GEAR UP Tennessee:

Examining the Roles of Site Coordinators and School Counselors in the Development and Implementation of Program Initiatives

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

Executive Summary

This report examines the role of GEAR UP site coordinators and school counselors in the development and implementation of GEAR UP Tennessee. The GEAR UP Tennessee program is an ambitious effort that offers a myriad of interventions to support academic preparation and college access in rural communities across the state. Though supported by a network of local and state partners, the program gives the nine participating districts discretion in the design and implementation of initiatives at the local level. Site coordinators are the primary agents charged with the responsibility of district-level implementation. Within the school context, school counselors are the individuals with the organizational proximity necessary for meaningful interactions with students concerning educational advancement. While GEAR UP Tennessee has collected data relative to the program's effects on schools, teachers, and parents, the work of site coordinators and school counselors has been largely overlooked. Therefore, in response to a request for assistance from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), we developed the following research questions:

1) How does the program structure and district context shape site coordinators' implementation of GEAR UP?

2) What factors affect school counselors' implementation of GEAR UP initiatives?

We conducted 63 semi-structured interviews with GEAR UP site coordinators, district leaders, school principals, school counselors and THEC officials. Interviews were designed to gather information on the district's performance in preparing students for post-secondary education; the respondent's knowledge of and role within GEAR UP; district and school supports and barriers affecting implementation, which include issues around individual and institutional capacity and will; the coherence of program messages and the sense-making in which respondents engaged to make decisions about their participation in the program and its implementation; and respondents' perceptions of program effects. Our data reveal that:

- Participating school districts were pressured by, and as a result largely focused on, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) compliance. The presence of NCLB largely detracted from the district's ability to fully embrace GEAR UP and integrate it into their district improvement plan.

- District and school leaders possessed little knowledge about GEAR UP, its intended implementation, and the appropriate role structure of site coordinators, district personnel, and school personnel.

- Most site coordinators did not perceive GEAR UP as a potential lever for systemic change.

- Site coordinators and school counselors received little substantive support from state and local leadership relative to implementation of GEAR UP college access interventions.

- The content of site coordinators' work focused predominantly on activity planning, resource distribution, and grant compliance.

- The community culture, specifically the "welfare state of mind," was perceived by all respondents as a barrier to advancing students' educational attainment.

- Training and professional development activities have been provided for site coordinators with a primary focus on grant compliance and reporting mechanisms. Site coordinators reported few opportunities to deepen their knowledge of how to increase students' academic preparation and college access, which has significant effects on implementation outcomes, program sustainability, and systemic change.

- Training for district and school personnel has been lacking and, in many cases, nonexistent.

- The work of school counselors is influenced by the lack of a coherent counseling curriculum, time constraints, and role ambiguity. Consequently, counselors provide sporadic support and leadership in GEAR UP implementation.

As a result of these findings, we offer the following recommendations to ensure full program implementation and the attainment of program goals:

- *Improve the visibility and effectiveness of site coordinators* by developing communication networks among coordinators and school and district personnel; creating comprehensive training manuals for coordinators; and implementing a series of trainings which address the factors influencing students' academic preparation and college access, as well as program implementation strategies supportive of GEAR UP goals.

- *Educate and involve district and school leadership* by developing a *GEAR UP TN Leaders Guide* in tandem with GEAR UP TN leadership trainings. Trainings will create the forum to collaboratively plan with site coordinators in order to align GEAR UP TN interventions to both the district and school improvement plans.

- *Educate and involve the school counselor* by developing a *GEAR UP TN School Counselors Guide* in tandem with GEAR UP TN counseling trainings. Trainings will help counselors implement college preparation curricula, improve collaborative planning with site coordinators, and develop communication networks among counselors.

- *Collectively develop a comprehensive sustainability plan* which determines how to effectively disseminate data; galvanize support of the school counselor as well as district and school leadership within GEAR UP TN; and effect state-level policy change to enhance the core goals of GEAR UP TN.

Introduction and Guiding Questions

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a discretionary grant program under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Teacher and Student Development Programs. GEAR UP was established in 1999 to meet the overarching goal "to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The GEAR UP program has three main objectives: 1) increase the academic performance and preparation for post-secondary education of GEAR UP students; 2) increase the rate of high school graduation and participation in post-secondary education of GEAR UP students; and 3) increase GEAR UP students' and their families' knowledge of post-secondary education options, preparation, and financing. The program provides six-year state and partnership grants for services to high-poverty middle and high schools. These services are comprehensive in nature, often including components of counseling, mentoring, family support, teacher professional development, community outreach, and scholarship programs.

The state of Tennessee was awarded a $3.5 million GEAR UP discretionary grant in September 2005 to bolster college access for low-income youth in rural communities across the state. During the grant period from 2005 to 2010, GEAR UP TN expects to serve approximately 6,000 students per year across nine rural school districts. The GEAR UP TN program is committed to providing its participating districts with resources to (1) serve a seventh grade cohort with support continuing throughout their secondary education program, and (2) educate high school juniors and seniors and their families about the benefits of post-secondary education, opportunities therein, and financial aid for higher education. With guidance from federal GEAR UP, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission developed goals and objectives for GEAR UP TN to serve as a program planning and evaluation tool in the implementation and assessment of program processes and outcomes (THEC, 2007). These goals include the following:

- Increasing the educational expectations of GEAR UP students and their families through an expanded knowledge of post-secondary access and financial aid opportunities.

- Enhancing the academic preparation of GEAR UP students to improve high school graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment, retention, and completion.

- Providing effective professional development for classroom teachers and school staff to ensure increased academic rigor and post-secondary preparation.

- Encouraging family and community involvement through GEAR UP, to foster an environment that supports life-long learning.

While the state of Tennessee has collected preliminary data relative to first-year program effects on students, parents, and teachers—namely the extent to which the program affected awareness of post-secondary education opportunities and the respondents' participation in program activities—the state has not systematically investigated how GEAR UP site coordinators develop and implement GEAR UP initiatives within their distinct institutional settings. Additionally, while the state has collected data from GEAR UP TN teachers, it has not gathered data on school counselors or their roles within the program and its implementation. Given the programmatic and institutional roles the site coordinators and school counselors play in preparing students for post-secondary education, an examination of their roles within local contexts is both timely and vital to understanding how programs operate and the extent to which implementing agents are supported or constrained by their local contexts. In other words, how are site coordinators embedded within the implementing system as well as the districts and schools they serve? To what extent do district and school contexts present barriers or provide supports for their implementation of GEAR UP interventions? Further, how well-integrated into the implementing system are school counselors, and how do their roles vary within the school context and local GEAR UP program? To this end, our inquiry focuses on two guiding questions:

1) How does the program structure and district context shape site coordinators' implementation of GEAR UP?

2) What factors affect school counselors' implementation of GEAR UP initiatives?

We derived these guiding questions from the current literatures on college intervention and preparation programs, post-secondary preparation and college access, and program and policy implementation. These questions provide an analytical framework aimed at a better understanding of the institutional supports for and constraints on chief implementing agents, and offer opportunities to open the "black box" of implementation to inform P-16 program and policy planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Framing the Inquiry

The National Landscape of GEAR UP and College Preparation Programs: What We Know, and What We Need to Know

The recognition that low-income and minority students are not adequately prepared for post-secondary education and do not possess the social and cultural capital required to traverse the college search and choice landscape with its complexities concerning financial aid and socialization into higher learning has led to the establishment of a myriad of college preparation programs (Perna & Swail, 2002a, 2002b; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Tierney et al., 2005). These programs include GEAR UP, Upward Bound, College Summit, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), "I Have a Dream," and a host of other localized initiatives in communities across the nation aimed at increasing the representation of disadvantaged and minority youth in college. While college preparation programs vary in structure and content, they have shared overarching goals to advance students' academic achievement and educational attainment (Perna, 2002a, 2002b; Corwin et al., 2005). Programs commonly address both academic and non-academic factors predictive of college-going through interventions such as academic tutoring, curricula reform, mentoring, partnerships between secondary schools and higher education institutions, counseling, and community outreach (Perna, 2002a, 2002b). Unlike many college preparation programs however, GEAR UP offers a *systemic* approach targeting all facets of the context within which students prepare for and make decisions about college—the peer group, classroom, school, family, and community. Through its cohort approach, GEAR UP provides universal interventions for students and their cohort peers and families, allowing for programmatic saturation in the creation of cultures that support college-going and are reinforced by school, community, and program structures deliberately crafted to advance academic press and educational advancement.

While there is great intuitive appeal and a belief that college preparation programs such as GEAR UP achieve their stated goals, the empirical evidence is inconclusive at best (Coles, 1993; Gandara et al., 1998; Perna & Swail, 1999; Tierney et al., 2005). Tierney and Hagedorn (2002) explain that the inconclusiveness regarding program effectiveness results from (1) a lack of experimental and control groups in the application of program interventions and evaluations thereof; (2) survey data reported without response rates or adequate descriptions of the sample; and (3) inadequate measures of desired outcomes.[1] Further, most program evaluations and research studies do not measure students' academic achievement (Tierney & Venegas, 2004), which is of particular import given research has consistently shown that being academically prepared for college coursework is a

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[1] Survey items measure students' *intent* to pursue college rather than their enrollment and persistence. Additionally, issues around construct validity have arisen regarding what such terms as "college" really mean to evaluators and respondents (e.g. a two-year community college, a vocational center, a four-year college).

significant predictor of college access and persistence (Alexander et al., 1978; Hossler et al., 1989; St. John, 1991; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2000; Cabrera et al., 2001).

Relative to GEAR UP more specifically, the evaluations conducted on state and community partnership programs have focused on how GEAR UP interventions have affected participating students, teachers, and parents. Evaluations within this paradigm have focused on program effects across an array of measures, including students' aspirations towards post-secondary education (Cowley, Finch, & Blake, 2002; New Jersey GEAR UP, 2005; Terenzini et al., 2005; Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2005; GEAR UP Arizona, 2006; Austin Independent School District, 2007); student achievement scores (The California GEAR UP Program, 2004; New Jersey GEAR UP, 2005; Terenzini et al., 2005; UP Kentucky, 2005; Intercultural Development Research Association, 2006; GEAR UP Arizona, 2006; Chicago GEAR UP Alliance, 2007; ACT, 2007); parents' knowledge of and involvement in college search and choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2003); and the effects of professional development on teaching strategies (Cowley, Finch, & Blake, 2002; Skolits, Lashley, & King, 2003; Terenzini et al., 2005; New Jersey GEAR UP, 2005; Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2005; GEAR UP Arizona, 2006; Austin Independent School District, 2007). Researchers, however, caution the practitioner and policymaking communities in making causal inferences based on data derived from the technically flawed measures and limitations of many localized program evaluations (Perna, 2002; Perna & Swail, 2002; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Tierney et al., 2005).

While we concur with arguments promulgated by researchers regarding the inconclusiveness of college preparation program effectiveness, we suggest that a fundamental gap exists, which may relate to conflicting, nonexistent, or unreliable program data. The current body of research on and evaluation of GEAR UP and college preparation programs is not well informed by an understanding of how the program context matters and in what ways. We argue that inquiries into program effectiveness should follow investigations of implementation processes within the distinctive institutional settings in which students and implementing agents interact with the program. The inconclusiveness around what program elements lead to desired outcomes underscores the need to open the "black box" of implementation to discern how program inputs and institutional capacity impact implementation processes and the work of practitioners charged with applying interventions within their local settings. This capstone project aims to address these gaps.

Factors Shaping Program Implementation

The implementation literature does not promulgate an explicit standard of "successful" or "effective implementation." Many individual programs have established benchmarks as indicators of success, and researchers have utilized post-hoc methods for identifying graduations of implementation quality (Desimone, 2002; Honig et al., 2006). Within

the field of implementation research, there is general consensus around the key factors that facilitate or prevent desired implementation processes and program outcomes, and these factors are of particular importance to program administrators. First, the characteristics of *program design and delivery* impact the degree to which implementers enact the program as intended (Bardach, 1977; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979; Kirst & Jung, 1980; Honig et al., 2006). Programs with a higher degree of design and delivery specification, or prescriptiveness, provide abundant program information and materials, implementation guides, and professional development, all of which increases the likelihood the program will be implemented as intended (Porter et al., 1988; Porter, 1994; Desimone, 2002). Second, research shows that the *capacity and will* of local actors affect program implementation (Murphy, 1971; Derthick, 1972; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; McLaughlin, 1987). Capacity encompasses both individual and institutional expertise, skill, and resources, while will includes individuals' commitment to the program, born from their individual beliefs and experiences regarding program content, as well as the personal incentives they may garner through enacting implementation. Third, researchers have found that dimensions of the *institutional context* (i.e. school or district) shape collective and individual action. These dimensions include supportive leadership (Desimone, 2002; Honig, 2006), consistency between the program and competing policies and programs (Desimone, 2002), institutional history (Honig, 2006), cultural norms and expectations (Coburn & Stein, 2006), and social relations and structures (Smylie & Evans, 2006). Finally, research has illustrated how *individuals' sense-making*, or the ways in which they construct understandings of the program, affect the degree to which they implement the program as intended versus implementing the program at a more superficial, surface level (Spillane et al., 2002). Taken together, these factors influence both implementation means and outcomes in a complex manner, requiring program administrators to consider each of them carefully throughout the program design and delivery process.

