

USU STARS! GEAR UP Program Awarded Two Grants for \$31M from the U.S. Department of Education

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Members of the GEAR UP team: Greg Callan, Aryn Dotterer, Mamie Goodwin, and Jason Payne

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federally funded national grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education. The program tracks students within the State of Utah from seventh grade through their freshman year in college. The USU STARS! GEAR UP partnership takes a comprehensive approach to address the needs of disadvantaged individuals in targeted schools across rural and urban areas in Utah. This program has been housed in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services since 2012 when the program received its first seven-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

At the beginning of the 2024 academic year, GEAR UP saw some significant administrative changes. Long-time executive director Jim Dorward retired after 12 years with the program, and Aryn Dotterer, associate professor in the Human Development and Family Studies department, became the new executive director. Now the USU STARS! GEAR UP team consists of Aryn Dotterer, executive director; Greg Callan, associate professor and researcher for the School Psychology program in the Psychology department; Jason Payne, project director for grant six (Granite School District); Mamie Miller Goodwin, project director for grant five (North Sanpete, South Sanpete,

Logan City School District, and charter school American Preparatory Academy in Salt Lake City); and Travis Jimenez, business manager.

“When Dean (Al) Smith approached me with the opportunity to serve as executive director of the GEAR UP programs, I jumped at the chance,” says Dotterer. “As a first-generation college student, I benefited from and worked in student access and success, making programs like GEAR UP near and dear to my heart. I am committed to using my research expertise on adolescent development in the context of school and family to carry out the mission of GEAR UP to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.”

As the transition into this new team has begun, Dorward said, “Sometimes, with all that goes into developing partnerships, working within organizational policies and guidelines, planning and staffing activities, and evaluating their effectiveness, we forget what really matters. Seeing the enthusiasm and energy that our students bring to the table, listening to the insightful questions they ask of university experts, and hearing about their journeys navigating the pathways into post-secondary education continues to be the highlight of our work.”

Within the GEAR UP organizational structure are site coordinators, who are key in the success of the program. They receive mentoring and training under the supervision of Goodwin and Payne, and these leaders serve an entire grade of students or cohort from seventh grade through their freshman year in college. Site coordinators work with administrators and staff to plan activities that meet the needs of their cohorts by organizing college visits, financial aid awareness nights, and tutoring and academic support.

“The site coordinators are in the schools on a daily basis with our GEAR UP students. They know their families and have helped their cohorts along the way, unlike a traditional teacher who has students for maybe only one year,” says Goodwin. “Our coordinators take these kids on college bus tours and river trips to teach them about our state, they help them with credit recovery, they go into their homes and teach their parents about financial aid. GEAR UP provides these students with opportunities they would never have without this program.”

Payne and Goodwin direct two existing GEAR UP grants that are nearing completion in their seventh and eighth years, respectively. These projects have been successful in increasing the number of low-income students graduating from high school and enrolling in college, but without new awards to support a new cohort

of students, GEAR UP funding to USU would have ended. The competition for GEAR UP grants is high, with a large number of applicants and only a small number of proposals being funded. Despite receiving perfect scores on both of the new grant proposals, USU was initially notified that their grants would not be funded because other proposals that served a larger number of low-income students were given priority.

Then on October 22, things began to look up. GEAR UP was notified that two new grant proposals, which had been submitted by Dotterer and Callan earlier in the summer, had received federal funding for the next seven years by the U.S. Department of Education. These new grants will remain service-based for program delivery. The new addition will be the research from Callan and Dotterer's work, which will be integrated into the already existing program goals, and the findings will be disseminated within the research community.

The grants together total \$31M. The first grant, entitled "Nuestra Vision Partnership," is for \$18.5M, and Callan will lead the research as the principal investigator. "My research will help GEAR UP students develop critical academic skills that are necessary for college success," he says. "I will help the students learn how to learn, and I will teach them how to motivate themselves to learn. These skills will not only help them get into college, but to succeed in college."

In Payne's district, he has mentioned to the administration the research Callan plans on conducting. "I talked to the Granite School District about Greg's research and they are interested in this direction. There is a program called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that is offered by GEAR UP, which helps students who are self-motivated and want to make changes in their high school path because they realize they are not on the college-bound path. How do I get on this path? This research will be insightful for the districts to learn why AVID works."

The second grant, USU STARS! GEAR UP, is for \$12.8M and will be directed by Dotterer, who will serve as the principal investigator. This partnership will have a comprehensive strategy that addresses 11 local needs and gaps across the three stages of progressing toward success—middle school, high school, and college.

"The services provided in this grant include comprehensive mentoring, after school and summer activities, college visits, STEM career exposure, and tutoring," explains Dotterer. "My research that is conducted in conjunction with GEAR UP evaluation will investigate the extent to which out-of-school time STEM activities are associated

with student achievement, course-taking patterns, and STEM persistence."

A big part of the research in both grants will be survey development work. "I would like to survey students about their study skillsets," says Callan. "This data will go back to the schools in a service format explaining the skills that are lacking in a particular student. This info can also be fed back to GEAR UP. This can help GEAR UP personnel know which programs help develop what study skills or if gaps exist in current programs. Ultimately, the hope is that the new measures can help connect students to the services they need most."

Overall, the future is bright for the new GEAR UP team and their goals for their new cohorts of students in 2025. "Both Greg and I are excited to be here at the beginning of these two new grants. We will get to work with the new seventh-grade cohorts and follow their progression," says Dotterer. "It's also great that we are not building this GEAR UP program from the ground up. We have seasoned professionals in Jason, Mamie, and Travis, who are continuing to establish partnerships and guide their staff and cohorts with this strong infrastructure."