

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

A Longitudinal Look at Counseling And Long-Term Connections To Caring Adults

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.



As counseling sessions go up,
so does the likelihood of high
school graduation.



As counseling sessions and hours
go up, so does the likelihood of
college enrollment.

A Longitudinal Look at Counseling & Long-Term Connections to Caring Adults

“GEAR UP [staff] talks to you like a friend, not just like a teacher.”

—PA STATE GEAR UP-3
STUDENT

“It felt good to know that there were people who were like basically rooting for you and, like gonna help you along the way.”

—PA STATE GEAR UP-3
STUDENT

PA State GEAR UP-3 supported students by providing targeted services including tutoring, counseling, non-cognitive skill development and college readiness activities. In the process, PA State GEAR UP-3 staff built long-term, supportive and encouraging relationships with students. In school environments characterized by high turnover among teachers, administrators and staff, the persistence of PA State GEAR UP-3 staff in counseling positions made an enduring impression on many students. This issue brief analyzes data from participating high school students (grades 9 through 12) to reflect on the influence of long-term connections to adults through PA State GEAR UP-3.

THE ROLE OF CARING ADULTS IN COLLEGE READINESS

Positive relationships have been shown to help students build self-esteem, benefit their academic performance (Pekel, 2019; Osher et al., 2018; Rumberger et al., 2017), and help them feel more confident seeking services in college (Kneiss et al., 2020; LeGree, 2019). A 2017 What Works Clearinghouse practice guide, *Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools*, recommends providing curricula and programs that help students **build supportive relationships** as a step towards engaging students through connecting schoolwork with college and career success (Rumberger et al., 2017). Higher teacher and staff turnover rates in low-income and urban schools — as much as 50% higher for teachers in Title 1 schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) — mean that the young people who could benefit most from sustained positive relationships with adults may have less access to those same relationships.

THE ENDURING PRESENCE OF PA STATE GEAR UP-3 STAFF

To varying but high degrees, PA State GEAR UP-3 operates in a **context of high transience among students and high turnover among educators** in Allentown, Harrisburg and Norristown. Harrisburg School District, for example, tops the state with 18.5% teacher turnover in 2018, while Allentown City School District has seen five superintendents in 10 years. PA State GEAR UP-3 staff also turned over in some positions and some districts, but **students benefitted from stability in core members of the counseling staff** across the six-year span of the

PA State GEAR UP-3 grant in high school. In all three districts, at least one member of the counseling staff remained in their position for the entire six-year grant period and nearly all PA State GEAR UP-3 staff served in their positions for at least three years (PASSHE State PA State GEAR UP-3 Administrators, personal communication, September 7, 2021). Students and staff alike posited that this persistence led to stronger relationships and more potential for lasting influence over time:

“Just being around the actual kids themselves [long term] has improved our relationships. Because we have been with them since their 7th grade year. So, if anything, even though I’m floating through all three schools, there are kids that are like, ‘Yo miss, you’re from middle school.’ And I’m like, ‘Yes, I’m still here. You always have a counselor.’”

Given this stability, and the **enduring connections** made possible by PA State GEAR UP-3 staff “following” the cohort across years, many students shared their perception that PA State GEAR UP-3 counseling staff were their “friends” and “champions” who had “been there since the beginning.” By grade 12, according to one student:

“They [PA State GEAR UP-3 staff] are like a second family.”

PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING OVER TIME

In the early years, students and PA State GEAR UP-3 staff described a **slow process of building trust** and establishing a GEAR UP culture of consistent care. According to one educator in Year 2, “I would say it is starting to [gain momentum], but the culture will take a while.” Students explained that they sometimes struggled to see the relevance of PA State GEAR UP-3 services and relationships in middle school and early high school:

“I go to [the PA State GEAR UP-3 counselor] for advice because she knows what to say. [The counselor] is like my Nana.”

—PA STATE GEAR UP-3 STUDENT

“I think it’s a really great program, but at first when I was younger, I was like, ‘What is this? Please stop shoving college in my face.’ But it ended up being so useful for me, and it was so helpful.”