Conceptualizing the Roles of Site Coordinators and School Counselors: A Framework for Understanding GEAR UP Implementation

Consistent with the GEAR UP and college access literatures, we view both the site coordinators (Westat, 2003; California GEAR UP, 2004) and school counselors (Fallon, 1997; Hossler et al., 1999; McClafferty & McDonough, 2000; McDonough, 1997, 2002) as chief implementers and mediators of college access. These key agents are typically equipped with the knowledge and skills required to effectively facilitate and support students' academic preparation and access to post-secondary education. Moreover, GEAR UP site coordinators and school counselors are positioned in contexts that span the college predisposition, search, and choice trajectory (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2002), and are the individuals with the organizational proximity necessary for meaningful interactions with students around educational advancement.

Site coordinators and school counselors represent the micro-implementation level of the GEAR UP program and are responsible for enacting the programmatic designs and directives of the macro-implementation unit, THEC. Viewing implementation in this two-dimensional way does not fully address the complexity of program implementation; rather, a perspective is required that acknowledges the institutional contexts within which the program and its actors reside (Berman, 1978; McLaughlin, 1987, 1998; O'Toole, 2004) and how these institutional contexts shape site coordinators' and school counselors' sense-making of the program (Spillane et al., 2002). To put it differently, the institutional setting sculpts how school and district personnel construct understandings of the program and its underlying principles. In this case, the institutional contexts of the community, school district, and school should be examined, as these contexts either facilitate and support or constrain and impede site coordinators' and school counselors' development and implementation of GEAR UP TN. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the macro- and micro-implementation levels and identifies the institutional contexts shaping GEAR UP implementation. Readers should note that the factors shaping implementation are in italics.

Figure 1. *Framing GEAR UP TN Implementation.*

Figure 1. *GEAR UP TN Implementation Framework.*
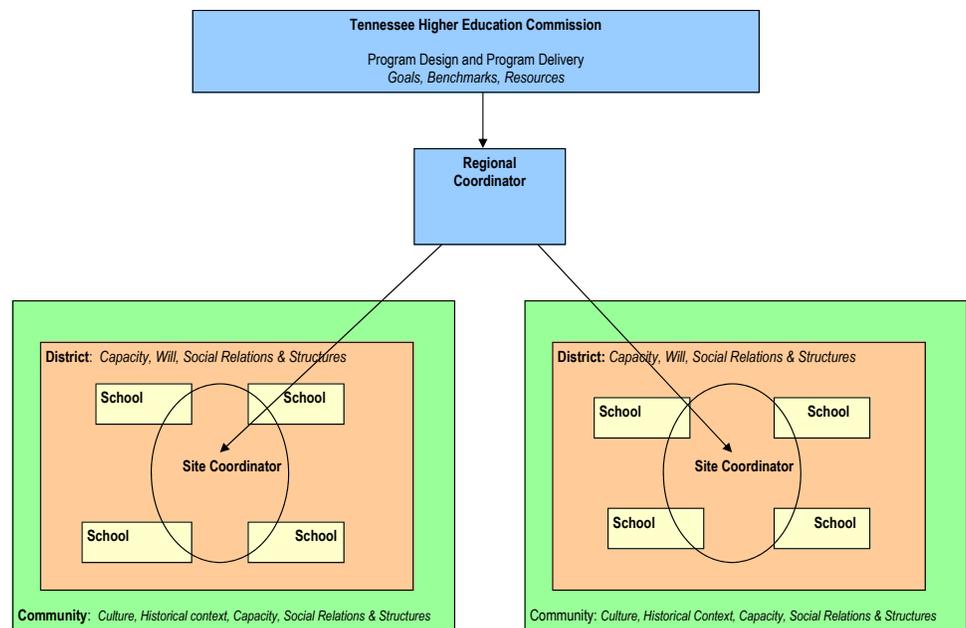
As the figure shows, THEC and the GEAR UP regional coordinators comprise the macro-implementation level. The macro-implementation level is typically viewed as the locus of program design, policy, and implementation direction (Berman, 1978). The regional coordinators are organizationally linked to

the district site coordinators, and through these links, program and content knowledge is distributed. The site coordinators reside within both a district and community context, and these linkages represent a less-institutionalized structure. In some cases the site coordinator resides within only one school, though most often the site coordinator assumes a district-level role even though this role may not be structurally or substantively embedded within the district context. Further, school counselors are organizationally linked to students, though not organizationally or operationally linked to the site coordinator or the GEAR UP program. This link is often informal and not yet institutionalized.

Sample and Methods

To understand the role of site coordinators and school counselors within the GEAR UP TN program and the contextual and institutional barriers and supports affecting their development and implementation of GEAR UP initiatives, we employed a qualitative design, collecting interview data from GEAR UP site coordinators, school counselors, principals, district leaders, and THEC program personnel.

We interviewed all GEAR UP site coordinators (n=9) because we sought an understanding of how site coordinators implemented the program in all GEAR UP TN counties and how distinct institutional settings and role structures shaped their implementation of the program. In selecting our school counselor sample, we sought to maximize diversity on two criteria: state geographic regions and school district size. Therefore, we first chose GEAR UP TN districts representing each region of the state—East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee. Second, we chose districts varying in their student populations and number of high schools in order to achieve a representative sample of GEAR UP TN districts. We selected a total of five school districts representing diversity on these two measures and interviewed all middle and high school counselors within each of the five districts (n=29).

Table 1. *GEAR UP TN District Sample*

	Region	**Student Population**	**Number of High Schools**
District A	West	4195	2
District B	Middle	2205	1
District C	Middle	2465	2
District D	East	5831	2
District E	East	1788	1

Since we sought an understanding of the contextual and institutional barriers and supports that impact site coordinators' and school counselors' implementation of GEAR UP TN, we identified two sources of respondents who would likely interact with the site coordinators and school counselors at the district and school levels, and who hold positional authority which could support or constrain implementation of the program as enacted by site coordinators and school counselors. District leaders and school principals met these criteria. We identified a district leader as an individual who is employed at the district level and supervises the site coordinator and the GEAR UP TN program. Selected district leaders typically held positions as directors of finance, directors of federal programs, and directors of schools. We interviewed at least one district leader in each district in our target sample (n=8), and in most cases, two district leaders were interviewed in each district. Relative to school principals, we interviewed all high school principals (n=9)

in our target districts because the GEAR UP cohort group is currently in the 9th grade, and 11th and 12th grade students are served in each year of the program. Three middle school principals were also interviewed as a result of opportunistic sampling.

To provide program background information and perceptions of implementation barriers and supports, we interviewed GEAR UP TN program administrators, which included three THEC personnel and two GEAR UP TN regional coordinators. We used these interview data to better understand the macro-level implementation of the program. Finally, all site coordinators, school counselors, principals, district leaders, and program administrators accepted our requests for interviews, which constituted a response rate of 100 percent for each respondent group.

Table 2. *GEAR UP TN Participant Sample*

Participant Type	
GEAR UP site coordinators	9
High school counselors	17
Middle school counselors	12
High school principals	9
Middle school principals	3
District leaders	8
Regional coordinators	2
THEC program administrators	3
Total	**63**

Data collection involved one audio recorded interview (30 to 90 minutes) with each respondent. The interview protocols were informed by extensive analyses of the literatures around (1) college preparation programs, including empirical studies of both state and community partnership GEAR UP programs; (2) post-secondary academic preparation and college access; and (3) program and policy implementation. The interview protocols were designed to gather information on the district's performance in preparing students for post-secondary education; the respondent's knowledge of and role within GEAR UP; district and school supports and barriers affecting implementation, which include issues around individual and institutional capacity and will; the coherence of program messages, and the sense-making in which respondents engaged to make decisions about their participation in the program and its implementation; and respondents' perceptions of program effects. Interview protocols are included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the researchers constructed narrative summaries and analytical memos of key findings and emergent themes (Patton, 2002). We analyzed these memos holistically to identify broad patterns in the data as they related to the project questions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the interview transcripts were coded through a multistage process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, we applied a set of descriptive codes according to our project questions and conceptual framework, followed by an application of sub-area codes based on the analytical memos, preliminary analyses, and reviews of the literatures guiding this study. We ensured internal reliability through a series of coding meetings during which we jointly coded transcripts and established shared understandings of key constructs and their resonance within the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). After we achieved intercoder reliability, each researcher coded the transcripts of interviews he/she conducted. Once all transcripts were coded, the data were entered into a database and examined again to ensure internal reliability.

Next, we created a series of analytical matrices for each project question (Patton, 2002). Each matrix was role-ordered and concept-clustered according to our conceptual framework. Further, each matrix represented the effects of institutional barriers and supports on the site coordinators' and school counselors' implementation of GEAR UP. This set of matrices allowed us to move inductively from respondents' perceptions of the program and its contextual factors to conceptualizations of how the implementation system impacted the chief implementing agents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Limitations

Our interviews were conducted in November and December of 2007, at which time GEAR UP TN was in its second full academic year of implementation. Since the program continues to manifest within GEAR UP counties across the state, our findings represent the conditions around implementation and the barriers and supports affecting site coordinators and school counselors within the study period. It is reasonable to expect program setting and history effects as the program moves through different stages of implementation at the state and local levels (Patton, 2002). The purposeful sample of respondents we interviewed does not allow us to generalize to all site coordinators and school counselors within GEAR UP programs outside of the state of Tennessee or to implementing agents within other college preparation programs. The nature of GEAR UP as specifically designed for local actors and contexts limits the extent to which processes and outcomes may be generalized to other GEAR UP or college preparation programs. However, our findings do provide accounts of implementation processes and their effects on implementing agents and local settings that can assist practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in obtaining a better understanding of how programs operate and achieve various outcomes. In short, our findings begin opening the "black box" of college preparation programs in a way that, to our knowledge, has not been pursued previously.

Findings and Discussion

Findings: Guiding Question 1

How Does the Program Structure and District Context Shape Site Coordinators' Implementation Of GEAR UP?

UNDERSTANDING THE STATE PROGRAM CONTEXT

The state context for GEAR UP TN refers to the program's organizational structure, connecting the work among site coordinators, regional coordinators, and THEC personnel. We sought to determine how the organizational structure provides opportunities for building site coordinators' capacity to meet program goals. In addition, we asked site coordinators to describe the nature and scope of their practice, their interactions with THEC, and the training they received.

The interactions site coordinators experience within the state program context shape their implementation of program interventions. The content of these interactions focuses predominantly on ensuring grant compliance and fiscal accountability. Site coordinators found both formal and informal opportunities to collaborate with other coordinators to be the most helpful in building their programmatic expertise and shaping their implementation efforts.

Site Coordinators' Role Within the Program: Compliance, Resource Allocation, and Activity Planning

The primary implementers of GEAR UP TN at the school and district levels are site coordinators. Though the program funds site coordinators' salaries, each district is responsible for interviewing candidates and selecting its site coordinator. While there are common expectations for the coordinator position, the specific roles of site coordinators vary among districts because local discretion has been granted for districts in determining both the structure of the GEAR UP program and the role of the site coordinator. For example, in some districts the site coordinator is the only person whose salary is solely paid through GEAR UP. Other districts allocate funding to hire additional GEAR UP employees involved in a range of activities such as data entry, tutoring, mentoring, or general assistance. In the initial year of grant implementation, several site coordinators reported that their positions were only partially devoted to, and funded by, GEAR UP. This provided an untenable workload for these site coordinators in regards to both GEAR UP and district responsibilities. For example, site coordinators who also served as teachers had to negotiate attendance at college visits and regional program meetings while also fulfilling their teaching responsibilities. At the beginning of the second year of implementation, one site coordinator reported the regional coordinator's support in influencing the district's director of schools to restructure her position so that it was fully devoted to and funded by the program, "*because we needed more time for GEAR UP.*"

In an attempt to prescribe the site coordinator's role within the district context, THEC created a resource manual that serves as an information source for site coordinators. Included in the manual is a monthly list of activities that site coordinators are expected to complete. One site coordinator stated, "*They give us a resource manual to go by. And also a planning guide that each month tells us the things that we need to be doing. That keeps you aligned with what they expect of you.*" Indeed, many site coordinators referred to the resource manual as the "track" that guides their work on a daily basis.

While the site coordinator resource manual provides guidance on completing specific monthly activities, it is not exhaustive in prescribing what site coordinators should do in their work. Our data reveal that the work of site coordinators revolves around tasks in three content categories. First, site coordinators focused much of their work on planning activities and events related to college awareness and academic preparation, and on providing financial aid information for parents and students. Planning college fairs and college visits as well as meeting with students were the primary activities promoting college awareness. Site coordinator efforts to improve student academic preparation included coordinating and promoting tutoring programs, summer and freshman academies, and standardized test preparation. The traditional format of a financial aid night was the primary focus for providing financial aid information to parents and students.

Second, the site coordinator's work was driven by determining how to appropriate GEAR UP funding. Teachers, principals, and district leaders were asked to submit requests for technology, educational materials, other "wish list" items, and field trip or college visit ideas. The site coordinator received these requests and prioritized them based on cost and alignment with program goals. Coordinators reported spending much of their time on decision-making around resource allocation, and variation exists regarding the extent to which site coordinators made these decisions unilaterally or in consultation with district and school leaders.

Finally, site coordinators focused a great deal of time on grant compliance and reporting mechanisms designed to ensure compliance. Most site coordinators reported that completing monthly paperwork is a source of frustration. However, the substantial grant awarded to each district emerged as a primary motivator for compliance.

