University of Nevada, Reno

GEAR UP Aspirations Project Evaluation

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership

by

Brad A. Trimble

Dr. Janet Usinger, Dissertation Advisor

August, 2013
We recommend that the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

BRAD A. TRIMBLE

entitled

GEAR UP Aspirations Project Evaluation

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Jantet Usinger, Advisor

Bill Thornton, Committee Member

George C. Hill, Committee Member

Patricia Miltenberger, Committee Member

Cleborne Maddux, Committee Member

Melisa Choroszy, Graduate School Representative

Marsha H. Read, Ph. D., Dean, Graduate School

August, 2013
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of the first two years of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Aspirations Project (Aspirations) using a Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the project during the middle school implementation and inform future practices. The evaluation employed Stufflebeam’s (2003a; 2007) revised and updated CIPP evaluation model to determine whether the needs identified by students, faculty, and administration at the middle school were satisfied by program goals, objectives, and activities. Since Aspirations was designed to prepare the student cohort for college, the fundamental purpose of this study is to explore the students’ college-going mindset at the conclusion of the 8th grade. This examination revealed well over 90% of the students at the middle school had plans for some form of postsecondary education. There was evidence of improved academic achievement at the school and students, faculty, and administration viewed the Aspirations Project and associated GEAR UP staff as contributing to an improved school climate. Though the Aspirations model markedly exceeded performance measures and satisfied the vast majority of stakeholders, there were programmatic complications and difficulties integrating a federally funded, state-staffed project into a school defined by transitional leadership, volatility, and scarcity.
Acknowledgements

This journey wouldn’t have been possible without unfaltering support from my wife Allison, abiding patience from my son Tyler, and certainly for baby Vera’s beautiful, calming influence throughout the final months. The moms unquestionably played vital roles as well. Grammy and grandma were always there to watch the kids during my countless trips to Reno. While in Reno, Dr. Usinger functioned as my *school mom* (Sanchez, 2010) by always applying the proper amount of pressure and support as required. I also owe acknowledgment to Dr. Thornton, Dr. Miltenberger, Dr. Laden, Dr. Ewing-Taylor, and Dr. Payne for providing substantive advice and for serving as effective role models throughout this process. Your dedication, insight, and amity were evident and invaluable throughout this process.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ i

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... ii

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................ iii

List of Tables and Figures .......................................................................................................... vi

Chapter I: Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1
  Background of the Study ........................................................................................................... 3
  Statement of the Problem ......................................................................................................... 6
  Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................................ 7
  Significance of the Study .......................................................................................................... 8
  Delimitations ............................................................................................................................ 9
  Limitations ............................................................................................................................... 9
  Definitions ............................................................................................................................... 10

Chapter II: Review of the Literature ......................................................................................... 13
  College Readiness ................................................................................................................... 13
  Efforts to Increase Postsecondary Participation ..................................................................... 18
    Educational reform efforts .................................................................................................... 18
    Postsecondary financial aid policy ....................................................................................... 23
  Disparity in Postsecondary Participation ............................................................................... 29
    Income status ....................................................................................................................... 30
    Race/ethnicity ....................................................................................................................... 33
  College Readiness Programming ............................................................................................ 35
  Program Evaluation ................................................................................................................ 39
  Summary .................................................................................................................................. 42

Chapter III: Methodology .......................................................................................................... 44
  The Aspirations Project .......................................................................................................... 45
  Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) Evaluation ............................................................... 46
    Context evaluation ............................................................................................................... 48
    Input evaluation .................................................................................................................... 48
    Process evaluation ................................................................................................................. 49
Stakeholder perceptions ................................................................. 90
Summary ....................................................................................... 93
Chapter V: Conclusion ................................................................. 95
Discussion .................................................................................... 96
Implication for the Future of the Aspirations Project ....................... 101
Recommendations for Future Research ......................................... 103
Conclusions ................................................................................. 103
References ................................................................................... 105
Appendix A ................................................................................. 129
  Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval ..................................... 130
Appendix B .................................................................................. 131
  Staff Interview Questions .......................................................... 132
Appendix C .................................................................................. 133
  Student Focus Group Questions ................................................. 134
Appendix D .................................................................................. 135
  Staff Information Sheet ............................................................. 136
Appendix E .................................................................................. 138
  Parent Information Letter .......................................................... 139
List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Conley’s (2010) four dimensions of college and career readiness…………… 15
Table 1: What is the highest level of education that you expect to obtain?...................... 86
Figure 2: Comparison between Aspirations middle school SAM scores and median SAM scores for 100 similar schools………………………………………………………………… 88
Figure 3: Comparison between Aspirations middle school SAM scores and annual state benchmarks……………………………………………………………………………… 89
Chapter I

Introduction

The promise of American public education as the cornerstone of the nation’s
democratic society and the gateway to equal opportunity for all citizens is imperiled
today as never before (Bullmaster-Day, 2011). Recent analysis of wage and employment
data demonstrated that America has been under-producing college-educated workers for
decades (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). Postsecondary educated employees remain in high
demand among employers, but the undersupply of college-educated workers has led to
efficiency and equity issues. Without the intellectual talent to meet employer demand,
the United States (U.S.) will lose the economic productivity gains that additional college-
educated workers contribute to the economy. In addition, scarcity has driven up the cost
of college-educated talent precipitously, exacerbating equality gaps (Carnevale & Rose,
2011).

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems estimated that at
least half of the needed growth in college degree attainment can be achieved by closing
the achievement gap with respect to low-income, African American, and Latino students
(Kelly, 2010). One major problem with this proposed solution is that current research
indicates an overall decline in college equity and access for these student populations
(Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Long & Riley, 2007). Access and equity issues stem from a
number of factors, but most notable is a general lack of college awareness and
Conley, 2005, 2010; Long & Riley, 2007). Resource disparity between schools located
in affluent communities that tend to serve Asian and/or White students and schools where
African-American and Latino students predominate is a primary factor behind students’ lack of college readiness (Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access [IDEA], 2010). Disparities are especially vivid when comparing the quality of the teaching staff, and its capacity to offer rigorous college preparatory courses (Hannaway, 2005; IDEA, 2010).

Regardless of the measure, low-income, African-American, and Latino students underperform academically when compared to their more affluent, Asian, or White peers (Hannaway, 2005; Sandy & Duncan, 2010). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2010) labeled many of the factors consistently found at schools located in economically disadvantaged communities as a systematic civil rights issue. Due to economic and social forces that surround these schools, many children of color are at risk and deprived of access to high quality education (Fenzel, 2009).

Adolescents from 7th to 12th grade in the secondary education pipeline are particularly at risk for educational disparity as they transition from elementary to middle grades and later to high school (Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer & Patterson, 2011; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Typically the transition to a new school includes changes in school size, climate, and academic expectations. The middle school years are particularly critical because of the relatively short period of time that students have to adapt to the school climate and culture before transitioning again to high school. Student anxiety is further complicated by other internal changes such as puberty, social and emotional development, the increased importance of peer relationships, and the development of higher order cognitive skills (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). These challenges can be especially overwhelming for low-income students living in environments that are unsupportive of academic achievement. As a result, many middle school students
become academically disengaged before they enter high school (Orthner, Akos, Rose, Jones-Sanpei, Mercado & Wooley, 2010; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Numerous programs have been developed to improve educational outcomes and increase the college-going rate. Some efforts are local partnerships between institutions of higher education and local school districts; other efforts originate at the state level and are intended to align the K-12 and higher education systems. Since the establishment of Upward Bound through the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, the federal government has contributed to the goal of increasing access to postsecondary education. Following this initiative, other federal programs, generally falling under the umbrella term “TRIO”, have been added (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The most recent federal program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) was signed into law as part of the 1998 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships [NCCEP], 2004). Although a federal program, GEAR UP was designed to respond to unique state and local conditions.

**Background of the Study**

GEAR UP is a discretionary federal grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships in order to provide services for students enrolled in low-income middle and high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The intent is for federal funds, administered through a GEAR UP-approved fiscal agent, to be leveraged with state and local resources to create new or expand upon existing efforts that strengthen
local schools and enhance educational opportunities for low-income students (NCCEP, 2004). Grantees serve an entire class or cohort of students beginning no later than the 7th grade and follow the cohort through high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Since the inception of GEAR UP, the federal objectives have been: (a) to increase the academic performance and preparation of students for postsecondary education, (b) to increase rates of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, and (c) to increase the knowledge base of postsecondary options, preparation, and financing for GEAR UP students and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, Program Performance Plan Section). Although the program was originally established through the reauthorization of the HEA in 1998, recently, in an effort to more strategically align GEAR UP with U.S. Department of Education (DOE) initiatives for school improvement, four funding priorities were added to the GEAR UP goals and objectives; these were published in the Federal Register on December 15, 2010. The DOE GEAR UP scoring rubric provided up to 12 additional points for proposals from state and local partnership applications that successfully met each of the four competitive preferences priorities (CPP):

1. Successful completion of a prior GEAR UP Project (two points)
2. Turning around persistently low-achieving schools (three points)
3. Enabling more data-based decision-making (three points)
4. Implementing internationally benchmarked, college and career ready elementary and secondary academic standards (four points)

In 2010, a western state responded to the federal GEAR UP Request for Proposal (RFP) with the Aspirations Project (Aspirations), designed to serve approximately 500 7th
graders with direct services until they graduated from high school in 2017. The Aspirations cohort was selected from five elementary schools that matriculated to 7th grade at the middle school under study in Fall, 2011. Aspirations Project goals included:
(a) attainment of a 20 percent increase in the number of students who achieve at grade-appropriate levels in mathematics as compared to the respective 2010-2011 class at the school; (b) increase in state standardized test scores of 3% for each year of the project; and (c) increase in the high school graduation rate.

The Aspirations Project was characterized by collaboration, student progress tracking, and data sharing among a family of schools across educational levels for the purpose of preparing the entire student cohort for college. The model was developed based on research studies of statewide academic preparation programs, data from the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) Program, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program, and studies conducted by the Institute for Educational Sciences (IES). In addition, The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College provided substantive vision into the rigor required to adequately prepare students for college.

Aspirations, the focus of this evaluation, was just one component of the state GEAR UP project. Other components focused on adults who served the students. These other components included professional development for school staff and affecting state and federal policy related to the goal of increasing the college-going rate of under-represented students. The overall intent of the State GEAR UP project was to focus on the individual students through the Aspirations Project, which would lead to school
improvement and allow the school to serve as a model to inform the state educational system.

**Statement of the Problem**

Over 1,000 college outreach programs exist throughout the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2001); these programs cost taxpayers billions of dollars, as well as the immense human and social capital provided by the people who implement these efforts. Despite all the planning, effort, and resources required to design and administer college outreach programs, very little is known about how well these programs actually operate or how effective these programs actually are (Domina, 2009). Furthermore, when programs have been evaluated, evaluations are frequently summative, occurring at the conclusion of the activities. This does not allow for appropriate modifications and adjustments to address issues and concerns that may be noted anecdotally, but they have not been captured in a systematic and rigorous manner. Additionally, summative evaluations often lack the early contextual nuances that may have greatly influenced the ultimate outcome of the program. This can be particularly evident with projects that are intentionally long-term and include different settings (e.g., students moving through the educational pipeline of middle and high school in anticipation of postsecondary education over a six-year period of time). By the time the students graduate high school, the specifics that occurred in middle school may be lost.

This evaluation of the Aspirations Project intentionally occurred at a critical point in the program. The cohort of students was selected when they were in the 7th grade, immediately before matriculation into the middle school under study. The program was initiated and had been implemented for the two years that the students were enrolled at
the middle school as 7th and 8th graders. At the conclusion of the study, the cohort of students was transitioning into high school. There was an expectation that many of the elements of Aspirations would be sustained in the middle school so the school could serve as a model of academic transformation; however, all of the staff and funding would move into the high school with the cohort of students. The staff and funding would remain in the high school for four years, twice as long as their presence in the middle school. Without a formal examination of the middle school years, the knowledge of what occurred during these two formative years could easily be overshadowed by the more recent and lengthy experiences in high school. This evaluation was designed to examine the foundational circumstances of this federally funded and locally matched GEAR UP college outreach program.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of the first two years of the Aspirations Project using a Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the project during the middle school implementation and outcomes to inform future practices. The timing of this evaluation was critical as the cohort made the critical transition from middle into high school. The evaluation followed Stufflebeam’s (2003a) management-oriented context, input, process, and product (CIPP) program evaluation model, in conjunction with Conley’s (2010) four key dimensions of college and career readiness.

Four questions guided this evaluation to examine the effectiveness of the first two years of the Aspirations Project:
EQ1 *(context)*: What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?

EQ2 *(input)*: Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?

EQ3 *(process)*: How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

EQ4 *(product)*: At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

These four guiding evaluation questions are expanded in Chapter Three.

**Significance of the Study**

GEAR UP has provided a substantial investment in Aspirations Project staff, time, funding, research, materials, equipment, and professional development. There is a need to examine how these investments are developing a college-going mindset within the student cohort at the critical juncture when students transition into high school. Middle grades represent the last best chance to identify students at-risk of academic failure and get them back on track in time to succeed in high school (Williams et al., 2010). In addition, student success during middle school is a strong predictor of success in high school and beyond (Roybal, 2011).

The intent of this objectives-based study was to provide formative information (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007) that could contribute effective adjustment to promote successful long-term outcomes for the Aspirations Project. Formative assessment of Aspirations Project objectives and outcomes at the midpoint of the funding cycle should
help to preserve program fidelity and potentially improve final outcomes. Results from this research will also add depth and insight to other, ongoing evaluations mandated by the U.S. Department of Education.

**Delimitations**

The sample for this study was limited to experiences associated with the Aspirations Project at the middle school under study. Quantitative measures were limited to archival data collected by Aspirations Project staff for reporting purposes. This study examined the cohort of students, which represented the entire 8th grade at the school at the time of data collection and analysis. Many college awareness and outreach programs include making exclusionary decisions to ensure services reach a specific target population. The Aspirations Project attempted to develop a college-going mindset for all students. Therefore, results of the proposed study might be generalizable to broader public school reform efforts.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation in this study was the potential bias of the researcher. The researcher was an employee of GEAR UP, but assigned to a related project. That potential bias was alleviated through the use of the external dissertation review committee. A second limitation was that unique program history, demographics, location, and services may have created reliability issues associated with broader implementation. GEAR UP was implemented at four additional middle schools and a high school in the same district as the middle school that hosted Aspirations. Therefore the GEAR UP organization had significant connections within the local school district that could have favored programmatic outcomes at the middle school being evaluated.
Lastly, there was no shortage of effective college and career readiness practices for middle grade students. Many of these efforts were not reflected in the Aspirations model and therefore were not addressed in this study.

Definitions

**Access:** The ability to attend college.

Components that contribute to an ability to attend college include but are not limited to: Financial resources, knowledge, academic-preparation, and habitus.

**Aspirations Project:** College outreach program designed to prepare low-income students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP).

**College and career-readiness:** The acquisition of knowledge and skills students need in order to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing coursework at a postsecondary institution (such as a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school) without the need for remediation (Achieve, Inc., 2012; ACT, Inc., 2011; Conley, 2010).

**College-going mindset:** For this study, college-going mindset represents a combination of student grade point average (GPA), course-taking pattern, and desire to earn a postsecondary degree or certification.

**Context evaluation:** Evaluations designed to “compare program goals and priorities with program needs, problems, assets, and opportunities” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 329).
Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs: This is a federally funded grant program with the acronym, GEAR UP. This discretionary grant program was signed into law as part of the 1998 re-authorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and was designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Habitus: A sense of one’s place in society based on perceptions formed from a complex web of interactions that link physical, social, and mental processes (Bourdieu, 1990; Hillier & Rooksby, 2005).

