

**PA STATE GEAR UP-3
ISSUE BRIEF:**

A Longitudinal Look at College Visits and College Enrollment Trends

The following issue brief was designed to accompany the Pennsylvania (PA) State GEAR UP-3 Final Evaluation Report, providing a deeper look into a specific topic salient to the seven-year program evaluation. PA State GEAR UP-3 was a seven-year state grant (2014–2021) developed to enhance academic improvement and early college awareness among at-risk youth and their parents. The program was implemented with an entire cohort of students beginning in grade 7 and followed through high school and into their first year of post-secondary education. The combination of academic support through tutoring, exposure to campus life through college visits and summer bridge programs, and information sharing through counseling and other events produced a well-rounded support system for PA State GEAR UP-3 students, enabling them to make informed decisions for their future.



PA State GEAR UP-3 students who went on college field trips eventually enrolled in a college they had visited with PA State GEAR UP-3.

A Longitudinal Look at College Visits and College Enrollment Trends



COLLEGE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

1 IN 4 GEAR UP students who attended college visits went on to attend a college they visited

PA State GEAR UP-3 students who enrolled in college attended an average of

4.5 college visits while those who did not enroll in college attended an average of **2.7** college visits

The predicted retention rate of enrolled PA State GEAR UP-3 students who took part in college visits was

73.6%

while the rate for PA State GEAR UP-3 students who did not go on visits was

61.6%

PA State GEAR UP-3 provided college visits to students in order to expose them to a variety of college campuses, increase their awareness of college life, and help to encourage them to see college as a possibility.

When we looked at data for PA State GEAR UP-3 students in grades seven to 12, over 1,700 students took part in college visits, and PA State GEAR UP-3 visited 50 campuses over the grant period. When interviewed about PA State GEAR UP-3, the majority of students reported thinking of college visits first.

COLLEGE VISIT PARTICIPATION

Over the course of the grant period, PA State GEAR UP-3 students had the opportunity to visit 50 campuses in person and additional schools via virtual visits. A total of 1,756 students took part in college visits in high school. Out of the 1756 students who visited colleges, 1082 (62%) visited more than one school. This includes times a student visited the same school multiple times, as well as incidents where they visited different schools.

The average hours per student spent on college visits was highest when students were in grade 8 (4 hours) and decreased each year through 12th grade (0.3 hours). This reflects the shift from initial overall exposure to schools to more targeted visits/meetings over time.

BENEFITS OF COLLEGE VISITS

Students and teachers identified numerous benefits of college visits. One common theme was that the visits helped students see college as possible. Stepping foot onto a campus, often for the first time in their lives, opened up a new mindset for many PA State GEAR UP-3 students. One student explained:

“

“OK, ‘cause like you go to these college trips and you just feel like you’re part of it...so it’s easier now than just like ‘Oh my gosh, I can go to college.’ Like yeah, I think it’s easy now since we visited colleges. I’m happy.”

Being on a campus also helped **expose students to college life**. This helped prepare them on a practical level and better know what to expect. One student said she wouldn't have known “half of the stuff that I know about college without going on those trips throughout high school.” Some students mentioned spending a week or staying overnight at a university which helped them experience college life and/or what it was like to take a college class. One remarked:

“I thought [the college trip] was actually really fun, and I really liked it because it helped me experience like what it would be like to be in college. I had roommates and advisors and we did a whole bunch of activities.”

As shown in the sidebar, approximately 25% of PA State GEAR UP-3 students enrolled in a school that they had visited through PA State GEAR UP-3 (28% of students who participated in college visits enrolled in any college). PA State GEAR UP-3 provided visits to the 10 schools in which the highest number of PA State GEAR UP-3 students enrolled. In interviews, we heard that the college visits helped students make decisions about which school to attend.

“Actually, one of the field trips that I went on, that's when I decided I wanted to come here [to the university], when I was in eighth grade. And so now, I am here.”