> *Our district wants me to make sure that I am fulfilling what THEC wants me to be fulfilling. And if they have something additional to that, they will let me know. I definitely feel like they are working hand in hand because our system wants to stay in the good graces with what THEC wants.*

Completing monthly reports was identified as a challenge by several site coordinators due to the amount of time required to complete them. The following statement from a site coordinator provided insight.

> At the end of every month, we have this list of what all we have to turn in and it's actually a three page list of paperwork information that you have to turn in to GEAR UP TN. This takes a lot of time. . . I never get to just sit down and do it, but it definitely stretches more than a week in the amount of time. That is including me going and doing my daily routine. If a student comes in, then I stop . . . This has been the bear of the whole program —all of this paperwork. It has really been the challenging part.

Site coordinators reported that teachers are often late or not cooperative in submitting instructor logs. Because of this, site coordinators are often forced to spend time tracking down individual teachers in order to obtain the necessary information to submit in the monthly reports. One site coordinator expressed that the paperwork required from teachers undermines the implementation of the grant.

> Another challenge I think is getting the teachers on board— getting them to understand that GEAR UP is important and not just paperwork for them . . . Some of them feel a little bit . . . biased against maybe programs like this because it takes a little of their time to complete paperwork and everything.

In sum, site coordinators perceived monthly reporting requirements as a distraction from the intent of the grant.

Several site coordinators identified their roles as a school counselor of sorts. One site coordinator stated, "*I have always told kids that I want to be seen as the extension of their guidance counselor.*" Another site coordinator added, "*I'm just another faculty member here, and I'm kind of a guidance counselor, too. So, I provide a lot of the college counseling, whereas our other counselors do more of the scheduling and the personal counseling.*" Other site coordinators assumed duties which typically were reserved for school counselors—whether or not they related to implementing GEAR UP TN. One site coordinator described the following scenario.

> I'm in my office doing what I need to do. Well then the counselor comes in, 'Will you take over the ACT and let the kids come see you?' So, now I've got kids barging in and out of my office with this. So, you get started doing this and the kids need the ACT —they need you to sit down one on one and help them fill it out. They've never filled out anything like that before. So, that's one of the first things that comes to my mind. I've been to counselor meetings and conferences with them. Just educating myself on different things for college because that's what they are working with. But other job descriptions—

"This has been the bear of the whole program— all of this paperwork."

when something needs to be done they will call me up, '[the site coordinator], can you do this?' And then I will run and do it. The counselor needs help with this kid who is having a meltdown. She's already got one kid who is suicidal. So, she calls me and says, 'Can you help me get this child calmed down?' And I will talk to her.

There is some level of overlap between the services that counselors provide and the responsibilities of the site coordinator in the GEAR UP program. However, it does not appear to be THEC's intent that a site coordinator's role includes serving as an extension of the counseling office.

Organizational and Operational Linkages among GEAR UP Staff

Interactions with THEC

Interactions between the site coordinator and THEC provided assistance and ensured accountability. Respondents reported that interactions with THEC staff were generally pleasant and encouraging. In terms of assistance provided by THEC, most coordinators stated that THEC's support focused on issues related to grant compliance and reporting strategies. THEC assists site coordinators in completing monthly reports, which call for detailed student-, school-, and district-level data. When questions arise regarding appropriate completion of these reports, site coordinators report that the THEC staff has been helpful. "*Like when I called them about paperwork like data entry, [THEC staff member] came out and she trained [me]. They are really supportive in that sense.*" While site coordinators identified the helpfulness of these interactions with THEC, they did not describe instances of support that deepened their knowledge of academic preparation and college access or how to implement program interventions in alignment with systematically identified local needs.

Site coordinators also reported their participation in gathering data for the external evaluators from the University of Tennessee. Teachers, students, and parents completed bi-annual surveys related to college awareness, academic performance and expectations, and post-secondary aspirations. Site coordinators administered and collected the surveys; however, they did not report any interaction with THEC or the external evaluators about analyzing the data to inform program design and delivery. This represents a lost opportunity to inform and improve the implementation of activities.

The program structure allows THEC to ensure accountability regarding the appropriate use of GEAR UP resources. Fiscal approval of expenditures over $1,000 is a primary form of accountability for site coordinators. Respondents reported that this approval process is a predominant reason for interaction between THEC and site coordinators. Some frustration was reported regarding requests for approval due to slow response times.

And you know, they're a great bunch of folks. Don't get me wrong, and

I really enjoy working with them and everything, but I think there may be some things that are beyond their control . . . that's been causing these delays, but it's kind of frustrating for us to be here wanting to help kids and then seeing the school year pass . . . something is delayed and it's frustrating to do that throughout the year...every week that passes is a week that they don't get to use this program, whereas if I had a more timely approval on it then we could get it ordered, get it installed, and get kids taking advantage of it .

Interactions with regional coordinators

Site coordinators identified their regional coordinator as a primary source of implementation support provided by THEC. One site coordinator stated, "*She is always there. I can call her at anytime, and she helps me with everything. She has been wonderful.*" Site coordinators reported having almost daily communication with regional coordinators through email, phone calls, site visits, and monthly regional meetings. This communication was generally focused on compliance mechanisms, including monthly reports and fiscal approval. Another site coordinator identified the helpfulness of the site coordinator in ensuring program accountability.

We have a regional coordinator, which is basically a life saver. She is a coach and keeps on top of us. When things come due, when we need to get things in, she lets us know. She visits us periodically and sees if we have questions or problems. I think that's the best resource that THEC provides us.

In summary, interactions with regional coordinators are important in keeping site coordinators connected with THEC, as well as with other site coordinators.

Learning Within a Community of Practice: Collaboration and Learning Among Site Coordinators

Most site coordinators reported strong relationships with coordinators around the state. These connections have been forged through interactions at monthly regional meetings in which site coordinators cited several instances of inspirational and programmatic support in fulfilling their roles. One site coordinator stated the following:

We have monthly regional meetings where we share stories . . . It's where people share ideas and we pick up from that and then call each other. It's like we're a big family already even though we've only known these people for a very short amount of time. Everybody is willing to share ideas and help each other.

One new site coordinator identified the supportive network of site

Site coordinators identified their regional coordinator as a primary source of implementation support.

coordinators as instrumental to her learning on the job and identified the monthly regional meetings as a place to ask questions.

> *Talking to the other coordinators [is helpful] because everybody is just a big family, and you don't have the fear of they are going to think you are dumb because you don't know the answer to this question. That is probably the best part of this job is being able to ask questions and not get yelled at for asking questions and not knowing them in the first place.*

Another respondent also reported sharing program information and experiences with other site coordinators "every other week" through phone calls. She reported initially feeling inadequate in providing any answers but soon realized the value of the support she provides and receives from other site coordinators. "*It's kinda funny because she will call me and ask me questions. You think you can't but you can. Everybody struggles in their own way.*"

For all of the support gleaned from the site coordinator network by some, others did not mention any interactions with or support received from their colleagues in other districts. Further, the data revealed that some site coordinators referred to a support network but did not describe how the network informs their practice or deepens their knowledge about academic preparation and college access.

Training of Site Coordinators: Disproportionate Focus on Compliance and Reporting Rather Than on Building Capacity

Site coordinators reported that training occurs through national and state conferences. These annual conferences provide a menu of seminars and workshops participants choose to attend. The National Council for Community and Education Partnerships sponsors an annual capacity-building workshop. Examples of sessions offered at a recent workshop include grant administration, parent and family engagement, college admissions, and leadership development. These workshops also provided opportunities for site coordinators to interact with their counterparts in other states. One site coordinator stated, "*I guess the next most important training I had would be the capacity training workshops where we actually learned from each other . . . They have, actually you know, site coordinators and so forth coming in to teach the workshops.*" Our data reveal that site coordinators found these conferences helpful and informative. However, there is no clear indication of the extent to which these trainings informed implementation or how site coordinators' practices were affected through transfer of training or subsequent follow-up by THEC personnel.

Additionally, site coordinators reported a disproportionate training focus on

There is no clear indication of the extent to which these trainings informed implementation or how site coordinators' practices were affected through transfer of training or subsequent follow-up by THEC personnel.

compliance and reporting. One site coordinator stated,

> *We've had about four or five different sessions at the state and in Nashville with people out to train us. We had a lady come from [a university] who was coming out of a grant and she came and provided like a one day—this is what the grant is kind of about and what you need to do.*

While training on grant compliance and reporting is important in the initial phase of implementation, training on factors affecting college access may be more critical for achieving systemic change and program sustainability. Site coordinators did not report experiencing a training with this content focus, nor did they identify this content as a learning need.

Planning retreats organized and conducted by THEC were also identified as helpful exercises because they provided assistance for local program planning. One site coordinator identified a tension around the timing of these retreats and program reporting mandates.

> *We have . . . a GEAR UP retreat around the first of the year where all the GEAR UP counties get together, and we basically plan for the next year. You know a lot of that stuff from the previous year has to be turned in by March or April . . . So, we really have to plan early.*

Several site coordinators relayed their appreciation of the training and support provided at these planning retreats.

Just College Awareness?: Site Coordinators' Understandings of Program Purposes and Goals

Our findings reveal that most site coordinators believe that exposing students to post-secondary education is the purpose of GEAR UP. One site coordinator said the following about the focus of his work: *"[It is] mainly just college awareness. There is somebody out there saying you can go to college. . ."* Another site coordinator stated a similar goal: *"We're planting a seed . . . that you can go to school."* However, some site coordinators had a broader vision of GEAR UP TN as a potential lever for systemic change. The following excerpt is representative of this perspective.

> *Now some of the big things that we are doing this year we started last year after attending some staff development and trying to create a better learning environment for our freshmen at [a district] high school. So, we started working on a Freshman Academy. We took about 15 percent of our GEAR UP budget—the big need was in science, because we could not rob the labs up on the other end of the building . . . So, we purchased learning activities directly related to the curriculum and the benchmark.*

This response indicates a conception of the purpose of GEAR UP TN as more

Our findings reveal that most site coordinators believe that exposing students to post-secondary education is the purpose of GEAR UP.

than college awareness. This site coordinator sought to affect the school's structure and culture in deep and enduring ways through using GEAR UP funding as the catalyst for curricular reform initiatives. Another site coordinator with a similar perspective relayed the following as the primary goal of GEAR UP TN. *"[Our goal is to] provide the services to the students that they need to get them to college and to make it.*" Our findings indicate that this disparity in perceived program purpose and goals has led to varied implementations in terms of breadth and depth of initiatives across district contexts.

UNDERSTANDING GEAR UP DISTRICT CONTEXTS

The district context includes both attributes of structure and culture that have a direct or mediating influence on the beliefs and behaviors of site coordinators, district leaders, and school principals. The district contextual factors pertinent to this study include the district's academic priorities; the policies, programs, and initiatives related to academic preparation and post-secondary access; the level of preparation the district provides for students to access post-secondary education; the level of academic press; and the culture around college-going both, within the schools and community. Further, district context refers to the structural supports and cultural assets on which the GEAR UP site coordinator can draw to implement GEAR UP initiatives, as well as the structural and cultural barriers or constraints that impede successful implementation of GEAR UP objectives.

Understanding GEAR UP Contexts: Culture, Values, and Student Challenges

The academic culture and level of academic press in GEAR UP TN schools varied. Participants reported inadequate teacher quality, weak instructional leadership, and low student motivation as dominant issues affecting the culture of academic press. Some respondents believed that recruiting high-quality teachers to isolated and economically depressed counties resulted in a lack of teacher quality and academic rigor. Others believed the focus of school leadership did not lend itself to a strong academic culture. As stated by one school counselor, "*We have a wonderful law and order principal, if that means something to you. We have a good environment. He's a good disciplinarian, but he's not an instructional leader.*"

Moreover, many respondents cited low student motivation as limiting the academic press of the school. Respondents' discussion of this issue situated the student as singularly responsible for his or her own academic engagement, rather than holding teachers and the school accountable for strengthening student engagement and academic achievement. One counselor remarked,

> *I think our students can be tremendously successful and they can excel, but they are not learning all they can learn here, because they are just not motivated. They have a lot on their minds besides school— home and family situations. School is just something else they need to*

deal with. We usually have 10-25 a year in each grade who just aren't motivated. I have one outside the door who is 13 lessons behind on his math but is advanced on TCAP. That has nothing to do with ability, its motivation.

The data contain numerous descriptions of school and district personnel's perception of students' lack of motivation, and all of them position the student as the single actor responsible for intrinsic self-motivation. In these accounts, school and district personnel were not depicted as accountable participants in the motivation or preparation of students to achieve academically.

Equally as salient in the data were references to the "welfare state of mind" impacting the culture around college-going within both the school and community. Respondents spoke to the reproductive nature of this cultural mindset and its permeation throughout generations of county inhabitants.

So mining dried up, everybody got on checks, welfare checks, and it's gone right on down through the family. These kids right here, the ambition of the majority of them is to draw. So there is not much motivation from home here, parents don't seem to care.

In addition to the "welfare state of mind" explicated above, respondents also discussed the desire of parents to keep their children in close geographic proximity. In short, parents do not want their children to leave home. Respondents described the fear surrounding education, most notably parents' fear that their children will leave and never return. Therefore, the culture around college-going in the GEAR UP districts was weak.

GEAR UP site coordinators were keenly aware of the school and community cultures around academics and college-going. They reported the ways in which they attempted to combat these norms and reconstitute them. The dominant means of doing so included community outreach and education events at football games and parents' workplaces, as well as college visits that took students beyond county lines to increase their awareness of educational opportunities and the resultant quality of life educational advancement garners.

