the use of these resources. Coupled with the need for access and knowledge of resources is the need for college readiness support to begin earlier than the traditional path of considering college readiness when students are in high school. Starting to address students' college readiness in middle school provides students with the opportunity to begin thinking about their future aspirations and begin building relationships with staff who can broker college-knowledge with students.

Relationships as Salient Features of a Strong College-Going Culture

It is important to understand the intricacies of student-school relationships because they positively impact student development and support students' academic achievement and college readiness (Bryan et al., 2012). Students in this study recognized the need for strong interpersonal relationships between students and school staff citing being non-judgmental, open-minded, and kind to students were some of the foundational characteristics of supportive staff that students would want to engage with. Getting feedback from students on the types of relationships and support they are seeking and would feel most comfortable with is important for gaining student buy-in to programming as students engage and respond to their environments based on their experiences and expectations (Spencer, 2006; Zaff et al., 2017). Students reported and described the impact and influence of supportive student-staff relationships which demonstrates that bonds

between students and teachers may be more important than previously thought, particularly with college programming staff. Strong relationships between students and quality programmatic staff can help arrange for students to build their capital and community cultural wealth.

Centering Student Voices

Centering student voices in program evaluation offers the opportunity for swift and relevant changes in programming brought about by students' experiences. For example, because of students' experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, students pushed for the need to expand notions of college readiness. Students want to be humanized understanding that their accomplishments and school performance will be reviewed by admissions officers, but with the understanding that students are more than just grades on a page. Students hoped that colleges would look at their transcripts and see their growth over time. Students discussed in focus groups how students may have access to support programming but may not be aware their access, demonstrating the need for not only access to resources, but knowledge as well (recall, even some students responded through surveys that they did not meet with the GEAR UP counselor because they were not aware that they had one or incorrectly stated that they did not have one).

Implications

The implications of this study are best described by students themselves:

> I just feel like coming from a community like this, it needs more involvement with the students, they just need to be heard, we need to be heard, that's it. Because we're talking and nobody's listening; it's just talking to a wall, and it's made students and it's made myself believe that 'if I talk, you're not going to listen so why should I be involved and why should I care what you say?

Marisol's comment, research, and this dissertation demonstrate a specific need: college-going discussions need to be more student centered. By centering college-going discussions and research on student experiences we gain insight regarding the personnel students feel most bonded to include students voice in research that contributes to policy that impacts students' lives, and aid programming staff in understanding students' needs in deeper and insightful ways.

The conceptualization of college readiness occurred without direct input from students and sorts them into categories (i.e., college ready or not) which can impact the ways students view themselves (Mitra, 2004). Students are part of the educational stakeholder community that are typically not included in policy decision making that influences broader education goals; however, including students in education research and evaluation can foster positive developmental trajectories for students, and provide feedback from the perspective of those directly impacted by educational policies or decisions (Arnold & Cater, 2011; Bertrand et al., 2018; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

It is important to acknowledge that every interaction with students contains elements of power imbalances when including student voices in research (Fielding, 2001). Richards-Schuster & Elliott (2019) outlines the ways in which youth can have different research and evaluation roles such as evaluative consultants, collaborators, partners, or leaders. Youth who are leaders in research and evaluation design all aspects of evaluation, those who are partners share some decision-making power, collaborators hold some decision-making power outside of evaluation, and youth consultants can provide input and advice, but do not make evaluative decisions (Richards-Schuster & Elliott, 2019). Including student voice in research can support students' sense of agency as well as encouraging students to raise equity issues that may not be previously thought of (Mitra, 2004). Students in this study want their voices and opinions to be heard at

school and within the college-access field. Students want school staff to spend time getting to know students, their experiences, and support their goals and aspirations. Students in this study want more support in the college going process and to have relationships with school staff who make them feel comfortable. At a societal level, students do not want to be viewed as monolithic; they are aware of the stereotypes and expectations of minoritized students in their communities and are citing that students who succumb to these stereotypes may disengage from programming or pursuing resources.

The GEAR UP program is a seven-year grant cycle which is long; however, it is not forever. The practical implications of including students' perspectives in college access programming design, implementation, and evaluation include building, maintaining, and sustaining college-going attitudes and cultures long after the program has ended. The survey and focus group processes of getting student feedback in real time is important for programmatic staff. Program staff can use student feedback to provide services that students will be more likely to engage in (since the idea came from their peers) and staff have access to school district leaders who can implement changes based on feedback. from students who may not be able to advocate for themselves. Lastly, programmatic staff can share what they learn from student feedback with other college access programs to ensure best practices that contribute to better student outcomes.