Input evaluation: Evaluation used to determine how an objective should be accomplished. Input evaluations are designed to “assess alternative approaches, competing action plans, staffing plans, and budgets for their feasibility and potential cost-effectiveness to meet targeted needs and achieve goals” (Stufflebeam, 2003a, p. 3).

Low-income schools: Elementary and secondary schools with a majority of students enrolled in the federal Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) program, which is based on family income.

Low-income students: Students from families that qualify for federal FRL.

Parent involvement: For this study, parent involvement includes the six types of engagement identified by Epstein et al. (2002). These include: (a) parenting support; (b) communications; (c) volunteering; (d) learning at home; (e) collaborating with community.
Postsecondary education: Education beyond the high school level at a degree or certificate granting trade school, technical school, two- or four-year college.

Process evaluation: Evaluation designed to assess the execution of strategies in order to determine if project outcomes are being accomplished (Stufflebeam, 2003a).

Product evaluation: Evaluation to determine the extent to which a program is successful in achieving its goals (Stufflebeam, 2003a).

Retention: Student persistence with satisfactory academic progress and continued institutional enrollment.

Social capital: The value of social networks or relationships among similar people who bridge diversity with norms of reciprocity (Dekker & Uslander, 2001; Sander, 2002). Social capital is guided by a concept that social relationships create goodwill, which is a valuable resource used by others in our network to support us (Adler & Kwon, 2002).
Chapter II

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of the first two years of the Aspirations Project (Aspirations) using a Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the project during the middle school implementation and inform future practices. Aspirations was a program model developed and implemented under the auspices of a state Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) project. The program was designed to increase the college-readiness of the entire cohort of students who were enrolled in 7th grade in the 2011-2012 school year; the evaluation occurred as the students transitioned out of middle school and into high school, following their 8th grade year in 2012-2013. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section is focused on the concept of college readiness. The second section includes policies and practices designed to increase access to postsecondary education. This is followed by a discussion of the disparity in postsecondary participation among subpopulations. The fourth section provides an overview of programming efforts to increase postsecondary participation, including a description of the GEAR UP program. Lastly, program evaluation is presented.

College Readiness

Conley (2010) has argued that college and career readiness for all students seems to be an idea whose time has arrived. Continued economic transformation from manufacturing to service and knowledge work necessitates that future workers possess some form of postsecondary education (Conley, 2005; 2010; Tierney, Venegas, & De La
Rosa, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). The fastest-growing industries in the beginning of the 21st century economy require workers with disproportionately higher education levels; indeed, many occupations currently require postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). As a result, postsecondary education has become the threshold requirement for access to stable wages and middle-class earnings.

One of the great debates, according to Conley (2010), is the extent to which college readiness and career readiness are parallel endeavors. The introduction of vocational education programs in the early 20th century prompted United States (U.S.) high schools to track students into either academic or vocational futures. Students were either college-bound or they were workplace-bound. Since that period the global economic system has evolved dramatically; the realm of industry and employment opportunities has grown exponentially, as well as in complexity. Therefore Conley (2010, p. 4) has posed the question, is there a “broader, more foundational set of knowledge and skills that span school and work, and if so, can this be taught to all students?”

Substantial evidence continues to reveal the importance of mastering a core set of skills and knowledge that transfer across a range of postsecondary and workforce environments (Conley, 2010). Examples are often described as soft skills and include abilities such as working independently or in a group, following instructions, formulating and solving problems, analyzing information, setting goals, and taking responsibility. These soft skills promote academic competencies and capabilities that include the ability to communicate in writing, listen with intent, digest technical information, and appreciate diverse perspectives (Conley, 2010).
While there is no formal definition of college and career readiness, a group of analogous descriptions have been proposed in the literature. The central tenets derived from research conducted by Conley (2010), as well as investigators from Achieve, Inc. (2012) and ACT, Inc. (2011) suggests the following definition: College and career readiness includes the acquisition of knowledge and skills students need in order to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing coursework at a postsecondary institution (e.g., a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school) without the need for remediation.

Conley (2010) further compartmentalized college and career readiness using a four-dimensional model. Conley’s (2010) four dimensions describe college and career readiness across a spectrum that includes: (a) key cognitive strategies; (b) key content knowledge; (c) academic behaviors; and (d) contextual skills and awareness (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conley’s (2010) four dimensions of college and career readiness
The model depicts student “capabilities, skills, knowledge, and behaviors” needed to pursue learning beyond high school (Conley, 2010, p. 19). Essentially, by the time students enter college they should be able to demonstrate the capacity to understand course expectations, manage content knowledge, and grasp key intellectual lessons and skills the course was designed to convey. It is important to note that Conley’s four basic dimensions interact extensively and are somewhat interdependent. For example, a lack of college knowledge often affects the decisions students make regarding specific content knowledge they choose to study and master. Additionally, a lack of attention to academic behaviors is one of the most frequent causes of problems for first-year students, whether or not they possess the necessary content knowledge and key cognitive strategies.

Key cognitive strategies are “patterns of thinking that lead to the development of a variety of specific ways to approach and attack challenging learning situations” (Conley, 2010, p. 33). Such strategies evoke a self-controlled approach to problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and precision and accuracy. In addition, these strategies indicate practiced behaviors that are strategic rather than habitual. Specifically, students make conscious decisions when to apply which strategy for the optimal effect in a variety of learning situations (Conley, 2010).

Successful academic preparation for college begins when key cognitive strategies co-mingle with key content knowledge, the second dimension. Key content knowledge includes mental models which allow for “processing of information so that its structure becomes more apparent and then probing, consolidating, and applying that information by means of the key cognitive strategies” (Conley, 2010, p. 35). There are two primary components of key content knowledge: overarching academic skills and core academic
subject knowledge and skills. Conley’s overarching academic skills include an ability to recognize critical differences among various forms of literature while possessing an ability to write and edit effectively. Core academic subjects knowledge and skills means that students possess a thorough understanding of the basic concepts, principles, and techniques in math, English, science, social science, world languages, and the arts.

Academic behavior is the dimension of college and career readiness that conveys the importance of self-management. Conley (2010) defined this dimension as a “range of behaviors that reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control of a series of processes and behaviors necessary for academic success” (p. 39). College-ready students possess a level of metacognition for which to realize key misunderstandings, utilize previous knowledge and experience, and employ a range of learning strategies in order to meet challenges.

The fourth basic dimension of college and career readiness is contextual skills and awareness. “Contextual factors encompass primarily the privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and a culture” (Conley, 2010, p. 40). Students who lack this understanding often become alienated, frustrated, and even humiliated during their first year of school and decide that college is beyond their capabilities; these students are at greater risk of failing to persist. College knowledge includes an understanding of practices such as college admission, curricular testing, application requirements, college options, financial aid, and heightened expectations.

In summary, though the term college and career readiness does not embody a standardized definition, the literature embodies a group of thematic constructs. These concepts include a transferable set of knowledge, skill, and behaviors, which are
applicable across a broad range of workforce and postsecondary learning environments. The importance of these constructs cannot be overemphasized in an increasingly competitive employment and college admissions environment.

**Efforts to Increase Postsecondary Participation**

In the past several decades, a number of policies and strategies have been adopted to increase college access for underrepresented student groups. These initiatives have been developed to ensure that students are better prepared to enter, fund, and succeed in postsecondary education. Two characteristics that continue to show promise are initiatives focused on early intervention, coupled with financial aid awareness education for primary and secondary grade students.

**Educational reform efforts.** Since the publication of a *Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the K-12 educational system has been in a perpetual state of reform to increase student academic achievement. One of the paramount changes initiated by the reform movement has been a continuing effort to standardize the educational system across the U.S. and align the system globally with other economically advanced countries. Historically, the K-12 educational system in the U.S. has been under state and local jurisdiction; however, by the mid-1980s, most states had imposed more strenuous high school graduation requirements and expanded preparation for and frequency of standardized testing. Merit pay programs for teachers whose students were successful, as measured through standardized testing, also became popular legislation; by 1986, 46 states offered merit-based compensation for teachers and administrators. Under the auspices of such reform efforts, most states and districts had adopted Outcome-Based Education, which tied educator evaluations and compensation to
student learning outcomes. The standards-based reform movement culminated in 2001 with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

The most recent effort, as of the time of this study, was the introduction of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI). The CCSSI effort has been coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Whereas NCLB was focused on academic achievement as measured by standardized testing, CCSSI is widely viewed as a viable solution to improve the level of knowledge and skills that will prepare all students for success in postsecondary education (Kendall, 2011). The CCSSI (2012) mission statement is to: Provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that young people need for success in college and careers. It has been promoted that when American students are fully prepared for the future, communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

It is anticipated that these national standards will have broad reach as 45 states, Washington, D.C., and four U.S. territories (CCSSI, 2012) have adopted them as of 2013. The unprecedented scale of CCSSI adoption across the country demonstrates a commitment to improving academic success for all students, regardless of state residence. Kendall (2011) contended that the notion of students learning at different levels in different states is no longer acceptable. Coming at the expense of widespread autonomy
throughout K-12 education, this systematic approach is designed to ensure all essential concepts and skills are agreed upon and included in the curriculum, regardless of location (Theroux, 2009).

The CCSSI (2012) have been developed with particular considerations made to satisfy the following criteria and expectations:

• Fewer, higher, and clearer educational standards to best drive effective policy and practice;

• Alignment with college and work expectations, so that all students are prepared for success upon gradation from high school;

• Inclusion of rigorous content and applications of knowledge through higher-order skills, so that all students are prepared for the 21st century;

• International benchmarking, so that all students are prepared for success in the global society; and

• Research- and evidence-based.

While the implications of the CCSSI will not be fully realized until 2014 when the assessments are implemented, the U.S. Department of Education and most American educators remain optimistic about learning opportunities associated with these standards. Some researchers suggest the CCSSI has potential to significantly reduce the nation’s most persistent achievement gaps (Daggett & Gendron, 2010).

Quality educational standards have been established as a means to improve educational access and reduce equity gaps; however, effective implementation of standards requires significant stakeholder engagement and commitment if their purpose is to be realized. Teachers, administrators, and school support staff are encouraged to
embrace parent outreach to enlist a school’s greatest resource. Epstein and Salinas 
(2004) presented a strategy for school personnel to partner with families and communities 
by developing “school learning communities” (SLC), which is a variation of the common 
term “professional learning communities” (PLC).

The term PLC first emerged as early as the 1960s, but was not a widely embraced 
in the educational lexicon until the mid 1990s. The concept of PLC arose as an 
alternative to the standard practice of U.S. educators operating in isolation. Professional 
learning communities are an ongoing process used to enhance teacher leadership capacity 
through active collaboration with other educators for the purpose of improving student 
achievement (Rentfro, 2007).

The difference between a PLC and a school learning community (SLC) is the 
inclusion of students and parents in the process of school improvement. Learning 
communities are critical to improve teaching, instruction, and professional relationships 
in the building, but Epstein and Salinas (2004) argued that the PLC structure falls short of 
producing a true community of learners. The SLC structure is favorable as it creates an 
“organized program of school, family, and community partnership with activities linked 
to school goals” (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, p. 12). Research and fieldwork continue to 
demonstrate that SLC improve schools, strengthen families, encourage community 
support, while improving academic achievement and student success (Epstein, 2001; 
Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003).

A well-organized SLC begins with an Action Team for Partnerships (Action 
Team) comprised of teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners. The 
Action Team collaborates with other school governance teams to “(a) develop annual
action plans for family and community involvement, (b) implement and evaluate activities, and (c) integrate the activities conducted by other groups and individual teachers into a comprehensive partnership program for the school” (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, p. 12). Epstein et al. (2002) described how annual action plans incorporate a research-based framework to identify six types of school involvement:

- **Parenting.** Assist and support families with parenting skills, child and adolescent development, and proper home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding the diverse family backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
- **Communicating.** Create two-way communication channels between school and home to ensure families are aware of school programs and student progress.
- **Volunteering.** Improve recruitment, training, activities, and schedules to maximize parental and volunteer involvement. Enable volunteers to serve the school directly at the sight or indirectly at other more convenient locations.
- **Learning at Home.** Involve families with their children in academic learning at home with homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks with their peers and families.
- **Decision Making.** Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations.
• **Collaborating with the Community.** Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities. Enable all local stakeholders to contribute service to the school community.

Several researchers (e.g., Clark, 2002; Dryfoos, 2000; Invernizzi, Rosemary, Richards, & Richards, 1997) have suggested that the greatest gains in academic achievement occur when family and community involvement is connected to student learning. Effective family and community connections embrace a philosophy of partnership where influence is shared—the responsibility for children’s academic achievement becomes a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members (Moore, 1998; Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001; Wang, Oates, & Weishew, 1995). The greater the level of collaboration and familial support, the better children perform academically (Marcon, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Sanders & Herting, 2000).

**Postsecondary financial aid policy.** Whereas primary education was promoted in the U.S. as a public responsibility, historically postsecondary education was largely understood to be a private or individual responsibility. This changed in 1862 with the passage of the Morrill Act and the establishment of a complex national system of public land grant universities (Thelin, 2004). The Morrill Act provided funds to build and support institutions; however, the legislation but did not provide direct support for students to attend postsecondary institutions.
The system for paying for college dramatically changed following World War II with the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill. This controversial bill faced substantial opposition from legislators and presidents of prominent universities who questioned the concept of sending battle-hardened veterans to colleges and universities, a privilege previously reserved for the nation’s wealthy and elite. It must be noted that the GI Bill was not designed to increase the number of college educated young people; the bill finally garnered the support necessary to clear the U.S. Congress as millions of veterans began returning from World War II; the idea became acceptable as an attempt to avoid the social and economic crisis experienced following World War I. The memory of millions of unemployed veterans returning to the civilian life after the war, contributing to the economic depression of the 1930s, was fresh in the minds of many political leaders. The GI Bill provided direct payment to individual servicemen to be used at a wide variety of postsecondary institutions (Mettler, 2005).

President Lyndon B. Johnson introduced the next major shift to direct financial aid support with the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. This legislation was intended to simultaneously strengthen the educational resources of America’s college and universities while providing financial aid support for students enrolled in postsecondary education (Cervantes, et al., 2005). In 1972, the HEA was reformed under oversight from Senator Claiborne Pell to improve access to higher education for America’s low-income students. As a result, Title IX of the Higher Education Amendments became the foundation for America’s federal Pell Grant. Pell Grants became the single largest source of federal grant aid for postsecondary education. While a specific income threshold did
not preclude Pell Grant eligibility, awards were intended for students from low-income households (Mercer, 2008).

Over time, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has waned as higher education costs have continued to escalate. Diminished value of the grant has prompted lawmakers to seek alternative solutions to supporting students who pursue higher education. A popular concept has been educational tax credits and deductions. Baum (2007) argued, however, that the problem with this source of aid is that it only improves college affordability for middle and upper-income families, but does not extend support to low-income families with the greatest need. The poorest families cannot realize much benefit from tuition-based tax credits and deductions, as they have little or no income against which to deduct. As a result, families who earn between $100,000 and $160,000 receive over 40% of the benefit provided by tax deductions, while those who earn less than $50,000 annually realize less than 25% of the same deductions (Baum, 2007).

Additionally, tuition-based tax credits and deductions are limited in scope. These tax incentives only apply to tuition and exclude mandatory university fees, books, or living expenses that account for the greatest proportion of the cost to attend college. Policy decisions associated with federal income taxes have led to larger inequality gaps and greater unmet need for economically challenged students (Baum, 2007). As a result, considerable postsecondary expense, paired with dwindling financial aid support are significantly affecting student decisions to enroll and persist in higher education (ACSFA, 2010). Baum (2007) conducted a meta-analysis to explore how financial aid at federal, state, and institutional levels has affected students from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Though the role of the federal government and financial aid is to equalize
educational opportunities for all Americans, policy decisions continue to widen inequality gaps between affluent and low-income students (Baum, 2007; ACSFA, 2010).