Defining the Access Problem: Divergent Perceptions of How Well the District Prepares Students for College

To better understand participants' beliefs about and experiences within the realm of college access, we asked for their assessments and observations of the district's performance in preparing students for post-secondary education. Participant responses varied from beliefs that the district performs well and has no areas to strengthen, to beliefs that improvements are unequivocally needed. This variation existed within and among the samples of counselors, principals, GEAR UP site coordinators, and district leaders. Further, these perceptions varied in districts with more than one high school; in these cases, one of the high schools tended to be more disadvantaged and

isolated than the other, which had implications for how personnel perceived relative school performance.

At one high school, the counselors and principal seemed to think they had been successful in preparing students for post-secondary education. One counselor stated,

> *The graduation rate is good; in fact, we are somewhat ahead of the curve of what we are supposed to be at on the sliding scale. Also our students do well on the ACT. Not quite as well as the state average but we've come up every year on the ACT (the 2007 mean composite score was 19.0). I think we do exceptionally well. I have not heard of any of our students over the past five years of wanting to get into a college that they could not get into with the exception that maybe they didn't get their very first choice, but they got their second choice.*

This counselor's appraisal was based on his isolation of students who applied to four-year colleges rather than the student population in the aggregate; therefore, he did not consider or evaluate how the district served and prepared all students, which may have elicited a different response.

Another counselor reported, "*Some areas here are not good…we don't have a lot of strong math teachers… [however] there seems more of a concern about getting them to secondary level or post-secondary.*" A district leader interviewed expressed a similar view. "*Well we know we've got improvements to make... we know that.*"

Finally, GEAR UP site coordinators varied in their assessments of how well the district was performing in preparing students for post-secondary education. For instance, one GEAR UP site coordinator could not articulate the district's performance in preparing students for post-secondary education.

> *Well I really don't have a lot of the information other than the ones that take advantage of our GEAR UP scholars…I don't know if our guidance counselor would have that kind of information or not you know as far as you know who they helped fill out applications and so forth and so on. I really don't have a good feel for that, I really don't think I could answer that.*

While site coordinators may be reasonably aware that academic preparation within GEAR UP counties is weak, the inability to appraise district performance in preparing students for post-secondary education remained somewhat surprising, given their roles as mediators of college access and linchpins of the GEAR UP program.

"Staying Off the List": NCLB Eclipses GEAR UP as a District Priority

"Alright, I know this is going to be beneficial, but now how does that compare to them missing their Algebra I class or whatever that if we don't pass their Gateways they're not graduating anyway, and so none of this you're doing means a thing."

The dominant district priority reported by district and school personnel is to meet the provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001). District leaders, school principals and counselors identified "making AYP," "test scores," and "staying off the list" as the central priorities in their districts. One district leader asserted, "*As a district, the burden that NCLB has put on us, that has to be our main focus.*" In addition, district and school personnel cited the graduation rate as both a priority of the high schools and the district at large. While coherence generally existed among all respondents relative to district priorities, principals believed GEAR UP was antithetical to the dominant district priority of avoiding NCLB sanctions for deficits in student achievement—in other words, antithetical to "staying off the list." Principals described the reduction in instructional time resulting from GEAR UP activities (e.g., college visits and tutoring) as problematic.

> *Alright, I know this is going to be beneficial, but now how does that compare to them missing their Algebra I class or whatever that if we don't pass their Gateways they're not graduating anyway, and so none of this you're doing means a thing. So just a balancing act there that [the site coordinator] has no understanding of.*

As embodied in the statement above, many principals did not view GEAR UP as a tool for improving student achievement and graduation rates; therefore, they did not recognize the alignment between district priorities and the GEAR UP program. Rather they viewed GEAR UP and the focus on NCLB as distinct and separate entities that are mutually exclusive and, at times, in conflict.

Some GEAR UP site coordinators acknowledged this conflict with school principals, though they interpreted the issue as principals' lack of understanding of the program rather than principals' lack of awareness in how the program fits within the context of district and school priorities. Principals who reported no such conflicts were in districts where the site coordinators had a history of working in the district and working with the principals.

We also asked GEAR UP site coordinators to identify their districts' priorities to gauge the extent to which the site coordinators were well-integrated into the district context, since this integration can facilitate program implementation. Site coordinators identified meeting NCLB mandates as the priorities within their respective districts, which demonstrated coherence among the perceptions of site coordinators and district personnel. However, some site coordinators were unable to articulate a district priority and responded with uncertainty; one coordinator stated, "*I have no idea.*" This lack of priority awareness may underscore a lack of integration into the district context, which impacts knowledge of district structures and the organizational culture, as well as the program's sense of place within the district.

"Signing Off" and Standing at the Periphery: The Roles of District

Leaders and School Principals in GEAR UP

Site coordinators' relationships with district leaders

The data revealed a high level of inconsistency in district leader involvement with the site coordinator. The extent of most district leaders' engagement was in fiscal matters relating to crafting the GEAR UP budget and approving requests for expenditures over $1,000. In addition to central office liaisons charged with GEAR UP supervisory responsibilities, district leaders involved with GEAR UP included directors of finance, directors of federal programs, and directors of schools. Respondents reported relatively frequent communication between site coordinators and these district leaders. However, in many districts, interactions with district leaders focused more heavily on grant compliance than on the development of local program goals and strategies aimed at increasing preparation for college. One site coordinator described,

> *The way it's structured is we have a liaison who is our federal projects director who's actually an assistant director of schools in charge of federal programs and he is my liaison. And that's basically to be a liaison between Tennessee Higher Education Commission and the school system in the whole raw matters. He was a big help to me in establishing the budget and doing the work plan and so forth and so on.*

District leaders also reported a content focus on compliance. "*My understanding of GEAR UP is that it is to get more students to go to college. I talk with [the site coordinator] quite a bit and oversee the budget as I have to sign all the monetary requests.*" Some site coordinators cited district leaders as having a high level of engagement in providing support to site coordinators in their implementation of the program. One site coordinator relayed that the central office liaison attended regional meetings and a national GEAR UP conference. Another district leader expressed interest and involvement in supporting the site coordinator since he was the high school principal during the first year of GEAR UP implementation and during the time when the district was awarded another college access grant. Consequently, he possessed a thorough working knowledge of GEAR UP. He described a typical interaction with the site coordinator.

> *She will use me I guess as a sounding board sometimes if she has ideas or plans. 'What do you think about this particular opportunity?' Teachers will bring to her programs they have seen or heard about that improve student achievement, discipline in the classroom, and they are looking to use GEAR UP funds to help purchase some of these things. Her and I get together and look it over and decide if it is something that relates to the GEAR UP program. Is it something we are going to purchase or not purchase, implement or not implement? So, we kind of become a two man committee.*

However, our findings indicated that this type of joint decision-making

between district leaders and site coordinators was rare.

Site coordinators' relationships with principals

While relationships and interactions between site coordinators and principals varied among districts and schools, many principals and site coordinators perceived the principal's role as one of passive cooperation enacted through the approval of program activities. One principal reported that his role was to "*stay out of the way of GEAR UP.*" The funding provided by GEAR UP for purchasing educational materials and equipment appealed to principals. In fact, one GEAR UP coordinator was referred to by a principal as the "wish list man," referring to the site coordinator's authority to purchase items for classroom use. At least three principals reported attending GEAR UP conferences, and several others described having collegial relationships with site coordinators. One principal described himself as the "cooperator with the coordinator." Another principal described support from the site coordinator.

> *He is down in the trenches with us if we need him, he is right there with the kids... I was caught up in something and I couldn't watch the halls, and he said, 'Don't worry about it . I'll take care of it for you.'*

For these principals and others, though, infrequent communication with the site coordinator was the norm. "*As far as the structure, [the site coordinator] comes out here several times during the year and lets me know what is available.*" Another principal stated, "*I'm just lucky to speak to her.*"

While there was evidence of support among some principals, others described frustrations with GEAR UP, site coordinators, or both. Regarding the program, one principal expressed concern regarding a lack of training offered to principals. "*[There was no training for principals]...which I would say is a hindrance or a failure on somebody's part, because we've basically kind of learned as we go type thing.*" This principal continued by describing the failure of the site coordinator and THEC to cast a vision for programmatic interventions based on research.

> *I would like to see a little more where he has a little more organized vision towards where we all should be going. Then, within that [and] working with me, he should be setting up and implementing under my guidance rather than having a great idea and saying, 'Here. Do it.'. . . They have very little vision of how they want it implemented. . . whoever's funding them [should say], 'Here is research-based data that will lead to helping kids get more in post-secondary education. And then here are these steps. Let's work towards doing these things.' And then I'm going to work with him and then I'm going to implement those things. Instead he says, 'What do you want to do?' I don't know what I want to do."*

When we asked the site coordinator who works with this principal to describe

the role of the principal within GEAR UP TN, he stated the following, "*It's understanding what the GEAR UP goals are and then what they can do to help accomplish those goals. They have to help determine, also, how they're going to request how the funds are used with their schools.*" The contrasting perceptions offered by this principal and site coordinator regarding the principal and site coordinators' roles in program implementation indicate a disconnect in what each person perceives to be the appropriate role structure for school principals.

Other concerns relayed by principals focused on site coordinators' legitimacy and accountability. One principal articulated, "*The person we've got doing it has very little understanding whatsoever of what the education process is like.*" The principal then detailed an interaction with the site coordinator regarding a proposed college visit in which he perceived that the site coordinator showed little regard for the complications associated with taking a large number of students out of class for a day. "*That requires a lot of work on my part, and he has no clue . . . You can't just take kids any day.*" Another principal expressed concern over the perceived lack of accountability in the GEAR UP structure, saying, "*I have no power. I can't make her do anything.*"

Most site coordinators believed the primary role of the principal was to "support" GEAR UP by approving activities or encouraging teachers to provide information about students. However, site coordinators and principals did not view the principal's role as active collaborator in diagnosing student needs, assisting in the development of strategies to differentiate programmatic interventions, or generating school-specific program goals. The data illustrate the key role of the principal in achieving program outcomes, and in the absence of a clearly defined role structure, the principal develops his own role, which may support or impede GEAR UP implementation.

District Leaders and Principals' Understandings of GEAR UP
The degree of knowledge district leaders and school principals possessed regarding the purpose and objectives of the GEAR UP program varied significantly. While most respondents recognized the program by name, few had a deep understanding of its goals and how program features may bolster academic preparation and college awareness. District and school leaders provided vague articulations of the purpose and objectives of GEAR UP TN. For instance, one principal remarked, "*What I think a lot of it is, is just what GEAR UP means, gaining awareness of opportunities out there.*" Most often, respondents simply stated that GEAR UP "*helps kids go to college.*" These vague descriptions of programmatic goals illuminate a lack of shared knowledge and clarity about the content of GEAR UP goals. Absent from district and school leaders' articulations of program knowledge was how programmatic core features worked together to form a coherent intervention addressing both academic and non-academic dimensions of college access. Moreover, it remains unclear how respondents defined college or the extent to which the district or school had a unified agenda for how the program should

address students' preparation for post-secondary education. This inadequate knowledge presented a barrier to effective program implementation and systemic change, as district and school leaders had no unified agenda for GEAR UP or for how the program may facilitate systemic change.

A Lack of GEAR UP Training for District Leaders and School Principals

A likely contributor to district leaders' and school principals' lack of knowledge is the absence of formal training for leaders regarding what GEAR UP TN is and how their roles are important to the effectiveness of the program. We asked every district leader and principal if they received training related to GEAR UP TN, and only one principal affirmed participation in the state GEAR UP workshop. Some participants, however, identified informal meetings with the regional coordinators or site coordinators as a form of training, though they also expressed a desire to learn more about the program or reported frustration that they had not received adequate training to fully understand GEAR UP. When asked about receipt of GEAR UP training, one principal stated,

> *We've basically kind of learned as we go type thing… I do [have more information] now. Meeting with [the regional coordinator] I think this year I spent more time with her and [the site coordinator] in meetings and trying to figure out where to go and what we wanted to do through those meetings I've kind of seen more of what the possibilities and opportunities are than I knew before. The only thing I knew before is it was to promote our students to go to post-secondary and I knew they had resources and that's really about the only two things I knew about it coming in to it.*

The variations in knowledge about GEAR UP TN and variations in institutional support for the implementation thereof pointed to a lack of formal training designed for each type of district and school personnel—a formal training encompassing more than simply compliance procedures.

Variations in Institutional Support for GEAR UP

The degree of institutional support provided by school and district leadership for the program varied across districts. The greatest variation in support existed within our sample of school principals. Principals who expressed frustration or concern with the program or who demonstrated efforts to thwart program implementation believed GEAR UP compromised valuable instructional time by removing students from class to visit college campuses or to engage in GEAR UP-related activities. This re-allocation of instructional time was believed to compromise the school's performance on state standardized tests, and therefore, to jeopardize their standing on "the list." Other principals, moreover, expressed frustration regarding a lack of information on how GEAR UP funds may be allocated to schools and school-based activities. These principals maintained that the funds are for the schools and that the principals should have some authority in how resources are allocated. For these reasons, this lack of institutional support for GEAR UP

Inadequate knowledge presented a barrier to effective program implementation and systemic change, as district and school leaders had no unified agenda for GEAR UP or for how the program may facilitate systemic change.

implementation affected the work of site coordinators, who also articulated how a lack of principal support affected successful implementation.