Future Directions

Scholars have recommended investigating college readiness within urban settings citing that students' perspectives may support culturally relevant notions of college readiness due to the fact that current frameworks are class and race neutral (Castro, 2013; Duncheon, 2021; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; Welton & Martinez, 2014); however, much like the findings of a study by Duncheon in 2021, most students' perspectives regarding what is necessary to support students'

college readiness were “culturally neutral” (Duncheon, 2021, pp. 1381). Future studies should take an overt critical approach to investigating students’ perceptions of culturally relevant college readiness frameworks to elicit nuanced responses from students. This study presents a case of an urban school district in partnership with the GEAR UP program that is cultivating a college-going culture with resources, information (e.g., college counseling, university partnerships), and opportunities (e.g., dual enrollment) that most underrepresented students within urban districts do not have access to (Duncheon, 2021; McKillip et al., 2012; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011). Participants in this study who participated in dual enrollment discussed their experience in depth after the focus group providing rich descriptions of their experience which future studies should seek to understand to strengthen the creation, applicability, and sustainment of dual enrollment programs within urban districts.

Conclusion

The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs federal grant program is a special case for understanding the needs of low-income students from diverse backgrounds. Through rigorous research involving difference-in-difference inspired analysis, rich descriptive analyses, and in-depth students focus groups the recommendations from students and needs are clear: college access programs need to provide information and resources that are useful to students while maintaining relationships with students by involving their feedback in decision making.

This study examines how students from low-income communities are perceiving their college-going niche and responds to calls for educational stakeholders to understand and promote synergy between students’ contexts (e.g., school, home community) and to identify how to enact structural change in high schools serving underrepresented students (Duncheon, 2021; Zaff et al.,

2017). This study demonstrates the importance of the GEAR UP program and its positive impacts on student performance beginning in middle school, underscores the notion that the positive perception of college-going culture within school contexts is dependent on the presence of supportive relationships, and demonstrates the necessity that educational stakeholders must include high school students' voices in discourse to understand their experiences (Duncheon, 2021).

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Appendix A
Standardized Regression & Sensitivity Checks

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA

ATET	
treatment (1 vs 0)	**0.186*** **
Robust Standard Error	0.035
95% Confidence Interval	[0.118, 0.254]

Note. ATET (average treatment effect on the treated) adjusted for covariates, panel effects, and time effects.

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA (Free/Reduced Lunch Removed)

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA

ATET	
treatment (1 vs 0)	**0.185*** **
Robust Standard Error	0.035
95% Confidence Interval	[0.117, 0.253]

Note. ATET (average treatment effect on the treated) adjusted for covariates, panel effects, and time effects.

Appendix B
Unstandardized Regression & Sensitivity Checks

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Unstandardized GPA (Free/Reduced Lunch Removed)

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA	
ATET	
treatment (1 vs 0)	**0.163*** **
Robust Standard Error	0.030
95% Confidence Interval	[0.103, 0.222]

Note. ATET (average treatment effect on the treated) adjusted for covariates, panel effects, and time effects.

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Unstandardized GPA (Math and Science GPA)

Average Effect of GEAR UP on Students' Standardized GPA	
ATET	
treatment (1 vs 0)	**0.129*** **
Robust Standard Error	0.029
95% Confidence Interval	[0.072, 0.186]

Note. ATET (average treatment effect on the treated) adjusted for covariates, panel effects, and time effects.

Appendix C

2018-2019 College-Going Culture Survey

2018-2019 College-Going Culture Survey Demographics

***N* = 692**

	6th Grade	7th Grade
Gender		
Male	45%	44%
Female	55%	56%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	85%	82%
Non-Hispanic	15%	18%
Race		
Native American or Alaskan Native, American Indian or Alaskan Native	19%	14%
Asian, Filipino, Other Asian	1%	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Samoan	1%	1%
Black or African American	15%	18%
White (not Hispanic)	1%	1%
White & Hispanic	54%	55%
Hispanic*	8%	10%

Unknown	2%	1%
Free/ Reduced Lunch		
Yes	32%	36%
No	68%	64%
Average GPA	2.8	2.6
English Language Fluency		
English Only	31%	32%
Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP)	3%	4%
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	26%	24%
Redesignated	39%	40%
Individualized Learning Plan		
Yes	4%	4%
No	96%	96%
Homelessness		
Yes	5%	5%
No	95%	94%
Foster Status		
Yes	1%	1%
No	99%	98%
Total	297	395

Note. Students were allowed to select "Hispanic" as a racial category and ethnicity.

Appendix D

2020-2021 College-Going Culture Survey

2020-2021 College-Going Culture Survey Demographics

***N* = 98**

	9th Grade
Gender	
Male	36%
Female	64%
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	90%
Non-Hispanic	10%
Race	
Native American or Alaskan Native, American Indian or Alaskan Native	17%
Asian, Filipino, Other Asian	0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Samoan	0%
Black or African American	10%
White (not Hispanic)	0%
White & Hispanic	61%
Hispanic*	2%
Unknown	9%
Free/ Reduced Lunch	
Yes	84%
No	10%

Average GPA	3.5
English Language Fluency	
English Only	21%
Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP)	4%
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	5%
Redesignated	69%
Individualized Learning Plan	
Yes	2%
No	98%
Homelessness	
Yes	0%
No	100%
Foster Status	
Yes	0%
No	100%

Note. Students were allowed to select "Hispanic" as a racial category and ethnicity.