Chen and DesJardins (2008) explored the effects of financial aid policies on disparities in student dropout risks by income level. They collected first-year postsecondary student data related to social and academic integration, dropout rates, and financial aid; they then categorized these variables into nine groupings that formed five constructs. After examining interaction effects between parental income levels and financial aid, 38% of low-income students dropped out of postsecondary education while middle and high-income students dropped out at 31% and 22%, respectively.

Financial aid policy plays a critical role if low-income students are to succeed in postsecondary education. Distribution of financial aid continues to evolve at federal and state levels. Doyle (2010) recently examined public and private, doctoral, and non-doctoral four-year institutions to determine whether shifts in need and merit-based financial aid awards were evident at the institutional level. The analysis revealed that public, non-doctoral institutions and all private institutions have become less responsive to student need and more responsive to merit-based, academic qualifiers. It has been recommended that this trend be moderated across all levels of postsecondary education if America intends to improve access and persistence rates among low-income student populations (ACFSA, 2006). In order to fill the void of reductions in merit-based aid, it has been argued that institutions should increase reliance on student loans (ACFSA, 2006). The inherent problem with such policies is the inequities created for those least able to repay student loans exiting college with the largest debt burdens.
Hauptman (2007), in conjunction with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), explored postsecondary equity, access, and retention disparities; they provided four recommendations for state policymakers. Recommendations were intended to improve preparation and performance of all students in postsecondary education, but particularly for disadvantaged, low-income students. Specifically, Hauptman’s (2007) recommendations called for:

- Increased funding of early intervention programs for at-risk students in order to improve readiness, access, equity, and retention;
- More stringent preparation requirements as part of eligibility for state need-based student aid programs;
- Financial aid directed more toward students from low-income families and other traditionally underrepresented student groups; and
- Institutional compensation based upon the number of Pell Grant recipients who finish a year of study, transfer, or complete a degree.

McSwain and Davis (2007) suggested removing the tax burden associated with all grant aid. An increase in the federal tax exemption for Pell Grants paired with additional tax credits for college fees, housing, and books would be important steps toward equalization of income inequalities plaguing low-income students. Higher annual income limits and greater childcare allowances for financial aid qualification could also positively affect access and persistence rates (McSwain & Davis, 2007).

St. John (2002) contended that equality gaps could be further reduced with federal reinvestment in the Pell Grant. Steady erosion of the purchasing power of the Pell Grant limits America’s chances of ensuring equal opportunity and success for all students.
St. Johns (2002) also argued that states should increase their investments in need-based aid. Expanded college outreach programming and need-based grants could reduce equality gaps to levels that existed in the 1970’s. At a minimum, it has been recommended that federal policy must seek to ensure that states and public colleges hold Pell Grant recipients harmless against increases in their cost of attendance (ACFSA, 2010).

**Nontraditional postsecondary educational opportunities.** Beyond the traditional community college, college, and university financial aid issues, there are unique challenges for other types of postsecondary educational opportunities. Chao, DeRocco, and Flynn (2007) recommended a reduction in Pell Grant restrictions to allow for year-round college attendance without reduction in aid for attendees of low-tuition distance education and community colleges. Jaggars (2011) also agreed that state imposed financial aid restrictions for students enrolled in online degree programs should be re-examined. These strategies could increase access to the additional low-cost, one-year or shorter certificate programs (Chao et al. 2007). Such succinct programs could better prepare large numbers of the working poor for increased employment opportunities (Bragg, 2001).

Though virtual certificate and degree programs can significantly enhance college access for low-income students, substantial improvements to current models must be overcome if students enrolled in these programs are to be successful in the online learning environment (Jaggars, 2011). Many colleges currently administer online readiness assessments, but these are typically used to restrict the students who enroll in online courses. Instead, Jaggars suggested that such assessments should be redesigned to
improve the success of all students who opt to enroll online. These assessments should primarily be used to assist students in building requisite skills prior to enrolling in online courses. Additional supports to improve access and success for low-income students taking online courses could include incentives such as reduced fees for students who build their online learning skills prior to enrolling (Jaggars, 2011). Struggling students must also be identified and provided with the scaffolding and supports needed within the framework of entry-level online courses.

Since most low-income students enrolled in online courses may not have the ability to meet face-to-face with student services personnel, Scott-Clayton (2011) recommended that support services must be seamlessly integrated into students’ lives. For example, support services could be incorporated into course activities; however, this is a task that requires increased collaboration among administrative units and academic departments at the institution. Though virtual classrooms and degree programs offer tremendous potential to improve access for low-income students, the online learning environment continues to require additional resources and substantial investment to ensure success for all students (Jaggars, 2011; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

**Disparity in Postsecondary Participation**

A generation ago, the U.S. led all nations in college completion, but currently trails ten other countries (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The college completion rate in the U.S. has largely leveled off at just over 40% among adults 25 to 34, while more than half of young adults in Canada, South Korea, and Japan have earned associates degrees or higher (Kelly, 2010). It has been argued that in order to remain economically competitive, the U.S. must develop a quality educational system that produces a highly
skilled and adaptable workforce (ACT, 2011). The recommended educational system does not end at high school; some form of postsecondary education must be part of that system.

Though college and career readiness for all students is quickly becoming a national priority, there are two subpopulations that continue to lag behind in postsecondary participation. Often students from low-income families lack the level of academic preparation and information necessary to enter, persist, and graduate from college (Chen & Dejardins, 2007; Conley, 2005; De La Rosa, 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Long & Riley, 2007; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Likewise, African Americans and Hispanic students continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary institutions. Though significant interactions exist between factors associated with these two groups, the following sections will explore each in isolation.

**Income status.** Whether academically prepared or not, low-income students often enter middle or junior high and high school with a general lack of informed resources or “college knowledge” (Conley, 2005, 2010). As a result, schools located in economically disadvantaged communities have the lowest college-going rates (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). In contrast, the opposite trend exists at schools that serve higher income families (Conley, 2005, 2010). Affluent families are much more likely to possess the specialized knowledge of critical secondary school course sequencing, college placement exams, financial aid, and admissions required for their children to transition into a four-year university (Conley, 2005, 2010).

Long and Riley (2007) found that only 43% of 2004 high school graduates from families making less than $30,000 annually immediately enrolled in some form of
postsecondary education. In contrast, 75% of students from families with annual income exceeding $50,000 entered higher education (Long & Riley, 2007). Inequality gaps grew when taking academic preparation into consideration. Essentially, the top quartile of low-income high school graduates entered college at the same rate as the bottom quartile of high-income graduates.

The gap in college participation between low-income and high-income students has widened substantially since 1980. St. John (2002) labeled this college access gap The New Inequality as tuition increases have outpaced the real value of federal grant aid. While college participation and enrollments at four-year universities have grown substantially since 1975, the diminished purchasing power of the Pell Grant has negatively affected access for low-income students (St. John, 2002; Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance [ACSFA], 2010). At the time of this study, a maximum Pell award covered just one-third of the cost to attend college (The Institute for College Access & Success [TICAS], 2012). Consequently, the disproportionate net cost to attend a four-year university has forced many lower-income students to enroll at community colleges.

In addition, Chen and DesJardins (2008) reported a direct negative correlation between dropout rates and parental income. Dropout rates for students from high-income families were nearly 60% lower than those of students from low-income families. While no significant statistical difference existed between dropout rates for students from low-income and middle-income families, parental education levels significantly affected dropout rates between the two groups (Chen & DesJardins, 2008). Students from
households with a parent who earned a bachelor’s degree or greater were 64% less likely to dropout than those from parents without a college degree (Chen & DesJardins, 2008).

Advantages for high-income students also extended to college persistence and graduation (Chen & St. John, 2011; Adelman, 2006). A mere 36% of low-income students graduated in eight years, while 81% of students from affluent families graduated in just five years (Adelman, 2006; Long & Riley, 2007). Hauptman (2007) contended that the postsecondary achievement gap between rich and poor has been a persistent concern for the past four decades, but policymakers have been unable to narrow the divide.

Chen and St. John’s (2011) multi-level analysis that examined the effect of state policy on student persistence revealed socio-economic status (SES) to be a significant factor. After controlling for all other individual, institutional, and state-level factors, high-SES students were 55% more likely to persist than their low-SES peers. This research included several additional correlations that help explain the phenomenon behind higher dropout rates among low-income students. Significant correlations included:

- Students with higher educational aspirations had lower dropout rates.
- First year GPA and dropout rates had a negative correlation.
- Students receiving loans, work-study, and those who demonstrated higher levels of academic integration were less likely to drop out of college.

Sandy and Duncan (2010) suggested that a share of the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers stems from systematic inequalities that plague the schools they attend. Discrepancies in available funding for low-income
schools are a key contributor to this inequality gap. School districts that educate the greatest number of poor and minority students average $966 less state and local funding per student when compared with districts that represent the smallest numbers of poor and minority students (Education Trust, 2001, 2004). This lack of resources at schools located in low income communities appears to contribute to many negative effects on academic achievement.

Another pronounced issue is the lack of high quality teaching and coursework available at most low-income schools (Hannaway, 2005). For example, Adelman (2006) contended that schools with high percentages of low income, racial and ethnic minority populations are far less likely to offer trigonometry than schools that serve students of more affluent families. Since the single most important factor that determines whether or not students will succeed in higher education is the level of academic challenge they experience in high school (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Conley, 2005), it has been argued that greater efforts should be directed at resolving persistent teaching quality and academic rigor deficits at low-income schools.

**Race/ethnicity.** It is anticipated that by 2050, nearly half of the U.S. population will consist of individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds—African American 14.7%, American Indian 1.1%, Asian/Pacific Islander 9.3%, and Hispanic 24.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In 1960, approximately 7% of U.S. high school graduates were members of racial and ethnic minority groups; following the 2000 census, that number had grown to 40% (Mortenson, 2002). The largest ethnic minority increase is expected to come from the Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
The National Center for Higher Education Management (2007) estimated that at least half of the needed growth in college degree attainment can be achieved by closing the achievement gap with respect to low-income, African-American, and Latino students. In order to achieve this goal, the U.S. Department of Education (2010) included objectives to ensure all students are college and career ready in the recent reauthorization proposal for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The framework set forth by the department charged all states to produce college and career ready high school graduates.

In recent years, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have completed high school and attended college at lower rates than their White and Asian/Pacific Islander peers (Akerhielm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997, 2002, 2008). This persistent achievement gap continues today. Among the entire U.S. population in 2007, 66% of Whites completed some college compared to 50% of African Americans and 34% of Hispanics (NCES, 2008). These educational achievement disparities have sparked significant concern as demographic trends continue to favor larger ethnic minority student populations (Cowan-Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Asian/Pacific Islanders are the only racial/ethnic minority group graduating greater numbers of students from high school and college. Other major racial/ethnic minority groups such as African Americans and Hispanics are caught in a “web of disadvantage that encompasses limited progress in personal wealth, negative self-image, low academic expectations, and community segregation that perpetuate conditions” (Berg, 2010, p. 83). Berg (2010) further argued that bans on affirmative action policies
during university admission decisions have complicated the issues facing these minority
groups.

**College Readiness Programming**

Morgan and Sores (2010) argued that college consumers are much more likely to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education if they are exposed to the proper information and resources in advance. In the past thirty years, numerous programs have been developed to increase the college going rate in the United States. Some efforts are local; some originate from a particular state policy or initiative. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 included the Upward Bound program; this was the first federal contribution to the goal of increasing access to postsecondary education. Following this original initiative, other federal programs, generally falling under the umbrella term “TRIO”, have been added (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The most recent federal program, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) was signed into law as part of the 1998 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships [NCCEP], 2004). It was designed to “increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This central goal contains three objectives: (a) to increase the academic performance and preparation of students for postsecondary education, (b) to increase rates of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, and (c) to increase the knowledge base of postsecondary options, preparation, and financing for GEAR UP students and their families (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).
Since GEAR UP was authorized during the William J. Clinton administration and reauthorized during the George W. Bush administration, President Barack Obama has further emphasized postsecondary education. He has set a clear goal to significantly improve America’s college completion rate by 2020. The U.S. Department of Education’s (DOE) response has been policy that encourages progression within elementary and secondary education using reform strategies focused on improving the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. Such strategies include (a) access to high-quality instruction based on rigorous college and career ready standards; (b) enriched assessment of student achievement using standards-aligned measures; and (c) efforts to turn around the lowest-performing schools. Final outcomes associated with the current reform efforts could rest heavily on successful GEAR UP outcomes. Therefore, DOE views GEAR UP as a critical component in their strategy to improve the quality of secondary schools so greater numbers of students are well prepared for college and careers.

Two forms of GEAR UP projects exist—state grants and partnership grants. Any state agency designated by the governor of the state may apply for the state grant. In contrast, partnerships consisting of one or more local educational agencies and one or more degree-granting institutions of higher education and not less than two other community organizations or other entities such as businesses, professional organizations, or state agencies may apply for a Partnership grant. Both state and partnership grants require an early intervention component. This early intervention component for students must begin no later than their 7th grade year and continue until the cohort of students graduates from high school. Examples of intervention efforts include, but are not limited
to, academic support, counseling, mentoring, and other services that focus on college awareness, entrance information, and financing options. The basis for such interventions was to improve inadequate college preparation and application rates among low-income, first-generation student populations.

Morgan and Soares (2010) challenged the federal government to play an even greater role in helping low-income families establish relationships and experiences necessary to become effective college consumers with the following suggestions:

- Use funding from the U.S. Department of Education Federal Work-Study program to create a college ambassador network. Rather than pay low-income students for work done at college campuses, nonprofits, and private industry, the program could be used to help ensure these students are able to make better-informed decisions about college by connecting them with current college students with similar backgrounds.

- The U.S. Department of Education should also invest a portion of its marketing and outreach funds to partner with state financial aid agencies for the purpose of creating web-based support groups. These forums could allow guidance counselors and college students a platform to share critical financial aid and college related information.

- Encourage dual enrollment through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Accelerated learning opportunities should be provided for low-income students on community college and university campuses.

Though the federal government can provide macro-level support to enhance social capital and habitus among low-income student populations, Tierney and Venegas (2005) argued
that the greatest gains occur when schools and local educational agencies work to connect these peer groups.

Establishing college preparatory cohort(s) that emphasize peer learning creates an environment where students envision themselves as part of an elite student group connected by the school setting (Tierney & Venegas, 2005). The significance of peer groups during adolescent development has been studied for some time (Hinde, 1987; Piaget, 1932). Peer groups are sometimes defined as independent or closed structures (Tierney & Colyar, 2005), while others characterize peers as close friends, classmates, or as a single reference group for decision-making and progress (Kemper, 1968). Tierney and Venegas (2005) build upon the notion of peers as reference groups where peers are influenced by a set of established norms and values.

When college preparation programs promote opportunities for more significant and sustained peer interactions, they are more likely to produce students who are equipped with the skills necessary for postsecondary education (Tierney & Venegas, 2005). The effects on social capital and habitus created by a peer culture based in college preparation are profound. Not only are students more prepared to get into college; they are also more likely to succeed once they arrive (Tierney & Venegas, 2005).