> *We had some problems as far as establishing ourselves because…I just think it was mainly just getting yourself established with the high school principals…so that you can go in and call them up just about anytime on the phone and say you know 'here's what I'm thinking about doing' and they'll take your calls…at first...it was 'who is this guy? I think I remember him' you know, but now we know each other and ….I go to the schools at least once a month and sit down with them and you know and talk about things, what they have in mind for me to try to accomplish and what I'd like to do for them. So I guess getting established last year was a challenge because the learning curve that comes with any new program.*

This site coordinator identified the importance of gaining institutional support to facilitate program implementation. In the case above, the site coordinator had to await the principal's acceptance of him in order to have conversations about GEAR UP and to effectively implement the program in the school. It also may be notable that this site coordinator visited the two GEAR UP schools in his respective county only once per month.

While some school leaders were reluctant to fully embrace GEAR UP, many site coordinators cited the support of school and district leaders for GEAR UP as a critical asset that facilitates their implementation of GEAR UP. One site coordinator stated, "*I see [the principal] as being the support that I need to get things done. When it's coming from the principal, he provides that extra support.*" The level of support provided to the site coordinator varied by district and school, though most principals stated their support of the program and many site coordinators described instances of support, namely the inclusion of the site coordinator in school improvement efforts. However, while school leaders declared support for the program, they also described how the program conflicts with instructional time, resulting in barriers to relationship-building and subsequent implementation.

Discussion: Guiding Question 1

How Does the Program Structure and District Context Shape Site Coordinators' Implementation Of GEAR UP?

Role Ambiguity Among Implementing Agents

We found ambiguity of roles to be a key factor operating within the district context and affecting implementation by the site coordinator. The district leaders and school principals generally possessed no clear sense of identity or role within the GEAR UP program. Hatch (1997) defines an individual's role as a part of the "social structure" of an organization. In addition to defined roles, an organization's social structure includes the relationships and connections among individuals, positions, and units. The author further theorizes that "*social structure cannot be avoided; if you do not design your organization around a social structure, one will emerge from the work activities and associations of people within the organization*" (p. 181). Our data illustrate that district and school personnel remain unaware of their roles and how the roles of different entities and individuals relate to and depend on one another. Since the roles of district and school personnel have not been developed or made visible to them, their expertise and their relative positional authority are un- or under-utilized by the site coordinator.

Initial designs of many GEAR UP projects across the nation have included decision-making and planning processes that involve a variety of personnel within the school and community. Despite those intentions, GEAR UP staff, including site coordinators, typically carried out project planning and initiatives (Westat, 2003). GEAR UP TN mirrors this national trend. At the district level, site coordinators primarily plan, initiate and conduct almost all things GEAR UP. The dominant perception among district and school personnel was that GEAR UP was an entity outside the scope of their role and work responsibilities; therefore, they did not actively pursue a role within the program, nor did they develop shared goals or commitments to the program or to the site coordinators. As a result, district and school personnel possess narrow understandings of the program. Additionally, without a clear definition of individual roles and the social structure framing those roles, district and school personnel have provided varying levels of support across districts and schools for GEAR UP TN.

Due to the program's comprehensive approach in enhancing college access, the program implicitly requires the interdependency of educational agencies and actors. While interdependence may breed conflict (Dahrendorf, 1958), a thoughtful implementation strategy may mitigate certain "jurisdictional issues" (Matland, 1995, p 156). In many ways, site coordinators serve as "boundary spanners" in their roles (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). As district level implementers of the state's program in schools and communities, site coordinators work simultaneously in multiple spheres. In some schools and districts, we found jurisdictional conflict resulting largely from role ambiguity. Principals, for example, were uncertain of their roles in GEAR UP and the appropriate roles of their staff, while also being unclear

on the precise means the site coordinators should pursue to implement the program in their schools. In several instances, this conflict inhibited the work of the site coordinator in implementing the program.

Finally, site coordinators face a level of role ambiguity that affects GEAR UP implementation. Though their daily work is driven in large measure by the resource manual created by THEC, the role structure of the site coordinator is not adequately defined within the district and school context. Since district and school personnel lack role clarity, the role of the site coordinator in the broader organizational structure supporting GEAR UP implementation is affected. Site coordinators do not know how principals, district leaders, school counselors, and others should implement the program. As a result, site coordinators at times engage in work that is outside the scope of their role as defined by THEC. This is evident in the fact that several site coordinators perceive themselves as possessing roles similar to school counselors instead of as coordinators of a district-wide effort to enhance post-secondary access. In sum, as a clearly defined role structure for district and school personnel is developed, the site coordinator's role will also be more completely defined, thereby enhancing their work.

Key Elements in Building Local Capacity

The research literature on implementation emphasizes the critical role capacity plays in achieving desired outcomes (McLaughlin, 1987; Desimone, 2002; O'Donnell, 2008). Our findings indicate that the current status of GEAR UP TN does not address all of the key dimensions of capacity identified in the literature, which include program and content knowledge, resources, and training (McLaughlin, 1987; Firestone, 1989; Fullan, 1991; Spillane et al., 2002). Unless measures are taken to build capacity in each of these areas, the immediate and sustained effects of GEAR UP TN will be undermined.

Capacity of Personnel to Support Implementation: A Lack of Expertise in Content and Program Knowledge

A key attribute of implementation capacity is the expertise possessed by both the implementing agents and individuals within the implementing system (McLaughlin, 1987; Honig et al., 2006). District leaders, school principals, and school counselors expressed a minimal level of knowledge regarding the program and generally did not convey a sense of content expertise. The expertise of both the site coordinator and other key district and school personnel is important to successful implementation.

As our findings illustrate, district and school personnel possess a minimal and surface-level knowledge of GEAR UP TN. These individuals know the program by name and tend to know that the program supports college visits, but that is the extent of their knowledge base. School principals tend to possess a greater knowledge than district leaders or school counselors, though their articulations of the program purpose and goals lack a depth of understanding of programmatic principles. Often respondents would simply state that GEAR UP TN "*helps kids go to college*." While this succinct

Our findings indicate that the current status of GEAR UP TN does not address all of the key dimensions of capacity identified in the literature, which include program and content knowledge, resources, and training.

response may be true, it does not convey knowledge of the fundamental principles undergirding the program; rather, it conveys a disproportionate attention to programmatic "form," i.e. the utilization of bus transportation for college visits, monetary incentives for GEAR UP student participants, and other, more visible, surface-level representations of the program. Research has shown that participant understandings of policy and reform reliant on "form" versus "function" have resulted in interpretations representative of "partial understandings" (Haug, 1999) that "*missed the core intent [of the program], contributing to superficial implementation*" (Spillane, 2000; Spillane & Callahan, 2000; Spillane et al., 2002). The core intent of the program is to manipulate those family and school variables that influence academic preparation and college access. By reconstituting those variables, the GEAR UP program acts as a facilitator and mediator of college-going, but only to the extent that the "underlying functions" of the program are understood by those within the implementing system (Spillane, 2000).

District and school personnel's lack of programmatic and content expertise hinders the capacity of the district to achieve successful implementation. In GEAR UP TN districts, the results have been implementation of concrete practices, such as travel to college campuses or EXPLORE testing; however, we found no evidence of functional changes in how districts prepare students academically or in how they mediate students' perceptions of post-secondary educational opportunity. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of conversation occurring within districts and schools relative to these functional principles of college-going, and this lack of organizational discourse and learning speaks to a lack of expertise and capacity to achieve desired implementation outcomes.

Furthermore, the site coordinator, as the linchpin of program implementation, is the individual charged with altering the district's discourse and practices around post-secondary preparation, and for these alterations in knowledge and dispositions to be realized, the site coordinator should possess deep programmatic and content expertise and distribute this expertise throughout the district. Our findings, however, point to site coordinators' lack of functional understanding and raise questions regarding the extent to which full implementation and systemic change can be realized. While site coordinators were able to provide a fair amount of information regarding programmatic objectives and activities, they did not convey an understanding of how those activities address factors influencing students' preparation for and awareness of college. For instance, site coordinators described the importance of providing financial aid awareness to students, though they did not connect this program activity to the extant knowledge that student perceptions of college costs and their (mis)understandings of financial aid mediate both college choice and college-going, and that effective financial aid awareness should address students' perceived costs and benefits, including forgone benefits (McDonough, 1997; King, 2004; Heller, 2006; Luna De La Rosa, 2006). Site coordinators tended to list activities, though they could not articulate how these activities worked together in a coherent manner to

Site coordinators tended to list activities, though they could not articulate how these activities worked together in a coherent manner to bolster preparation and access to post–secondary education.

bolster preparation and access to post-secondary education. Site coordinators, similar to district and school personnel, relied upon concrete activities as representations of program implementation and outcomes, rather than underlying programmatic principles.

Capacity of District Policies, Programs, and Initiatives to Support GEAR UP Implementation: A Promising Yet Uncultivated Seedbed

As our findings illustrate, districts in our target sample are poised to facilitate site coordinators' development and implementation of GEAR UP initiatives. While districts vary in their capacity to provide supports for implementation, most districts have cultivated a seedbed on which to build capacity, relying predominantly on their prior knowledge of college access grant interventions, current curricular reform initiatives affecting college preparation, and existing structures that link students to post-secondary education. These institutional resources offer site coordinators opportunities to align the GEAR UP program with existing district activities, to build upon these activities to increase program effectiveness and sustainability, and to exercise leverage in increasing program awareness and commitment. However, we question the extent to which the content of capacity-building efforts appropriately addresses both the features of successful program implementation and the factors affecting academic preparation and college access.

Site coordinators' references to "capacity-building workshops" provide evidence of a macro-level focus on increasing implementation capacity, though the work of site coordinators in building capacity seems to be constrained by how districts define capacity-building. Most districts believe capacity is constituted in the material goods provided by the program and the awareness of college the program brings to students. Districts did not identify any type of knowledge or skill district leaders, school principals, and school counselors need to successfully implement the program or to meet the program objectives of advancing academic preparation and college access. For example, while the districts with prior involvement in college access grant programs are familiar with grant reporting and the logistics of college visits, we did not find evidence of deep content knowledge regarding the factors influencing students' academic achievement and educational attainment. Moreover, we did not find this content knowledge in any of the districts in our target sample.

Districts working to strengthen college preparatory curricula by adding courses such as physics or trigonometry did provide some evidence of knowledge about the effects of advanced coursework on college-going (St. John, 1991; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2000; Cabrera et al., 2001). However, the potential of this capacity-building effort is thwarted by what school and district leadership believe is a lack of qualified teachers willing to teach in geographically isolated GEAR UP counties. Additionally, all districts have existing structures and activities aimed at increasing college awareness, and some view GEAR UP as a way to expand upon existing structures and

programs. Even so, site coordinators do not seem to have accessed these existing supports in ways that deepen institutional partnerships or create stronger linkages between schools and institutions of higher learning. While a seedbed exists, it has not been utilized to the program's fullest benefit.

Building Capacity of Personnel in Program and Content Knowledge: A Necessary Component Not Yet in Place

In addition to participant understandings grounded in form-focused attributes of the program, we attribute the lack of programmatic expertise to a lack of high-quality training for district and school personnel within the implementing system. Training is a key dimension of building capacity for implementation (McLaughlin, 1987; Desimone, 2002; Coburn, 2003; Honig, 2006), and it currently represents a missing paradigm within the GEAR UP TN implementation framework. While site coordinators have received training through state conferences and meetings, regional monthly meetings, and collaborations with regional coordinators, district and school personnel have not. When district leaders, school principals, and school counselors were questioned about participation in any GEAR UP-related training, the overwhelming response was that they had not received any training, though they may have "heard about" GEAR UP at a district or faculty meeting during which time the program was introduced but not explained in terms of how it affects professional practices or the system at large.

Providing training to individuals within the implementing system is a fundamental component of building institutional capacity (Elmore, 1996; Firestone et al., 1999; Coburn, 2003), and if the district context is to support and reinforce core programmatic principles and structures, personnel should not only be cognizant of the program's existence but also, and more importantly, be equipped with the knowledge of how their professional practices should be altered in ways more amenable to successful implementation and goal attainment. Research has illustrated the ways in which individuals' mental models, or internal representations of understanding programs or policies, influence professional practices (Gentner & Stevens, 1983). In order for district and school personnel to receive and integrate knowledge of GEAR UP and its underlying principles, and to reconfigure existing mental models of their practices, training must occur. In the absence of thoughtful training, district and school personnel are passive recipients of program knowledge and simply assimilate new programmatic and content knowledge into their familiar ways of thinking about academic preparation and college access (Flavell, 1963). Moreover, the premise behind GEAR UP is to change the way students and educators engage in the process of academic preparation and college access, so this reconstitution of knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions about students and their educational advancement is critical to building institutional capacity for the program and for achieving successful implementation. Spillane et al. (2002) offers this caution.

Learning new ideas…is not simply an act of encoding these new ideas; it may require restructuring of existing schemas, and the new ideas

are subject to the danger of being seen as minor variations of what is already understood rather than as different in critically important ways (p. 396).

The danger associated with the absence of GEAR UP training is that the program is perceived as calling for minor variations in how district and school personnel prepare students and make them aware of post-secondary education. GEAR UP, on the other hand, addresses not minor variations within middle and secondary schooling but addresses perceptions of education opportunity that need reframing, and practices of academic preparation that need improved upon.

