

Jazmin Goodwin, GEAR UP Alumni Leader and Howard University Student
Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Public Witness Hearing
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Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative. GEAR UP is a highly-competitive discretionary grant program housed at the U.S. Department of Education designed to substantially increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. It is an honor to represent the GEAR UP community and the 635,000 students served across nearly 2,800 secondary schools. The return on investment of GEAR UP is extraordinary, and I urge the committee to appropriate \$350,000,000 for Fiscal Year 2018 to this critical program so that an additional 54,000 students across our great nation may realize their college and career goals.

My name is Jazmin Goodwin and I want to share with you how GEAR UP fundamentally changed my life from middle school to the present day. Even after high school graduation, I have remained active in supporting the work of GEAR UP as an alumni leader, contributing to my hometown GEAR UP program and the national work of GEAR UP across 46 states.

As you know, GEAR UP provides 6- or 7-year grants to states or partnerships comprised of K-12, higher education, and community-based organizations that strengthen the pathways to college and careers in low-income communities. GEAR UP identifies whole classes of 7th graders

and exposes them, their families, and their schools to comprehensive interventions that follow them through high school graduation and optionally through the first year of postsecondary education. GEAR UP uses early and sustained interventions to ensure that students are successful in rigorous courses, are knowledgeable about the steps necessary to prepare for life beyond high school, and ultimately enroll in a high-quality certificate, associates', or bachelors' degree program that suits their goals.

The results of GEAR UP have been remarkable. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the program is meeting or exceeding performance targets related to the percentage of students taking critical gateway courses in mathematics, the percentage of GEAR UP students completing high school, and most importantly, the percentage of GEAR UP students enrolling in higher education. The Department reports that 77.3% of the GEAR UP class of 2014 enrolled in a postsecondary institution immediately following high school graduation¹. Considering that nationally only 45.5% of low-income students did the same over the prior year, GEAR UP is clearly a catalyst for results. Achieving these outcomes at a modest annual federal investment of \$505 per GEAR UP student speaks to the power of these highly flexible, locally-led programs. Keep in mind that for each federal dollar a state or partnership receives, it is matched with a local, non-federal dollar, subsequently doubling our national investment in our GEAR UP students, families, and schools.

My mother and father were in the United States Army, and I was born on a military base in Germany. My early years were spent at Fort Bragg in North Carolina before my family settled in Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina. Columbia is known for being a tight-knit and patriotic community, but it is an economically diverse one as well. The importance of education

beyond high school was not universally appreciated like in many higher-income communities. The schools I attended generally viewed students as either “college material” or “not college material,” early on in ways that did not always seem fair.

I was quite lucky to have a different perspective. My grandmother—who raised me when my parents were away for long deployments—made sure I knew that education was my passport to a rewarding career and self-sufficiency. My mother, who worked full-time, led by example and went to college as I grew up, becoming the first in our family to earn a college degree. Seeing her, I knew early on that having a high school degree was not enough, and most of my fellow students knew it too. We knew intuitively what the research has long supported. Most jobs in this country will require some form of postsecondary training, and despite perceptions, most low-income students want to go to college². We just have a more challenging path to get there.

Despite the encouragement I had at home, higher education seemed out of reach. The GEAR UP staff at my middle school saw the potential in students that others may have missed. GEAR UP changed the culture of our school by raising expectations and providing a wealth of academic programs to support us.

I needed GEAR UP the most during my freshman year of high school. I was experiencing a tumultuous time at home; my parents separated, my father was deployed abroad, and my mother typically worked twelve hour days at her military post. Because of her schedule, I would arrive to school an hour and a half early, and would have to wait three hours or so before I could get picked up. I was adrift, and my grade point average suffered: it was 1.9 on a 4.0 scale. The GEAR UP staff went to extraordinary lengths to help me find my purpose by making me

aware of opportunities that I did not know existed. Most importantly, they gave me and my peers the tools we needed to take advantage of those opportunities. I heard a speaker once say that, "GEAR UP isn't a hand out, it's a hand up," and I could not agree more. The GEAR UP team challenged me each day to do my absolute best, and I started to see dramatic improvements in my grades.

It was at a GEAR UP college and career fair that my future came into focus. I met admissions staff from Howard University in Washington, D.C. and I made my mind up then and there that Howard was the university for me. Given my grades, I had a long way to go, but my GEAR UP team helped me set a path to attend Howard. They provided me with after-school and weekend tutoring, mentored me, sent me to summer academic programs, helped me prepare for the SAT and ACT, and guided my family through the college application and financial aid processes. GEAR UP was a life-line to my classmates, and the overall impact the program had on our school was profound.

As you can surmise, I achieved my goal and am now a junior at Howard University where I have a 3.78 GPA and am majoring in Media, Journalism, and Film and plan to attend law school after graduation. Financing my postsecondary education is a challenge every year, but using the skills I learned in GEAR UP, I apply for every scholarship possible. This year, I have earned \$31,000 in academic scholarships. When I graduate next year, it will be an extraordinary event for both my paternal family and my GEAR UP family.

I could not have made it this far without GEAR UP. When they met me in the 7th grade, my life could have proceeded down several routes, but they made sure I was ready for the life I dreamed of. I do not want you to think that GEAR UP only worked for me, because I am just one

of the millions of students who have seen their prospects improve because of GEAR UP. The program reflects the communities it serves. GEAR UP works in rural Oklahoma, the urban schools of Connecticut, and in every state represented by this distinguished subcommittee. GEAR UP can succeed anywhere that K-12, higher education, and community leaders have a commitment to improving college and career readiness for students like me.

Given that the workforce of today *and* tomorrow requires an education beyond high school³, I hear frequently from our national leaders that we need to do more to prepare students—especially those from low-income and working class backgrounds—for that reality. My fellow students and I agree wholeheartedly and believe that GEAR UP is an important part of the solution. Yet the demand for the program far exceeds the available resources. As you take on the hard work of preparing the Fiscal Year 2018 appropriation, our community urges you to consider a modest increase for the GEAR UP program to \$350,000,000, an increase of \$27.2 million over the prior year, so that 54,000 new students can benefit from the program as I did.

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

¹ U.S. Department of Education. (2016). FY 2017 Department of Education Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress: Higher Education (Volume II). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/justifications/index.html>

² Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., & Coca, V. (2009). College readiness for all: The challenge for urban high schools. *The Future of Children*, 19(1), 185–210.

³ Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce. Washington, DC.