Research continues to indicate that student decisions to attend college and eventually complete a degree program are the result of a complex process that begins at or before the 7th grade (Cabrera et al. 2006). This research demonstrates that students are more likely to be aware of and prepared for college when parents, faculty, administrators, peers, and community collaborate to inform students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Cabrera,

**Program Evaluation**

Widely viewed as the father of educational evaluation, Ralph W. Taylor coined the term *educational evaluation* (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The Tylerian Age extended from approximately 1930 to 1945 and was defined by the development of Tyler’s perspectives of evaluation which were focused on internal comparisons of outcomes with clearly stated objectives (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Madaus, 2004). The field of educational evaluation continued to evolve organically through the late 1940s until a major shift occurred in 1957 with the Russian launch of *Sputnik I*.

The launch of *Sputnik I* primed the U.S. Congress to pass the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which provided for substantial investment in new educational programs and testing. Educational programs in mathematics, science, foreign language, counseling, and testing programs were created to end a perceived era of complacency in public education (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Additional investments in public education came with passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965; this legislation was passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Among other things, the ESEA emphasized equal access to public education and established high standards paired with systematic program evaluation. As a result of the focus, intensity, and formalization of program evaluation that occurred between 1958-1972, Madaus and Stufflebeam (2002) referred to this period as The Age of Development.
The next phase in the evolution of program evaluation, termed The Age of Professionalism, began in the early 1970s and continues today. This era has been defined by ongoing efforts to distinguish the field of evaluation from its origins in research and testing. The profession of program evaluation now embodies a multitude of theoretical approaches and models, in addition to varied definitions of evaluation. Though educational evaluation has evolved since the Tylerian Age, theoretical development of program evaluation remains in its infancy (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Weiss, 1998).

Evaluations are intended to provide information that enables stakeholders to determine the value of a particular program (Guba & Stufflebeam, 1970; Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000; Stufflebeam, 1971, 1974, 1986; Stufflebeam & Webster, 1980; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Tyler, 1942). At its core, the essence of evaluation is to determine the merit, worth, or value of something (Gibton, 2002; Kellaghan, Stufflebeam, & Wingate, 2003; Madaus, Scriven, & Stufflebeam, 1983; Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2002; Scriven, 1991; Stufflebeam, 2004; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Though the basic purpose for evaluation remains universal, three unique branches define the field. According to Alkin and Christie (2004), the three branches of evaluation include: Methods, Valuing, and Use.

Theorists within the Methods branch tend to emphasize research methodology and rigor over all other considerations (Alkin & Christie, 2004). Evaluation models associated with this branch are usually based in knowledge construction and emphasize randomized sampling and control groups (Alkin & Christie, 2004). This approach to
program evaluation tends to be narrow in scope as quasi-evaluation methodology determines the nature of the program (Scriven, 1991; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Theorists within the Valuing branch argue that the critical component of the evaluation process is the value placed on the evaluand (Alkin & Christie, 2004). Evaluation models from this branch are used to determine the “merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process” (Scriven, 1991, p. 139; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 369). Scriven (2003) proclaimed evaluation as the science of valuing; and argued that an evaluation is not evaluation without a valuing component.

The Use branch is the third branch of the evaluation theory tree; it is based on the work of Daniel Stufflebeam and Michael Quinn Patton. Use-focused theories are also referenced as improvement/accountability-oriented models (Stufflebeam, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003a; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Theorists from the Use branch are primarily focused on the ways in which stakeholders may use the evaluation information. Patton (1997) defined the models from this approach as a “systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (p. 23).

Stufflebeam developed the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model as a Use-focused evaluation, since the primary function of this model is to provide program improvement information (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The CIPP model is grounded in a social systems approach to evaluation which assesses the interrelated set of activities that function together to fulfill a programmatic mission (Ryan & Cousins, 2009; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This comprehensive framework promotes and assists
goal achievement and ongoing improvement, while simultaneously providing an effective platform for judging program merit, worth, and accountability (Stufflebeam, 2003a, 2003b; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The framework is also well suited for internal evaluations to support managerial decision making from a systems perspective (Ryan & Cousins, 2009; Stufflebeam, 2003a; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Summary

There is strong evidence that in order for the U.S. to retain its global economic standing, an increase in the number of individuals who enter and succeed in postsecondary education is essential. Increasing postsecondary participation involves improvements in academic preparation, increased “college knowledge” (Conley, 2010), and financial aid policy that does not disadvantage families that experience financial challenges. Indeed it has been argued that if groups underrepresented in higher education (e.g., low income, African Americans, Latinos) were provided a secondary education that directly reflected college and career readiness, as well as had access to financial aid, the gap between the actual and desired rate of postsecondary participation could be eliminated (Kelly, 2010). Many programs have been developed to increase the college-going rate in the U.S.

One of the most recent federal efforts has been the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). GEAR UP was designed to reflect contemporary understandings of college readiness within a local context. In order to understand the first two years of a locally implemented GEAR UP effort, entitled Aspirations, a use-focused theory of evaluation, Stufflebeam’s Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model, was conducted. The CIPP model is grounded in a social
systems approach to assess the interrelated set of activities to function together to fulfill the programmatic mission.
Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this formative evaluation was to examine outcomes after the first two years of implementation of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Aspirations Project (Aspirations) at a middle school in the Western United States. The evaluation focused on student outcomes and cultural shifts at the middle school related to project goals. The study employed Stufflebeam’s (2003a, 2007) revised and updated Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) evaluation model to answer the following evaluation questions (EQ):

EQ1 (context): What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?

EQ2 (input): Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?

EQ3 (process): How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

EQ4 (product): At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

This chapter is comprised of seven components: (a) an overview of the Aspirations Project, (b) CIPP program evaluation, (c) data sources, (d) data collection, (e) data analysis by CIPP component, (f) elimination of potential bias and (g) summary.
The Aspirations Project

In 2010, staff working for an existing state-sponsored GEAR UP initiative responded to a new federal Request for Proposal (RFP) with the Aspirations Project. The project was intended to serve approximately 500 middle school students with direct services until they graduated from high school in 2017. The Aspirations cohort was selected from five elementary schools that matriculated to the middle school under study in Fall, 2011. The project was designed as a series of interventions and supports to increase the number of college-going students enrolled at this impoverished school, and improve school culture to reflect an environment where all students are prepared for postsecondary success.

Aspirations included direct services for students, as well as professional development for the teachers, staff, and administrators; parent workshops related to college preparation and financing were also built into the project. This evaluation examined the implementation and effectiveness of Aspirations from Spring, 2010, when the cohort was identified, through the end of the 2013 school year as students transitioned out of middle school and into high school. The social, emotional, and physiological challenges that adolescents face while transitioning from middle school to high school are well documented (Bottoms, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The internal and external conditions adolescents experience during this pivotal period can either facilitate or hinder their progress toward graduation (Samel et al. 2011).

Aspirations at the middle school was defined by two primary goals: (1) develop a college-going mindset throughout the student cohort, and (2) enhance support systems for families and community. Three specific objectives were established: (a) attainment of
a 20 percent increase in the number of students who achieve at grade-appropriate levels in mathematics as compared to the respective 2010-2011 class at the school; (b) increase in state standardized test scores of 3% for each year of the project; and (c) increase in the high school graduation rate. Aspirations sought to achieve the objectives and accomplish the goal of developing a college-going mindset by providing students with a set of research-supported, grade-appropriate services to enhance their present and future academic success. Aspirations also sought to engage families and the local community with home visits and a workshop series that covered (a) strategies for student success; (b) effective school partnerships; (c) college preparation; and (d) financial education (Aspirations Project, 2010).

**Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) Evaluation**

The fundamental purpose of program evaluation is to improve rather than “prove” (Ryan & Cousins, 2009; Stufflebeam, 2001; Weiss, 1998). Stufflebeam, Madaus, and Kellaghan (2000) created categorical classifications for evaluations; one classification is the improvement/accountability oriented evaluation approach, which is focused on assessment of programmatic merit and worth. This broad approach is designed to account for the full range of questions and criteria required to assess the value of a program, and examine both intended and unintended outcomes (Stufflebeam, Madaus, & Kellaghan, 2000). The CIPP model typifies the improvement/accountability oriented approach to evaluation.

The CIPP framework was developed to provide an analytic and rational basis for programmatic decision-making. CIPP is based on a cycle of planning, structuring, implementing, reviewing, and revising decisions (McLemore, 2009). Each component of
this cycle is examined from a different perspective: Context, Input, Process, and Product evaluation. The CIPP model has three fundamental strengths: (1) it is applicable to a variety of evaluation situations; (2) it is comprehensive and can be used at any point from initial program planning to final program outcomes; and (3) it is well recognized with a capacious history of practical application (Guerra-Lopez, 2008).

Consistent with the CIPP model focus on improvement, priority is placed on affecting long-term, sustainable program improvement efforts (Green & McClintock, 1991; Stufflebeam, 2003a). Therefore, the intent of the model is to supply stakeholders with “timely, valid information of use in identifying an appropriate area for development; forming sound goals, activity plans, and budgets; successfully carrying out work plans; periodically deciding whether and, if so, how to repeat or expand an effort; and meeting a funder’s accountability requirements” (Stufflebeam, 2003a, p. 5). When selected for retrospective assessments, CIPP evaluations should reconcile programmatic “merit, worth, probity, and significance” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 329). Such reports can provide stakeholders with actionable information to help assess the quality, cost, utility, and effectiveness of services provided or consumed (Stufflebeam, 2003a).

The CIPP model includes four distinct evaluations. These include the context evaluation, the input evaluation, the process evaluation, and the product evaluation. Each of the four CIPP components could be treated as a separate, stand-alone evaluation or these components can be categorized into a comprehensive program evaluation (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). For this evaluation, the four components of the model were used to conduct a broad, two-year evaluation of the Aspirations Project. The
following sections describe how each component of the CIPP model was used to evaluate elements of the Aspirations Project.

**Context evaluation.** The initial component of the CIPP model is the context evaluation, which addressed EQ1, *What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?* Context evaluations should “compare program goals and priorities with program needs, problems, assets, and opportunities” (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 329). The context component included the following sub-questions:

- What were the factors at the middle school that contributed to the implementation of Aspirations?
- What were the characteristics at the school that contributed to the implementation of Aspirations?
- What considerations influenced the selection of the middle school for Aspirations?

The context evaluation provided a framework for the three remaining components of this study. This framework guided an examination of the extent to which Aspirations Project goals and corresponding objectives were aligned with the needs of participants.

**Input evaluation.** The input component of the CIPP model is used to determine how an objective should be accomplished (Stufflebeam, 2003a). Input evaluations are designed to “assess alternative approaches, competing action plans, staffing plans, and budgets for their feasibility and potential cost-effectiveness to meet targeted needs and achieve goals” (Stufflebeam, 2003a, p. 3). As indicated in the model, the input
evaluation was aligned with the context evaluation. The input evaluation provided information about the extent to which Aspirations Project services and strategies supported participant needs identified in the context evaluation. This input evaluation addressed EQ2, *Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?* and included the following sub-questions:

- Were the resources allocated to Aspirations sufficient to conduct the necessary activities, interventions, and strategies?
- Were Aspirations activities, interventions, and strategies appropriately grounded in relevant college and career readiness research and literature?
- Was Aspirations responsive to participant needs?

**Process evaluation.** The third component of the CIPP model is the process evaluation, which aligned with EQ3, *How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?*. This component of the model was used to assess the execution of strategies in order to determine if project outcomes were being accomplished (Stufflebeam, 2003a) (EQ3). This process evaluation focused on observation, documentation, and assessment of Aspirations Project activities. The following sub-questions guided this section:

- How did the Aspirations Project attempt to create a college-going mindset among the student cohort at the middle school?
- How was the Aspirations Project introduced to the middle school?
- How were Education Trust Awards implemented?
- How was student mentoring implemented?
- How was family engagement implemented?
• How was professional development for school staff implemented?
• How were summer activities implemented?
• What feedback methods were used to improve Aspirations?

**Product evaluation.** The final component of the CIPP Evaluation Model is the product evaluation. The primary purpose of this component is to determine the extent to which a program is successful in achieving its goals (Stufflebeam, 2003a). This study employed the CIPP Checklist developed by Stufflebeam (2007), which divides the product evaluation into three subsections: (a) impact (Did the program reach the intended audience?), (b) effectiveness (Were participant needs met?), and (c) sustainability (Are programmatic achievements sustainable and replicable?). The product evaluation for this study related to EQ4 *At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?*

This component answered the following sub-questions:

• What were the postsecondary goals of the Aspirations cohort?
• How did the middle school perform on state standardized metrics after the Aspirations Project intervention?
• What affect did school staff perceive the Aspirations program to have had school culture?

**Data Sources**

Five existing data sources, coupled with individual interviews, focus groups, and general observations, were used to conduct this evaluation. The five existing data sources included: (a) the state GEAR UP grant proposal; (b) the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 Annual Performance Reports (APR) for the Aspirations Project; (c) 2012-2013
GEAR UP student surveys; (d) state standardized test scores and school accountability metrics; and (e) GEAR UP document archives.

The grant proposal was used to identify project goals and objectives, intended participants, staff expertise, requested budget, project resources, timeline, and performance assessment plan. Project goals and intended outcomes were developed according to the funding agency RFP; the proposal set forth clear project priorities and a plan to accomplish programmatic goals. The proposal contributed to the context, input, and process portions of the CIPP evaluation.

The APR was the annual report submitted to the federal agency for accountability and funding considerations. The APR contained six sections for reporting individual student participation, activities, and outcomes, as well as project successes and concerns. Two APRs for the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 program years were used to examine progress toward the project goals and objectives outlined in the grant proposal. The APRs primarily contributed to the process and product portions of the CIPP evaluation.

GEAR UP student surveys were developed by the U.S. Department of Education (i.e., the funding agency) and were required to be administered biannually by all GEAR UP projects. These surveys were designed to examine student aspirations and whether or not they had received postsecondary information from adults at their school. For the purpose of this evaluation, student surveys were used to measure postsecondary aspirations of the student cohort. Survey items related to whether or not students received college information from adults on campus were too rudimentary to be of use for this evaluation. Since the Aspirations Project had just two years of direct service to
students at the conclusion of this evaluation, GEAR UP survey data was only available for the 2012-2013 project year, when the cohort was in the 8th grade.

Other data sources included in the evaluation were state standardized test scores and the associated school accountability metric (SAM) used to rank the performance throughout the state. Specifically, the SAM and test scores were used to compare change-over-time at the middle school under study and compare this performance with 100 similar schools as determined by the State Department of Education. Test scores and SAM rankings were examined over a ten-year period.

In addition to the existing GEAR UP, Aspirations, and state records and data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key program stakeholders, including the (a) State GEAR UP Director, (b) Aspirations Project Manager; (c) two school administrators; and (d) four teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to explore stakeholder experiences with Aspirations and uncover thematic patterns that provided collective meaning among the participants (Kvale, 1996; McNamara, 2005). According to Bernard (1988) semi-structured interviews are best employed when the interviewer will not have more than one chance to interview subjects. Flexibility in the design of the semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to follow topical trajectories during conversations that strayed from the predetermined interview guide. Staff interview questions are included in Appendix B and focused on all four components of the CIPP model.

To understand the dynamic that existed between students and the Aspirations Project, two focus groups were conducted. Focus groups are ideal for obtaining participant attitudes, opinions, perceptions, motivations, and behaviors (Barbour &
Each focus group consisted of 7-10 8th grade students who were recruited during an Aspirations afterschool activity. Focus groups were conducted in a private setting at the Aspirations Project office. Focus group questions are located in Appendix C. Data from these questions contributed to all four CIPP evaluation components.

Finally, observations also contributed to all four CIPP evaluation components. Observations provided general information about how Aspirations functioned and exposed intrapersonal interactions on campus. No specific rubric was used; rather observations were written as field notes to provide insight into the contexts, relationships, and behaviors present at the middle school. Observations helped provide clarity during interpretation of other data sources.

