

**Promoting Low-income Students' College Readiness, Well-being, and Success:
A GEAR UP Counseling Program Study**

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Abstract

This article documents narrative experiences from alumni who participated in the GEAR UP program. The San Jose State University GEAR UP program, based on an intensive counseling model, is grounded in social capital and resilience theories, and is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Qualitative findings from surveys and semi-structured interviews with GEAR UP alumni highlight the power of this intensive counseling model in providing meaning, connectedness, and a sense of empowerment for students to support their personal and academic development, college readiness, and overall well-being.

Keywords: GEAR UP, connectedness, empowerment, meaningfulness, non-cognitive skills, school counseling, resilience, social capital, student success

Promoting Low-income Students' College Readiness, Well-being, and Success: A GEAR UP Counseling Program Study

It is documented that only 24% of first-generation low-income students make up the college-going population, and 43% will not graduate from high school (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In fact, nationally, approximately half of Latino and African American high school students drop out of high school before earning their diploma. Of those remaining, only slightly more than half go directly to college after high school (Losen, Orfield, & Balfanz, 2006). To help increase these rates, numerous programs have been designed to support underrepresented students' educational achievement and success for college entry (Gandara & Contreras, 2010). These programs include AVID, TRIO and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). GEAR UP is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to assist students from low-income communities to prepare for and enroll into college. During the 2016-17 school year, GEAR UP programs are projected to serve over a half million students in 128 regions in 44 states and territories. However, there is limited research to demonstrate the impact of these programs.

The purpose of this study was to examine the counseling impact of a six-year GEAR UP program through documenting narrative experiences from alumni who participated in the program administered by San Jose State University (SJSU). The study used a mixed-methods design to examine factors (e.g., counselors and program activities) that impacted GEAR UP students during and post-high school. Students' academic trajectories (i.e., original educational goals versus actual outcomes) and their

potential impact on students' academic aspirations and possible non-cognitive outcomes (Duckor, Maffini, & Sussman, 2015) were also examined.

Background and Motivation for Study

The SJSU GEAR UP program was a 6-year cohort-based university-school partnership project that partnered with several community-based organizations and two school districts to provide academic support services to students from 14 middle schools and eight high schools. GEAR UP's three main objectives are to increase low-income students' (a) academic performance and preparation for post-secondary education, (b) high school graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment rates, and (c) families' knowledge of postsecondary options, preparation, and financing.

GEAR UP services were provided from 2008 through 2014, to over 3,000 students, starting from 7th grade through high school graduation. Services included: counseling, mentoring, college field trips, after school tutoring, Saturday and summer school, parent training, financial aid information, and college admission coaching. The project incorporated interventions and workshops that promoted and supported rigorous academic performance with extended learning opportunities and tutoring in After School, Saturday, and Summer Academies.

The SJSU GEAR UP program was designed based on a developmental school counseling training model, in which SJSU Pupil Personnel Services School Counseling credential candidates were employed as the core staff (e.g., GEAR UP counselors and site-coordinators). These school counselor credential candidates were trained using the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model to support students' academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2005; 2012).

Based on theories of student resilience (Benard & Slade, 2009) and social capital (Bryan, Holcomb, Moore, & Day, 2011; Coleman, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) and the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005; 2012), the GEAR UP project model established a network of caring adults (e.g., GEAR UP staff, school counselors, and teachers) that built and supported students' college-going aspirations; engaged and assisted students in completing critical steps for college entry; increased students' and their families' financial awareness and assisted them in applying for financial aid; and created an overall positive learning community for the GEAR UP cohort. With GEAR UP's support, 91% of program participants earned a high school diploma in 2014 and 83% applied to colleges and universities. Among these students, 42% met California's four-year college entrance requirements and 39% applied to four-year colleges.

The motivation for the current study resulted from an initial analysis of how non-cognitive factors (Farrington et al., 2012) mapped on to the SJSU GEAR UP project's services and student outcomes (Ducker et al., 2015). The goal was to assess how GEAR UP's activities and services led to students developing a sense of meaningfulness, connectedness, and empowerment while supporting their personal and academic development, college readiness, and overall well-being.

Theoretical Foundation

This study integrated three theoretical frameworks to examine the SJSU GEAR UP project's impact on students' well-being and success. These frameworks included: student resiliency, social and cultural capital, and non-cognitive skill development.

