



Telling Your
GEAR UP Story
An Advocacy Toolkit

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Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler and White Pass School District students Brenda Draper and Breana Kelly

Advocacy 101

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is traditionally defined as the act of supporting a cause or proposal. But really, advocacy is just telling a story about something that is important and celebrating successes, in this case, sharing how GEAR UP and college readiness programs have been good for your school and community.

Why should I advocate?

Stakeholders and other potential organizations or individuals might not know about GEAR UP and how important it is to prepare students for college. Tell them—and then ask for their support, with publicity, funding, or volunteers!

Who should I tell my story to?

Everyone! The local media, local and state elected officials, current and potential partners in your community, potential funders, your students, parents and your community.

When should I tell my story?

All the time, anytime. For example, get the word out before major events or activities (so they will want to come and see for themselves!), after state report cards come out showing improved test scores, before the school board makes budget decisions or any other relevant occasional.

OK, I'm in! How should I do this?

We thought you'd never ask! First things first, you need to create your message. Then, start talking—or e-mailing, or tweeting, or however you like to communicate. Read on for more info!

Advocacy 101

It's all about relationships

Telling the GEAR UP story is the first step in building a relationship with stakeholders who you can ask for support. This means promoting an awareness of GEAR UP activities, convincing stakeholders in the benefits of the program, and finally, asking them to act in some way.

It's mutually beneficial

Advocacy is a two-way street! When asking for stakeholder support, be sure to let them know how GEAR UP is good for students, the economy, and their own interests. Consider how the school might help stakeholders meet their goals; it can and should be a win-win for both parties.

It starts locally

Get the superintendent, school board, mayor and city council on board with GEAR UP and the importance of college readiness.

It's on-going, and long-term

Advocacy is not a one-time event. Rather, it's a continuous process of celebrating GEAR UP's successes with stakeholders in an effort to build and maintain relationships. Use our Event Checklist to remember to invite media and elected officials, take photos and get quotes to better help tell your story!

No lobbying to members of Congress!

GEAR UP grantees are prohibited from using federal funds to engage in lobbying. That means you may not request increases in GEAR UP funding or discuss current funding levels. However, you may share the impact of your program with elected officials and thank them for their past support.



Telling Your GEAR UP Story

It is important to have a clear and consistent message when telling the GEAR UP story. No matter the audience, you can use the same stories, data and anecdotes. Follow these five steps using our Advocacy Worksheet to create an advocacy plan and a custom message about your school:

Familiarize yourself with GEAR UP's key messages.

Hint: Just copy and paste!

List three key statistics/data points that demonstrate that GEAR UP works in your community.

Hint: What is the evidence that GEAR UP works?

List three examples of GEAR UP at work in your community.

These should be specific, true examples from a student, parent, staff or partner. Hint: What are your premier events or programs that people should know about? Do you have a student who has overcome obstacles to achieve success?

List three things you want or need and could ask for from a stakeholder.

Hint: Would you like volunteers? An appearance by an elected official? A newspaper story?

List three stakeholders you want to connect with to share the GEAR UP story.

Hint: Be specific and, if possible, include how you will connect with them and what you will ask.



Delivering Your Story

Now that you have the elements to tell your story, you need to have a powerful and concise delivery. Use this simple formula:



The Issue: What is the issue facing students or the community? State this clearly.

The Solution + a Story: How does GEAR UP address this issue? Provide a specific example or statistics.

The Ask: How can this stakeholder support GEAR UP? How can the school support this stakeholder?

EXAMPLE:

Students who grow up in rural communities have limited exposure to the kinds of careers that may be available to them after completing a postsecondary program. GEAR UP addresses this issue by providing the resources and opportunities for students to participate in career exploration activities and job shadow programs. In fact, 75% of GEAR UP students completed a career exploration curriculum last year.

You can support GEAR UP in this effort by allowing your employees to use work time to volunteer in our classrooms and talk to students about their own careers and educational backgrounds. We can support you by publicizing your companies culture of volunteerism and dedication to the students and families in our community.



The average number of phone calls it takes to convince a Member of Congress that an issue is important in their community.

There are many ways to communicate your GEAR UP story to stakeholders, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls, letters, e-mails, and social media like Facebook and Twitter. Use the method that is most appropriate for your audience—and that will generate attention! In general, the biggest impact will come from more personal contact including personal meetings and phone calls, but with limited time and resources, Twitter can be a great tool for building awareness and program support. Remember, advocacy is all about building relationships!

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook and Twitter are other avenues for getting the word out—either by creating a fan page or Twitter account for your school’s GEAR UP program, or simply using your personal account to post articles, links, and information about GEAR UP on your wall or those of your elected officials.

TWEET CONGRESS

We encourage all GEAR UP supporters — particularly students, alumni, and program staff, to tweet messages to their elected officials. It’s a straightforward 140 characters that can speak volumes. Not sure what to say? Try something like:

- Did you know WA #GEARUP kids enroll in college at a rate 28% higher than their low-income peers? #GEARUPWorks
- Thank you @PattyMurray for your support of #GEARUP! WA & the nation appreciate your dedication to students. #GEARUPWorks
- It’s official! @GovInslee proclaims 9/19 - 23 Washington GEAR UP Week! #GEARUP #NationalGEARUPWeek
- So exciting for two of our amazing #GEARUP students to get the chance to meet their Representative @HerreraBeutler and share how #GEARUPWorks for them!