Furthermore, an absence of training prevents both shared understanding of the problem and the development of a common language for those within the district context to utilize when discussing their professional practices in relation to program objectives. The ways in which problems are defined affect how programs and policies address those problems and how implementation is enacted to solve them (Bardach, 1977; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979; Matland, 1995). When program training does not occur, implementing agents operate with varied conceptions and understandings of the problems, and the problems in this case include districts' low academic achievement, low educational attainment, and low earnings. Moreover, our findings illuminate the varied perceptions of what the program does and what problems it addresses, while also underscoring the differences in how participants define the problems GEAR UP aims to solve. An effective GEAR UP training would explore these disparate problem definitions and the assumptions therein, while also specifically examining personnel's understanding of their own roles within the college predisposition, search, and choice trajectory (Hossler et al., 1987). A training of this nature offers a venue within which a discourse around district performance can be facilitated. Even further, high-quality program trainings have the potential to alter the district context in both structural and normative ways that not only engender successful program implementation but also lay the foundation for systemic change and program sustainability.

District expertise around the GEAR UP program and its underlying principles has not been developed in GEAR UP TN districts, and as such, the capacity to ensure successful implementation has not been built. Since site coordinators are the primary GEAR UP TN implementing agents within districts, they are positioned to lead the training of district and school personnel necessary for a productive discourse about the program and the district's performance in preparing students for post-secondary education. However, our data illustrate that site coordinators rely upon informal "hallway" conversations with district leaders, school principals, and school counselors or brief large-group presentations at district- or school-wide meetings to dispense programmatic information. Given participants' lack of basic program knowledge, we question the extent to which reliance on informal communication establishes a foundation of the requisite strength

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needed to build district capacity for implementation. While the lack of district knowledge influences the effectiveness of the site coordinators, the site coordinators are ultimately responsible for educating the district community about GEAR UP TN in ways that promote engagement, commitment, and capacity. To put it differently, the district context—currently devoid of program and content expertise—constrains the site coordinators' development and implementation of GEAR UP initiatives; however, this constraint emanates from the lack of basic program training site coordinators are equipped to provide to the district community. We contend that not only the district context shapes the work of site coordinators, but also, and more importantly, the site coordinators shape the work of the district.

Making Sense of GEAR UP: How Site Coordinators, District Leaders, and Principals Understand Program Goals and Strategies

GEAR UP TN leaves both financial and conceptual program design and implementation to local discretion. The site coordinator serves as the programmatic linchpin, whose purpose is to bring district and school leaders to shared understandings regarding what GEAR UP means for their local contexts. While this approach allows for local innovation and experimentation, there may be unintended consequences. Without role clarity and a shared consensus around locally generated program goals, implementing agents construct their own understandings of GEAR UP and implement program initiatives in ways that mirror only partial understandings of the program's intent. This does not suggest that implementing agents intentionally ignore program initiatives or sabotage implementation; rather, these individuals engage in sense-making, or the process of constructing understandings of the program's intent, that may or may not include attention to the reform principles undergirding GEAR UP (Spillane et al., 2002). Our findings relative to how implementing agents understand GEAR UP goals and college access strategies are consistent with the implementation literature.

The data indicate that site coordinators possess narrow conceptions of GEAR UP as an approach to enhancing college access. Most site coordinators believe exposing students to post-secondary education is the purpose of GEAR UP. As one site coordinator stated, "*[It is] mainly just college awareness.*" While college awareness is an important component of GEAR UP, it does not encompass the program's full potential and intent. Instead of understanding GEAR UP as a unifying and cohesive program aimed at changing how schools prepare students for post-secondary education, site coordinators perceive it as a program that provides funding to "do" activities like college visits, tutoring, and purchasing technology for schools.

Moreover, these implementing agents appear to have few opportunities to learn how each GEAR UP activity affects students' preparation for post-secondary education, which is a critical understanding required to effectively design and implement programmatic interventions that are sustainable. Spillane et al. (2002) note that "*most implementing agents are novices*" and require concrete direction regarding how a program "*charts new*

Without role clarity and a shared consensus around locally generated program goals, implementing agents construct their own understandings of GEAR UP and implement program initiatives in ways that mirror only partial understandings of the program's intent.

terrain" (p. 400). However, most coordinators reported that their training focuses predominantly on grant reporting and compliance procedures. Left to determine how each program activity affects college-going and how strategies should be implemented, site coordinators construct understandings of program goals and underlying programmatic principles within the context of their existing expertise, experiences, and professional practices. As site coordinators engage in this sense-making process, they are confronted with restructuring their previously held understandings of what it means to go to college, who should go to college, and how the school and community affect students' academic preparation and college choice. GEAR UP calls for a critically different approach to preparing students for post-secondary education, and as the linchpin of GEAR UP within districts, it is imperative that site coordinators have fully developed conceptions of the program and its potential effects on all aspects of students' college-going. There is no reason to believe that site coordinators' under-developed conceptions of GEAR UP result from a lack of attention to the program and its implementation.[2] Our data reveal that site coordinators are hard-working, conscientious, and motivated people with a genuine interest in the welfare of the students, schools, and community. Their conceptions may be seen as evolving, and as such, program designers should be cognizant of implementers' needs for deeper understandings of GEAR UP's intent as a lever of systemic change in how schools prepare students for post-secondary education.

Our data also illustrate that district leaders and principals have narrow views of GEAR UP goals and may view the program as an activity outside of their purview. District leaders and school principals have been apt to understand GEAR UP as an "add-on" program, rather than as a lever of systemic change in the ways students are prepared academically and socially for post-secondary education.

Due to a lack of knowledge about the program, district and school personnel were vaguely familiar with the overarching program goals and possessed no locally generated goals for the program as existent within their particular school or district contexts. One of the promises of GEAR UP is the ability of local districts to develop a program consistent with local needs, goals, and priorities; these "street-level bureaucrats" are afforded considerable discretion in developing initiatives and implementing them in ways that are congruent with the local context (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; Lipsky, 1980). Not only does the GEAR UP structure allow for districts to develop local program goals and strategies, but it also promotes a sense of autonomy and ownership of the program on the part of local implementing agents. High levels of local ownership are required for desired implementation outcomes and program sustainability. Contrary to the promises inherent in GEAR UP and to the programmatic advantages of localism identified in the

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[2] Indeed, research indicates otherwise. Hill (2001) and Haug (1999) found that teachers often had varying understandings of state curricular reforms efforts despite spending substantial time in gaining an understanding. Additionally, Haug (1999) discovered that the depth of understanding of a reform predicted implementation levels across various districts.

implementation literature (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976, 1978; Matland, 1995), our data reveal that local discretion has not manifested in district-specific or district-generated program goals or implementation strategies, nor have most of the district and school personnel assumed ownership of the program, its mission, and objectives.

The ambiguity around programmatic goals affects district capacity to implement GEAR UP TN, as well as district and school personnel's commitment to the program. Without knowledge of overarching GEAR UP goals and without development of school- and district-based goals, district and school personnel do not possess the expertise to act as effective implementing agents, nor do they have motivation to work collaboratively with site coordinators. Therefore, site coordinators often work in some degree of isolation within districts as they strive to construct program initiatives and implementation strategies.

Making Sense of GEAR UP Within a High-Stakes Environment

District and school personnel exist in an institutional context overwhelmed with pressure to meet federal NCLB regulations; therefore, their interpretations and understandings of GEAR UP will be mediated by these pressures in their environment (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976, 1978; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; Porter et al., 1988). Their cognition is situated in such a way that their will or commitment towards the program is at times mitigated to the detriment of implementation (Spillane et al., 2002).

Moreover, district and school personnel have incentives to maintain a singular focus on NCLB and to buffer activities that would jeopardize performance, whereas no such incentives have been promoted or recognized by district and school personnel to implement GEAR UP or to support the work of the site coordinators. Implementation scholars have long identified the importance of incentives in motivating individual will and commitment to programs and policies (Fullan, 1982; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Cohen, 1995; Elmore, 1996), and participants in this study failed to recognize incentives to implement the program as intended or to collaborate with site coordinators in ways supportive of bolstering college access and organizational learning around the program.

Furthermore, the agency of site coordinators in assisting participants—namely district and school leaders—in positioning GEAR UP as a district priority remains absent from the data. Site coordinators appear to have assumed a more passive stance within the district and schools, resulting in a failure to make GEAR UP a legitimate priority focus within an institutional context of competing goals and demands. Research has demonstrated the effects of multiple organizational goals on implementation outcomes (March & Olsen, 1989; Mazzoni, 1991; Ogawa et al., 2003). This research underscores the importance of aligning GEAR UP TN with district goals in a clear and coherent manner that may assist in promoting participants' understandings of program goals, objectives, and how the program aligns with other district emphases.

Our findings illustrate the salience of NCLB in establishing priorities within GEAR UP TN districts and schools, which has a direct impact on the site coordinators' implementation of GEAR UP. Rather than viewing GEAR UP as a tool for meeting NCLB provisions, some participants view GEAR UP as a competing entity and obstacle to the advancement of instruction and student achievement. Principals most notably maintain this perspective, which elicits the question of the extent to which site coordinators and district leaders have provided principals with a coherent framework for situating the program within the district's priority to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and meet NCLB mandates. Our evidence suggests that school leaders have interpreted GEAR UP as antithetical to NCLB priorities; site coordinators and district leaders are not attuned to how they may illustrate the ways that the program supports district goals relative to NCLB. Alignment between district priorities and the GEAR UP program is critical to the work of the site coordinator; this alignment provides the site coordinator the leverage necessary to enact program initiatives.

Findings: Guiding Question 2
What Factors Affect School Counselors' Implementation of GEAR UP Initiatives?

The school counselor is one of the most significant school members in determining college-going behaviors among students (e.g. student achievement and financial aid knowledge), especially in traditionally underserved populations (Rosenblum, 1976; Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004; Plank & Jordan, 2001; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Similarly, in studying college persistence patterns, "appropriate counseling and resources" have been consistently shown to increase college-going behaviors (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; McDonough, 1997). Further, the success of college preparatory programs in low-income schools is attributed to the effectiveness of the school counselor (Tierney & Venegas, 2005; McDonough, 2004). Thus, the school counselor has the potential to be a key implementing agent.

Defining the context of school counselors within GEAR UP counties began through exploring how school counseling practice was shaped by the presence of the GEAR UP program and subsequent interactions with the site coordinator. To gain a broader view of the school counselors' role within GEAR UP, we sought an understanding of how the district, school, and community contexts influence general counseling practices. This line of inquiry provided a lens that allowed us to ascertain the extent and scope of a school counselor's role in the development and implementation of GEAR UP.

Twenty-nine school counselor interviews created a portrait of counseling practice. Of particular importance in understanding school counseling in GEAR UP districts were issues of counseling load and years of counseling experience.

Table 3. *GEAR UP TN School Counseling Load and Years of Experience*

District	Average Counseling Load	Average Years of Experience
District A	245	5.2
District B	275	11
District C	326	15
District D	338	19.2
District E	322	15
Overall Average	**315**	**13**

Situating the Counselor within GEAR UP Tennessee

School counselors reported their responsibilities across counseling, administrative and clerical spectrums. None of the school counselors identified work with GEAR UP as a dominant strain in their counseling practice. Instead, school counselors shared that they most often acted as testing coordinators, attendance monitors, registrars, character education liaisons, discipline specialists, special education gateway interventionists, personal and academic counselors, and as "guidance-teachers" who taught in-class guidance lessons. Within GEAR UP counties, school counselors assumed these roles while providing services to an average counseling load of 315 students. In some cases, a school counselor provided these diverse services alone and across grade levels, as he/she was the only counselor in the building.

School Counselors Are Disconnected from GEAR UP Implementation

School counselors appear to be disconnected from the GEAR UP program for two reasons: (1) a lack of training relative to GEAR UP, and (2) a lack of communication with the GEAR UP site coordinator. School counselors explained that they had not received any formal GEAR UP training by way of professional development workshops or GEAR UP literature. The majority of school counselors responded that they did not know of the governing agency of THEC and if they did, they did not know how GEAR UP was involved with THEC. The lack of knowledge regarding both THEC and GEAR UP is attributable to the lack of attention given to the school counselor in GEAR UP documents. For example, in the narrative, the school counselor is not included as a member of the GEAR UP state advisory council, a contributor to the sustainability plan, or given provision for specific school counseling professional development. Instead, we note that the school counselor is only referenced tangentially; the narrative suggests one-time phone calls should be made to introduce the school counselor to the GEAR UP Bridge

Scholarship. Similarly, the 2007 evaluation report does not specifically reference the school counselor in its measurement of GEAR UP interventions. Instead, the evaluation measures the success of GEAR UP by investigating the experiences of only teachers and administrators. It appears that the inattention to the school counselor role in GEAR UP documents caused the school counselors in our sample to provide little substantive descriptions of the GEAR UP program. That is, many school counselors could only articulate GEAR UP as a new program, designed to get more students to go to college. Even though school counselors knew that GEAR UP was designed to get students to go to college, they had little understanding of how the program achieved this goal organizationally, fiscally, or programmatically. Moreover, it is important to note that school counselors were only able to describe one goal of GEAR UP. Indeed, absent from their descriptions of GEAR UP were the core programmatic goals of academic preparation and community engagement.

Even though school counselors knew that GEAR UP was designed to get students to go to college, they had little understanding of how the program achieved this goal organizationally, fiscally, or programmatically.