Increasing resiliency. Significant research shows that resilience theory supports a developmental theory of change. That is, when youth experience home, school, and community environments that provide them with developmental supports and opportunities (also referred to as external assets or protective factors) of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution, they are more likely to meet their developmental needs (Bernard & Slade, 2009). This resilience, or increase in intrinsic motivation, in turn, nurtures youth's internal assets, which lead to healthy development (e.g., social competence, problem-solving, autonomy and identity, and a sense of purpose and future). Furthermore, these individual characteristics promote successful learning and protect youth against involvement in risk behaviors.

Increasing social and cultural capital. The concept of social capital as it applies to school settings refers to how school personnel serve as access to otherwise inaccessible resources for disadvantaged students and their families. Research supports that social capital positively impacts students' achievement and assists students from dropping out (Coleman, 1994). In addition, there is strong evidence supporting the relationship between students' social capital derived from relationships formed with institutional agents (e.g., teachers and guidance counselors) and their grades and educational and occupational expectations (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Furthermore, in a study looking at the relationship between peer social support networks and help-seeking experiences of low-income youth, Stanton-Salazar and Spina's (2005) research demonstrated that peers can provide low-income youth with emotional support to work through school-related

problems. Moreover, Bryan et al.'s (2011) research showed that the number of school counselors and student contacts with counselors predicted student college application rates. This suggests that one of the only sources of college-related information and social support for historically disadvantaged populations may be school counselors.

Enhancing non-cognitive skills. Traditional paradigms of what constitutes school performance and student success are expanding beyond academic/cognitive factors to embrace non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, social skills, persistence, creativity, and self-control (Farrington et al., 2012), and consider how people contribute meaningfully to society and succeed in their public lives, workplaces, homes, and other societal contexts. Calls to include measures of non-cognitive factors in educational reforms and policies are gaining momentum (Garcia, 2014; Hein, Smerdon, & Sambolt, 2013), particularly because recent research has demonstrated a link between the development of non-cognitive skills and future success in college and work (Farrington et al., 2012). Some of these non-cognitive skills also closely align with the *ASCA National Standards for Students*, which “identify and prioritize the specific attitudes, knowledge and skills that students should be able to demonstrate” within the domains of academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2004).

Guiding Research Questions

The following research questions guided the present study: (a) What are typical and unique GEAR UP experiences for program participants? (b) What are potential effects of GEAR UP on participants' college enrollment/remediation/successful completion of 1st year? (c) What are potential non-cognitive effects (i.e., empowerment, connectedness, and meaningfulness) of GEAR UP for program participants?

Method

An open-ended survey and interviews were used to capture GEAR UP alumni's retrospective and current experiences one year after they completed the GEAR UP program. Data were collected through online surveys and individual interviews and qualitative data analysis methods were used to assess the data. The goal was to document first-year alumni experiences with the GEAR UP program (e.g., types of activities they participated in, level of involvement with activities), types of interactions with GEAR UP school counselors, their educational and/or career trajectory one-year post-high school graduation; and possible initial effects of their participation in the GEAR UP program.

Participants

A pooled sample of 102 GEAR UP participants who had graduated from high school in the previous year served as the participants for this study. Twenty-four GEAR UP program alumni, 18-19 years of age, participated in the online survey and, of those, 11 participated in follow-up interviews.

The demographics for the 24 participants who completed the online survey (via Survey Monkey) included the following: 55% female and 45% male; 64% Latino/Hispanic, 32% Asian, and 4% declined to state; all were first-generation college students; 40% had parents with a middle school education or less; 85% were attending 2- or 4-year college full-time; 63% were attending 4-year colleges; and 60% were working full or part-time. The demographics for the 11 participants who were interviewed (via telephone or Skype) included the following: 36% female and 64% male; 64% Latino/Hispanic and 36% Asian (largely Southeast Asian); all were first-generation

college students; 63% were attending 4-year colleges and 27% were attending community colleges; 18% (2) were working full-time.

Instruments

The online survey and semi-structured interview questions were generated by GEAR UP program faculty, staff, and an external evaluator, guided by GEAR UP evaluation documents (Duckor et al., 2015) and associated research (e.g., Farrington et al., 2012) related to selected non-cognitive constructs (i.e., meaningfulness, connectedness, and empowerment) closely aligned with SJSU's GEAR-UP program.

Survey and interview questions were designed in parallel to gauge what types of social, academic, and/or career goals the GEAR UP alumni were involved with post-GEAR UP and what potential effects, if any, the GEAR UP program may have had on their academic development and overall well-being.

