

Testimony of Aaron Thompson, Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer  
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education,  
and Related Agencies

“Oversight Hearing - Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education”

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**I. Introduction**

Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and the national GEAR UP community.

I sit before you today wearing multiple “hats.” In addition to my role at the Council, I have spent 25 years engaged in scholarly research focused on issues of equity, diversity and student success in education. My long-standing involvement in multiple state and national efforts includes the federally-funded GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) initiative, which has enabled Kentucky to increase college-going rates for participating low-income students by 22 percentage points.

Through this work, I've been able to share and apply what I have learned from my research about what works in increasing access and success in education for all students regardless of background, identity, or income. That is at the heart of what I will share with you today--because I am a real life example of the transformative power of the opportunity that education can provide.

My father was an illiterate coal miner and tenant farmer who signed his name with an X, and my mother was the leading academic of the family with her eighth grade education. As African-American parents living in poverty in rural eastern Kentucky, they couldn't provide me with the financial assistance needed for college, nor the guidance about how to navigate that uncharted path. What they did give me is something far more important and lasting—their deeply held belief in the value of education as a key to a sustainable income and a better, more secure life.

But beyond my story, education is the engine of economic growth and opportunity that impacts us all more than ever before. Not only has the share of jobs that require postsecondary education doubled over the last 40 years,<sup>i</sup> research shows that higher levels of educational attainment benefit individuals and society. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed or incarcerated, and more likely to live healthier lifestyles and be engaged citizens.<sup>ii</sup> These outcomes fuel our national and state economies and have a profound generational impact. The benefits of education are even more powerful for low-income individuals, who are five times more likely to move out of poverty if they attain a college degree<sup>iii</sup>. I am here today as living evidence of education as the stepping stone out of the cycle of poverty.

My children will have a better chance to achieve prosperity because of my education, as will many of yours. But many students still face the same obstacles that I encountered along the way. The term “achievement gap” refers to the different levels of performance between different groups of students, whether it be students from higher-income and lower-income households, racial/ethnic minority and majority students, or students who are breaking the mold to become the “first generation” to pursue postsecondary education. For the purpose of this testimony, we will refer to these student groups collectively as “gap students.” Although we see no difference in the college aspirations of gap students,<sup>iv</sup> the disparity is alarmingly apparent when we look at how prepared they are for postsecondary education, whether or not they are choosing to enroll in college, and how often they persist to earn a degree.

When we look at the overall picture, there's no doubt progress is occurring, especially in Kentucky. In 2010, only 34 percent of Kentucky high school graduates were ready for college or a career on graduation day. Four years later, this number had increased to 62 percent.<sup>v</sup> These remarkable gains have put a national spotlight on Kentucky's efforts. Building up our history of education reform dating back 25 years, our most recent landmark legislation in 2009 (SB1) spurred us to adopt statewide definitions and standards for college and career readiness, which has fostered

an increasingly seamless relationships between K-12 and postsecondary systems. Next on the horizon, we will leverage this synergy by employing a systemic approach to improving teacher quality. Our K-12 and postsecondary institutions are now working together to reimagine how we better prepare Kentucky teachers for today's classrooms and Kentucky students for a global economy through an initiative we call Kentucky Rising.

Despite this remarkable progress, challenges persist for gap students who have so much to benefit from higher education. Nationally, low-income students are enrolling in college at substantially lower rates<sup>vi</sup> and are half as likely as their higher income peers to earn a degree within 6 years<sup>vii</sup>. The educational gaps that emerge early between low- and high-income students manifest themselves later across nearly every dimension of college access, readiness, and success. This disparity points to the need for early emphasis on improving the academic, social, and financial readiness of gap students to be integrated into our state and national strategies. GEAR UP has been proven to be an effective catalyst for states and communities to working together toward this common goal through comprehensive solutions that are a result of K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations.