**Data Collection**

This evaluation was conducted under the auspices of the University of Nevada, Reno Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A). Existing state GEAR UP data, including the grant proposal were obtained from the State GEAR UP Director. Aspirations Project data, including a six-year working plan, APRs, and GEAR UP student survey results were acquired from the Aspirations Project Manager. Standardized testing results and state accountability metrics were obtained from the State Department of Education website.

**Interviews.** State GEAR UP, Aspirations, and school stakeholders identified in the previous section were contacted individually to arrange for interviews. All interviewees were provided with the Information Sheet included in Appendix D. The Information Sheet was used in lieu of written consent because the information collected
pertained to the implementation of Aspirations and was not personal in nature.

Interviews were conducted in the Aspirations office at the middle school and at the State GEAR UP office. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded to allow the evaluator to focus on participants rather than taking detailed notes. Field notes were written immediately following each interview to document interviewee’s body language and other pertinent information.

**Focus groups.** Two student focus groups were conducted; each was comprised of 7-10 student participants. Parents received an Information Sheet (Appendix E) as an electronic notification from the school; this process was consistent with the manner in which school officials informed parents of activities being conducted at the school. The Information Sheet included an opt-out process for parents to follow if they wanted to have their child excluded from the study. Parents had one week to return the opt-out form. No parent opted out of their child’s participation in the focus groups.

Focus groups were conducted after school in the Aspirations office at the middle school. The office was intentionally designed as an open and inviting space that students frequently used to socialize and receive services. Students were greeted and offered a light snack before focus group interviews began. The students were reminded not to use names during the interviews and that anything shared was not to be discussed after the conclusion of the session. Focus groups lasted approximately 15-20 minutes each. The focus groups were audio-recorded, and similar to staff interviews, the evaluator wrote field notes following each focus group to describe the setting, mood in the room, and other pertinent information.
Observations. Observations were made during Aspirations events and activities. Focus was placed on general interactions between students as well as interactions between students and project staff and/or teachers. Observations also noted how attentive students were during specific Aspiration activities. No rubric was used; rather, notes were recorded in a field notebook either during the activity or shortly after the observation occurred. Observations were conducted as inconspicuously as possible.

Data Analysis by CIPP Component

Data analysis for the CIPP model was somewhat complex because of the various data sources. The exiting data sources were used as the skeleton of the evaluation. Specifically, each data source was carefully reviewed; relevant information from each source was sorted appropriately into the various components of the CIPP model. Once the hard data was compiled, information gleaned from interviews, focus groups, and observations were added to provide insight and clarification. The analysis process was iterative because each CIPP component informed another component. For instance, the product component revealed more nuanced examination of the context and process components; other interactions occurred as well. Although iterative in the actual evaluation, each CIPP component is described lockstep below.

Context. Data from the grant proposal and APRs were examined to answer context evaluation sub-questions and establish context for each project year. These documents contained data that were used to compare Aspirations Project goals and priorities with school needs, assets, challenges, and opportunities. Interviews with key stakeholders also provided critical contextual information. A review of program archives
added additional color to activities, environment, and change over time in context of the Aspirations Project.

Demographic data collected from APRs identified the student cohort. Programmatic problems, barriers, and challenges are also identified in the APR. These data were used to define what needs were to be addressed and aligned with EQ1: *What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?*

**Input.** Aforementioned data sources also informed the input evaluation. The RFP, grant proposal, and especially interviews and field notes contained critical data to examine whether the Aspirations Project was responsive to participant needs. These documents also provided measurable quantifiable data to examine the sufficiency of work plans, scheduling, and implementation. These findings supported EQ2: *Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?* and the associated sub-questions.

**Process.** Data sources used for the process evaluation included APRs, field notes, program archives, and key stakeholder interviews. These data informed the process evaluation questions in the following manner:

- All program records and reports were reviewed to determine how the program was implemented and refined according to project goals and objectives.
- Annual performance reviews and program archives were used to understand how program implementation was reflected formally.
- Key stakeholder interview and focus group data, as well as field notes and general observations were analyzed to determine the nuances and individual interpretations of how the program had been implemented.
This component of the CIPP model answered the central question “Is it being done?” (Stufflebeam, 2003a, p. 3). The equivalent research question for this section was EQ3: How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school? and the related sub-questions.

**Product.** Data sources used for the product evaluation included GEAR UP student survey responses, state standardized testing results, observations, and interviews. These data were used to answer the central evaluation question, EQ4 At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

- GEAR UP student survey results from the 2012-2013 project year were examined to determine if the Aspirations cohort future plans included a college education after almost two full school years with the program.
- State standardized test scores were examined over a 10-year period to examine academic performance at the middle school and compare it to the performance of similar schools throughout the state.
- Both aforementioned data sources were triangulated with interview data and field notes to determine what effect school staff perceived the Aspirations Project to have had on their school culture.

The primary goal of product evaluation is to answer the basic question “Is it succeeding?” (Stufflebeam, 2003a, p. 3). This question was aligned with EQ4 At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the school? and the related sub-questions.
Trustworthiness of the Findings

Stufflebeam’s (2007) CIPP evaluation model checklist includes a final review of findings by key stakeholders that occurs prior to completion of evaluation. This activity is designed to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of the final reported findings. Administrative turnover at the middle prevented the evaluator from submitting findings for a final administrative review. However, the State GEAR UP Director and the Aspirations Project received a copy of the findings and provided feedback as to the accuracy of the findings prior to publication.

Summary

This evaluation employed the CIPP evaluation model to answer the following evaluation questions:

EQ1 (context): What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?

EQ2 (input): Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?

EQ3 (process): How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

EQ4 (product): At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

Five existing data sources complemented interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups with students, and general observations. All existing data was analyzed first and organized into the four components of the CIPP model. Hard data garnered from existing
sources was further refined through interviews, focus groups, and observations. An iterative analysis of all data sources provided additional depth to each CIPP component.
Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of the first two years of the Aspirations project using a Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the project during the middle school implementation and inform future practices. The evaluation focused on student outcomes and cultural shifts at the middle school related to project goals. The study employed Stufflebeam’s (2003a, 2007) revised and updated CIPP evaluation model to answer the following evaluation questions (EQ):

EQ1 (context): What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?

EQ2 (input): Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?

EQ3 (process): How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

EQ4 (product): At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to answer the evaluation questions within the CIPP framework. This chapter is comprised of five sections: (a) Context, (b) Input, (c) Process, (d) Product, and (e) Summary.
Context

Within Stufflebeam’s (2007) model, context evaluation is described as an assessment of needs, assets, and problems within a defined environment. For this evaluation, the following context question included three sub-questions.

EQ1, *What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?*

- What were the factors at the middle school that contributed to the implementation of Aspirations?
- What were the characteristics at the school that contributed to the implementation of Aspirations?
- What considerations influenced the selection of the middle school for Aspirations?

With an overall goal to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education, the school under study was ideal for inclusion in the State GEAR UP project. Whereas the federal requirement for school selection was greater than 50% free and reduced lunch (FRL) rate, the predominant measure for socio-economic status (SES) in schools, this school had over 90% FRL. Furthermore, of the 944 students enrolled at the middle school, 192 were English Language Learners representing 18 different languages on campus. Only 21 students, just over 2%, qualified for advanced placement courses. The cohort’s racial-ethnic composition was: 39% Hispanic, 28% African American, 23% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% White, and 5% multiracial.
The school was located in what would commonly be described as a rough, urban neighborhood comprised of apartments, subsidized housing, and countless vacant buildings. Commercial space that remained occupied was dominated by fast food restaurants, check cashing businesses, as well as thrift and discount retailers. The community surrounding the school could be considered on the decline. It had a population that exceeded 72,000 just a decade ago; at the time of the study, fewer than 25,000 people resided in the zip code. Average adjusted gross income (AGI) per household was below $35,000, approximately half of the average AGI rate reported for entire state. Most apartments and housing in the community had some form of metal perimeter fencing or bars on the windows and doors. A large discarded pile of trash could be seen untended in the street less than a block from the campus. Law enforcement was always highly visible in the neighborhood.

The school had a particular visual image. It could best be described as an island in the community, cordoned off by tall chain-link fencing and brick walls with a large steel security gate at the main entrance. A typical school day started and ended with the same routine. The steel security grille rolled up about hour before school started at 7:00am and promptly closed after the first bell rang. The gate did not open again until moments before the final bell rang at 2:47pm. Once the final bell rang, students poured out through the gate. Observations revealed that some students appeared concerned or even in a state of panic as they bolted away from the school on their bikes while others opted to linger in small racial or ethnic clusters just outside the gate. Except for a handful of boisterous teens teasing one another, the majority of students who remained huddled outside the gate appeared reserved and watchful.
One observation was particularly noteworthy. Without notice, an administrator appeared at the gate and loudly, but respectfully informed all students that school had concluded for the day and the time had arrived for everyone to head home. Most of the students hesitated and continued to socialize quietly. Only when the administrator began approaching each group of students to request again that everyone leave campus were the students finally convinced to leave the premises. As the students began to fan out into the neighborhood, another administrator arrived with a radio in hand and news that a fight between two racial groups had been planned at the nearby park. Law enforcement was immediately notified; one administrator headed for the park, and the other returned to roll down and lock the steel security gate.

Although the community where the school was located was both economically disadvantaged and riddled with crime, the school offered some opportunities for academic advancement prior to the implementation of Aspirations and GEAR UP. The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program was the primary means of college related materials and curriculum on campus; however, AVID was only designed to reach a select group of the total student population at the school. Additionally, while the middle school had received considerable categorical, Title I funding to help support the low-socioeconomic student population, staff reported a general lack of programming to support students who needed additional “motivation, help, and resources.” Before Aspirations was implemented on campus, the only program offered to meet these broader needs was an afterschool-tutoring program designed to serve approximately 100 students at a time. Although available, students in the focus groups described the afterschool program as tedious and uninspiring.
Beyond AVID and afterschool tutoring, there were reports of isolated attempts to promote college awareness at the school before GEAR UP was implemented, but progress was slow. Some teachers hung college banners in their classrooms. The school hosted an annual college and career fair, and at one point a few years prior to GEAR UP, the school received grant funding to take the entire 8th grade on a college campus tour. As one staff member stated, “We were pushing kids toward college, but not in the capacity that GEAR UP is able to.”

In addition to being demographically ideal, another reason the middle school was selected by the GEAR UP leadership was based on established connections with the feeder high school and district office. From 2005 to 2011 a successful GEAR UP Partnership project had been conducted at the feeder high school. This project was also based on a cohort model; it was called the Cooperative Project (pseudonym) and resulted in significant increases in academic achievement, advanced placement enrollments, as well as scores of proficient and advanced on state standardized testing.

Summary. The school selected for implementation of Aspirations, a component of the State GEAR UP project, could be described as highly diverse. The school operated in a community challenged by poverty and violence. Attempts had been made by school and district personnel to improve academic achievement, but they tended to be sporadic and/or only meeting the needs of a select group of students. Staff of the State GEAR UP program recognized the challenges at the school, but were also familiar with a reportedly successful GEAR UP project in the past and the effective alignment between the middle school and the high school where the students would matriculate.
Input

Within Stufflebeam’s (2007) model, input evaluation describes the resources used to address the needs identified in the context. For this evaluation, the input question included two sub-questions.

EQ2, *Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?*

- Were the resources allocated to Aspirations sufficient to conduct the necessary activities, interventions, and strategies?
- Were Aspirations activities, interventions, and strategies appropriately grounded in relevant college and career readiness research and literature?

The State GEAR UP grant was written in response to goals established by the U.S. Department of Education, with special consideration to three of four federal competitive preference priorities (CPP) identified in the Federal Register. The first priority, not included in this evaluation, related to maintaining the same fiscal agent as previous GEAR UP awards; therefore, did not affect the specific program design. The U.S. Department of Education GEAR UP scoring rubric provided up to 10 additional points for proposals from state and local partnership applications that successfully met each of these priorities.

**CPP 2: Turning Around Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools.** Up to three additional points were awarded for projects that addressed one or more of the following priority areas:

(a) Improve student achievement in persistently low-achieving schools.
(b) Increase graduation rates and college enrollment rates for students in persistently low-achieving schools.

**CPP 3: Enabling More Data-Based Decision-Making.** Projects designed to collect, analyze, and use high-quality and timely data were awarded up to three additional points. Measures of program participant outcomes in one or more of the following priority areas:

(a) Improving instructional practices, policies, and student outcomes in elementary or secondary schools.

(b) Improving postsecondary student outcomes relating to enrollment, persistence and completion and leading to career success.

(c) Providing reliable and comprehensive information on the implementation of DOE programs, and participant outcomes in these programs, by using data from state longitudinal data systems or by obtaining data from reliable third-party sources.

**CPP 4: Internationally benchmarked, College-and Career-Ready Elementary and Secondary Academic Standards.** Projects designed to support implementation of internationally benchmarked, college- and career-ready academic standards held in common by multiple states and to improve instruction and learning, including projects in one of more of the following priority areas:

(a) The development or implementation of curriculum or instructional materials aligned with those standards.

(b) The development or implementation of professional development or preparation programs aligned with those standards.
(c) Strategies that translate the standards into classroom practice.

**The Aspirations Project.** The Aspirations Project was one component of the State GEAR UP proposal. Other complementary components were found in the grant application; however, Aspirations was considered the centerpiece of the overall project. Through an intense focus on the students, Aspirations was designed to strengthen the connections between the GEAR UP middle school and feeder high school for the purpose of creating and sustaining a college-going culture at both institutions. The interventions associated with Aspirations were expected to provide an important conduit for curriculum alignment and increased communication between the two schools for the purpose of improving student achievement and retention.

To achieve the goal of creating a sustainable college-going culture in the middle school, the Aspirations Project consisted of two primary foci. These included (a) creation of a college-going mindset and (b) improved family engagement at the middle school. These were developed based on current college and career ready research that identified three thematic gaps that occur during the middle school years, and particularly at schools located in communities such as the one under study. The first gap is that middle school educators often lack understanding and knowledge of their role in preparing students for higher education. The second gap is that families frequently lack expertise and knowledge about how to be engaged at the school, how to monitor school programs or initiatives, and how to be a resource for illuminating the path to college for their children. The last gap is that middle school educators often lack the tools, information, and guidelines to support students and their families in preparing for college.
To address these gaps, seven specific components were included in the design of Aspirations: fundamental values; college and career readiness workshops; leadership for boys; leadership for girls; education trust awards, transitional supports; and parent engagement. Each component was based upon current theory and/or research findings. In many respects, the idea was to have the Aspirations staff serve as role models for the school personnel.

**Fundamental values.** One component of the Aspirations model that reached all students at the middle school on weekly basis was a workshop series that covered ethical values. Curriculum was designed to maximize student engagement with a blend of amusement and physical activity. Content included learning outcomes related to appropriate citizenship, courtesy, perseverance, kindness, respect, and self-control.

The structure included students being pulled from their regularly scheduled physical education classes once per week to experience presentations and engage in activities lead by Aspirations staff and members of the community. For example, students watched a presentation about classroom bullying conducted by a guest speaker. At the conclusion of the presentation students were required to reenact a bullying experience they had witnessed on campus in front of their peers and demonstrate both the right way and the wrong way to handle a situation. Students were then asked to reflect on the consequences associated with each scenario. Different topics were covered throughout the school year using a format appropriate to teaching and learning the specific concept.

**College and career readiness workshops.** The other component of weekly physical education classroom pullout intervention included college and career readiness
workshops. These workshops were designed to enhance students’ understanding of the necessary steps and attributes required to be both academically successful in high school and prepared to meet college admission requirements after high school. Such information and activities included development of effective study skills, establishment of academic goals, development academic plans, college admissions and financial counseling.