Appendix E

2021-2022 College-Going Culture Survey

2021-2022 College-Going Culture Survey Demographics

***N* = 412**

	9th Grade	10th Grade
Gender		
Male	128	82
Female	106	92
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	187	145
Non-Hispanic	47	29
Race		
Native American or Alaskan Native, American Indian or Alaskan Native	37	20
Asian, Filipino, Other Asian	1	1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Samoan	2	0
Black or African American	44	30
White (not Hispanic)	1	0
White & Hispanic	130	98
Hispanic*	9	20
Unknown	10	5
Free/ Reduced Lunch		

Yes	157	141
No	77	33
Average GPA	2.6	2.9
English Language Fluency		
English Only	79	49
Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP)	8	2
Reclassified Fluent English Proficient	103	93
English Learner	37	24
Individualized Learning Plan		
Yes	11	8
No	216	161
Homelessness		
Yes	2	2
No	225	167
Foster Status		
Yes	1	2
No	226	167

Note. Students were allowed to select "Hispanic" as a racial category and ethnicity.

Appendix F

2018-2019 College-Going Culture Survey

2018-2019 College-Going Culture Survey Items

Likert-Scale Questions (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

My teachers are committed to making sure that I succeed, academically.

My teachers provide me with information on how I can become a higher achieving student.

I can get tutoring and other help if I am having trouble in school.

My teachers are clear about what they expect from me.

My teachers are fair about how they grade me.

I have the opportunity to do assignments and projects about interesting topics in class.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future education.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future career.

My teachers know my academic strengths.

My teachers know where I could improve, academically.

My teachers show that they are interested in my academic success.

I have at least 1 adult at this school who I can go to for help and personal support.

At least 1 of my teachers knows something about my goals for the future.

My teachers have encouraged me to consider college or further education after high school.

At this school, I have easy access to information and resources about college.

My classes are helping me learn the study skills I need to be successful in college.

My classes are helping me learn the time management skills needed to be successful in college.

My teachers are helping me learn the steps involved in applying for college.

I know about the classes (A-G requirements) I need to take in high school, in order to be eligible for college.

I know about the availability of governmental financial aid that will help me and my family pay for college.

This school is working hard to inform my parents/family about preparing for college.

My parents/family expect me to go to college.

My parents/family regularly talk to me about college.

I will be prepared to enter college when I graduate from high school.

On a scale of 1 to 4, how knowledgeable are you about the costs and benefits of Financial Aid?

Do you think that you could afford to attend a public 4-year college using financial aid, scholarships, and your family's resources?

Additional Items

Item	Response Choices
Which adult at your school is most helpful to you in planning for college? - Selected Choice	Assistant principal, Coach, Counselor, Principal, Someone else (specify), Teacher
This school year, have you participated in after-school tutoring?	
This school year, have you participated in any of the following college readiness activities? (Check all that apply)	College Fair, Visit to school college Center, School assembly about college, College visit/field trip, financial aid workshop/training, classroom guest speaker talking about college
What are your plans immediately after high school graduation? (Check all that apply) - Selected Choice	Attend a trade/vocational school, Attend a 2-year community college, Attend a 4-year college or university, Attend a 2 or 4 year college, Find a full-time job, Find a part-time job, Join the military, Other, I don’t know
Has anyone in your immediate family (mother, father, sister, brother) graduated from a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No
Has anyone in your extended family (aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent) graduated from a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No

What is the highest level of education that you expect to obtain?	High school diploma, Some college/ 2-year certificate, 4 year college degree, Graduate degree (i.e., Masters, PhD, MD)

Appendix G

2020-2021 College-Going Culture Survey

2020-2021 College-Going Culture Survey Items

Likert-Scale Questions (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

AS2 My teachers provide me with information on how I can become a higher achieving student.

I can get tutoring and other help if I am having trouble in school.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future education.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future career.

My teachers know my academic strengths.

At least 1 of my teachers knows something about my goals for the future.

My teachers know where I could improve, academically.

My teachers show that they are interested in my academic success.

My teachers have encouraged me to consider college or further education after high school.

My school is working hard to inform my parents/family about preparing for college.

My parents/family expect me to go to college.

My parents/family regularly talk to me about college.

I will be prepared to enter college when I graduate from high school.

At this school, I have easy access to information and resources about college.

My classes are helping me learn the study skills I need to be successful in college.

My classes are helping me learn the time management skills needed to be successful in college.

My teachers are helping me learn the steps involved in applying for college.

