

The University of Texas-Pan American GEAR UP Project
Written Congressional Testimony
March 22, 2007

Good afternoon Committee Members and thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony today. My name is Dr. Martha Cantu and I am the Director for the University of Texas-Pan American GEAR UP Project. Our Project provides services to nearly 9,000 GEAR UP students, their parents and teachers in 28 different middle schools in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas.

I would like to begin by sharing some recent survey data collected from the GEAR UP students and parents in our Project. This data shows that students in our area have a strong desire to pursue a college education and that their parents support them in this pursuit of the American Dream.

Of the 7800 students surveyed, 94% reported that they would like to obtain a college degree. I remind you that these are 8th grade students that have already formed an aspiration to graduate from college.

Of parents surveyed, ninety-nine percent of them indicated that they want their children to obtain a college degree.

These are compelling numbers. They show the passion for education shared by Hispanic parents and children that are traditionally underrepresented in colleges and universities in our nation.

Clearly aspirations are high, but now I would like to share additional information collected in the same survey that shows that our parents lack knowledge on the processes involved in college enrollment and degree attainment; therefore parental involvement activities are a strong component of our grant services.

Only thirty-four percent of parents accurately reported the cost of college, and only 43% report knowing college admissions requirements.

This is why GEAR UP is critical; there is a perilous disparity between aspirations and the knowledge necessary to make those aspirations a reality.

With a grant such as ours, we are able to ensure that students and parents are learning about the college admissions process, college entrance exams, financial aid, the value of rigorous coursework in high school, and also receive constant support and guidance in making the right choices. To facilitate this, each of the 28 GEAR UP campuses has both a GEAR UP Coordinator and Family Liaison to provide services to students, parents and teachers.

The Department of Education sets forth service requirements for the GEAR UP Projects across the country. This means that students, parents, and teachers must be provided with an array of opportunities that will increase college aspirations and actual college enrollment and success.

I would now like to highlight some of the strides we are making in GEAR UP.

- This year, our Project tested over 8,000 8th grade students with the EXPLORE exam which is a precursor to the ACT. GEAR UP will also provide the ACT PLAN Exam in the 10th grade and the ACT in the 11th grade.
- GEAR UP provides summer camps in Computer Science, Robotics, Creative Writing, Clinical Lab Sciences, Physics, and Math to name just a few.
- GEAR UP college tutors assist students in the core content areas with a focus on math and science. This year, over 5,800 students have each received an average of 14 hours of tutoring.
- By the 8th grade, 5,858 GEAR UP students have visited at least one college or university.
- Volunteer parents enter an intensive training called “Las Platicas Academy” It is a 15 hour course that includes topics such as NCLB, graduation plans, study habits, college and financial aid information. Once parents complete the training they will share acquired knowledge to empower and train other parents by conducting community outreach, and spreading the message that every student will have access to college with GEAR UP Project support.
- We have also partnered with the National Hispanic Institute to develop an 8th grade comprehensive parent curriculum that was utilized to train parents in the middle school during monthly parent meetings.
- There are also two annual parent conferences that are held to inform parents about college admissions, financial aid, core content area training and making sure their children are on track for college.
- Additionally, we have partnered with Texas Instruments, FORD PAS, Princeton Review and other local entities including UTPA and other local colleges, over 300 GEAR UP teachers have received comprehensive professional development to assist them in preparing our GEAR UP students for a post secondary education.

My testimony today is that GEAR UP is needed to continue to train parents and teachers in significantly increasing the number of students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post secondary education.

In closing I would like to quote a Grant 1 GEAR UP student who said “GEAR UP has inspired me and has helped me set my goals. Before GEAR UP, my plans were to continue field work as a migrant. When I started getting involved with GEAR UP, my whole life changed. I decided to start applying for scholarships and admission to different universities to continue my education”.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

Due to the brevity of the oral testimony, I would like to provide additional information on the University of Texas Pan American GEAR UP grant and the services provided to students, parents, and teachers. Our grant is broken down into five major components, each of which is measured by a set of objectives that are evaluated annually and reported to the Department of Education. Below is a brief synopsis of each of the five grant components and some key initiatives in each area.