PA State GEAR UP-3 staff reported a persistent impression over time that a small subset of students accessed substantially more services through PA State GEAR UP-3 compared to the rest of the cohort.

By Year 3, PA State GEAR UP-3 counseling staff were differentiating between students who needed remedial support and these **so called “frequent flyers”** with whom they could focus more on the future. Per one PA State GEAR UP-3 staff member, “We’re telling struggling students what will happen if they can’t pass grade 9, but for [frequent] flyers we tell them more about grades 10–12.” Even with only “a very small percentage of students excelling,” said another staff member, “we approach everyone the same way [with the assumption they will graduate high school].”

Looking back from the vantage points of Years 6 and 7, many students described an experience of initial skepticism towards PA State GEAR UP-3 staff members evolving into **respectful mentorship and eventually mutual gratitude**. According to PA State GEAR UP-3 students when they were in grades 11–12:

“[PA State GEAR UP-3 staff] made us more comfortable after, like, time. They made it more comfortable and easier for us to come to them. Because you can go to teachers, but they don’t have the time. And you could really come to GEAR UP.”

“It’s not just a teacher–student relationship. I mean it is, but if you need help, they will help you. If you need to talk, they’re definitely there. They don’t make it awkward. It’s not like talking to an adult; it’s like talking to someone you know.”

“When I look at GEAR UP, it’s just different from all my other programs. Because they’re really just doing just doing out the kindness of their hearts. They’re just trying to make sure you’re good.”

INTENSIVE COUNSELING EXPERIENCES

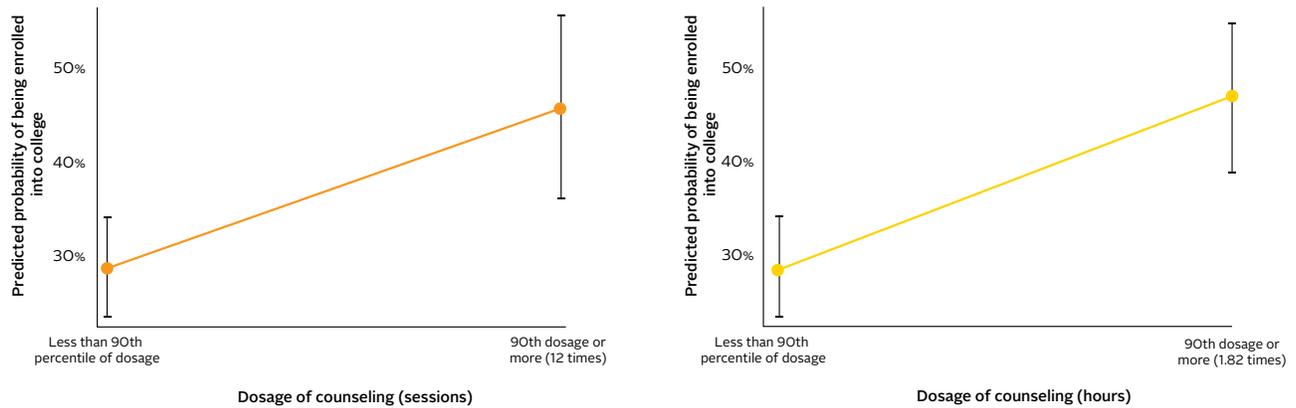
If PA State GEAR UP-3 counselors’ role as caring adults in young people’s lives had any effect, we might expect to see differential outcomes for students who had the highest exposure to counseling experiences, i.e., “frequent flyers” or participants in intensive counseling. Participants in intensive counseling are defined as those students with the number of counseling sessions or counseling hours in the top 10 percent compared to the full PA State GEAR UP-3 cohort (12 or more counseling sessions and 1.82 or more hours of counseling). The average and maximum number of counseling hours and sessions (Table IV-1 below) demonstrate that the extent to which PA State GEAR UP-3 students participated in counseling services, and therefore the level of formal exposure to sustained engagement with individual PA State GEAR UP-3 staff members, varied substantially and that some “frequent flyers” were indeed interacting with counseling staff far more often than most of their peers.