The school counselor's lack of knowledge relative to GEAR UP is due not only to an absence of programmatic acknowledgement but also to inconsistent communication between site coordinator and school counselor. In most counties, communication between site coordinator and school counselor can be categorized as "informal and on a need basis only." The site coordinator and counselor engaged in little collaborative planning relative to college access interventions. That is, coordinators and counselors only seemed to interact when they were trying to inform students about scholarships, financial aid, or college visits.

Several counselors cited that informal and inconsistent communication with the site coordinator resulted from the counseling burdens of case load and lack of time. In responding to a question regarding communication and planning with the site coordinator, one counselor stated,

> *Some, yes. It just depends on the….with 500 students and 500 schedules twice a year it is really hard for me to have the time to spend [on GEAR UP]…it would be more preferable if I had the choice to plan rather than doing schedules. That is why we have him to really help. And he will ask me, 'what do you think about this?; and I'll give him the ideas and he has helped out a lot with that.*

In many cases, the school counselor shared that the site coordinator had become the "*extra set of hands or go-to person*" who was able to take over college counseling entirely. For example, school counselors stated that it was the site coordinator who was able to plan all the college visits, scholarship, and financial aid nights. Moreover, in some cases we found that the site coordinator was actually working as more of an interpersonal or family counselor, meeting with at-risk students regarding academic progress or with entire families about the college application process. As one counselor found, "*He knows a lot of them and 400 is a lot to get to know, but yeah, he has gotten to know [them], especially the ones who tend to stay in trouble*."

With the disconnect between school counselor and the GEAR UP program uncovered, we investigated how the district, school, and community contexts might have contributed to the apparent disconnect from the GEAR UP program. Specifically, we sought to determine how the influence of, and communication with, district and school leadership, colleagues, and community members defined school counseling practices relative to GEAR UP.

District and School Leaders Have Narrow Conceptions of School Counselor Role Within GEAR UP

Across GEAR UP school districts, the district leadership asserted that the school counselor is poised to be the "touchstone" for all elements of counseling, including college access. The collective voice regarding the purpose of the school counselor was defined by one district leader. "*If anybody can have an influence on students in the schools it's the school counselor*." Consequently, district leaders found that the school counselor is the school member most appropriate to be involved in GEAR UP activities. Specifically, the leadership indicated that school counselors are likely to be the informational resources for the planning of GEAR UP interventions; however, they did not articulate a specific role or capacity a counselor should assume within the GEAR UP program. Instead, they offered obtuse direction-sharing, "*They probably would connect GEAR UP to the students*."

The district leader's vague understanding of the counselor's role within GEAR UP can be attributed to sporadic communication with school counselors. While school counselors did find support within the district office, the support was articulated as "informal" and occurred only when "questions about a particular subject arise." As a result, we found no evidence of school counselors communicating with the district leadership regarding GEAR UP.

The district leadership's perceptions of the school counselor role within GEAR UP are closely mirrored by the school leadership. Like communication with district personnel, we found that school counselors and their principals communicate informally about issues pertaining to both counseling and GEAR UP. As one school principal shared, "*She keeps me in the know and let's me know what's going on with things as needed*." School counselors corroborated this statement as they offered that they did not have regular meetings with the school principal. The informality of communication regarding both counseling practice and GEAR UP suggests that the role of the counselor in the implementation of GEAR UP is loosely defined, with no specific roles or responsibilities.

Counselor Support Networks Within and Outside of School

School counselors indicate no interaction with fellow faculty members or counselors around GEAR UP. Indeed, we found little evidence of consistent communication with teachers or fellow counselors about the general counseling practices. Counselors explained communication with teachers as nonexistent or as predicated by conflict. One counselor felt she was constantly

"battling teachers" for time, and remarked, "*I have had to make a name for myself, which is not always been easy.*"

It is important to note that in rare cases, counselors described the physical location of their office as facilitating communication. For example, one counselor shared, "*That's one thing we've got is a small staff and they'll come through that door right there two or three times a day and they'll make comments about students.*" Similarly, a counselor working within a freshman academy found that her office location within the freshman academy allowed both "*teachers and students to easily seek her out.*"

The majority of school counselors did not describe frequent communication with fellow counselors or identify school counselor support networks. Counselors shared that the lack of district counselor networks could be attributed to the differences between counselor job responsibilities, which were shaped by varying school cultures. As one school counselor stated, "*So our job, our roles are quite a bit different from what she does there, what I do, so it makes planning together hard.*"

In terms of school counselors' communication pertaining to academic preparation and post-secondary planning, we again found little evidence of collaboration. For example, there was little evidence of communication regarding transition between 8th and 9th grade. The reasons for this absence of communication varied. In some cases counselors shared that recent changes in counseling staff made establishing relationships difficult, while others cited finding time to meet as a barrier. Still others shared that they wanted to be solely responsible for the transition of students. "*I want to meet with all the 8th grade students myself so I can get them ready for our high school.*" The remainder of our sample noted that, while no communication existed relative to transitioning students from middle school to high school, they do look forward to collaborating with other school counselors in the future, often describing it as a "future goal."

Unlike sporadic, isolated, and sometimes conflicting communication with members of the school community, we found that the majority of school counselors had created strong college access support networks with community agencies. Beginning with high school curriculum, counselors described that they have developed strong relationships with dual enrollment coordinators at community colleges. Shared one school counselor, "*I called her [community college representative] and she let us add one student into an EMS class that was normally closed to high school students…she really cares about our kids.*" Moreover, counselors frequently reported calling on the expertise of local college officials to speak with students about the college application process and financial aid options. However, in all cases, we note that while counselors had strong college access support networks, none of the counselors connected their relationships with community liaisons to the objectives of the GEAR UP program.

Barriers and Supports to Counseling Practice Within the Institutional Context

Uncovering the organizational context of the district, school and community in which the school counselor implements GEAR UP is only one facet of our findings. Indeed, it is necessary to uncover how the school counselor internalized these contextual influences, as they provide another perspective in determining how school counselors implement GEAR UP.

Leadership as a Barrier to GEAR UP Implementation

School counselors consistently perceived the lack of direction from both district and school leadership as a major barrier in conducting their work relative to both general counseling services and GEAR UP implementation. One counselor stated, "*What we're struggling with here is being a counselor vs. being everything else.*" While another counselor noted, "*The thing about it is, I don't think our administration knows what we should do, except that we should wear all the hats.*" That is, counselors believe that a lack of direct and appropriate leadership resulted in counselors assuming non-counseling duties. Assuming non-counseling duties, including disciplinarian, test administrator, and clerical staff duties, creates barriers to conducting daily counseling practice. For example, several counselors shared that acting as a "disciplinarian" created a wedge between student and counselor. In addition, one counselor viewed the assumption of secretarial work as a shift in the profession, stating,

> *From when I started in '72 as a counselor and then reentering it, the shift has been unbelievable away from therapeutic intervention and social development to more of an administrative [role]—so much of my—80 percent of my work could be handled by a technician doing registration—not a technician—a registrar.*

Therefore, it appears that counselors are rarely given the explicit or sole job of counseling.

The ambiguity around the counselor's role appeared to have a domino effect on counselors' implementation of GEAR UP, such that school counselors believed their in-school counseling duties took constant precedence over GEAR UP activities. As a result, most counselors viewed GEAR UP as an auxiliary part of their counseling practice, as it was often left to the site coordinator. As one counselor offered, non-counseling duties prevented her from seeing the "vision" of GEAR UP in her school.

School Structures Strain and Support in GEAR UP Implementation

School structures and schedules varied widely both in and among GEAR UP counties. However, the majority of counselors identified the rigidity of the school schedule as a barrier to consistent counseling practice, and ultimately identified it as a barrier in implementing GEAR UP. For example, counselors practicing within a block schedule noted that the schedule does not allow for counselors to meet students individually or in

"The thing about it is, I don't think our administration knows what we should do, except that we should wear all the hats."

groups. As one counselor described, "*The block schedule is one of my biggest frustrations as I have to try to get information to students at the beginning or end of class*." Counselors also found the traditional schedule to be a barrier in providing counseling services. Specifically, counselors believed that teachers are often unwilling to let students out of class to discuss guidance issues. One counselor speculated that the focus on school-wide achievement has prompted teacher rigidity regarding class release time, stating, "*It's hard, because the teachers don't like for you to get them out of class, especially required courses. Because the math is the big thing, they need to be in that math class because our ACT scores in math are below the national average*."

In contrast, several counselors shared that school schedules were supportive of their practice, as existing schedules created logical and open time periods for counseling activities to occur. For example, one counselor practicing within a freshman academy noted that common planning and activity periods for both teachers and students allowed her to easily plan and facilitate student meetings as well as parent conferences. Another high school counselor found that the activity period nested within the middle of the school day provided a logical block of time to access and follow up with students who needed counseling services. These collective findings suggest that the structure of school schedules can have a wide impact on a counselor's ability to implement counseling services and GEAR UP.

Time Takes a Toll on Counseling Practice
Throughout GEAR UP districts, counselors perceived a lack of time as a barrier to implementing an effective counseling practice. Counselors explained that time constraints prevented effective counseling from occurring both within counseling sessions and in creating consistent contact with students. For example, several counselors cited that they were in a "rotation" or asked to serve as "specials or auxiliary" guidance teachers, where they only saw students once or twice per month. Another counselor perceived the lack of time and facilitation of non-counseling duties to be a barrier to implementing college access interventions: "*As far as having time to sit down and say let's do some applications. We really don't have the time to do that [because] we do a lot of administrative things*."

Misalignment of Counseling Curricula
While counselors identified a number of resources that framed their counseling practice and subsequent college access interventions, they did not articulate how these curricula supplement the GEAR UP initiative. Commonly, counselors cited the Kuder Career Assessment, EXPLORE test, PLAN test, TCIDS Pathways career inventory, and American Careers Magazine as common tools which aided in providing career and college awareness. Few counselors from our sample reported using the GEAR UP sponsored, "collegefortn" resource as a tool to inform students about career and college awareness.

We found some sporadic evidence of counselors' use of resources to promote academic preparation. For example, some counselors from our sample reported using the EXPLORE test to inform the course registration process.

> *Only ones that tested high enough on the EXPLORE test in eighth grade were allowed to take Art, Visual Art, Theatre Arts, the first year of high school. They could go on and take Algebra II their first year; that way they could take Geometry, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus Trig. There were several classes that they allowed the ones that did test high enough.*

This statement describes a situation where a child who did not make a certain math score would not be allowed to select and engage in any elective of choice, even if that child did not want to take a math enrichment course. Consequently, we found that using data to inform registration and placement created a certain rigidity in course-taking options for students. It appears that individual student choice could be overridden by school policies and counselor discretion. Specifically, our transcripts revealed that school counselors held tight to these benchmarks as they often used student scores to make predictions on a student's high school academic path and post-secondary aspirations. Therefore, we often found evidence of counselors using resources to inform placement, rather than to contribute to college planning.

The Community's Perceptions of College: An Obstacle for School Counselors

With rare exception, school counselors across the districts identified communication relative to college-going with parents and students as difficult. To begin, most counselors described parents as "uninvolved" and "uninterested in school life." For example, school counselors found that parents did not come to after-school financial aid or college planning events even after multiple publicity attempts and the offering of free meals. School counselors attributed the lack of parental involvement as part of the larger community welfare state of mind. As one school counselor stated, "*I hate to say this but this is the way it is in this county, getting through school to draw a check…it's the focus of a lot of students because that is what their parents do.*" Another school counselor asserted, "*Parents will come to register students for high school because staying in school guarantees a check whereas dropping out does not…that's why they don't come to participate in financial aid or scholarship evenings…it doesn't matter to them.*"

Similarly, several counselors do not believe students are well prepared to go to college, as they found that students lack both academic ability and motivation. As one counselor shared, "*These students can't even pass Algebra II, how are they going to do in college math?*" Motivation as related to college access was shared as, "*Students just don't want to do the work to go to school and so they just drop out.*" Another counselor analyzed a lack of motivation as reluctance to attend college. "*In other schools, it's effective reluctance. I think*

they're just intimidated by the requirements of like UT Knoxville, MTSU, the bigger schools, you know, or even UT Martin, in our backyard, scares them from going."

While the majority of school counselors viewed the overarching community context as a barrier to their practices, they did cite a willingness to try new methods to motivate students and involve parents as a way to increase college-going behaviors. "*I keep searching for new ways to involve parents in school.*" Another offered, "*It is a goal of mine to make parents and students more aware ...educate them.*"

Discussion: Guiding Question 2
What Factors Affect School Counselors' Implementation of GEAR UP Initiatives?

The discussion begins with the way the school counselor role is articulated through the macro- and micro-policy contexts and how these contexts influence the articulation of the school counselor role within GEAR UP. Next, the discussion moves deeper, determining how the capacity and will of the school counselor sculpts the implementation of GEAR UP. Finally, the discussion concludes with how school counselors make sense of their role within GEAR UP. Specifically, we examine how policy signals, capacity, and will shape the school counselors' understandings of GEAR UP.

Distance Can be Damaging: The Program Structure Creates Role Ambiguity for the School Counselor

The program's organizational and macro-implementation structures shape the role of the school counselor and his/her understanding of GEAR UP. THEC does not formally address the role of school counselor in the grant narrative or related program documents. The school counselor is addressed only tangentially, often as a possible resource for the GEAR UP site coordinator.

Our findings support this counselor-absent conception of the program, as most of the school counselors could not identify their formal role in GEAR UP or define the organizational body that is THEC. Certainly, distance from the macro-implementation environment can create a void in clearly understanding the role of GEAR UP in everyday school counseling practice. The policy implementation literature informs us that distance from the program's leadership creates a context that is ripe for counselors' misunderstandings of and possible poor implementation of GEAR UP goals (Matland, 1995).