Five Major Grant Components and Services Offered By GEAR UP:

Component 1: Academic Preparation

The foundation of the GEAR UP Project is academic preparation. Our students must be exposed to the rigor of college level work and must be held accountable with high expectations of success. Our Project provides a variety of services that area aligned to the mission of GEAR UP and are intended to prepare students to complete high schools and enroll and succeed in college.

Services provided in this area include:

ACT/SAT Exam Preparation

Repeated exposure to college entrance exams is critical; GEAR UP allows for early testing on an exam called the EXPLORE which is a precursor to the ACT and given at the 8th grade. This year, our Project tested well over 8,000 students and we have been able to use those results to guide curriculum in the classroom. Furthermore, there is much weight in telling an 8th grader that he/she is about to take college entrance exam because it communicate high expectations and a belief in their ability. GEAR UP will also provide the ACT PLAN Exam in the 10th grade and the ACT in the 11th grade.

Concurrent Enrollment and Dual Credit Courses

Once our students reach the 10th grade, GEAR UP will provide opportunities for students to enroll in college level courses at the University of Texas Pan American and at South Texas College to earn college credit and high school credits concurrently. GEAR UP students have the potential to graduate from high school with up to 60 college hours.

Math and Science Summer Camps

GEAR UP provides summer camps at the University of Texas Pan American each summer and at other colleges in the area. Our intent is to provide a strong academic curriculum taught by college professors with the university as a backdrop and full

exposure to dorm life, facilities, professors, intramural activities, and of course, the college cafeteria! Just last summer in the Electrical Engineering Camp, we had our 7th grade students study, construct, and test an electric car with a command box! This is hands-on science and math in a college environment made possible because of GEAR UP and resources offered by our fiscal agent, UTPA. This summer we have 11 different camps planned for both boy and girls as they transition into the 9th grade in Computer Science, Robotics, Creative Writing, Global, Drama, Clinical Lab, Physics, and Math to name just a few.

College Tutors

Each GEAR UP middle school has college tutors that are made available using GEAR UP funds. These college tutors assist students in the core content areas with a focus on math and science. Furthermore, they serve as mentors because they are living the college dream and are eager to share that experience with our GEAR UP students. This year alone, 5,867 students have each received an average of 14 hours of tutoring hours through GEAR UP resources.

Component 2: Academic Preparation Support Services

This component of our grant supports the rigor of the classroom with consistent exposure to college type of activities that help to motivate students to do well in their classes. Many have heard the term “well-rounded” when referring to students and the GEAR UP Project contributes to that ideal by infusing real life experiences to support the mission of GEAR UP.

Services provided in this area include:

Guidance and Counseling

Each GEAR UP school has a GEAR UP Counselor that monitors and supports the progress of GEAR UP students. This advocate position is critically important because this same person began with the cohort in the 7th grade and will continue to serve in this position until the students complete the 12th grade. They are a constancy in the life of students and develop a true relationship with students, their parents, and their teachers to make sure that the needs of the GEAR UP students are being met and that all entities work together. This year alone, the GEAR UP Counselors in our grant provided extensive guidance and counseling services to 7,430 GEAR UP students.

College Visits

The Rio Grande Valley is home to the University of Texas- Pan American, the University of Texas Brownsville, South Texas College, Texas State Technical College, and variety of local intuitions of higher learning and/or certificate programs. The GEAR UP approach is to start locally and have students visit our local schools before leaving the area for state tours. By the 8th grade, 5,858 GEAR UP students have visited at least one college or university! Each year, the visits become more selective and include presentations from beyond the university’s outreach department, but also include presentations and tours of the different departments, classroom observations, college student discussions, and the exposure to different guest speakers, art exhibits, performing

arts events, and countless other examples of college life activities. Universities are no longer a place to fear, but rather a place students long to be because they see the richness of the college experience and GEAR UP provides consistent support to make college trips possible.