I know about the classes (A-G requirements) I need to take in high school, in order to be eligible for college.

I know about the availability of governmental financial aid that will help me and my family pay for college.

Additional Items

Item	Response Choices
What are your plans immediately after high school graduation? (Check all that apply) - Selected Choice	Attend a trade/vocational school, Attend a 2-year community college, Attend a 4-year college or university, Attend a 2 or 4 year college, Find a full-time job, Find a part-time job, Join the military, Other, I don't know
What is the highest level of education that you expect to obtain?	High school diploma, Some college/ 2-year certificate, 4 year college degree, Graduate degree (i.e., Masters, PhD, MD)
Please indicate how knowledgeable you are about the A-G requirements	Not knowledgeable, A little knowledgeable, Knowledgeable, Extremely Knowledgeable
Please indicate how knowledgeable you are about how Financial Aid works	Not knowledgeable, A little knowledgeable, Knowledgeable, Extremely Knowledgeable
Do you think that you could afford to attend a public 4-year college using Financial Aid, scholarships, and your family's resources?	Definitely not, Probably not, I'm not sure, Probably, Definitely
Have your parents/guardians graduated from a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No
Have any of your siblings (brothers/sisters) graduated from, or are currently attending, a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No
How influential are the following people on your decision to apply to college?	My parents, Teachers, GEAR UP staff, School counselors, Friends, Siblings/cousins/other family members, Coach(es)
Approximately how many times will you meet with your GEAR UP coordinator this year?	1 time, 2-3 times, 4-5 times, 6-10 times, More than 10 times, None
(If "none" is selected)	Briefly explain why you indicated you will not meet with your GEAR UP Coordinator this year
If you are considering attending college, how important are each of the following reasons for applying, when thinking about your top college choice:	Not important, Slightly important, Moderately important, Very important

Distance from home, Affordability, My friends applying there, My parents/guardians wanting me to apply there, My GEAR UP coordinator wants me to apply there, It is the best academic match college (the college best for you based on GPA and test scores), It is the best personal fit college (school culture, student body make-up, size, location, major)	
How has COVID-19 directly impacted your life? (Check all that apply)	Challenges with virtual learning, Feeling disconnected from my peers, Lost a family member and/or friend to COVID-19, Negative impact on my health (physical and/or mental), Increase in family responsibilities (i.e. helping sibling(s) with remote learning), Decrease or loss of household income (i.e. parent/guardian laid off from work), Other
How has COVID-19 impacted your learning? (Check all that apply)	Lack of learning resources (internet quality/availability, computers, etc.), Lack of learning space for virtual class/studying, Decrease in live interactions with my teachers, Less engaged in my school work, Other
How has remote learning affected your college preparedness?	I have experienced a decrease in motivation, It has made an impact on my family's ability to pay for college, Remote learning has not affected my college preparedness, Other

Appendix H

2021-2022 College-Going Culture Survey

2022-2022 College-Going Culture Survey Items

Likert-Scale Questions (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

AS2 My teachers provide me with information on how I can become a higher achieving student.

I can get tutoring and other help if I am having trouble in school.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future education.

My classes show how the things I am learning will be useful in my future career.

My teachers know my academic strengths.

At least 1 of my teachers knows something about my goals for the future.

My teachers know where I could improve, academically.

My teachers show that they are interested in my academic success.

My teachers have encouraged me to consider college or further education after high school.

My school is working hard to inform my parents/family about preparing for college.

My parents/family expect me to go to college.

My parents/family regularly talk to me about college.

I will be prepared to enter college when I graduate from high school.

At this school, I have easy access to information and resources about college.

My classes are helping me learn the study skills I need to be successful in college.

My classes are helping me learn the time management skills needed to be successful in college.

My teachers are helping me learn the steps involved in applying for college.

I know about the classes (A-G requirements) I need to take in high school, in order to be eligible for college.

I know about the availability of governmental financial aid that will help me and my family pay for college.

Additional Items

Item	Response Choices
What are your plans immediately after high school graduation? (Check all that apply) - Selected Choice	Attend a trade/vocational school, Attend a 2-year community college, Attend a 4-year college or university, Attend a 2 or 4 year college, Find a full-time job, Find a part-time job, Join the military, Other, I don't know
What is the highest level of education that you expect to complete?	High school diploma, Some college/ 2-year certificate, 4 year college degree, Graduate degree (i.e., Masters, PhD, MD)
How many colleges (2 and 4-year) do you plan to apply to?	1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7 or more, I don't know
Have your parents/guardians graduated from a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No
Have any of your siblings (brothers/sisters) graduated from, or are currently attending, a 4-year college or university?	Yes, No
How often do you talk with your friends about going to college?	Always (weekly), Often (2-3 times a month), Sometimes (about once a month), Rarely (several times a year), Almost never or never (5)
How influential are the following people on your decision to apply to college?	My parents, Teachers, GEAR UP staff, School counselors, Friends/peers, Siblings/cousins, Coach(es)
If you are considering attending college, how important are each of the following reasons for applying, when thinking about your top college choice: Distance from home, Affordability, My friends applying there, My parents/guardians wanting me to apply there, My GEAR UP coordinator wants me to apply there, It is the best academic match college (the college best for you based on GPA and test scores), It is the best personal fit college (school	Not important, Slightly important, Moderately important, Very important