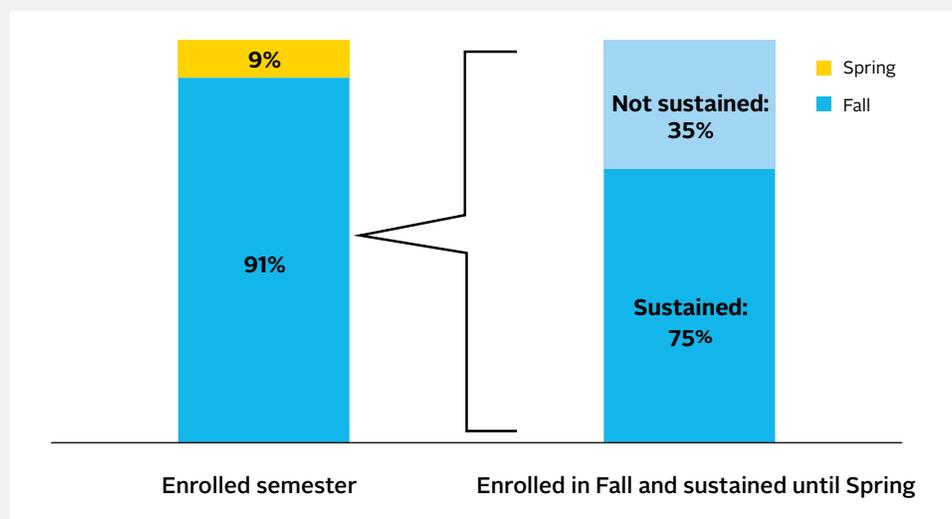
College visits also helped students to determine that a school was not right for them. One teacher pointed out that it is “equally valuable to find out what you want to do as it is what you don't.” From these college visits, students could **make informed decisions** about which colleges were a good fit for them, ultimately leading to increased satisfaction and retention. This finding is supported by quantitative data that show a link between PA State GEAR UP-3 college visits and **retention in college**—of the 584 students for whom we obtained college enrollment information, 530 enrolled in college in the fall semester, and 398 of those (75%) continued on to the subsequent spring semester. (see Figure II-1 “College visits and enrollment in second semester in college”.)

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I think when they finally do choose a school, they're gonna know what they want and what they don't want. I think in that aspect it's just giving them more options and giving them more information.”

—TEACHER

Figure II-1: College visits and enrollment in second semester in college



METHODS

This longitudinal look at college visits in PA State GEAR UP-3 students' lives applied a mixed-method analysis to explore student participation, perceptions from students and teachers, and the effects of college visits on college enrollment and retention. Analysts combined and re-analyzed quantitative participation and post-secondary enrollment data with qualitative interview and focus group data from Years 2 through 7 of PA State GEAR UP-3.



QUALITATIVE
ANALYSES



QUANTITATIVE
ANALYSES



INTEGRATION
ANALYSES



Further, a logistic regression analysis of retention and college visits showed that, for the students who enrolled in college, students who attended college visits on average had a higher likelihood of staying in college at least until spring, compared to those who did not visit colleges. The predicted average retention rate of enrolled students who took part in college visits was 73.6%; while the rate for enrolled students who did not go on visits was 61.6%, holding background characteristics at mean.

College visits also helped **broaden students' horizons** in general by exposing them to the world outside of their hometown. A PA State GEAR UP-3 counselor discussed the importance of the college visits in “opening their eyes to the world being bigger than just our town, because a lot of them have never been there.” Parents mentioned that PA State GEAR UP-3 visits saved them time and money, offering their children exposure to colleges through they wouldn't have been able to make.

CHALLENGES

One of the challenges mentioned by teachers was that there was a core subset of students who repeatedly participated in the college visits. This meant that there were a number of students who did not take advantage of the trips. Because college visits affect school attendance, teachers were frustrated by some kids going on multiple trips. Some students reported feeling that there was an uneven proportion of students across high schools who had the opportunity to attend trips. However, the quantitative data show that 86% of students who attended PA State GEAR UP-3 college visits attended five or fewer trips while just 1.5% attended 15 or more trips over the four high school years.

A suggestion from a few respondents was to broaden the range of schools that PA State GEAR UP-3 visits to suit the needs of students who may not be a good fit for a four-year college. The data show that of the 50 schools visited over the grades 9–12 timespan, four were community colleges and an additional two were technical schools. One of the PA State GEAR UP-3 counselors described working with a nearby community college that offered a program specifically for Spanish speakers. PA State GEAR UP-3's introduction to this program helped make college seem possible for students who didn't see it as an option. Continuing to coordinate with programs such as these may increase the number of students who seek to participate in college visits.