Educational Exhibits

Instruction outside of the textbook is key to understanding the depth of content material. GEAR UP students are consistently exposed to educational field experiences. This year UTPA provided GEAR UP students a guided tour of The Henrietta Marie Slave Ship Exhibit. Students saw first hand the atrocities of slavery and were able to better understand this period of American History with artifacts such as shackles, slave sales books, replicas of transport cabins, and listen to recorded accounts based on historical accounts of the voyage. GEAR UP students also have hands on learning in science when they visit the UTPA Coastal Studies Lab at South Padre Island. Students board a vessel and take a brief excursion where nets are cast and specimen collected for examination and classification at the actual lab. South Padre Island is approximately an hour from most cities in the RGV, but the majority of students have never visited and/or taken account of the natural science resources our area has to offer. I have been on the sailing vessel with students and their excitement is evident in their wide eyes as the net is lifted and the movement of sea life is visible. The net is dropped and opened on deck into a tank and fish, shrimp, sea horses, sting rays, and plant life frolic about...this moment is real learning and GEAR UP provides these types of real world connections to curriculum. Through GEAR UP, 929 students have received hand-on learning such as this.

Career Exploration

During the 8th grade year GEAR UP students completed a career interest inventory that provided each student with a summary of work areas they may be interested in based on their responses to survey questions. GEAR UP then provides countless opportunities for students to explore those careers through fairs, job-site visits, online virtual job shadowing, and student conferences. Recently we hosted a Career Extravaganza held at the University of Texas Pan American with over 1000 students and collaborated with each College within the University to have guest speakers in professions that pertain to each, for example, in the College of Health Sciences students interacted with doctors, physical therapists, pharmacists, and physicians assistants to name a few. At the end of the day, some may have changed their mind about what they want to be when they grow up, but at least now they are informed and can make better choices later. This past year, 7,570 students have received career exploration services through GEAR UP.

Component 3: Family and Community Outreach

The UTPA GEAR UP Project understands that a well informed parent is an active and engaged parent. With that premise, our Project strives to provide parents with up to date information on the needs of their children. Each GEAR UP campus has both a GEAR UP Coordinator and Family Liaison that plan monthly parent meetings to provide parents with GEAR UP awareness and information on testing,

study skills, college awareness, school policies, educational opportunities, financial aid, and opportunities for their own personal and educational growth through G.E.D. and E.S.L class offerings. Furthermore, parents are also engaged in the same type of educational experiences as their children with sessions on how to use Texas Instruments graphing calculators and the Navigator System, participation in experiments on the UTPA Regional Biotech Mobile Lab, college tours to UTPA and other local community colleges, and online research in the UTPA Mobile Go Center that brings a wealth of college access information right to their doorstep!

Services provided in this area include:

College Tours

Parents are continuously invited by the GEAR UP family liaison to attend college tours at UTPA and other local colleges in South Texas. Transportation for parents to attend college tours is provided through local school district GEAR UP funds or through the university GEAR UP budget. Parents are given the opportunity to visit some classrooms and ask questions regarding college admissions and financial aid.