culture, student body make-up, size, location, major)	
Please indicate how knowledgeable you are about how Financial Aid works	Not knowledgeable, A little knowledgeable, Knowledgeable, Extremely Knowledgeable
Do you think that you could afford to attend a public 4-year college using Financial Aid, scholarships, and your family's resources?	Definitely not, Probably not, I'm not sure, Probably, Definitely
Roughly, how much do you think it costs each year (including tuition, books, housing, and food) to attend a California State University (CSU)?	$10,000-$20,000, $20,001-$30,000, $30,001-$40,000, $40,001-$50,000, I have no idea
Roughly, how much do you think it costs each year (including tuition, books, housing, and food) to attend a University of California (UC)?	$10,000-$20,000, $20,001-$30,000, $30,001-$40,000, $40,001-$50,000, I have no idea
Please indicate your level of knowledge about the following Financial Aid factors. Remember, there are no wrong answers	The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), The availability of free money for college (grants/scholarships), The availability of money to borrow for college (loans)
During this school year (2021-22), did you participate in any GEAR UP tutoring, homework help, academic counseling/advising, or mentorships?	Yes, No
Please rate the following GEAR UP services based on their level of helpfulness	Tutoring/Homework Help, Academic Counseling/Advising, Mentorship
Approximately how many times have you met with your GEAR UP coordinator this year?	1 time, 2-3 times, 4-5 times, 6-10 times, More than 10 times, None
(If "none" is selected)	Briefly explain why you indicated you will not meet with your GEAR UP Coordinator this year

Appendix I
High School Student Focus Group Interview Protocol

Statement to Participants:
My name is Ashlee Belgrave, you can call me Ms. Ashlee, and I am a student at UCI in the School of Education working to understand what students think about college.

I am conducting interviews with students across schools in this district and they should take about 45-60 minutes. I am going to audio record the interview and will keep your personal information private if you choose to participate, and I will not attribute any comments to any of you specifically. What this means is that I am only recording our voices and will make sure the script of what we say can't be linked back to you all specifically. For example, if you say "My name is Joe. I'm in Mr. Jones' 3rd period at Woodbury High" the script will say "My name is 'student name removed.' I'm in 'teacher name removed' 'period number removed' at 'school name removed." Also, if at any time I am sharing what we talked about today with anyone (school staff, program staff, etc.) I will speak generally as in saying "a student mentioned they liked going to class, but did not like getting points taken off for being late."

Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may ask at any time for a break. You are welcome to leave at any time, and you may also request at any time that we not include your story in the interview script.

Again, no names will be included in the recording.

Does anyone have any questions? Do you all agree to be audio recorded during this interview? If so, please say yes.

I am going to start the recorder now. (TURN ON RECORDER).

I'm going to share some guidelines for today:
• Please silence your phones and devices if you haven't already done so.
• Only one person should speak at a time, but please feel free to respond to what someone else has said.
• Please speak clearly so that the recorder can hear you.
• Please let me know if you'd like for me to repeat any questions and remember there are no wrong answers.
• Lastly, this is a space where we will respect each other.

Does anyone have any questions?

Conceptualizing College Readiness

1. What are some things you have heard about college?
    a. Where did you hear this; school, home, neighborhood?
    b. Are there any differences between the messages you receive about college from different people?
    c. In what ways do your parents/guardians and loved ones motivate you for school?
2. Did your parents/guardians or loved ones go to college, finish college, or go to trade school?
3. What information have you learned about college-readiness that you would like to share with your families?
4. What do you all think it means to be ready for college?
    a. Can you describe any skills or resources you think students like yourself would need?
    b. If a person begins college, but doesn't finish, would you still consider them college ready? Why or why not?
5. What have you heard about the college application process?
6. What do you think colleges and universities should be looking for in high school students like yourselves to know that students are ready for college?

College Readiness During COVID-19

7. What were some of your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
    a. What grades were you in?
    b. How did COVID-19 impact your interactions with friends, your social life, and your academics?
        i. What were some challenges you faced during remote learning?
        ii. What were some challenges you faced returning to school?
8. Some colleges in the past have used things like test scores to determine if a student is ready for college, but a lot of that changed during COVID-19. What do you all as current students think colleges and universities should be focusing on to determine if a student is ready for college?
    a. Should people change what they think it means to be ready for college because of the pandemic?
        i. Why or why not?
        ii. How should we change what we think?
    b. What would you like universities to know about your experience with distance learning and the pandemic?