The other aspect of this component included career readiness edification. Aspirations staff guided students through activities such as an online personality assessments and a career interest inventory designed to help students determine potential future careers that would meet their current interests. Students then linked career interests to colleges that offered programs to help prepare them for their desired career fields. Students developed six-year academic plans and completed their Specific Measureable Attainable Realistic Timely (SMART) Goals during this pullout-time.

**Leadership skills enterprise for boys.** This component of the Aspirations model was focused only on the 8th grade boys at the middle school. The initiative focused on character, confidence, and college/career preparedness. Approximately 20 boys met once per week after school and participation was based on self-select model; however, Aspirations staff focused on recruiting African American boys who were struggling academically and/or socially and were perceived to need additional support.

Activities included video presentations covering various forms of leadership. Students engaged in conversations and journaling about the definition an effective student-leader; these activities were complemented by student-leadership demonstrations such as community service activities (e.g., helping ensure that students did not litter
during lunchtime) on campus. Students were also paired with older mentors or served in mentorship roles for the 7th grade students on campus. The overarching goal was to build peer-to-peer support networks and provide students with opportunities for educational skill building in a safe environment to tackle common problems and challenges in a safe environment.

_Leadership skills enterprise for girls._ Based upon literature that indicated the importance of gender specific leadership skill development among adolescents, Aspirations included leadership skills group specifically designed for girls as well. Due to the level of dialogue and reflection required of students in the leadership skills groups, a coed setting was not considered a favorable option.

For the most part, leadership skills for girls mirrored the boys leadership group, but interventions were tailored more toward social dynamics, healthy lifestyle choices, empowerment, and personal advocacy for young ladies. This group was also based on a self-select model that included approximately 20 girls who participated in weekly afterschool meetings.

_Education trust awards._ This component of the Aspirations model included a specific $50,000 budget item for $2,000 college scholarships that could be used at any institution of higher education for 25 progressing 8th grade students at the middle school. These scholarships were awarded to students in the form of 529 College Savings Accounts that would become available when the students enrolled at a qualifying institution (e.g., accredited four-year public or private university, four year college, or two-year community college). The 529 Internal Revenue Service Code is designed to provide tax advantages for designated beneficiaries through the form of higher education
savings plans operated by a state or financial institution. The student selection process for the 2013 8th grade class was based upon students meeting the following eligibility requirements:

- Completed, formal ETA application
- Teacher recommendation letter
- Minimum 2.5 cumulative grade point average
- Persuasive essay

Each requirement was weighted separately with the persuasive essay accounting for the greatest portion of eligibility weighting.

**Transitional supports.** Aspirations staff worked with teachers and administrators from the middle and feeder high school to improve the transition for 8th grade students progressing into high school; this was considered by all to be a time when many students *fall through the cracks* and begin the downward progression to dropping out of school. Specific activities included counselors from the feeder high school visiting the middle school during the spring before 8th grade promotion to provide students with their 9th grade class schedules well in advance. This activity was paired with parent tours at the feeder high school. Tours included a secondary review of proposed class schedules and exposure to programs, clubs, and activities offered at the high school.

**Parent engagement.** While many of the aforementioned components included some form of parental engagement, the primary purpose of this component was to inform and engage parents and families in the college preparation process. In particular, this component was intended to educate parents in the middle and high school course taking patterns required for their children to gain admission to four-year universities. Parents
were encouraged to actively participate in the preparation of their children for higher
education.

Specific strategies included quarterly regional outreach events that included
stakeholders from the feeder elementary schools and high school, individual family
meetings, and Parent University. Parent University was an annual event that involved
inviting parents, students, and community members to attend a dinner and college
presentation. A variety of postsecondary education providers shared information about
college programs and admissions information to help parents prepare their students for
higher education.

Parents also received the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) nine-week
Parent Engagement Education Program to educate parents on how to foster a positive
educational environment for their children both at home and at school. The workshop
series was provided during the 2012-2013 project year and included a curriculum
specifically designed for parents of middle school students and addressed the six most
common issues faced by parents of middle grade students. Classes were provided in the
primary languages spoken at the school.

**Staffing the Aspirations Project.** In order to address the systematic gaps
through the seven components of the Aspirations Project, seven people were hired with
GEAR UP funds. The school context greatly influenced the human resources dedicated
to the effort. Due to the nature of this persistently low-achieving middle school and the
community in which the school was located, a sizeable intervention staff was considered
necessary to counteract and positively affect a school culture historically defined by
academic underperformance, hopelessness, and scarcity.
**State GEAR UP Director.** This individual was responsible to oversee all activities and personnel associated with the Aspirations Project, as well as all other State GEAR UP initiatives. The director had responsibility for strategic planning associated with political advocacy, financial management, relationships and communication between State GEAR UP and external stakeholders. The individual also maintained regular communication and aligned the State GEAR UP project to the State Higher Education Consortium. Because of these other responsibilities, only about 20% of the director’s time was devoted to Aspirations; approximately 80% of the director’s responsibilities were outside the scope of Aspirations.

**Aspirations Project Manager.** This individual was responsible for managing the day-to-day operations, including staff supervision, of the Aspirations Project at the middle school. Part of the management included maintaining communications between the middle school, feeder high school, and district office; to that end, the individual served as the formal liaison between the Aspirations program staff, school counselors, and the school leadership team. This individual also managed all Education Trust Accounts (ETA) for the students in the Aspirations Project as well as GEAR UP students in other schools around the state.

**College and Career Readiness Coordinator.** This individual was responsible for the implementation of all Aspirations student pullout workshops. Whereas the Project Manager interacted mostly with the school personnel, the Coordinator interacted with the students in the GEAR UP cohort by helping them develop six-year academic plans and SMART Goals. Interaction with school personnel was on behalf of the students, connecting middle and high school counselors with the students’ individual academic
plans and goals to improve long-term student outcomes. The Coordinator also facilitated activities at the district sponsored summer algebra academy and administered a reading program to provide academically challenging materials and supplement the existing middle school curriculum. The coordinator was dedicated full time to the Aspirations Project.

**Family Engagement Coordinator.** Because family involvement was identified as a critical gap, one staff member was dedicated to administering the regional family center which connected students enrolled at the middle and feeder schools and their parents with district, community, state and federal government resources. As would be expected in schools located in high poverty and crime ridden communities, many of the GEAR UP students had already experienced problems in school or the juvenile justice system; this individual collaborated with parents of these students to develop two-year success plans. The Family Engagement Coordinator also administered the Aspirations leadership program for girls.

**Leadership Skills Coordinator.** Although the Family Engagement Coordinator was responsible for leadership skills for girls, another coordinator was assigned to administer the Aspirations leadership program for boys. This individual developed and delivered a workshop series covering leadership and developed activities to foster natural connections and commonality between students from multiple grade levels. This was especially important for young males who might not otherwise have a male role model in their lives.

Peer-to-peer student mentoring was part of this individual’s responsibility; students from the progressing 8th grade Aspirations class were paired with students of
similar backgrounds already enrolled at the feeder high school. Because college was the ultimate goal of Aspirations, the Leadership Skills Coordinator was responsible for working with the neighboring community college to improve student access to college credit courses at the feeder high school.

**Project Coordinator.** The coordinator provided relevant life skills training to improve social interactions and behaviors of students most in need of these skills. Another responsibility was to facilitate student workshops and afterschool tutoring program with students from the middle and feeder high school.

**Elementary Coordinator and Site Contact.** As with all federal grants, collecting and managing data for program evaluation was integral to the Aspirations Project. One individual was hired to manage the Aspirations database, make logistical arrangements for field trips, and organize college awareness events and activities. All data related to student participation, academic performance, and family engagement was maintained by this individual.

**Summary.** The Aspirations Project was developed with considerable attention devoted to funding agency priorities and was grounded in current college and career readiness literature. Aspirations Project inputs included seven components designed to improve academic achievement and parent engagement at the middle school. Coincidentally, the project also had seven GEAR UP personnel directly responsible for day-to-day operations. These resources were certainly sufficient to conduct the necessary activities, interventions, and strategies.
Process

Within Stufflebeam’s (2007) model, process evaluation describes the execution of strategies in order to determine if project outcomes are being accomplished. This process evaluation was based upon observations, documents, interviews, focus groups, and examination of Aspirations Project activities. The following question and eight sub-questions guided this section:

EQ3, How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

- How did the Aspirations Project attempt to create a college-going mindset among the student cohort at the middle school?
- How was the Aspirations Project introduced to the middle school?
- How were Trust Awards implemented?
- How was student mentoring implemented?
- How was family engagement implemented?
- How was professional development for school staff implemented?
- How were summer activities implemented?
- What feedback methods were used to improve Aspirations?

The State GEAR UP Director was notified of the six-year grant award in spring 2011, approximately six months before the cohort of students entered middle school. This timing allowed for preliminary planning and activities to prepare students for their middle school experience. This period was known as the “Planning Phase” and consisted of two goals: (a) GEAR UP introductions and (b) 2011-2012 (Year 1 of the grant) project planning. It is important to note that the Aspirations Project was designed with six
annual goals to guide overall implementation; however, specific programmatic planning was developed on a year-by-year basis to help ensure interventions adequately satisfied prevailing needs at the school each year.

Introductions to GEAR UP introductions consisted of two parts: introduction to the middle school staff and introduction to the students. The overall goals and objectives of the State GEAR UP project and the Aspirations Project specifically were introduced by the principal at a professional development meeting during the summer of 2011. School staff was informed that GEAR UP was a program to inform students about their options for postsecondary education as well as to establish a college-going culture at the school. After the initial introduction, faculty members from each content area met with the College and Career Readiness Coordinator for further clarification. The College and Career Readiness Coordinator requested that the physical education teachers surrender one 55-minute class period, per student, per week so that Aspirations staff could expose all students at the school to Aspirations interventions. Interviews with school staff revealed that at the conclusion of this exploratory meeting, faculty members were convinced that the school should host the Aspirations Project.

Though the Aspirations model and project activities were specifically designed to focus on the middle school cohort in fall of 2011, introduction to GEAR UP activities were actually provided to students as early as spring of 2011 at their respective elementary schools. The preliminary Aspirations outreach activity included the introduction by Steering Talented and Engaged Pupils Toward Undergraduate Programs (STEP UP) Mentors, with the assistance of the Aspirations staff. STEP UP consisted of seniors from the local high school visiting with students at all five feeder elementary
schools for the primary purpose of encouraging academic achievement and college awareness for the soon-to-be GEAR UP Aspirations cohort. These high school seniors also lead character development sessions to accentuate behaviors that exuded a college-going mindset. This introduction included guest speakers who brought the GEAR UP message of college and career readiness for all students.

The second key introductory activity on the Aspirations Project timeline also occurred during spring of 2011. Spring-Transition to Middle School involved inviting all 6th grade students from feeder elementary schools to visit the middle school to meet school personnel and current middle school students. Teachers and administrators shared information about the changes that 6th graders could expect as they transitioned from elementary to secondary school. Some 8th grade students shared information about student life, extracurricular activities, and tips for middle school success at a student rally.

Additional planning phase activities included the development of project materials, a web-accessible database to improve student progress tracking, and 6th grade family panels to initiate the family engagement process; however, these efforts were not as successfully executed as the interactions with the students. Project materials primarily consisted of student handouts detailing critical college-going information and announcements for upcoming Aspirations events. The web-accessible database was developed, but plans for its use were scaled back because school staff did not demonstrate interest in using the information to monitor student progress. As a result, the database became the central repository for all Aspirations related student progress tracking, rather than a collaborative tool to increase communication between Aspirations
and middle school staff. Plans to develop four 6th grade family panels with middle and high school parents faced a similar fate and were abandoned due to a lack of outreach and coordination from school personnel.

Though the federal GEAR UP program was based on a cohort model whereby only one grade of students was to receive services, a programmatic decision was made by the State GEAR UP leadership group to administer the Aspirations model and treat the entire middle school (i.e., 7th and 8th graders) as a cohort. This decision was made to ensure equity and access to services for all students at the school rather than just one grade level. Although programmatically sound, particularly given the characteristics of the school, this resulted in the loss of comparative data for the purpose of evaluating program outcomes.

**Year 1: 2011-2012 project year.** The first official project year began with a central goal to create a college-going mindset among the cohort of students. Aspirations activities for this project year are described in three sections: (a) transition activities; (b) student interventions; and (c) education trust awards. Some project activities could be classified under multiple subheadings, but for the purpose of this examination, each activity was only classified under the most appropriate subheading.

**Transition activities.** As a follow-up to the activities that had occurred while the students were at their elementary schools, the first day of middle school started with a welcoming day for the incoming 7th graders. The College and Career Readiness Coordinator began the process of working with individual 7th and 8th grade students to develop their six-year academic plans; this information was shared with the school counselor. The Project Manager began officially tracking students’ yearly student
progress with the Aspirations database to monitor student participation and academic progress during Aspirations intervention strategies.

**Student interventions.** Intervention strategies included (a) fundamental values; (b) college and career readiness workshops; and (c) leadership skills enterprise for boys and girls. Fundamental values was a weekly workshop series that reached all students at the middle school and primarily covered ethical principles. College and career readiness workshops were the other component of the weekly intervention. Students were pulled out of their physical education classes once per week in order to receive the intervention. The 7th graders were pulled out on Tuesdays; 8th graders were pulled out on Thursdays. Classes were conducted by Aspirations staff and others appropriate to the topic. These workshops were designed to enhance students’ understanding of the necessary steps and attributes required to be both academically successful in high school and prepared to meet college admission requirements after high school. Such information and activities included development of effective study skills, establishment of academic goals, development academic plans, college admissions and financial counseling.

Whereas the weekly interventions were designed to reach all students in the cohort, participation in the leadership skills enterprise for boys and girls was voluntary and conducted after school to help further build character, confidence, and college/career readiness. Approximately 20 boys and 20 girls began meeting once per week after school to experience in activities designed to promote student leadership on campus. The leadership for boys was conducted by the Leadership Skills Coordinator, a male; leadership for girls was conducted by the Family Engagement Coordinator, a female.
**Education trust awards.** Funding for 529 Education Trust Awards (ETA) was earmarked for the 2011-2012 project year. In an effort to improve school climate, broaden faculty buy-in, and advance congenial relationships between students and faculty, Aspirations staff requested that school faculty manage the student selection process. Unfortunately, the middle school leadership team failed to establish a selection process before the end of the project year. The confusion and miscommunication resulted in delay, thus causing the 8th grade class of 2012 to miss out on ETAs. Funds were reallocated to other activities.

**Year 2: 2012-2013 Project Year.** The central focus for the second project year was family engagement. Modifications were made to the previous 2011-2012 project year activities so that parents would be deliberately included. Activities are grouped into (a) transition activities; (b) parent engagement; (c) student interventions; and (d) education trust awards. Again, some activities could be classified under multiple subheadings, but for the purpose of this examination each activity was only classified under the most appropriate subheading.

**Transition activities.** This included a number of initiatives directed specifically toward students, but the most effective strategy in terms of attendance was the addition and inclusion of parents in the freshman selection process at the feeder high school. It was noted during the interviews with school staff that successful student transitions from the middle school to the high school were considered of critical importance not only for the students, but for all stakeholders due to localized population out-migration. The population of the community continued to be in decline; as students and families moved...
from the area, local schools received less funding and were forced to reduce course offerings, enrichment programs, sports, and student activities.

Aspirations staff worked with the feeder high school to improve the transition for the incoming 8th grade class. The process in place prior to the implementation of Aspirations included counselors from the high school visiting the middle school annually in spring to place students into high school classes and provide them with a copy of their 9th grade class schedules. During the 2012-2013 program year, Aspirations provided the opportunity for the activity to evolve and include a family night during which more than 300 families attended to review their child’s class schedule with the high school teachers and counselors. This event also included high school campus tours provided by the STEP UP student mentors, presentations covering the difference between regular and advanced placement courses, as well as information and presentations covering student clubs and activities.