Las Platicas Academy

Each campus also identifies parents that are very involved at school and in the community and recruits those parents to complete an intensive training called the Las Platicas Academy. The Academy is a 15 clock-hour course that includes topics such as NCLB, growth and development, graduation plans, TAKS tests, study habits, organizational skills, college admissions, testing and financial aid information. After the 15 clock-hour course, the Family and Community Outreach Coordinator provides continuous updated monthly training for the Platicadoras. The training is conducted utilizing the Abriendo Puertas parent volunteer curriculum developed by Texas A&M University. UTPA and other local colleges also provide many resources for parent training. The intent is to continue to increase parents' knowledge about college requirements and build capacity to support their children with the goal of college made tangible through empowerment. Once parents complete the training, a graduation ceremony ensues at UTPA and they will be certified and known as "Platicadores" or parent volunteers. They will share acquired knowledge to empower and train other parents by conducting home visits, neighborhood walks and community outreach, spreading the message that every student will have access to college with GEAR UP Project support. The Project currently has graduated 100 Platicadoras and these parent volunteers are asked to in turn train a minimum of 25 parents in the community. This will result in approximately 2500 parents trained annually on college access.

Monthly Parent Meetings/Training

The UTPA GEAR UP project partnered with the National Hispanic Institute to develop an 8th grade comprehensive curriculum that was utilized by the GEAR UP family liaisons to train parents in the middle school during monthly parent meetings. The development of the 9th grade curriculum is currently in progress. The middle school training consists of 9 modules in which 8th grade GEAR UP parents are trained in social influences and

psychological shifts their child will experience at this critical age, popular undergraduate majors, 8th grade academic planning and beyond, timeline for early college preparation, navigating the application process and paying for college, and the importance of pursuing a rigorous curriculum in high school. Monthly parent meetings are held in the school and they are usually conducted in the evenings, during school hours and on weekends. Due to our diverse population of parents, family liaisons offer on-going monthly sessions. Parent meetings are also held out in the community in places such as public libraries or local places of worship. Home visits are conducted often by the family liaisons for parents that cannot attend meetings on campus. The family liaison conducts the parent training during the home visit.

Parent College Summits/Conferences

There are two annual parent conferences that are held to inform parents about college admissions, financial aid, core content area training and making sure their children are on track for college. The conferences utilized a workshop style approach to ensure parent engagement. This year each GEAR UP parent conference attracted approximately 300 parents. Parents evaluated the conference through the GEAR UP evaluation survey.

ESL/GED Classes

Parent literacy opportunities are made available through the Project. GEAR UP collaborates with the Educational Service Center and local school districts to support their parent literacy programs.

Parent and Student Engagement

The GEAR UP Family and Community Outreach Coordinator is always looking for opportunities to provide parent training through meaningful and exciting ways. Many times a student event is that perfect opportunity! The parent will attend the event with their child and as their child is receiving training in matters such as which classes to take in high school, the parent is receiving training on the benefits of a pre-AP or AP curriculum. The GEAR UP Project, the university and other local colleges have held such events. A Career Extravaganza was held recently in which approximately 1,200 students received information about career awareness, taking the appropriate high school courses and were given opportunities to explore the different majors available to them in college. Parents also attended the Career Extravaganza and received training from GEAR UP and university personnel regarding parental involvement in post-secondary institutions, financial aid planning and the understanding high school credits. Parents are also invited to listen to motivational speakers throughout the year to assist in reinforcing the message at home about making good grades and making plans to attend college. Our GEAR UP parents have also attended and assisted with community service activities with their children to better understand the meaning of a well rounded student.

Component 4: Professional Development

At the cornerstone of student success, is teacher preparation and the UTPA GEAR UP Project recognizes the need for continued professional development of teachers.

Our goal is to provide teachers with training that will assist them in promoting rigor and challenging coursework in their classrooms.

Services provided in this area include:

Master's Degree Tuition Assistance Program

Our Project provides teachers the opportunity to attain a Master's degree in critical areas such as math and science. Each year, teachers that work with GEAR UP students may apply for tuition assistance to pay for the courses on their degree plan that will lead to a Master's degree in the area they teach. This is a systemic contribution to our area as teachers become more educated in their fields, then the more depth their teaching will hold in the classroom.