GEAR UP Knowledge

9. Are there any resources or programs available at your school to support you with getting ready for college?
    a. Probe for awareness of GEAR UP

10. Have you heard of the GEAR UP program? How would you describe GEAR UP to a friend?
    a. What do you think is the purpose of GEAR UP?
11. GEAR UP offers different services; which ones, if any, do you know of?
    a. Have you, or anyone you know, used these services? If yes, which ones?
    b. Which services do you think are the most helpful keeping in mind GEAR UP's mission to prepare students from lower income communities for college?
12. Who do you think should be doing this work, what type of characteristics would you like for college access program staff to have so that you would feel comfortable speaking with them?
13. If you were able to choose what types of services GEAR UP could provide to help students' college readiness, what would you choose and why?

Closing

14. Thank you all for your responses. Is there anything else anyone would like to share?
15. Is there anything you'd like to know about college that you have not had the chance to ask someone?

Closing Remarks

Thank you all for your time and for sharing your stories with me. I am going to end the recording now.

Appendix J
Middle School Student Focus Group Interview Protocol for 8th graders

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Statement to Participants:
My name is Ashlee Belgrave, you can call me Ms. Ashlee, and I am a student at UCI in the School of Education working to understand what students think about college.

I am conducting interviews with students across schools in this district and they should take about 45-60 minutes. I am going to audio record the interview and will keep your personal information private if you choose to participate, and I will not attribute any comments to any of you specifically. What this means is that I am only recording our voices and will make sure the script of what we say can't be linked back to you all specifically. For example, if you say "My name is Joe. I'm in Mr. Jones' 3rd period at Woodbury High" the script will say "My name is 'student name removed.' I'm in 'teacher name removed' 'period number removed' at 'school name removed." Also, if at any time I am sharing what we talked about today with anyone (school staff, program staff, etc.) I will speak generally as in saying "a student mentioned they liked going to class, but did not like getting points taken off for being late."

Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may ask at any time for a break. You are welcome to leave at any time, and you may also request at any time that we not include your story in the interview script.

Again, no names will be included in the recording.

Does anyone have any questions? Do you all agree to be audio recorded during this interview? If so, please say yes.

I am going to start the recorder now. (TURN ON RECORDER).

I'm going to share some guidelines for today:
• Please silence your phones and devices if you haven't already done so.
• Only one person should speak at a time, but please feel free to respond to what someone else has said.
• Please speak clearly so that the recorder can hear you.
• Please let me know if you'd like for me to repeat any questions and remember there are no wrong answers.
• Lastly, this is a space where we will respect each other.

Does anyone have any questions?

Let's begin:

1. Has anyone here had any thoughts about what you'd like to be or do for a job growing up?
    a. Follow Up: do you think you'd need to go to college to do that? Why or why not?
    b. Do you know anyone who has gone to college, even if they didn't finish?

College Knowledge & Academic Socialization

2. Let's zoom out a little bit. What do you know about college? It's alright if you feel like you don't know everything right now.
3. Have the people you'd consider yourself closest to (like your parents, grandparents, guardians, or cousins, neighbors, friends, teachers, etc.) talked to you about college? If so, what do they say?

Conceptualizing College Readiness

4. What do you think it means to be ready for college?
    a. How do you know if someone is ready to go to college?
        i. Probe for specific markers of college readiness (e.g., grades)

College Readiness During COVID-19

5. What were some of your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
    a. What grades were you in?
    b. How did COVID-19 impact your interactions with friends, your social life, and your schooling?
    c. What were some challenges you faced during remote learning?
    d. What were some challenges you faced returning to school?

16. How have your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how you think about college?
    a. Do you believe you can still go to college? Why or why not?
17. What have you heard about getting into college and applying?
18. Some colleges in the past have used things like test scores to determine if a student is ready for college, but a lot of that changed during COVID-19. What do you all as current students think colleges and universities should be focusing on to determine if a student is ready for college?
    a. Should people change what they think it means to be ready for college because of the pandemic?
        i. Why or why not?
        ii. How should we change what we think?
    b. What would you like colleges to know about your experience with distance learning and the pandemic?

GEAR UP Knowledge

6. What questions do you have about college right now that you think other students like you have?

    a. Who would you go to for help answering these questions?
7. Are there any people in your school that talk about college and getting ready for college?
    a. Have you taken any college visits or trips with your school, GEAR UP, or any other programs?
        i. What did you think about these trips?
8. What do you know about the GEAR UP program?
9. If you could be the leader of the GEAR UP program to help students like yourself get to college, how would you design it?
    a. What programs or services would you provide and why?
    b. If you had a chance to visit some college campuses, which ones would you like to visit and would you go to college there?
        i. Have you had the chance to go on any GEAR UP college visits?
    c. Probe for if students would include familial services

Families

Now that we've learned about how you think about college readiness and your experiences, I want to ask about your families' experiences with college.

