

CLEP® Opportunities Help Teach High School and Middle Grade Students About the Value of College Credit



Colorado GEAR UP is a unique program focused on helping low-income and first-generation students graduate from high school and prepare for college. The program emphasizes high expectations, and students who meet those expectations may be eligible to apply for GEAR UP college scholarships. Colorado GEAR UP is a federal grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education and managed by the Department of Higher Education on behalf of the Colorado Governor's Office. This precollegiate service program helps low-income and first-generation students prepare to meet the high expectations for high school graduation and college admission.

The program serves more than 4,000 middle and high school students throughout Colorado, all of which serve student populations of 50 percent or more who qualify for free and reduced price lunches. Through Colorado GEAR UP, precollegiate advisers work in 33 schools. These advisers deliver monthly college readiness workshops for students and work one-on-one with students, providing counseling and mentoring focused on preparing for college admission and academic success. In addition, the program includes a focus on early remediation, concurrent enrollment opportunities, and participation in the CLEP® exam program. The program's scholarship component provides tuition assistance for students who complete high school and enroll in college courses. Grant funding also makes it possible for counselors to follow students into their first year of college, and program leaders have the opportunity to evaluate how CLEP and concurrent enrollment credits are giving students an important first-year boost.

“ We focus on making sure our students understand the importance of college credit and also understand and realize that they're totally capable of going on to that next level and accomplishing their postsecondary plans.”

Christina Ingram
Program Director

Meeting Students Where They Are and Expanding the Skills and Knowledge They Already Have

Colorado GEAR UP program leaders explained that a majority (nearly 75 percent) of the 4,000 students in the program are Hispanic American and most speak Spanish fluently. This sparked the idea to introduce CLEP exams. The idea was to build student confidence by letting them know that their mastery of the Spanish language could be a stepping-stone in their college plans and goals. Timpi Webber, director of finance and strategic measures, credits student success to confidence boosting, preparation, and efficient use of resources, such as time and money. Program leaders knew that if students had the opportunity to take the CLEP Spanish Language exam and do well, they had the opportunity to receive college credit. GEAR UP counselors were prepared to help students transfer those college credits. Students quickly understood that the credits they earned would save them time and money when they enrolled in college. Another important benefit for every GEAR UP student is that their CLEP exams and student preparation materials are offered at no cost through the grant.

From Pilot to Rollout, an Aggressive Goal

In the first year of the CLEP pilot, approximately 10 percent of the GEAR UP students participated in the CLEP exam. Based on the success of the pilot, the program plans to test juniors each year throughout the remaining four years of the grant, with a goal of 60 percent of all GEAR UP students completing a CLEP exam. As part of the expansion, students can now take the CLEP French Language exam and the program is evaluating opportunities for students to take exams in core subject areas as well.

Webber notes that during the initial phase of the CLEP pilot students were unfamiliar with CLEP and questioned how taking the exam could actually benefit them. Counselors addressed their concerns and questions, and after students took the exam, they began to see the benefits. A full 100 percent of the students in the pilot passed the exam. Counselors, with the help of the director of finance and strategic measures, make sure their scores appear on either their college or their high school transcripts.

In advising students, counselors used information that resonated with students immediately. They shared the facts that matter, informed students that all public two-year community colleges in Colorado accept CLEP credits, and pointed out that a score of 50 or higher earns at least 10 credits. Most GEAR UP students scored high enough to be eligible for a college minor program. Christina Ingram noted that this was a true “AHA!” moment for students and resulted in an authentic boost in confidence.

Success Creates New Momentum and Interest

Ingrum notes that the success of students in the program on the CLEP exam has generated interest from high school principals around the state of Colorado for students who are not served by GEAR UP. This kind of “viral” interest in helping students earn college credits while still in high school benefits all students. According to Webber, the success of the pilot has not only been noticed by high schools, but has also attracted attention at the institution level. Community colleges are making information more available to help with the ease of the transcription process.

Best Practices Emerge

Both Webber and Ingrum credit the strength, experience, and commitment of their team of advisers and supervisors for the program’s successes to date. The focused training on CLEP helped the team understand how the CLEP exam program works. At a team retreat, Webber walked through the entire exam process, from test preparation to exam day processes and procedures. A solid timeline for the advising team was developed, so they could pace their work with students and stay on track.

In fall 2014, Webber pioneered a programmatic shift to better support CLEP efforts, resulting in the hiring of two CLEP specialists to help the 30 advisers answer student and parent questions and support the advisory team in each GEAR UP school. All of the program staff that works with CLEP have been trained and have completed certification through CLEP, so they’re well informed and up-to-date on all CLEP exam details and procedures.

The program has also benefitted from a dedicated effort to provide comprehensive resources to the advisers at each school site. Webber developed a detailed, thorough handbook for advisers, along with resources for students that provide information for site setup, exam preparation, and registration. Ingrum said, “These materials, particularly the handbook, help advisers focus intently on their students, preparing them to take the CLEP exam.” Counselors also had access to study guides from the College Board and students could use these as part of their individual exam preparation. Counselors also used a pretest to gauge which students were likely to succeed on the exam. Information from the pretest helped them work with students on a more personalized level.

The Colorado GEAR UP team advises middle and high school educators to test equipment and connectivity prior to the actual test delivery and to form strong relationships with both school principals and IT directors, so that help and support are available as needed. Finally, they urge secondary school educators to promote CLEP opportunities to students and parents by participating in school events and information sessions and by attending parent/teacher conferences.

Executive Summary

More than 4,000 students each year participate in the Colorado GEAR UP program in 33 middle and high schools. The program is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education and managed by the Department of Higher Education on behalf of the Colorado Governor's Office. By introducing CLEP exams to students in the program, these students understand the value of college credits and the process of preparing to succeed on a high-stakes exam — all as part of an intensive focus on helping traditionally underrepresented students build the skills and knowledge needed for college readiness.

Colorado GEAR UP CLEP by the Numbers

- Over 40 middle and high school students became eligible for 10–16 credit hours during the 2013-14 school year pilot.
- Over 400 students will participate in CLEP exams during the 2014-15 school year.

Colorado GEAR UP Best Practices at a Glance

- Focused CLEP training for all program counselors and supervisors
- Clear, detailed timelines for exam introduction, preparation and support for students, parents, and teachers
- Detailed handbooks and comprehensive resources for site-level staff and students
- Solid relationships with school instructional and technology leaders
- Participation in schoolwide events to develop awareness and visibility for CLEP opportunities

For more information, visit clep.collegeboard.org.