Though academic readiness isn't the only factor that influences college completion, it is a prominent one. Based on scores on the ACT college entrance exam, we see a substantial and persistent gap in academic readiness in terms of race/ethnicity and income at the state and national levels. Kentucky students of color have trailed the ACT scores of their white peers by as much 24 percentage points, a performance gap that is even larger and persistent at the national level.<sup>viii</sup> Similarly, only 20 percent of low-income students met at least three of the four ACT college readiness benchmark scores, compared to 62 percent of students from high-income families. Even more telling, nearly half of low-income students didn't meet a single benchmark.<sup>ix</sup>

**But a single set of standardized test results does not tell the whole story.** When it comes to equipping and empowering our students to be successful, four key influencers are in play: family, institution, community, and self.<sup>x</sup> I call these the "Four Pillars of Student Success," and each represents the individuals or communities that influence student life choices. When all four are aligned in support of educational success, we see positive outcomes.

**Pillar #1: Family.** The first teachers and primary caregivers of students are their family. Regardless of its structure, a student's family has a huge impact on how they value education, perceive themselves as capable of achieving their goals, and access financial resources to pursue them. Many gap students have parents/guardians with low levels of educational attainment and limited experience (if any) navigating the career planning and college entrance processes. This often results in a lack of family encouragement or involvement in plans to enroll in college or persist to graduation. Low income families often consider college beyond their reach because of their perceptions of how much it will cost. With nearly one in five Kentuckians living in poverty and a median household income of \$42,610,<sup>xi</sup> the price tag for a college education is a constant and growing challenge for our students. Even if they are able to access grants and/or student loans, conflicting commitments to family and/or employers often pull students' time and energy away from the academic demands and social experiences of college, decreasing their likelihood of success.

**Pillar #2: Community.** Students are also influenced by individuals and groups outside the family unit, such as employers and faith- or community-based organizations. In the formative adolescence years, the level of this pillar of influence increases, with the strongest of voices being those of peers. Students in communities with low educational attainment often feel alienated from friends who choose to not pursue postsecondary education. The disconnect between their everyday culture and personal educational attainment goals, along with a lack of sufficient role models in their community and on college campuses, can negatively impact their likelihood of earning a degree.

**Pillar #3: Institutional.** Each institution students move through along their educational journey has a different but vital role to play in ensuring they have adequate life skills and receive rigorous instruction, career planning guidance, academic advising and extra supports when needed. Gap students that lack adequate family and community involvement may depend on institutional involvement at higher levels. Unfortunately, because gap students are often held to lower expectations by K-12 teachers,<sup>xii</sup> they are too often steered away from taking more rigorous courses, an essential ingredient for college readiness. Compounding the problem, school counselors are stretched far too thin, as indicated by the national average counselor-to-student ratio of 457:1<sup>xiii</sup>. This further limits access to the needed guidance that gap students can't find elsewhere, making them less likely to take the right steps to prepare for life

after high school. On the other hand, when gap students are in an environment of high expectations and high support, they rise to the challenge.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Pillar #4: Student self.** The pillars of family, community and institution individually and collectively form the contours of a student's self-esteem and their ability to assess and monitor their own behavior and skills. If a student has adequate self-actualization, he or she is able to recognize what they need to be successful, see where they are lacking and then find the appropriate resources to address those gaps. When a student's influencers don't support their educational success, the student is less likely to establish sufficient goals or maintain a commitment to college. If they persist toward their goals independent of these pillars, they may experience social alienation, inadequately plan for college and career, and develop ineffective study habits.

## II. Why GEAR UP Works

To close these gaps, our response must be comprehensive and target the unique needs of gap students by mobilizing and aligning these key student influencers toward a common goal.

Congress has invested more than \$4.5 billion since 1999 in a bipartisan effort to better prepare millions of low-income students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education through the GEAR UP program. A competitive, six- or seven-year grant program administered by the Department of Education, GEAR UP provides funding to either states or partnerships of middle/high schools, postsecondary institutions and community organizations. Grantees work directly with students in both rural and urban areas which, regardless of geographic location, enroll high proportions of gap students.

This year, the \$301.6 million GEAR UP appropriation will support 551,000 students through 128 existing projects in 43 states and one territory. These grantees utilize GEAR UP to ensure students are a) academically ready for postsecondary work, b) aspire to complete college, and c) have the knowledge and resources they need to successfully enter and complete postsecondary education after high school. In Kentucky, our state GEAR UP project at the Council and three partnership projects at Berea College serve more than 40,000 students in 47 counties, 23 of which are classified as "distressed" areas. Your current seven-year investment of \$140 million in Kentucky is equally matched with \$140 million in contributions and cost sharing from project partners and reaches into 133 middle and high schools in some of the most economically challenged communities in the Commonwealth.