19. Did your parents/guardians or loved ones go to college, finish college, or go to trade school?
20. In what ways do your parents motivate you to focus on school?
    a. Would they be excited if you went to college
21. What do you think you'd like to do after high school?
    a. How do you think your parents/guardians and loved ones feel about these plans?

Closing

10. Lastly, do you want to go to college? Why or why not?
11. Is there anything else anyone would like to mention?

Closing Remarks

Thank you all for your time and for sharing your stories with me. I am going to end the recording now.

Appendix K

High School Pilot Reflection

"Part of me is wondering if I should take out the part of the protocol that has to do with COVID…but I do notice that students are bringing up mental health as important for being ready for college because of how COVID affected them. Mental health is the first thing students are bringing up before they bring up academics, but I need to get deeper into talking to them about what they think about GEAR UP and college access programming or college prep programming and what makes it work. Today's group was a lot quieter than the middle school group, but I noticed in the middle school group I spent a lot more time asking them about how their day was how things were going, and I did notice that this high school group started to answer more when I asked them about their individual interests, so I'll rearrange the protocol to ask general questions first and see if that's a way to get students talking because they didn't seem like they were going to discuss large abstract ideas… they started off with yes or no where responses to questions first"

Description of Location:

-In corner of someone's office; she was still there which could have affected responses

    -small low table and ottomans for chairs

-Students were pulled from computer class

    -reluctant disposition

    -5 students, one female

    -3 students seemed to know each other

-The student who wanted to go to culinary school not as engaged…maybe I should only interview students who want to go to college

-Another student wanted to play professional esports

Appendix L

Middle School Pilot Reflection

"I had a group of all girls (two were twin sisters) all who seemed to know each other, and they were all pretty chatty. We did talk about stuff that was not relevant to the study at all (i.e., chisme). What students emphasized was the mental health aspects of college readiness and that "anyone can have good grades, but you really have to see what it takes to actually get through college not just having good grades," students talked about how their teachers would sort of talk down to them after returning to school post COVID and saying they didn't know a lot of stuff, so they said that college applications should be looking at how hard students try in their last year of high school, considering how much school they missed. The students, who are in eighth grade, did school online in fifth grade so they missed some formative years. They talked about maybe not even going to college, or if they want to go they really just want to make money and get out. There were some of them who also talked about having a fruitful life, not just making money or going to school. They said the way that people talk to them about college is weird and that "you have to bring it up in an authentic conversation," they said basically that they would get to know students one on one if they were GEAR UP counselors and talk to them like "real people" and "humanize them, "and they appreciate when people are authentic and "giving off good vibe" when they're talking to them… they told me "you have good 8th grade girl energy… like good vibes, you came in here and let us talk and listen to our chisme before talking to us, treated up like human beings" (slight paraphrased). Overall, it seems like I can cut some stuff out of the interview protocol maybe the second part that talks more in depth about what their families tell them about college in the beginning, so things naturally came up…maybe I'll move that around a little bit"

-Students were pulled from robotics class

-Decent relationship with teacher

-Coordinator in room; at one point a student told the coordinator she owned her ice cream for a previous activity

-New room furnished with funds from grant for tech stuff

-Sat at corner of table, two girls sat opposite of one another and the other was at the head

-One student had a sibling that went to college but didn't finish even though they were "smart" so she brought up that being smart was not enough and you need "the mindset"

-2 to 3 students popped in and asked what was happening

-long tangent about tiktok and young girls having "glow ups"

Appendix M
Codebook

[Parent Code] Academic Socialization		
Code	Definition	Example
School Performance Expectations	Includes any references to how students are told/believe they should behave, achieve academically, or interact in school spaces.	"Yea, my mom is always telling me that I should get good grades and do well in school so I can get into a good college."
College Messaging	Includes any references to what students are told/believe about college.	"I kind of struggled during the pandemic so I'm worried that college may be a little hard if I don't have strong support" "I feel like my school always says 'oh, you know college isn't like high school, it's more difficult,' but my sister went to college and said it was about the same"
[Parent Code] Capital (Bowman et al., 2018)		
Code	Definition	Example
Human Capital	"Intangible resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, motivation) embedded in a person's ability to produce economic value and to increase overall quality of the labor force" pp. 401	"I mean they always say 'oh, go to college, it'll help you get smarter for a job'"
Economic Capital	"Economic resources from sources that include employment, property, inheritance, and investments" pp. 401	"I heard if you have more money it's easier to get to college."
Social Capital	"Resources that make certain	"My parents know a lady who

	actions and results possible within a social structure…set of resources that influence students' educational attainment" pp. 401	knows like college stuff, and she helped me with my application"
Within Family	"Relations between parents and children"	"Well because my parents went to college they tell me to go and make sure I have resources and money to go"
Outside the Family	"Social relationships of parents and other adults in the community that constitute the cultural norms and the value system and can aid in the development of human capital"	"Well all my parents' friends went to college too so I guess they've always like worn college stuff around me and are always asking me where I want to go"

[Parent Code] Caretaker(s)

Code	Definition	Example
Family/Caregivers	References to family members, or individuals considered to be family.	"My grandma is always saying I should go to college."
School Staff	References to school personnel	"My teacher says it's good to go to college."