Texas Instruments

Through a partnership with Texas Instruments, over 150 GEAR UP teachers have received an intensive 12 day training on math strategies and the use advanced equipment called the TI Navigator that works in conjunction with graphing calculators. Once teachers completed the training, their classroom was equipped with a TI Navigator and a class set of TI- 84 calculators to supplement instruction.

Component 5: Higher Education Collaborative

This component of our grant is critical in establishing a smooth transition of GEAR UP students into college and universities across Texas and the nation.

Communication and planning must exist between public schools and institutions of higher learning and GEAR UP has become the active liaison between the two and continues to make strides in this area.

Services provided in this area include:

College for Texans Campaign: Go Centers

The establishment of Go Centers in schools can also be attributed to GEAR UP intervention. The Go Centers are an initiative established by the Texas Coordinating Board's College for Texans Campaign as a response to low college enrollment and post-secondary degree attainment throughout the state. The UTPA GEAR UP Project has collaborated with the UTPA Valley Outreach Center to help launch Go Centers at GEAR UP schools. The Go Center itself is a physical location where internet ready computers and countless types of college access information is available to students; the center is manned by a G-Force that is a group of students at the school that are peer mentors in the area of college access and enrollment. The Go Center makes college a part of the high school culture and defines college as an expectation for all students.

Adopt-a-School Mentoring

GEAR UP and the UTPA Division of Enrollment and Student Services have formed a mentoring program that pairs University employees with local GEAR UP middle schools to provide college access information. In this initiative, directors in the Division "adopt" a GEAR UP middle school and visit that school throughout the year to give presentations

in rallies, classrooms, parent meetings, and one on one mentoring with a central message: You can and will go to college if you prepare early, study hard, and make the right choices!

Partnership with The University of Texas-Pan American

The services provided by our grant are facilitated by our fiscal agent and educational partner, The University of Texas-Pan American. UTPA educates the most Mexican American students in the nation and ranks second in the nation in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics. Recently, it was named by The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education as one of the nation's "Top 100 Colleges for Hispanics".

Approximately 67% of UTPA students receive *need-based* financial aid. Of the 11,489 students awarded need-based aid in FY2006 (fall/spring), 8,354 students (73%) were Pell eligible (economically disadvantaged). Of the Pell eligible students, 4,966 (59%) had a zero Expected Family Contribution (EFC).

GEAR UP students are able to benefit from different access programs made available through UTPA; some of which include:

Texas Scholars

A state-wide incentive program to motivate a greater number of students to prepare for the future by completing the *Recommended High School Program*, a more rigorous academic path. This program is through the Texas Business & Education Coalition (TBEC) and receives support from UTPA and local and state business leaders.

UTPA Concurrent Enrollment

UTPA invites high school juniors and seniors who attend high school in the surrounding Rio Grande Valley school districts to apply for admission to the Concurrent Enrollment program. In AY 2006, concurrent enrollment had increased its enrollment by more than 730% compared to its enrollment in 1998. AY 2006 enrollment was 1,227 while AY 1998 had only 167 students. Students earning satisfactory grades were over 91%. Between 2003 and 2005 an average of 59.6% of CE high school graduates matriculated to UTPA as entering freshmen. Of the graduation class of 2001, 33% of the students graduated from UTPA within four years and maintained a mean GPA of 3.4 on a 4.0 scale.

UTPA offers a unique program called University Scholars; it is a four-year tuition and fee scholarship awarded to students who have successfully earned college credit through Advanced Placement examinations and/or Concurrent Enrollment at UTPA. It is designed in 1998 to encourage high school students to enroll in rigorous academic courses that will prepare them for success at the college level. Participation in the program has increased from 19 students in 1998 to 301 students in 2006.

UTPA is also home to long standing TRIO federal programs such as CAMP, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math and Science, Educational Talent Search, and HEP.

The merits of The University of Texas-Pan American are a true benefit to the GEAR UP program because they provide constant support to local school districts and provide access opportunities to GEAR UP students and their parents to make the aspiration to attend college a reality.