

USU STARS GEAR UP Supports Middle Schoolers as They Navigate Into Higher Education



Students meet with advisors to celebrate the completion of their seven-year GEAR UP cohort.

USU STARS GEAR UP college advisers welcomed students from the program's fourth cohort to decompress from the stress of finals on April 22 on the Salt Lake Community College Taylorsville campus.

Students enjoyed large cinnamon rolls and last-minute encouragement from advisers and friends at the event. The event marked one of the final milestones for this group, who began their GEAR UP journey in 2018 as middle schoolers.

"We have goals and hopes for them. It's fun and exciting to see them doing what you hoped they would do," said Missy Adamson, a GEAR UP college adviser at Hunter High School.

Utah State University STARS was awarded its first seven-year grant in 2012 from the U.S. Department of Education to provide student services in school districts throughout Utah. Cohort four students are in the Granite School District, located in Salt Lake City. Additional grants were awarded to the program in 2015, 2017, and 2018. These four awards total \$64 million with schools and partners matching an equal amount to support programming in the schools.

GEAR UP partners include under-resourced schools in both urban and rural settings in Utah. This program services an entire grade or cohort of students at a school, starting in seventh grade, and advisers continue to work

with the same students into the first year of college. Site coordinators at each school work with administrators and staff to plan activities that meet the needs of their community.

For some students, the USU STARS GEAR UP program has been a steady source of guidance for up to seven years. Emely Rivas, now a Salt Lake Community College first-year student, began attending GEAR UP events in her first year of high school four years ago.

"It gave me a lot of information and helped me a lot with applying to college. I don't have much help with that sort of thing," Rivas said. Rivas is a first-generation college student. She is proud of how far she's come. She said she put a lot of pressure on herself in middle and high school and believes those struggles played a role in her current success.

"I did a lot of healing during my final two years in high school. I still had my struggles, but I believe that's what has helped me grow in college," she said. "I'm thankful for all the help I've gotten to get to where I am now. College is still confusing and scary to me, but I refuse to let that stop me from growing," Rivas said.

Rivas received the Honors at Entrance scholarship at SLCC, demonstrating her resilience and determination to continue studying

During their time in the program, college counselors help students in high school and after graduation take a variety of post-secondary school steps, such as applying for financial aid, securing scholarships and transferring from a community college to a four-year university. Rivas said her counselors taught her that asking questions is acceptable, and she wants to continue applying that important lesson.

"I have a hard time asking for help because I don't want to be a bother," she said. "Having them encourage that and constantly being there helps a lot."

Encouraging students to ask questions is a priority for GEAR UP college adviser Makenna Nichols, who is based in the Salt Lake area and works with students in various schools throughout the area. "I hope they take that and run with it because that's what college is all about," she said.

GEAR UP events throughout the year teach students about college and career paths. Adamson said that finding fulfillment in their work is just as important as earning a paycheck. "You have to work for most of your life, and it's a lot better when you have something you can put some passion behind," she said. "This is why education matters."

The final event was bittersweet for college adviser Ashley Johnson, who reflected on her students' journeys. "I'm so proud of the students and all they've accomplished and all the hard work they put into getting to this point," she said.

Advisers often take on a mentorship role as they help the students in the cohorts navigate emotional and academic challenges of their first year. "It is cool to see them experience the growing pains that come with college and then to come out and say, OK, that was fine. It was hard, but I did it," Adamson said.

As the fourth cohort wraps up, college advisers work to show students on-campus resources that will benefit them as they venture out on their own. "We help them connect to resources on campus so that after this year when I'm not here, they can find those resources for themselves," Nichols said.

The college advisers said they look forward to keeping in touch with students in the fourth cohort as they progress along their university and professional paths.