**Parent engagement.** Families were also invited to attend a college awareness event at the middle school; this activity was attended by more than 200 families. The event included presentations from Aspirations staff and guest speakers and was intended to provide parents with information to help prepare their students for college. The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) also provided a nine-week Parent Engagement Education Program to educate parents on how to foster a positive educational environment for their children both at home and at school.

**Student interventions.** Aspirations staff continued to conduct weekly physical education pullout sessions that included fundamental values and college and career readiness workshops with all students at the school. The leadership skills enterprise was
continued for boys and girls after school. Curriculum modifications kept the material fresh and relevant for the students. During student focus groups, Aspirations staff received a considerable appreciation for their ability to “make school fun” and keep them engaged throughout the activities.

The Project Coordinator was a critical addition to the Aspirations staff in the second project year. This individual was consistently described as the glue who held the collective in balance. Over 20 years of experience at the middle school serving as a school resource officer made this individual an invaluable asset to the program and critical link to the community. The Project Coordinator literally knew almost everyone in the community due to familial ties at the middle school. Many local residents simply had no resources to leave the neighborhood surrounding the school and therefore nearly everyone still living in the community either went to middle school or had family members who did.

The Project Coordinator’s stature in the community led many residents to assume this individual was the principal of the middle school. Due to the level of respect and connections the individual had established in the community the Project Coordinator was able to reach and positively affect behavior and academics for some of the most troubled students. The Project Coordinator’s aptitude to motivate the lowest-achieving students provided opportunities for remaining Aspirations staff to focus efforts toward students with stronger academic and social backgrounds.

*Education trust awards.* Following the challenges faced during the first project year, faculty came together early in the 2012-2013 school year to establish a formal selection process. Education Trust Awards were provided to 25 students based on these
criteria. The persuasive essay that detailed student ambitions for higher education was heavily weighted as a criterion. This provided a more level playing field where all student applicants, regardless of GPA, would have an equal opportunity to be awarded an ETA. The result reflected the intent, as a large majority of the students who were awarded ETAs were not higher performing students enrolled in advanced placement courses at the middle school.

Summary. The Process evaluation revealed how the Aspirations Project was implemented during the first two years at the middle school. Processes were grouped into four subheadings titled transition activities, student interventions, parent engagement, and education trust awards. This portion of the evaluation was designed to present an accurate record of program activities, events, and problems.

Product

Within Stufflebeam’s (2007) model, product evaluation describes the overall effect that the Aspirations Project had on the school and its stakeholders. The following question and three sub-questions guided this section:

EQ4 At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

• How did the middle school perform on state standardized metrics after the Aspirations Project intervention?
• What were the postsecondary goals of the Aspirations cohort?
• What affect did school staff perceive the Aspirations program to have had school culture?
A crucial component of this evaluation was the academic success and behavior indicators of Aspirations students. The context, input, and process evaluations served to identify the rationale for Aspirations, assets, opportunities, strategies, and the process of implementation at the middle school. The product component was used to evaluate the overall level of programmatic success. Though the overarching goal of the Aspirations Project was to increase the proportion of students from backgrounds and communities that historically have not pursued a postsecondary education to both enroll and succeed in higher education, this goal is particularly difficult to measure; especially at the middle school level. As a result, the Aspirations Project required both qualitative and quantitative data to examine programmatic success.

**State standardized math test.** College and career readiness literature identifies student performance in mathematics as the primary gatekeeper to both college admission and success. Therefore, the primary evaluative measure included in the grant proposal was to increase the number of students that score proficient or advanced on the annual state standardized math test (SSMT) by 20% as compared to the 2010-2011 class at the middle school. Results from this analysis revealed that nearly 35% more 7th graders in the Aspirations cohort scored proficient or advanced in mathematics on the SSMT than did the previous 7th grade class at the school.

Aggregated results demonstrated that 43% of total test-takers at the middle school scored proficient or advanced in 2011-2012 as contrasted to only 36% in 2010-2011. The Aspirations middle school also had the largest student achievement gains in the district across four subgroups: Asian, Hispanic/Latino, English Language Learners, and socio-economically disadvantaged.
College aspirations. Federal guidelines required that all GEAR UP programs administer the GEAR UP student survey developed by the U.S. Department of Education on a biannual basis. As a result, GEAR UP student surveys were only administered to students during the 2012-2013 school year, when the students were in 8th grade; therefore, there was not an opportunity to measure changes in student responses from the first to the second year of program implementation as originally intended.

Students completed the surveys during an Aspirations workshop conducted during their physical education classes and the response rate was 97% of all GEAR UP students at the middle school. Question five of the GEAR UP student survey holds particular relevance in this product evaluation designed to examine the college-going mindset of the Aspirations cohort. Results of this survey question are included in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High school or less</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>4-year degree or higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the entire Aspirations cohort, over 93% of the middle school students expected to enter postsecondary education. Of the students who intended to attend college, nearly 72% expected to earn at least a four-year degree.

Student focus groups revealed similar results. Each student in the focus groups named a four-year university or trade school that he/she planned to attend after high school. When questioned further about whether GEAR UP helped them make these
decisions, students unanimously responded that they already had plans to attend college, but GEAR UP gave them the tools to actually make it happen. In addition, students agreed that GEAR UP was the only resource they had available to help prepare for college.

**School accountability metric.** The western state that administered the state GEAR UP program and the Aspirations Project used a *high-stakes*, standardized measurement to rank and assess academic achievement at its publicly funded P-12 schools. While this measure fails to assess the college readiness or awareness, the metric does provide a generalizable and comparable glimpse into academic performance at the middle school. Because academic achievement and performance on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT serve as critical gatekeepers to four-year college and university admission, analogous state assessments are relevant when establishing the college-going mindset among the Aspirations cohort at the middle school.

The school accountability metric (SAM) is a measure of academic performance and progress at P-12 schools throughout the state and is one of the primary components of state-sponsored school accountability legislation. Scores are calculated by converting student performance on four statewide exams across multiple content areas into points on a scale, which ranges from 200 to 1,000. Individual student scores on the various statewide assessments are used by the State Department of Education to calculate one composite based score for the school. The statewide performance target for all schools in the state is 800.

The SAM is also based on an improvement model. The model is designed to compare academic performance during the current school year with a SAM score and
benchmark based on the prior year to measure annual school improvement. Scores are also used to rank schools. Each school is compared to other schools statewide, and also to 100 “similar” schools that have comparable opportunities and challenges as determined by the State Department of Education.

The inputs used to calculate SAM scores are both complex and in a constant state of flux; therefore, statistical analysis of the changes in these scores was considered ineffective. However, comparison of the SAM scores of the middle school where Aspirations was implemented over the past decade versus the median values of 100 similar schools, revealed a track record of SAM performance at or below the levels of the comparison population. This trend changed in the 2011-2012 school year when the school under study dramatically outperformed.

Figure 2. Comparison between Aspirations middle school SAM scores and median SAM scores for 100 similar schools.
With regard to state ranking comparisons, the middle school under study ranked in the lowest decile or “well below average” when compared to all schools in the state for the 2010-2011, the year prior to the implementation of the Aspirations Project. The school ranked in the fifth decile or “about average” for 2010-2011 when compared with 100 similar schools in the state with similar opportunities and challenges.

A notable improvement occurred during the 2011-2012 school year when the Aspirations middle school realized a 42-point gain in their SAM score. The SAM increase from 2010-2011 to 2011-2012 school year was also the largest increase in a district that represented more than 65 schools. This gain represented a 19% increase in the school’s SAM score year-over-year, which is the largest increase at the school since the state began issuing SAM scores.

Figure 3. Comparison between Aspirations middle school SAM scores and annual state benchmarks.
The middle school made positive shifts in SAM state rankings which is reflected by the 42-point increase in the 2011-2012 school year score. The school moved from the first decile to the second tier when compared to all schools statewide, and from the fifth decile to the eighth tier or “above average” when ranked against 100 similar schools. As before, these increases only represented school improvement during the first year of Aspirations implementation. State SAM results for the 2012-2013 school year, or the second year of the Aspirations Project at the middle school were not released prior to publication of this evaluation.

**Stakeholder perceptions.** Interviews with teachers and administrators and focus groups with students provided considerable depth to examine the impact of Aspirations at the school. Analysis of transcripts from recorded sessions revealed a number of thematic patterns across stakeholder groups. These themes included the critical need for the program, overall satisfaction with outcomes, and genuine concern about departure of Aspirations.

Prior to the implementation of GEAR UP and the Aspirations Project on campus, teachers acknowledged a troubled culture at the school defined by discontinuity, scarcity, and external pressures. As one teacher stated,

This school is a tough site. There’s a lot that goes on here and in the community that negatively impacts the school. In addition, there is a general lack of connectedness between the school and the broader community. We’ve never had a record here of long-term connections between our students and the school. Leadership is constantly changing, and the principals we receive tend to be inexperienced, first-timers who don’t have experience working at a site like this.
Another teacher provided additional depth and clarity with her vivid description of the endemic culture at the school and its relation to other schools in the district.

Before GEAR UP came to campus we had more suspensions, more fights, and in general the student body seemed to be a rougher crowd. The lower performing kids weren’t thinking about college because we didn’t have access to any programs to work with these students who needed extra motivation, help, and resources. When comparing our school to others in the district, we have the greatest need for GEAR UP. Our population doesn’t know anything about college, and the parents aren’t as involved. Many lack access to the most basic resources like Internet access. As a result, our students miss an important connection to college information.

Statements made during the student focus groups triangulated this teacher’s assertion about the lack of resources and college information at the school and in the broader community prior to GEAR UP implementation. They conceded that the Aspirations Project was in fact the only program they could access to help prepare for college. Students also claimed that Aspirations had done a good job of preparing them for college and “made it fun to come to school”.

According to the teachers, the greatest effects that Aspirations had on school culture and the students’ college-going mindset stemmed from weekly physical education pullouts conducted by Aspirations staff. These pullout sessions covered a wide array of learning outcomes related to topics such as study skills, test taking strategies, effective communication, interpersonal skills, high school course patterns required to gain college admission, career readiness and leadership. Students agreed with the faculty assessment
and requested more Aspiration pullouts to supplement the existing weekly sessions. Students reported a strong connection with these activities because Aspirations staff remained focused on a fresh curriculum comprised of relevant topics that maximized student engagement.

Faculty members also reported cultural improvements on campus as a result of the student essay contest associated with ETA awards. Teachers who scored these essays reported exceptional work from students across the entire academic performance spectrum. Again, student interviews revealed similar perceptions as all interviewees praised the ETA competition, even though just one of the focus group participants was actually awarded a scholarship.

Teachers, students, and administrators alike agreed that the Aspirations Project had a positive impact on the culture at the middle school and collective college-going mindset. Some stakeholders went so far as to say that all aspects of the Aspirations model were a successful and there was no need for improvement. Data collected from student participants and teachers revealed a reduction in suspensions and positive impacts on academic achievement, engagement and retention.

When questioned about sustainability of the outcomes experienced at the conclusion of GEAR UP’s two-year tenure on campus, teachers and administrators acknowledged that the departure would be a tremendous loss. Acknowledged was the fact that the school would not have the financial means to sustain most GEAR UP activities like ETAs, pullouts, field trips, and college campus tours. School personnel made no mention during interviews of any plans to sustain any of the activities or objectives set forth GEAR UP or the Aspirations Project.
The majority of students and faculty felt that the Aspirations model adequately met their needs. School administrators reported satisfaction with the product, but added that the organizational structure of the Aspirations Project could have better met their needs. Administrators described the school organizational structure as “flat and flexible”, primarily due to the unsettled nature of the school and surrounding community. They claimed that the vast majority of low-income middle schools operate in a similar organizational structure, much like “Silicon Valley start-up businesses”. In contrast, the Aspirations model was described as a hierarchical, compliance based structure.

Because compliance with federal project requirements is non-negotiable, the organizations that administer these programs must reflect a similar structure in order to operate. School personnel often possess the solutions for their greatest problems, but are unable to act upon them if these needs do not clearly align with federal guidelines. Interviews with administrators pointed to the problems created when a lack of operational control over funds intended to improve student achievement. One administrator claimed that the rigidity of the Aspirations model had a negative effect on staff buy-in and sustainability of programmatic outcomes. Two faculty members echoed similar disappointments, but all parties expressed gratitude for the program and especially for the commitment and competencies demonstrated by Aspirations staff.

**Summary**

GEAR UP and the Aspirations Project were implemented at the middle school as part of a grant to help improve the depressed socioeconomic status of the surrounding community and a school history mired in low academic performance. Staffing under the Aspirations model could be considered heavy, but this was likely because of chronic
issues that had historically plagued the school. Understaffing such a program at a school of this nature could have had dire consequences for program implementation, outcomes, and sustainability. Even with heavy staffing levels, it took the Aspirations Project staff the entire first project year to reach full implementation. This speaks to the difficulties programs like GEAR UP face when operating in a schools of this nature. Although measuring of program impact on the middle school had its challenges, it was clear that Aspirations had a positive impact on school culture.
Chapter V

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Aspirations Project (Aspirations) to examine the implementation of the first two years of the program and inform future modifications. This study employed Stufflebeam’s (2003a) management-oriented context, input, process, and product (CIPP) program evaluation model. The four components of the CIPP model were used as a framework to analyze the following four evaluation questions:

EQ1 (context): What contextual factors contributed to the implementation of Aspirations at the middle school?

EQ2 (input): Were the inputs (e.g., staffing, specific interventions) appropriate to the needs identified in EQ1?

EQ3 (process): How were processes employed during implementation of the Aspirations Project at the middle school?

EQ4 (product): At the conclusion of the second year of Aspirations implementation at the middle school, what was the impact of the program on the students and the school?

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to answer the evaluation questions within the CIPP framework. This chapter is comprised of four sections: (a) Discussion, (b) Implications for the future of the Aspirations Project, (c) Recommendations for future research, and (d) Conclusions.
Discussion

The findings from this formative evaluation revealed that school where the Aspirations Project was implemented demonstrated a chronic need for improvement both culturally and academically. The implementation of Aspirations appeared to have resulted in a change in school climate and academic achievement; the intensity of the human resources allocated, coupled with the multifaceted programming, complemented, the academic experiences offered at the middle school. Although the program could be deemed successful, particularly as measured by increases in student math proficiency, the school accountability metric (SAM), and statements made during interviews and focus groups, there were challenges as well. It took time to develop the systems for the implementation of several components of Aspirations. There were cultural differences between the manner in which the middle school operated and the requirements and expectations of administering a federally-funded grant. Lastly, some of the data anticipated to be used in the evaluation was not available.

School climate has been described as being similar to the air one breathes; nobody notices it until the air becomes foul (Freiberg, 1998). The climate of a school can be a positive influence on learning or seriously hinder how a school functions (Hinde, 2004). It is not a static entity and is constantly being constructed and shaped through interactions and reflections on campus (Finnan, 2000). Indeed, Noblit and Pink (2005) contended that schools are a reflection of their environments: parents; communities; local, state, and federal policies; they added societal values to the list as well. Observations, interviews, and focus groups conducted at the middle school under study revealed a school climate historically defined by deficit and resistance. There appeared to have been several factors
that contributed to the culture and climate. Staff reported a high turnover in leadership at the middle school. This was further evident as the principal at the middle school left at the conclusion of the 2012-2013 school year. The school appeared to be a reflection of the surrounding community that was plagued with lack of employment opportunities, poverty, and violence. Even more significantly, the community was also in decline, having lost approximately two thirds of its population over a decade. Attempts were made at the middle school to support academic advancement, but they were reported to be sporadic and relatively small in scale.