Washington’s Members of Congress on Twitter:

@PattyMurray
@MariaCantwell
@RepDelBene
@RepRickLarsen
@HerreraBeutler
@RepNewhouse
@CathyMcMorrisRodgers
@RepJayapal
@RepJimMcDermott
@RepKimSchrier
@RepAdamSmith
@RepDennyHeck

Hashtags to Remember:

#GEARUP

#GEARUPWorks

#NationalGEARUPWeek

#IheartGEARUP

#MyGEARUPstory

Tips & Resources for Key Audiences

ELECTED OFFICIALS

Policymakers on both local and national levels want to represent the interests of their constituents. Tell your GEAR UP story so they will know that college readiness is an important issue in your community!

Check out www.gearup.wa.gov for:

- Find Your Legislators (U.S. and Washington Contact Info).
- Tips on Contacting Elected Officials.
- Tips for Writing Letters/Emails to Members of Congress.

MEDIA

Connecting with the local media about GEAR UP at your school is a key way to engage with the community and share successes with a broad audience. It also helps to inspire students, parents and school personnel when they are featured in newspapers and magazines or on TV or radio shows.

PARTNERS

Community organizations and businesses, universities and community colleges, as well as local, state and national foundations and funding agencies will be key in the sustainability of GEAR UP at your school. Seek out and build these relationships now.

Marketing

GEAR UP in Your

Community



Connecting with the local media about GEAR UP at your school is a key way to engage with the community and share successes with a broad audience. It also helps to inspire students, parents and school personnel when they are featured in newspapers and magazines or on TV or radio shows. Spread the word about Oregon GEAR UP!

“Traditional media” includes newspapers, magazines, TV and radio. There are specific ways (media alerts, press releases, and pitch letters) to contact them either before or after an event, or simply to be profiled in the local news. There are a few guidelines that apply to all of these:

KNOW YOUR MESSAGE!

1. Remember the 4 C's:
 - Consistency (have key talking points written down)
 - Candor (be open and sincere)
 - Credibility (repeat goals and benefits for the community)
 - Control (always provide a response; almost never say “no comment” as it assumes guilt or that you’re hiding something)
2. Every story needs a face – focus on specific students, parents, etc., who can reiterate your message.
3. Gather data in advance – have information about GEAR UP and your school available.

CONTACTING MEDIA OUTLETS

Media Alert

- Before an event (ceremony, guest speaker, student-run event) takes place
- The Basics: Who, What, Where, When, Why
- Identify contact person for media, include phone numbers and e-mail
- State news in headline
- Provide additional details that might interest them such as guest speakers,
- Include directions if it’s not a well-known location
- Include boilerplate information about GEAR UP and your school
- E-mail alert to appropriate news desk; be aware of deadlines!
- Follow up with reporter to see if he/she is coming, presentations, etc.

Press Release

- After an event takes place
- Identify contact person for media, include phone numbers and e-mail
- Summarize story in headlines
- Provide details of the event and relevant quotes
- Do not exceed one page
- Include boilerplate information about GEAR UP and your school
- E-mail to media
- Have spokespeople available for media calls and line up students/parents who are available or interviews

Pitch Letter

- Know the audience
- Frame it as part of a larger, relevant issue
- Address to a specific person, when possible
- Have a compelling first line, followed by information as to how the story relates to their audience
- Have story come from a recognizable name, when possible
- Include contact information
- Follow up with phone call or e-mail

Key Messages

WHAT IS GEAR UP?

Created by Congress in 1998, GEAR UP—Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs—is a federal program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of the program is to significantly increase the number of low-income middle and high school students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Since becoming law in 1998, GEAR UP has become a prolific program, impacting 12 million students in 49 states, Washington D.C., and the U.S. territories.

Currently, GEAR UP serves over 560,000 students enrolled in over 3,525 secondary schools across 45 states. GEAR UP has three objectives:

1. Increase academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education.
2. Increase high school graduation and postsecondary participation rates.
3. Increase students' and their families' knowledge of postsecondary options, preparation, and finances.

WASHINGTON STATE GEAR UP KEY MESSAGES:

Washington State GEAR UP provides funding and support to 26 high poverty school districts in every geographical region of the state.

GEAR UP focuses on students from low income and underserved communities, many who may be the first person in their family to graduate from high school or go on to college. GEAR UP services begin in middle school, guiding students and families through the early years of college preparation, including the academic, social, emotional, and financial aspects of preparation. GEAR UP ensures that they have access to the people, resources, and the information needed to graduate from high school and continue their education in the postsecondary program or institution of their choice.

We provide access to financial aid resources, but we also teach valuable study skills and provide mentorship opportunities. We believe that personal relationships fuel a student's desire to go to college and are just as important as academic success.



This guide was developed by Washington State GEAR UP and is an adaptation of the Oregon GEAR UP program’s advocacy toolkit, and the National Council for Community Education Partnerships NCCEP/GEAR UP Resource Guide and Effective Advocacy Toolkit.

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