Online survey. In addition to demographic questions, the survey included the following questions: Which GEAR UP activities were most important to you in middle school [and in high school]? Did GEAR UP support your preparation for college? Did GEAR UP impact your decision to go to college? Do you feel empowered in college and/or in the workplace as a result of your GEAR UP experience? Did GEAR UP change you as a person? Did you meet regularly (e.g., at least once a year) with a GEAR UP counselor? Check all the reasons for meeting with your GEAR UP counselor during middle school [and during high school]: Did your GEAR UP counselor(s) empower you to make better life choices? Did your GEAR UP counselor(s) help you think about the value of your education? What is the greatest challenge you face right now?

Interviews. The individual follow-up interviews included the following questions: (a) How are things going for you at school (or work)? (b) Can you tell me a little bit about the challenges you faced this year? (c) Looking back, what impact did your GEAR UP experience have on your current academic pursuits? Interpersonal relationships (peers, teachers, family, co-workers)? Career endeavors? (d) How did your GEAR UP experience affect the choices you have made since graduation? Give an example. (*meaningfulness construct*) (e) Has your GEAR UP experience had any noticeable effects in your relationships in school, home, or in the workplace? (*connectedness construct*) (f) How has GEAR UP changed your view of yourself in relation to your community and the world at large? (*empowerment construct*)

Procedure

An on-line survey was emailed via Survey Monkey, in May 2015, to a pooled sample (n = 102) of GEAR UP alumni who had graduated high school approximately one year prior, in 2014. The individuals who completed the online survey (n = 24) and also expressed an interest in participating in a follow-up interview (n = 11) were then interviewed via telephone or Skype by an external evaluator. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using an online transcription service or directly by the evaluator.

Data Analysis

The online survey and interview data were analyzed, coded, and triangulated using cross-comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collected were compiled into a database and emerging themes were drawn from the data using a constant comparative method of analysis. Participant responses from both the online survey and individual interviews were examined and coded both within and across

respondents. From these triangulated data, there were five general thematic categories that emerged: (a) Increasing educational goals and aspirations; (b) Navigating high school to college transition; (c) Importance of the GEAR UP school counselors; (d) Building connections with others; and (e) Feeling empowered to help others.

Results

In general, respondents noted participation in multiple GEAR UP activities while in middle school and high school. Nearly all (86%) had met with their GEAR UP counselor at least once a year. When asked which GEAR UP activities mattered to them most during their program, meeting with GEAR UP school counselors was the most prominent (52%), followed by summer school (43%), college and educational field trips (38%), tutoring (29%), and various workshops (e.g., time management, career exploration, study skills) (24%).

Findings from both the survey and interview data suggested that the alumni had largely positive views about their GEAR UP experiences. The five thematic findings from the data are presented below by category.

Increasing Educational Goals and Aspirations

Even though nearly all GEAR UP alumni were from families where their parents only had a high school diploma or less, most had high educational aspirations for themselves. The majority of the survey respondents (92%) hoped to attain a bachelor's degree or higher; 54% hoped to attain a bachelor's degree, 21% a master's degree, and 17% a doctoral (Ph.D. or Ed.D.) or professional degree (e.g., M.D., D.D.S., J.D.).

Some of their interest in pursuing college degrees can certainly be attributed to GEAR UP program activities. One of the highlights of the GEAR UP program was field

trips to local colleges and universities. In addition to being a bonding experience for GEAR UP participants, for most, the trips were oftentimes the first time being on a college campus and having meaningful exposure to college life. These experiences made pursuit of college “more real” to them. One male alumnus, who was attending University of California Davis, stated, *“I wasn't aware of the prestige of different colleges, so I was at that time trying to [it] figure out. GEAR UP helped me to open my perspective about colleges. They motivated me, they supported my choices.”*

Several alumni noted that participation in the GEAR UP program prompted them to think beyond their original educational aspirations, and provided the necessary information, advice, and support to attain these goals. For example, prior to participating in GEAR UP, some knew they would go to college, like a California State University (CSU) campus, but ended up going to a University of California (UC) campus instead. GEAR UP program participation expanded students' potential to consider educational possibilities beyond their expectations. One UC Davis student noted, *“It [GEAR UP] helped me realize that I was capable of more than I thought I was. I still cannot believe that I got to go to UC Davis. If I can go to college, then I can do whatever I want to do in my life... I didn't really think I could be in college, it was just too far away. But now that I am here, I am learning that I can do a lot more than I thought. And if I believe in myself, then there are more things possible in my life.”*