Table IV-1: Counseling sessions and hours, mean and maximum (Total across 4 years of HS)

	Mean	Maximum	High dosage marker for those in top ten percentile
Counseling sessions (times)	5.1	74	12 times or more
Counseling hours (hours)	0.78	15	1.82 hours or more

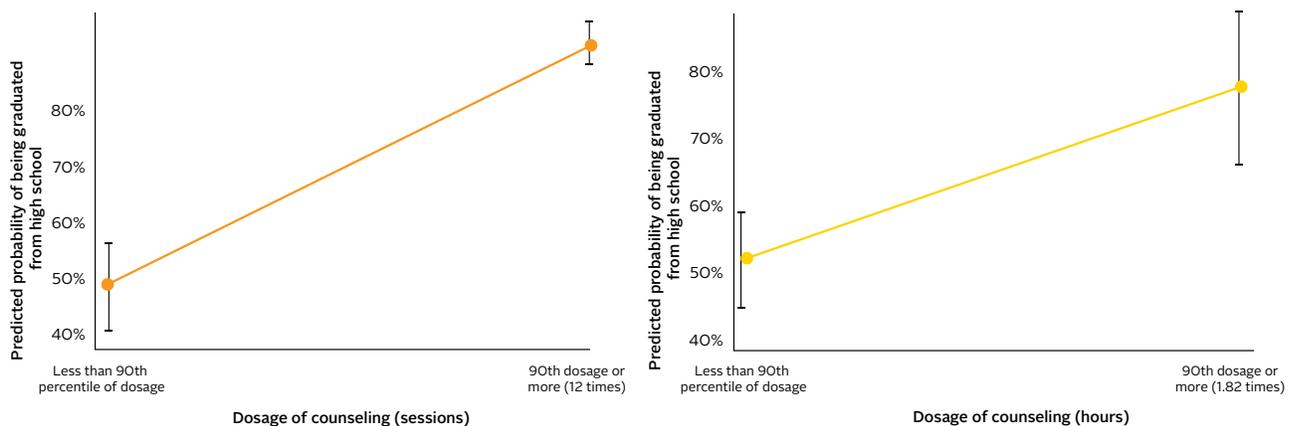
Results related to the relationship between college enrollment and participation in intensive counseling indicated that **students who received a high dosage of counseling (both in terms of the number of sessions and the number of hours of counseling received) were on average more likely to be enrolled in college compared to those who did not**, holding other characteristics constant. The difference between the students who received high dosage of counseling and those who did not was statistically significant, indicating that a high dosage of counseling was associated with higher probability, on average, of being enrolled in a college compared to students without high dosage of counseling. Figure IV-2 below shows statistically significant differences between the students who received high dosage in terms of hours of counseling service received and those who did not receive a high dosage in terms of hours of counseling service received.

Figure IV-1: Predicted relationship between dosage (number of sessions and number of hours) and college enrollment rate



Students who engaged in intensive counseling by session were statistically more likely to graduate from high school compared to those who did not. Interestingly however, in the relationship between high school graduation status and high dosage in *hours* of counseling, the influence was much less clear. We did not find statistically significant differences between the students who received high dosage in terms of hours of counseling service received and those who did not receive a high dosage in terms of hours of counseling service received.

Figure IV-2: Predicted relationship between dosage (number of sessions and number of hours) and high school graduation status



METHODS

This longitudinal look at counselors as caring adults in PA State GEAR UP-3 students' lives in applied a mixed-method analysis to explore counseling hours and participation, student reflections on counseling, and the connection between counseling dosage and high school graduation and college enrollment. Analysts combined and re-analyzed quantitative participation and college 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



These results indicate that, as PA State GEAR UP-3 staff members speculated, “frequent flyers” who are willing and able to participate in more intensive PA State GEAR UP-3 counseling services see results. Their willingness to seek out services, however, may suggest that they are not the students in greatest need of connections to caring adults. Balancing student needs against service provision and participation is a critical ongoing function of GEAR UP programs.

References

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