

**Mark Anthony Figueroa, GEAR UP Alumnus**

**National Council for Community and Education Partnerships**

*House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Services Appropriations*

*Subcommittee*

*U.S. Department of Education*

Distinguished members of the House Labor-Health and Human Services-Education

Appropriations Subcommittee, thank you for the giving me the opportunity to provide testimony on the profound impact that the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) initiative has had on my life. My name is Mark Anthony Figueroa, and it is my honor and pleasure to be sharing this testimonial on behalf of GEAR UP alumni and over half a million GEAR UP students across the country. Given the program's return on investment, I urge the committee to appropriate \$435,000,000 for GEAR UP in fiscal year 2023 to support an additional 80,000 students across our country so that they, too, can have the support I received in GEAR UP.

As you know, GEAR UP provides 6- or 7-year grants to states and partnerships comprised of K-12, higher education, and community-based organizations that strengthen pathways to college and careers in low-income communities. GEAR UP exposes students, and their families, starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade 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. In the most recent year in which we had a large class of graduating seniors, the

postsecondary enrollment rates of GEAR UP students were over 31% higher than low-income students nationally<sup>1</sup>. Considering that GEAR UP achieves this critical goal at a cost of approximately \$645 per student, per year, I strongly believe that the investment in GEAR UP pays significant dividends. GEAR UP is a powerful catalyst for sustained community improvement.

I grew up on the Eastern part of Washington State, in the city of Pasco. This part of the country is fueled by passionate Latino/a immigrant migrant families working in predominately agricultural fields. With long days and hard work, preparing for a higher education can be challenging and a first for many. As a first-generation migrant student and the eldest of six in my family, post-secondary education seemed like a very distant, unknown land with no clear path toward it.

However, participating in the GEAR UP program helped me actualize my dreams of a post-secondary education through mentors, college & career fairs, FAFSA nights, and college admissions workshops. Being the first in my family to pursue a higher education, my parents and I had many questions. It is a daunting process, especially if done alone. Nevertheless, GEAR UP was there to support and walk with us all the way. Because of GEAR UP, I was admitted to and graduated from Washington State University. With these experiences, and the confidence that GEAR UP gave me, I was able to develop strong leadership skills, community connections, and discovered all the different ways to give back to my community. During my time at Washington State University, I connected with other first-generation migrant students we encouraged one another to follow our dreams. I joined the only Aztec-based brotherhood in the Pacific Northwest, I was elected and served in student government, and helped lead a student ministry at

the intersection of faith and culture. Having led the way, with the support of GEAR UP, I am now there for my parents and five sisters as they navigate the college-going process.

Additionally, I was inspired by my experiences and the experiences of others with stories like mine, and I was able to bring awareness to various issues affecting college students from all walks of life. I currently work with local civic engagement organizations to encourage marginalized members of my community to elevate their voices. As a former high school history teacher, a soccer coach at the same high school where GEAR UP supported me, a current graduate student pursuing a master's degree in theology. I can attest to the truth that GEAR UP does work.

For me, none of this would have been possible without the guidance of the GEAR UP program. Through my own achievements in attending postsecondary education, I can see that generational barriers in my family have been removed for future generations, and they may find the same successes that I have through education. While the support that GEAR UP provided me was truly priceless, the only way that other students will be able to access the educational experiences I had because of GEAR UP, will be to continue to increase funding. Acknowledging that I am just one of many thousands of families GEAR UP has positively impacted, highlights the impact of the GEAR UP program.

As you take on the work of preparing for the fiscal year 2023 appropriations, I urge you to consider increasing the investment in the GEAR UP program to \$435,000,000 so that 80,000 more students just like me can benefit from the program as I did. Thank you to the committee for taking the time to read my testimony.

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<sup>i</sup> 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>