Navigating the High School to College Transition

Several alumni explicitly noted that the GEAR UP program gave them the confidence and skills to navigate challenges that presented themselves in college, work, family, and in life. Such new experiences increased the level of and types of demands

placed on these young adults, requiring them to adjust to new situations, such as having greater independence, needing to study on their own or form study groups, keeping themselves motivated to do well in school to continue into college, and developing good time management skills (e.g., commuting between home and school, getting to class, studying, and getting enough sleep), particularly with increased time on their hands. Some noted they learned to procrastinate less from GEAR UP. Others mentioned they learned to ask for help (i.e., increased help-seeking behaviors) when they needed it.

GEAR UP alumni largely mentioned they learned how to apply for college and financial aid and everything related to the college application process. Without exposure to this information, via workshops and through GEAR UP counselors, students may not have known how to qualify for and apply to college. One alumnus, finishing his freshman year at UC Santa Cruz, said: *“I wouldn’t be at the school that I’m now. I wouldn’t have made some of the decisions I made in the educational system. I would have lost motivation. I wouldn’t know who to speak to about college. Until GEAR UP happened, I didn’t know about the ACT or SAT. I really want to thank GEAR UP for helping me, for guiding me in the right direction. It’s something you’re eternally grateful for.”*

GEAR UP also played a role in helping students reach their full potential as students and as individuals. This included seeing the potential in the GEAR UP participants, oftentimes before they realized it themselves. Other times it meant supporting students to see and choose the best opportunities available to them, and helping them navigate these opportunities to maximize their learning experiences. For example, one student attending UC Berkeley stated: *“Going into high school I was really*

shy. I wouldn't speak in public or anything. It [I] wasn't influenced by anyone until I got into GEAR UP and started helping with tutoring and summer school. From then I started helping more in the community and applying for internships, applying for programs that helped me. Before then, I didn't have any idea how to help out... I think that having a space to talk, to get tutoring help, or doing all of that it helped with seeing different perspectives. I grew more, they encouraged me to get me out of my comfort zone, more than anyone else did... they [GEAR UP counselors] would hear of a lot of opportunities and encourage me to try them... they would push it, and then eventually I would start doing it on my own. There were a lot of times when I doubted what I could do or how far I could go, but every time I talked with them I would leave more motivated than before. I wouldn't have known my actual potential like I do now. Their encouragement was really great. I wouldn't trade it ever."

Another factor was access to a readily available social support system. About a quarter of the respondents noted that in GEAR UP the students all knew each other, counselors would come to them, and that there were friends, mentors, and supports readily available. In college, however, students had to seek out assistance and support from their peers, instructors/professors, and support groups. So, through GEAR UP they learned to expand their social networks and seek help when they needed it.

Further, alumni were encountering increased course difficulty and expectations in college, larger class sizes (sometimes 500 students in a lecture hall), feelings of anonymity, not knowing the professors, as well as less access to professors. They were in a new academic environment and, for some, a new city as some had moved away from home. One alumnus attending UC Santa Cruz noted how he adapted to college life

and the increased demands on his time: *“When I first came to college, I had to adapt. I am finally in college. I am here. I was ready to go, but I sort of lagged with my academics. I feel like I didn’t try to reach my full potential like I did in high school. There were a lot of major changes from high school to college.... I signed up for tutoring. I went to office hours with my teacher. I used up all the resources available.”*

Several alumni appreciated the study and life skills they had developed, though noted that putting them into action was a learning process. Many expressed a level of resilience acknowledging, despite the challenges before them, that they would figure out a way to overcome them. Even though they did not have answers now, they all seemed confident they could figure out how to overcome their respective challenges. This feeling of personal agency and empowerment (belief in oneself) was nearly universal among the GEAR UP alumni respondents. For example, one university student noted that being in GEAR UP gave her the confidence to ask questions in classes when she didn’t understand the course material, as well as to build strength through stronger social and familial connections, noting: *“It [GEAR UP] helped me to more openly talk with teachers about my classes and to ask questions. When I need help, I just ask for it. I think GEAR UP gave me more confidence to do that. And I talk with my mother a lot now too. It strengthened our bond and I really appreciate her [GEAR UP Counselor] support. Like I will call her up and tell her about what is going on at school.”*

Importance of the GEAR UP Counselors

Numerous respondents highlighted the role GEAR UP counselors played in their high school experience and beyond. While some alumni only had occasional contact with the counselors, others had regular contact. They noted that the counselors served

several purposes, typically serving as friends, college guides, and academic and personal/social advisors. Respondents frequently mentioned that the counselors become trusted confidants who they could talk to about anything, who provided reassurance (and oftentimes advice) that everything would be okay, who helped build their confidence in challenging situations. For many, having counselors who were also GEAR UP alumni with similar experience and who were 'like them' helped to build trust and rapport.