One of the most powerful and unique characteristics of GEAR UP is its school-based cohort approach. While many college access outreach programs work with targeted groups of students based on a specific needs or characteristics, GEAR UP projects serve entire grade levels within a school beginning in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and follow these students through the first year of postsecondary education. This ongoing intervention model establishes educational expectations early and supports the realization of student goals by bridging the often difficult transitions from middle to high school and from high school to college. Because research shows that persisting to a second year of college substantially increases the odds of earning a degree for gap students,<sup>xv</sup> GEAR UP continues to provide support services through the end of the college freshman year. It was this unique cohort approach that compelled the New America Foundation to name GEAR UP as "the most promising college readiness outreach program" and call for tripling funding support for grantees to work with schools longer and serve additional cohorts.<sup>xvi</sup>

Through GEAR UP, states and local communities are able to establish comprehensive K-12 and higher education partnerships to address the pathway to college success as a whole. The unique approach of GEAR UP as a *holistic and early* intervention is successful because **it supports and aligns all four pillars of student success.**

GEAR UP intentionally **involves families** so they understand that college is critical and accessible, and that their support is irreplaceable. Through family workshops, campus visits, college planning resources and other services, GEAR UP equips parents and family members to support their children in becoming college ready. Projects supplement family financial resources by awarding student scholarships and providing financial aid counseling. For students who don't have family support available, GEAR UP mobilizes counselors to mentor them as they progress, developing deep bonds. For example, the GEAR UP Kentucky project supplements the deficient school counselor-to-student ratio by providing one College & Career Advisor for every 250 students in participating cohorts.

GEAR UP fosters **community involvement** for student success within its very structure. Not only does the 100% match requirement create partnerships built upon mutual contributions and benefits, the two different types of GEAR UP grants offer unique opportunities for community involvement. GEAR UP partnership grants provide the impetus for local communities to evaluate their unique areas of need and then leverage GEAR UP resources to specifically target those needs. This flexibility for local control gives GEAR UP a unique effectiveness even in the most rural areas of the nation—an important reason why GEAR UP has been so effective in Kentucky. On the other hand, state grants provide the opportunity to scale up effective practices and embed them into state policy. In Kentucky, we see GEAR UP as the natural bridge between K-12 and postsecondary education reform efforts, which you will see reflected in our statewide strategic agenda.

Rather than solely providing services to students for a set period of time until funding runs out, GEAR UP fosters **institutional involvement** by focusing on building a college-going culture in schools so that sustainable change occurs and benefits future classes of students after grant funding ends. School improvement efforts in GEAR UP are centered on using student data to inform decisions about school practice, policy and professional development, especially when it comes to ensuring all students have access to rigorous instruction.

GEAR UP **serves the whole student self** – not just through increasing their awareness of the importance of postsecondary education, but in supporting them to become academically, socially and emotionally ready for the college experience. Whether it is expanding students' confidence about becoming a college student through campus visits and summer programs, or intentionally developing self-regulation skills through a 21<sup>st</sup> century skills curriculum, the early and ongoing mentoring of GEAR UP builds self-esteem and survival skills needed for college success.

### III. How We Know GEAR UP Works

As you can see, GEAR UP doesn't tinker around the edges. As a result of its research-based approach and comprehensive structure, GEAR UP is raising students' aspirations, giving them the necessary tools and support to succeed, and changing their lives in profound and permanent ways.

Like you, our GEAR UP community is deeply committed to ensuring a measurable return on the taxpayer's investment. We focus our time as a learning community on advancing our evaluation efforts so that each program is guided by evidence, more responsive to changing practices, and ultimately more accountable for outcomes. While our existing data collection and reporting infrastructure is far from ideal, we are pioneering unique solutions to long-standing challenges. For example, Kentucky is one of 14 state GEAR UP programs that have formally committed to dramatically higher evaluation standards through the voluntary and state-led College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium. Since 2012, project leaders in these states have collaborated to conduct a multi-state evaluation of the GEAR UP program and assess the impact of interventions against specific indicators of success. It's all about improving our ability to consistently measure and report outcomes of individual projects, compare data across grants and states, and most importantly, use data to improve our practices as a whole.