[Parent Code] College-Going Culture Customs & Practices (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006)

Code	Definition	Example
College Partnerships	Connections between K-12 schools and universities	"I know like we have people from USC and UCI here"
Information & Resources	Presence of, should be up-to-date	"I know like the coordinators have like information on the new SAT and stuff"
Testing & Curriculum	Students aware of necessary testing and have preparation and financial resources	"I don't know why we have to still take the SAT even if some schools don't want it anymore"
Clear Expectations	Explicit college preparation	"This school is always saying

	goals shared across all stakeholders such as students, families, and school staff	like ‘get your AA, IGETC, and you A-G done”
Comprehensive Counseling	Students interactions’ with staff are opportunities for advising	“No because every time I see my counselor they’re like ‘oh how are you, did you do your applications yet?”
Faculty Involvement	Faculty actively involved in partnerships with counselors, families, and students while engaging in PD that supports college prep	“I know the teachers that come here for dual enrollment actually like work at the college and sometimes they have meetings and stuff on how to teach us better”
College Talk	Clear college-oriented communication	“Everyone says ‘go to college,’ but only the college center people really sit down with you and say “oh this is where you want to go? Okay, let’s look up books and classes’ and stuff”
Family Involvement	Opportunities for families to get college knowledge and understand their contributions to the process	“My mom said the school had a financial aid night or something for parents to learn about the FAFSA”
Course Articulation	Students receive ongoing communication through their educational journey with supports at each stage	“I think we were told that after English 101 we take English 103”
[Parent Code] College Readiness		
Code	Definition	Example
Conley Oriented College-Readiness	Includes any references to college-readiness standards outlined by the Conley framework (i.e., coursework, GPA, no remediation, high test scores).	“I think they probably want us to like take hard classes and have good grades.”
[Parent Code] Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005)		

Aspirational Capital	"Hopes and dreams for the culture, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" pp. 77	"I mean, my parents didn't go to college because they came here when I was little, but they want me to go even if it's expensive to like better myself'"
Familial Capital	"Cultural knowledges nurtured among familial (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition" pp. 79	"Like when my mom tells me 'oh, you should go to college, it'll mean a lot because you could like share what you know with your cousins and they can share that too and spread knowledge' it feels like cool to know that I could do that for my community"
Linguistic Capital	"Intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" pp. 78	"You know like when you see people on the campuses and stuff and you hear them speak Spanish or whatever so you talk to them in Spanish and they give you more information or they're nicer"
Navigational Capital	"Skills of maneuvering through social institutions" pp. 80	"Sometimes when you go to the college center they can help you with trying to figure out what it would be like if you transfer credits over."
Resistant Capital	"Knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" pp. 80	"I went on a college tour and saw someone from my community and was asking them what's it like to be like a Hispanic person on this campus 'cause sometimes I hear that people can be kinda mean"
Social Capital	"Networks of people and community resources…peer and other social contacts" pp. 79	"One time my friend brought me to the college center and it was great because now I know the people in here"
	[Parent Code] Programming	

Code	Definition	Example
GEAR UP	Mentioning of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs	"You know, I remember when we first got in GEAR UP and they took us on trips and stuff"
Design	Students' imaginings of how they'd design educational programming	"Like if I could like do a GEAR UP or something I'd take kids on lots of field trips"
Recommendations	Students' overt and/ covert recommendations for educational equity programming	"You know, sometimes I wish they like took us to more colleges"
[Parent Code] Settings		
Code	Definition	Example
School	References to school building	"I feel like school is a place where they're always pushing college, especially the counselors."
Community/Neighborhood	References to local context and individuals	"People usually don't think people from this neighborhood can get to college."
[Parent Code] Subsystem Interactions		
Code	Definition	Example
Cohesion	Instances in which college-going messages across the subsystems are aligned	"I mean my parents tell me to go to college and that's what I hear here at school too"
Friction	Instances in which college-going messages across the subsystem are unaligned and/or differ	"I know at school they tell us like 'oh, you should go to college, but I know some kids whose parents don't want them to go 'cause they have to work to help their family"
[Parent Code] Surrounding Culture		

Code	Definition	Example
Society	References to large masses of individuals or the public as one group.	"I mean my parents probably think like everyone else does. You know, do good in school, go to college, get a good job. Like that sort of stuff."

Note. These are not actual quotes from students

Appendix N
Recruitment Materials