Some alumni noted confiding in the counselors about problems they were having at school, at home, and with friends. Several identified specific counselors who elicited an 'aha' moment with them, where they realized that they could go to college and attain whatever dreams or aspirations they had. One University of California student noted, *"I was able to openly discuss things with them [GEAR UP counselors]. We could discuss anything. They were like teachers, friends, and we could talk about anything. It didn't really matter what we talked about. But they were really nice and supportive, and I felt they were open to anything that I asked about or wanted to talk about.... [T]hey taught me a lot. They are really supportive and I learned a lot about myself – that I could do anything that I set my mind to."*

Others noted that the GEAR UP counselors saw potential in them that they didn't see themselves. For example, one community college student noted, *"I feel like they [the counselors] have a way of seeing potential. I feel like when it comes to school it's very easy to slip."*

A GEAR UP 5th year senior who had just graduated high school at the time of the interview (and who was about to enter community college) noted: *"They [GEAR UP*

school counselors] just influenced us. It was how they talked. The school counselors at GEAR UP, they were more like mentors than anything else.... The counselors would ask you how you were doing. They'd like give us advice about school, some ideas for doing well, working hard, and staying in school and stuff."

Several noted that GEAR UP counselors were always available to help. For example, one community college student noted, *"I would always see them walking around interacting with students that they know. Talking to people in a very chilled, personal way because everyone knows them. I feel like they're always open. At least I see them every day open to talk to people about what they need to do, what's going on. They're always available. They're pretty much always there to help."*

Building Connections with Others

Respondents overwhelmingly felt that the GEAR UP experience helped develop their social networks and interpersonal relationships with others. Some made new friends outside of their general circle of friends. Others mentioned the program helped them meet and relate to peers from different backgrounds or from different grade levels, young counselors ("near-peers" who themselves were GEAR UP program alumni), their family and co-workers, and people from all walks of life.

The GEAR UP experience had different impacts on students, depending on their self-perceptions and social skills coming into the program. For students who were already quite social, they felt that they still learned from interactions with counselors. For students who were more reserved or looking for greater social support, the program made a marked difference. Two of the 11 alumni interviewed noted they were around peers they wouldn't normally hang around with but, through GEAR UP, they learned

increased tolerance and understanding of the diversity around them. For example, one University of California student noted, *“Being in GEAR UP, it’s like having another family with them, I was pretty close with most of the staff. GEAR UP encourages participation from everyone in the group, they want to hear other people’s opinions, and then they taught me how to be more open-minded of other people’s opinions...”*

A couple respondents mentioned that they were encouraged to join clubs in high school and/or college to increase their social connectedness with others and as growth opportunities, particularly from different groups (e.g., racial groups, AP versus non-AP). For many, this increased social support and communication between peers, families, school counselors, teachers, and others associated with the program provided a feeling of safety, where trust was developed and maintained. People could be themselves without fear of repercussion. Sometimes the school counselors helped to support students as they talked with their families about the best educational decisions to make, even if they were initially counter to the parents’ desires for their children. *“For financial reasons I was debating between going to UC or going to a CSU. GEAR UP supported me and talked with my parents...while doing GEAR UP, I was exposed to different people...and was open to new perspectives.”*

For many GEAR UP participants, particularly those experiencing difficulty in their lives, the program became a safe haven or a fun place to ‘hang out’. For example, an alumni now at SJSU described GEAR UP as a “safety net for a lot of us...a second home.” One 5th year senior who had just graduated high school at the time of the interview and was about to enter community college noted, *“Being in GEAR UP was like being in a bomb shelter. It was a safe place for me. And I could be with people who*

cared about me and who cared about my future. We just hung out with friends and the counselors, and I learned a lot about myself and about life. I didn't know what I was doing before, you know, and then I found a direction and something that I could do in my life. Yeah, it changed everything."