While this work to align data collection and reporting is ongoing, there is already ample evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of GEAR UP. As a beneficiary of your committed bipartisan investment in GEAR UP for 15 years, Kentucky has reaped significant outcomes. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of GEAR UP students who planned to attain a postsecondary degree increased 18 points (from 64 percent to 82 percent), and those who were advised about college entrance exams increased 35 points (from 25 percent to 60 percent). We saw significant improvements in how low-income students perceived their ability to afford a college education, and the percentage of students who took Pre-Algebra in 8th grade (a proven indicator of college success) nearly doubled. In our second GEAR UP project, the college-going rate at participating schools increased from 45% in 2004 to 67% in 2011.

Our colleagues at Berea College GEAR UP have had extraordinary success working with low-performing Appalachian middle and high schools. With the support of GEAR UP, the percentage of students at or above grade level on K-12 state assessments increased by 17% in math and 15% in reading. Their innovative approaches have consistently increased high school graduation rates and college enrollment in some of our most challenging communities in Kentucky.

Nationally, the data show that GEAR UP is meeting or exceeding expectations in indicators related to taking rigorous courses, college and financial aid awareness, and most importantly, college enrollment. The Department of Education reports that between 2011 and 2013, cohorts of GEAR UP high school graduates enrolled immediately into postsecondary education at rates of 60, 62, and 75 percent respectively. In comparison, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 66 percent of ALL high school students nationally enrolled immediately, and only 51 percent of low-income students do the same<sup>xvii</sup>. Clearly, GEAR UP demonstrates that narrowing the college enrollment gap is achievable.

#### **IV. The Ongoing Demand for GEAR UP**

We must capitalize on what we know works. It's vital to not only sustain effective efforts/programs like GEAR UP, but to seek ways to continually improve what we are doing and scale up effective practices to reach more students and communities. Unfortunately, stagnant funding for GEAR UP over the last four years has resulted in a tragic loss of successful projects. For example, in 2011, eight GEAR UP projects were active in Kentucky; in 2012, only three were refunded for a new grant. This has also spurred dramatic increases in competition for funding for new projects.

The current investment in GEAR UP is highly successful, but federal funds are not adequate to serve all the low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students who need help. In the 2014 GEAR UP competition, we estimate that less than one in five applicants were ultimately funded. If level funded in FY 2016, the Department of Education will be unable to host a new competition for awards, effectively closing the door on communities who would greatly benefit from the program for several years.

We need to move from pockets of success to a comprehensive system that meets the current need. Given its cohesive approach, flexibility for local control/customization, and adaptability to all geographic regions, GEAR UP is the most promising investment. At an average of \$547 per GEAR UP student this year, this investment is also a cost-effective one. While the demand for GEAR UP is substantial, we estimate that even with a modest \$20 million increase in FY 2016, we could serve an additional 35,000 students through new awards. With increased support, GEAR UP could expand interventions and practices proven to be effective for students who may otherwise fall between the cracks.

While the numbers speak loudly to the remarkable impact of GEAR UP, the greatest testament can be found within the stories and experiences of the students it serves. Allow me to offer you to a real life example of the GEAR UP promise realized in a community close to my hometown.

Harold grew up in Rockcastle County, Kentucky, where one in every four of his 17,000 neighbors lived in poverty. Not only did he lack adult role models who had successfully completed college (only 10% have a bachelor's degree), one in every four in his county dropped out of high school. An alumnus of Berea College and a beneficiary of its GEAR UP program, Harold says the following about how GEAR UP was a game changer for him:

*"Without GEAR UP, my adult life would likely look completely different. I probably would not have gone to college without having gained what I did from GEAR UP. If I did go, it probably would not have been straight out of high school, and definitely would not have been the best-fit college. ... [Since graduating college] college access and success is a field I have spent working in for the last five years, and I am thankful that I learned back then in high school about my ability to have a genuine connection with others. I feel I am called to impact change in the world. To be a GEAR UP alum is very precious to me, and I wish to continue making meaningful connections with youth, in the same way the GEAR UP staff supported me, every day indefinitely."*

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning and I'll be happy to respond to any questions.

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