It appeared that the presence of GEAR UP and the Aspirations Project had positive affects on the climate of the school. Faculty interviews reported that student-faculty relations were at the best point in recent memory during Aspirations tenure on campus. Deeper relationships between faculty and the student body were also noted. For the first time some of the lower performing students were asking questions about college and their future. Some students even claimed GEAR UP activities were their greatest motivation to attend school.

What was noteworthy about the Aspirations Project was the scale of the intervention. The investments were extensive and multifaceted. Aspirations added seven staff to support the students at the middle school. Each had specific responsibilities that were designed to complement the existing academic curriculum. Faculty reported an inherent ability for Aspirations staff to connect with students and deliver inspiring content that kept students engaged. For example, the Project Coordinator alone had more than twenty years of service at the school and was often perceived to be the principal by community members due to his visibility and engaging personality.
The change in climate appears to reflect Bourdieu’s (1983) transference theory of social capital. According to this theory, the aggregate of actual or potential resources one can obtain is directly linked to the possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and membership in a group. Because the college completion rate for the residents living in the area was less than half of the state average, and the vast majority of residents reported educational attainment below the high school level, Aspirations students had virtually no opportunity to receive important college-going and career preparatory information from their social networks. Students from such neighborhoods have very little, if any community resources from which to acquire the specific knowledge set and abilities to be successful in college (Conley 2005; 2010). It appears that because of the intensity of staffing and degree of exposure, Aspirations provided the opportunity for the transference of social capital.

Interviews with teachers pointed to a culture of disconnect between students and the school. Some faculty members praised the Aspirations activities that set aside time for teachers to formally introduce themselves to students and share their experiences and motivations for teaching. As one veteran faculty member acknowledged, “…for the first time my students actually knew something about me and my background.” This testament is important to note because Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011) contended that students’ connection to school has a significant positive relationship with a range of positive outcomes such as student learning, achievement, and well-being.

Other faculty members claimed that GEAR UP’s Education Trust Awards (ETA) were instrumental in changing school climate. They claimed that for the first time, some of the lower performing students at the school turned in exceptionally well written essays
detailing college intentions and plans for the future. All faculty interviews included mention of fewer student altercations at the school and a better general atmosphere while the Aspirations Project was on campus.

Though changes in school climate are elusive and difficult to measure (Hinde, 2004), there was a dramatic change in the academic standing of the school during the time of this evaluation. The school exceeded its annual SAM growth target by more than 5% during the first year of Aspirations implementation. The school also ended a ten-year trend of performance at or below the levels of similar schools throughout the state. This SAM score increase moved the school up by 10% in statewide rankings and elevated its ranking by 30% when compared to similar schools throughout the state.

While the middle school experienced a positive climate shift during GEAR UP’s presence in the middle school, there is a question whether the shift will be sustainable, primarily because of the length of time that the project was at the school. Following several months of planning, the Aspirations Project was implemented in the middle school for two years. The first year was required to establish relationships as well as create and implement the systems to accomplish many of the tasks. It was only during the second year when the project operated according to plan. However, Aspirations staff were attempting to improve a persistently challenged school. Such schools tend to be mired in dysfunctional belief systems that inhibit learning outcomes, especially those of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Noguera, 2003). These negative environments develop over a long periods of time and they take substantial energy and resources to amend; especially at schools that have developed climates based in toxicity and hopelessness (Peterson & Deal, 1998).
The community’s effect on the school is important to note. Such deep-rooted problems take significant time and resources to counteract. This is due to the reality that almost all forms of change introduced to schools are met with resistance (Hinde, 2004). Clearly school culture change is a complex endeavor with many moving parts. There are abundant opportunities for school change efforts to fail. Hargreaves (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of failed reform efforts and noted a common resistor to sustainable change is a failure to make a long-term commitment to the change that carries stakeholders through the anxiety, frustration, and anguish of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks. Given the concern expressed by the school personnel about Aspirations and GEAR UP leaving the school, there remains a question as to whether or not the changes had become a part of the cultural norms of the school and therefore sustainable.

Regardless of the level of effort and resources committed to the Aspirations planning phase the program was bound to face challenges during implementation. As evidenced in historical examples of corporate and organizational mergers, when two organizations that lack established working relationships are suddenly forced to work together problems arise. The 2011-2012 project year was a prime example, as some strategies required modification and certain opportunities were missed due to misconceptions or other unforeseen circumstances. An administrator at the school said that it took almost a year and a half for the school to establish an efficient and effective working relationship with the Aspirations Project.

Essentially Aspirations and middle school experienced all the frustrations and challenges of merging two organizations just to have the partnership dissolved six months later. Programs like GEAR UP designed to affect school climate at low-income schools
need more time to work with the schools being served. Hargreaves (1997) warned against the temptation to withdraw financial resources or innovation strategies too quickly after implementation as that strategy is often associated with failed reform efforts. Because funding is not limitless and stakeholders want to realize sustainable, long-term solutions for the problems that outreach programs are designed to remedy, future exploration of strategies that could yield improved outcomes and for all stakeholders is vital.

The intent of this evaluation was to examine change over the two-year period time that Aspirations was at the middle school, but a general lack of year-over-year comparable data prevented this. For example, GEAR UP student surveys were only administered during the 2012-2013 project year as required by the funding agency. Therefore, growth comparisons from the first to second project years could not be measured. Bamberger (2004) argued that data constraints are a common problem for evaluators, especially for those with limited budget and/or time to complete evaluations.

**Implication for the Future of the Aspirations Project**

The findings from this formative evaluation have several implications. As GEAR UP students in the cohort transition into high school GEAR UP resources will follow the students. As a result, the “receiving” high school will be allocated GEAR UP resources to continue supporting the cohort of students. This has implications for both the students in the cohort and the middle school under study. The students indicated that they had desires to go to college; Aspirations provided tools they needed to understand how to achieve their goals. Students appeared to have improved their academic preparation. As such, it appears that the students are well positioned to continue into high school.
However, it will be critical to continue the momentum established during middle school as the students are confronted with the increased complexity associated with a high school curriculum and the high school social structure.

Sustainability of the middle school the “new” culture is a concern. Statements made during interviews suggest that it will be a challenge to continue the energy created by the presence of Aspirations for the two years. Although it can be assumed that many of the school staff will remain at the school, the additional human and financial resources will no longer be available. If sustainability was an expectation of the grant, the strategies employed in the Aspirations Project were not designed to be maintained without the additional financial resources.

Another complication is the intersection of projects that attempt to simultaneously affect the students and the school climate. Although laudable to have both goals, these are two different ideals; successful student outcomes do not necessarily equate to success for the school, as was the case at the middle school under study. Students move through the educational system; therefore, programs must reflect their developmental journey. Schools have their own journeys that are subject to the trajectories of the various personnel hired to lead the educational endeavor. Administrators set the direction and lead the school; teachers implement the direction and lead the learning in the classroom. Frequent turnover of school leaders, typical of schools located in economically challenged communities, compound the problem of sustaining a particular school climate.

Likewise, policymakers who develop school reform programs to improve low-income schools should consider inherent structural conflicts that exist when hierarchical state and federal organizations attempt to implement these programs at challenged
schools. Recurrent leadership changes paired with inadequate resources and stressors imposed from the surrounding community force most low-income schools to operate in a flat, flexible organizational structure. Attempts to fuse such divergent organizations that lack previous working experience is certainly a problematic endeavor. Moreover, conflict created during assimilation negatively affects program implementation, outcomes, and long-term sustainability. These pitfalls should be anticipated and greater emphasis should be placed on preemptive dialog and program flexibility.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research could follow the progression of the Aspirations cohort as they progress through high school. This might be a more precise measure program effectiveness and better determinant of long-term effectiveness and sustainability. The ultimate programmatic outcome is the number of Aspirations students who actually enroll and succeed in higher education. Assessment of these final outcomes is imperative.

Additional research could include follow up research at the Aspirations middle school to determine the extent to which Aspirations interventions were sustainable. To what extent did Aspirations interventions influence school staff to develop similar interventions that might be more representative of school needs? Will school accountability metrics maintain the current positive trajectory or will the intervention strategies be short-lived?

**Conclusions**

The findings from this formative evaluation revealed that school under study experienced some positive shifts in school climate and academic achievement at least partially on account of the intensity of the human resources allocated by GEAR UP.
Aspirations curriculum and programming met stakeholder needs by complementing and enhancing existing curriculum and programmatic offerings at the school.

Though the program could be deemed successful, particularly as measured by increases in the school accountability metric (SAM) and statements made during interviews and focus groups, there were significant challenges. Several components of the Aspirations model required time to develop. Cultural differences between the middle school and the requirements of administering a federally-funded grant were also evident.

Although there were challenges in bringing the program to scale, once the systems were in place, the intensity of resources allocated to the program appeared to have made a difference in the school culture and the academic achievement of the students at the school. Students, faculty, and administration claimed the program was a “game changer” for their school, but school staff reported significant concerns about a future without Aspirations.

Because of the short duration of the program in the school, two years, questions remain whether the changes are sufficiently embedded to be sustainable. The original intent of Aspirations was to allow the school to serve as a role model for other schools located in economically disadvantaged communities. However, there appeared to be insufficient time to fully embed a culture of academic achievement in this seriously challenged community.
References


Kelly, P. K. (2010). Closing the college attainment gap between the U.S. and most educated countries, and the contributions to be made by the states. Retrieved from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) website:


development and evaluation of programs. *Administration in Social Work, 29*(2),
85-103.

progress at community college* (CCRC Working Paper No. 25, Assessment of
Evidence Series). New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College,
Community College Research Center.


S. Donaldson & M. Scriven (Eds.), *Evaluating Social Programs and Problems:

elementary schools to improve student achievement on state tests. *Urban Review, 35*(2), 149-165.

excellence: School success and minority student achievement in Department of
Defense schools* (Report presented to the National Education Goals Panel).

Nashville, TN: Peabody Center for Education Policy, Peabody College Vanderbilt
University. Retrieved from
http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/DoDFinal921.pdf

*Policy issue report.* Retrieved from the National Association of State Student Grant & Aid Programs website:


Appendix A
Certification of Approval for New Protocol: Social Behavioral
Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board
FWA00002306

Date: May 9, 2013
To: Janet Usinger, PhD College of Education
Copy: Brad Trimble

UNR Protocol Number: 2013S096
Protocol Title: GEAR UP Aspirations Project Evaluation
Sponsor Names: None

Type of Review: Expedited 7 Minimal risk

Meeting/Review Date: 05/06/2013
Approval Period: May 6, 2013 to May 5, 2014

This approval is for:
Approved number of subjects: 26
Approved documents:
Protocol Application 04/09/13
Principle permission letter
Recruitment Script (staff)
Information Sheet (staff)
Interview Questions (staff)
Recruitment Script (student)
Information Letter (student)
Focus Group Questions (student)

The above-referenced protocol was reviewed and approved by one of UNR's Institutional Review Boards in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Federal Regulations on the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50 and 56).
Appendix B
Staff Interview Questions

1. Please remember back to the time before the Aspirations Project came to campus. What was going on at the middle school during that time?

2. Why do you think the school was selected to host the Aspirations Project?

3. How was Aspirations introduced on campus?

4. Which Aspirations activities do you feel have been most successful? Why?

5. Do you feel these successes will be sustained once Aspirations leaves for the high school? Why or why not?

6. Which Aspirations activities do you feel have been least successful? Why?

7. Do you feel the Aspirations Project has been designed and implemented with your school needs in mind? Why or why not?

8. If you could change something about the Aspirations Project, what would you change? Why?

9. What effect do you feel Aspirations has had on the students?
Appendix C
**Student Focus Group Questions**

1. Think about all of the things you have done with GEAR UP for the past two years. What do you like most about GEAR UP? Why?

2. How often do you participate in GEAR UP activities?
   a. Do most of your friends participate?
   b. Why do you think some students don’t participate?

3. If you could change something about GEAR UP, what would you change? Why?

4. How many of you want to go to college?
   a. Tell me about some of your plans.

5. Have GEAR UP activities prepared you to make this decision? If so, how?
Appendix D
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY: GEAR UP Aspirations Project Evaluation
INVESTIGATOR(S): Brad Trimble, M.A., 775-682-9076; Janet Usinger, Ph.D., 775-682-9083
PROTOCOL #: 20135096

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to evaluate Aspirations Project activities, goals, and objectives to determine whether or not they are meeting the needs of students and staff at the middle school.

PARTICIPANTS: You are being asked to participate because you are an administrator or teacher at the middle school.

PROCEDURES: If you agree to participate, you will engage in a brief (approximately 30 minutes) interview. The questions will pertain to the implementation of the Aspirations Project. Specifically, questions will pertain to the reason(s) why your school was selected to host Aspirations and whether program goals and activities were responsive to school needs.

DISCOMFORTS, INCONVENIENCES, AND/OR RISKS: As a program evaluation, there is very little risk to participating in this research. None of the questions are sensitive in nature and you may refuse to answer any questions which make you feel uncomfortable.

BENEFITS: We don’t anticipate that you will personally benefit from participating in the interview, but your responses will help us improve the Aspirations Project for the future.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your identity will be protected to the extent allowed by law. You will not be personally identified in any reports or publications that may result from this study. The Department of Health and Human Service (HHS), other federal agencies as necessary, the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board may inspect your study records. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in the Principal Investigator’s office until the study is complete.
COSTS/COMPENSATION: There will be no cost to you nor will you be compensated for participating in this research study.

RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW: You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and still be part of the Aspirations Project.

QUESTIONS: If you have questions about this study, please contact Brad Trimble, M.A. at 775-682-9076 at any time. You may ask about your rights as a research subject or you may report (anonymously if you so choose) any comments, concern, or complaints to the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board, telephone number (775) 327-2368, or by addressing a letter to the Chair of the Board, c/o UNR Office of Human Research Protection, 205 Ross Hall / 331, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, Nevada, 89557.

CLOSING STATEMENT:

I have read ( ) this consent form or have had it read to me ( ). [Check one.]

Brad Trimble has explained the study to me and all of my questions have been answered. I have been told of the risks or discomforts and possible benefits of the study.

If I do not take part in this study, my refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of rights to which I am entitled. I may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty [or loss of other benefits to which I am entitled].

I have been told my rights as a research subject, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I have been told what the study is about and how and why it is being done. All my questions have been answered.

I will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Signature of Participant (or Legally Authorized Representative*) Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

Signature of Investigator Date
Appendix E
Dear Middle School Parents,

I am a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Janet Usinger, professor, at the University of Nevada, Reno. I am conducting an evaluation of the Aspirations Project currently in place at your child’s middle school. Since the Aspirations Project was created to prepare students for college, a portion of this evaluation is to explore student opinions about college and the Aspirations Project.

Part of this evaluation will consist of two small group discussions (7-10 students per group). Students will be asked to participate during a regularly scheduled Bridge activity. There is a chance that your son or daughter will be asked to join one of the small group discussions. These discussions will be audio recorded and involve questions for the entire group; students voluntarily take turns answering the questions. They have the right not to answer any question, and may stop participating at any time.

Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary. If he/she chooses not to participate there will be no penalty. Though privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during group discussions, we won’t collect names and any references to specific people will be deleted.

If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact the evaluation team at:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Janet Usinger, usingerj@unr.edu
Co-Investigator: Brad Trimble, batrimble@unr.edu

If you do not want your child to participate, please ask him or her to refrain from volunteering. If you have any questions about your child’s rights as a subject/participant in this evaluation, or feel your child has been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at (775) 327-2368.

Thank you for your consideration.

Brad Trimble
Co-Investigator