Feeling Empowered to Make a Difference

The respondents were universally grateful for their GEAR UP experience. They all appreciated the study and life skills they learned. Others appreciated being involved in a broader program that made a major difference in their lives, in their educational future, and likely beyond. Others felt empowered to help people within their own family and in the community. Some students felt like they benefited from GEAR UP and could serve as role models for others. One UC Santa Cruz student noted, *"I am applying the skills I learned in GEAR UP...I learned ahead of time not to procrastinate and to use my time more efficiently...I am first in my family to attend a UC and I feel pretty proud."*

Discussion and Implications

Alumni noted that their GEAR UP experience, including key program activities and particularly the GEAR UP counselors and mentors, provided them with a constant supportive and positive, yet informative, safe-haven that allowed them to self-actualize beyond their expectations. Alumni were positive about how GEAR UP program activities (e.g., counseling and field trips) guided them in navigating the college application process.

The three key elements of the GEAR UP program were most impactful for study participants: (a) To a great extent, alumni noted that participation in GEAR UP inspired *them to progress beyond their original educational goals*, often surpassing them,

beyond what they could do on their own. For many, this boost in confidence carries over into other aspects of their lives and a feeling that they “can do anything they set their minds to”; (b) *One-on-one mentoring/counseling support served as a key leverage point* for GEAR UP participants. As most GEAR UP counselors were only a few years older than the participants, they served multiple roles: role-model, friend, mentor, and educational and “life coach.” The participants noted the consistent stable sources of support provided a ‘safe haven’ for them to connect with other students (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005); and (c) the *GEAR UP counseling program’s focus on helping GEAR UP students develop and expand their social networks* helped them increase their confidence in themselves and connect them to peers and key institutional agents that provided them with access to resources and self-empowerment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). There was also a strong feeling of connectedness and belonging to something ‘bigger than me’. Such coping strategies helped alumni to redirect (potentially negative) thinking toward positive pursuits and goals, while acknowledging and embracing their personal potential. This ability to alter their mindset and increase self-awareness helped the alumni cope not only academically, but also socially, and beyond.

Key Findings

This study provided clear evidence of the impact the SJSU GEAR UP program made, particularly with its intensive counseling model, on program participants. The key findings are summarized into four significant themes below: (1) GEAR UP counselors enhanced students’ personal, social, and academic relationships (connectedness) by providing consistent and accessible counseling and mentoring services; (2) GEAR UP counselors increased students’ sense of social justice and responsibility to help others

in their community and beyond (empowerment); (c) GEAR UP counselors increased students' confidence and motivation to do better in their academic and personal lives; and this included changing their beliefs on self-worth, potential, and confidence. (d) GEAR UP helped to expand students' world views by providing them with educational experiences outside of the school setting. Such findings suggest that the personal/social and non-cognitive outcomes were, in many respects, more impactful than the academic outcomes.

Limitations of Study

There are limitations that must be noted. Most notably, GEAR UP alumni who participated in the online survey and interviews may not be representative of all program participants, generally. Findings for this study represent the views of a likely self-selected group who may have had positive experiences with the GEAR UP program. Additionally, despite efforts to obtain a balanced representation of their high school GEAR UP and post-GEAR UP experiences, the alumni were generally quite positive. Some of this may be due to memory effects as data were collected retrospectively.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study brings attention to the significant role that academic support programs (e.g., GEAR UP) and school counselors play in guiding student development and fostering non-cognitive outcomes such as finding meaning in their personal and academic lives, establishing connections with school personnel and others, and developing personal agency and empowerment to make a difference in their local and broader communities. Continuing to conduct research on these outcomes and their potential impact on at-risk and underserved students are key elements to increasing

student academic achievement, success, and overall well-being (Garcia, 2013). We have begun to explore tools and protocols for school counselors specifically validated for diagnostic use in supporting vulnerable students as they explore the skills and dispositions required for college preparedness (Duckor, Maffini, & Sussman, 2016), but more research needs to be done. Researchers should continue to explore how interventions, and the stories students tell about them, can improve student engagement, success, and overall well-being.

Implications for School Counselors

Particularly for underserved youth who feel disconnected and disengaged from school, school counselors play a critical role in addressing students' needs. School counselors can do this by reaching out to students who typically do not seek guidance, helping students identify and build on their strengths, assisting students develop social support networks and interpersonal relationships (connectedness), focusing attention on developing students' life skills and personal agency (empowerment), and helping students find a sense of purpose to provide them with future direction (meaningfulness). With counselor-to-student ratios being significantly higher than ASCA's recommended 1:250 ratio, particularly in states like California, programs like GEAR UP can assist school counselors in delivering the services needed to support students' academic, career, *and* personal/social development.

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