The School Environment Contributes to Counselors' Role Ambiguity

The micro-implementation of GEAR UP is influenced by district policies, district and school leadership, and the surrounding school community context. Like the macro-program context, the micro-program context is

typified by ambiguity, whereby school counselors do not know how to contribute to the implementation of GEAR UP. We note that discussions with district and school leadership revealed an obtuse understanding of the role of school counselors, as both district and site level leadership never articulated how a school counselor could have an effect on students within the GEAR UP program. Specifically, we note that, collectively, the leadership did not dominantly describe the role of the counselor as "counselor." The lack of role definition creates a certain ambiguity for the school counselor. Consequently, this ambiguity explains why counselors are unable to connect their daily practice to GEAR UP.

The lack of role definition creates a certain ambiguity for the school counselor.

Clearly, the lack of consistent role conception by school leadership is driven by an absence of district and school policies defining the role and practice of school counselors. The lack of these policies can foster misleading and ambiguous contexts, as Desimone and Porter (2002) explain that a lack of "policy specificity" often leads to unsuccessful implementation of an initiative.

The absence of specific school counselor district and school policies has a strong influence on the formal communication networks that comprise the micro-program context. In short, school counselors cited no sustained or formal counselor communication networks relative to GEAR UP. The absence of communication channels indicates that the micro-level program environment consistently signals to counselors that their role within GEAR UP is individual and often solitary. The implementation literature advises that strong communication networks, as well as a collective identity among implementing agents, is necessary for policies to be implemented and become sustainable over time (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Edwards, 1980; McLaughlin, 1998;).

Building Counselors' Capacity and Engaging Their Will

The role of the school counselors within GEAR UP is also influenced by their individual will and capacity. Specifically, we assert that while some elements of capacity are supportive, the overall capacity of the school counselor is thwarted by barriers that prevent full actualization within the GEAR UP program. Similarly, we maintain that while the will of the counselor is generally positive, institutional leadership and community cultures affect counselors' engagement with the program.

The Fallow Field: School Counselor Capacity is Represented by Thin, Non-Aligned and Often Constrained Curricula

The knowledge of, access to, and use of school counseling curricula represent barriers to capacity in implementing GEAR UP. To begin, it logically follows that the lack of direction by district and school leadership has led to the creation of ambiguous and non-aligned counseling curriculum. Without a supportive or authoritative leadership influence, counselors appear to languish in ambiguity, choosing curricular interventions that are not aligned to the goals of the school and/or district. The selection of similar and various

state-provided curricular resources (Kuder Career Assessment, TCIDS/ Pathways Career Assessment and American Careers Magazine) illustrates an array of interventions with little direction or alignment. Moreover, since many counselors failed to mention "collegefortn," it is quite clear that this GEAR UP-sponsored resource has made few inroads in college-access counseling practices.

Additionally, counselors did not have a deep understanding of the non-aligned activities they were employing. For example, one middle school counselor shared that she used the *American Careers* magazine with her eighth graders to "*discuss future careers*," but never related this activity to choosing courses for high school while completing the state-mandated, six-year academic plan. A lack of understanding concerning programmatic elements of chosen counseling activities was also evidenced by counselors' inability to articulate a curricular progression. Similarly, school counselors were not able to articulate how the activities aligned with student need (e.g. maturity, social context concerns, etc). Lack of programmatic knowledge thwarts the school counselor's ability to contribute to the organization and implementation of GEAR UP (Matland, 1995). It is important to note that the lack of counseling curriculum is not an unusual finding (Cole, 1991; McDonough, Ventresca, & Outcalt, 2000). Indeed, Tierney and Venegas (2004) confirm that historically, counselors have considered college curricula as "tangential" to their counseling practice, and as a result have little knowledge about selecting and teaching from common college access interventions.

Yet, the best practices derived from school counseling and college access literatures suggest that for meaningful personal, academic, and social growth to occur, systemic pathways must be present (Matland, 1995; Gysbers & Henderson, 1997;). For example, Carnevale and Desrochers (2003, as cited in McDonough, 2004) find that post-secondary awareness begins as early as pre-school, when students begin to aspire to different careers. Thus, if counseling curricular activities are to complement GEAR UP college-access interventions, they ought to be developmentally appropriate, meaningful, informative, and helpful to students.

The absence of counseling curriculum has created a barrier for the fruitful implementation of GEAR UP. GEAR UP is entering counties that are typified by non-aligned counseling resources and lack formal college counseling curricula. Thus, GEAR UP is trying to plant college access interventions into a field that has lain fallow for years. This barren curricular landscape explains the current state of the GEAR UP program, where college access interventions seem to fragmentally implant in schools, often independent of a specific championing actor or department. This assertion is best represented by the site coordinator who is often found acting as the visible representation of the GEAR UP program in the school. Again, the implementation literature informs us that having a program which is not integrated into organizational norms and structures will not allow for solid

Historically, counselors have considered college curricula as "tangential" to their counseling practice.

roots or programmatic stability to occur (McLaughlin, 1987; Matland, 1995; Spillane et al., 2002). If the interventions created by GEAR UP Tennessee are to survive the termination of grant funding, the soil must be tilled. The school counselor remains the agent who is most aligned to receive the interventions and begin the process of growing roots.

One of the barriers to creating strong programmatic capacity is the lack of professional development for GEAR UP school counselors. While school counselors did cite sporadic funding of professional development activities by both school and district officials, there was no evidence of a sustained school counselor professional development initiative. Most striking is that little evidence of college access training for school counselors exists. Yet, these findings are consistent with the counseling literature that shows that school counselors are traditionally not trained in creating college access interventions for students and while in practice, do not receive sustained professional development relative to college access (Hossler, 1999; McDonough, 2004; Tierney et al., 2005).

Little evidence of college access training for school counselors exists.

Structure, Load and Time as Barriers to Building Capacity

The absence of sustained and meaningful curriculum can be attributed to the daily barriers of school structure, time, and counseling load. These barriers continue to both derive from and influence the unfolding organizational context. GEAR UP school counselors consistently found that the rigid structure of the school day prevented them from accessing students in a consistent manner. School counselors also cited that the lack of access to students was made significantly worse when they determined the amount of time during the day they could actually devote to individual student meetings.

Adding to time constraints is the number of students each counselor was asked to serve. On average, counselors in GEAR UP counties have a student load of 315. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommends a 1:100 counseling ratio (ASCA, 2008). Clearly, GEAR UP counseling loads are well outside the recommended average, suggesting that school counselors acting within GEAR UP have little possibility of getting to know the individual post-secondary needs of all students. In terms of college access counseling, McDonough (2005) finds that "*when counselors work with insurmountable caseloads, they are simply not as effective in providing students with adequate and appropriate information*" (p. 210). Yet, we often note that, despite barriers of counseling load and time, GEAR UP counselors are identified by principals and district leaders as the actors who are ultimately responsible for providing financial aid and support during the college application process. Again, there appears to be a mismatch between the expectations of the leadership and the ability of school counselors to act within their perceived structural and time barriers.

Finally, school counselors note that the time barrier also transcends their ability to establish professional relationships with teachers and other counselors. With rare exception school counselors noted that they did not have

time to talk with teachers about a student's individual progress and/or discuss transition services with counselors within the district. This perceived time barrier ultimately affects a counselor's ability to fulfill the third goal of GEAR UP, which is to "*enhance the academic preparation of GEAR UP students to improve high school graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment, retention, and completion*." That is, counselors could be proactive in meeting the third GEAR UP goal if they had the ability to meet with teachers and devise intervention plans for at-risk students. The counseling literature confirms this idea, finding that the key to college access is rigorous academic preparation, which is not only typified by coursework but the coordination of all actors in the K-12 setting (Gandara, 2002; Perna, 2005, as cited in Tierney et al., 2005).

The Role of Community in Determining School Counselor Will and Capacity

Counselors believed generational poverty to be a pervasive element that was typified by wide community subscription to state-supported welfare. Counselors connected the atmosphere of poverty to a lack of motivation among students. Indeed, our transcripts were filled with counselor assertions that the majority of students stayed in school long enough "to keep a check" and then graduated only to aspire to "draw a check." Parents fit into this equation as harbingers of generational norms, as counselors frequently cast them as "absentee" or "uneducated" about the college-going process. Clearly, the collective voices of school counselors suggest a sense of hopelessness and lack of capacity to change this negatively perceived community context. We found that as counselors detailed these community biases, they ultimately made value judgments about who should go to college. We connected these judgments to our finding of counselor gate keeping. The literature defines gate keeping as a counselor's actions that prevent students from freely enrolling or applying to programs of interest (Cicerl & Kousel, 1976; Lee et al., 1984; Corwin, 2000 ; McDonough, 2004). Evidence of gate keeping in GEAR UP counties included, but was not limited to, school counselors placing high achieving students in advanced courses, and only individually meeting with "college-bound" students to discuss college search and application processes. In one example, counselors shared that they believed college entrance exams (e.g. the ACT) should only be open to interested and/or motivated students. Gate keeping actions appear to quickly transcend relationships with parents, as most counselors find parents unwilling to either attend or enter into conversations regarding college-going. While counselors still offer opportunities for parents to attend college-preparation related events they do not seem optimistic about parental participation or follow through. That is, it appears as though counselors insert invisible but impermeable post-secondary barriers when working with children who they deem are "unmotivated" or incapable of advanced study.

The poor community view that counselors consistently possess not only leads to gate keeping but also has a detrimental effect on their subscription to, and consequential role in, implementing GEAR UP. The will

of the counselor in the implementation of GEAR UP then creates tangible barriers in the implementation process. The counseling and college access literatures confirm that gate keeping can have a detrimental effect on both student and communal post-secondary aspirations. College-access literature finds that post-secondary enrollment patterns among at-risk and impoverished populations can be directly attributed to comprehensive and transparent college counseling (Flint, 1993; Cabera & Lamas 2000; Horn et al., 2003; as cited in Perna, 2006; Luna, 2006). Additionally, the literature (McDonough, 2004; Tierney & Venegas, 2004; Tierney & Auberach; 2005) finds that all parents must be counseled about the benefits of post-secondary education if students are to remain interested and persist in both the post-secondary application and enrollment processes.

In conclusion, the discussion of capacity and will from the perspectives of leadership, curriculum, and the surrounding community context depicts the school counselor as an often un-actualized actor in the implementation of GEAR UP.

Supports for Building School Counselor Capacity

Several school counselors across GEAR UP counties find that, despite the overwhelming barriers in their implementation of GEAR UP, there are some supports to capacity that merit discussion. These supports revolve around school structure, connection to the site coordinator, and post-secondary support networks. To begin, several counselors cited that strategic "break" periods throughout the day allowed for frequent dissemination of college access material and often, allowed for meetings with both students and staff. As an exemplary example, we found that counselors who were situated in a high school academy had the most flexibility and therefore easily perceived their ability to connect with students and staff. Next, several school counselors cited support relative to the GEAR UP site coordinator. Counselors found that the site coordinator was often available and assisted in either planning or facilitating college access interventions. Finally, the majority of counselors cited a robust relationship with college-access officials outside the school district (e.g. community college liaisons). These networks were perceived as supportive, as they helped counselors learn about college entrance requirements and in some cases, provided individual attention to students' application files. These supports mirror the literature's finding that a supportive organizational context comprised of supportive liaisons assists in creating a strong college-going culture (Tierney, et al., 2005; Hammarth & Allen, 2005; McDonough, 2005). Clearly, when combined, these supports define the counselor's situational context, predisposing them to adopt a strong will in the school context. Additionally, these supports are synonymous with facets of strong capacity (McLaughlin, 1987) and as such, position the counselor to be strong agent in GEAR UP implementation.

Points of Promise: Counselors' Desire for Change

Despite the perceived barriers of capacity relative to will, we note that the situational context for GEAR UP is not completely hopeless. Rather, our

findings offer several points of promise for school counselors in the GEAR UP program. We note that school counselors are quite enthusiastic to actualize themselves as counselors. That is, while they find their current role to have barriers, they anxiously await a time when they can assume the counseling duties which are congruent with their training. Moreover, we note that the majority of counselors seem anxious to receive specific school counselor professional development, including professional development relative to college access. Thus, it seems that while GEAR UP has not made any inroads into specific counselor training or counselor advocacy, the majority of our respondents appeared to welcome any assistance that offered a return to traditional counseling practice and the possibility for professional growth. Therefore, we argue that GEAR UP school counselors have a promising will in the implementation of GEAR UP. Targeted interventions to ameliorate both poor counselor beliefs and perceived barriers would make the counselor more amenable and ultimately more helpful in the implementation of GEAR UP.

Making Sense of GEAR UP Within the Context of Practice: Counselors' Understandings of GEAR UP

The context in which the GEAR UP counselors interact ultimately shapes their sense-making regarding their professional status and role within GEAR UP. We argue that it is imperative to understand the origin and depth of the sense-making in order to illuminate how to better integrate GEAR UP into school counseling practices. To begin, the lack of direction provided by both the macro- and micro-program contexts creates a discord in how school counselors understand program goals and the role of school and district personnel. The lack of concrete signals often manifests itself as fragmented or disjoined conceptions of school counselors' appropriate role within the school context and how the program's purpose and goals align with counseling practice. Specifically, when counselors are asked to implement GEAR UP on the school level, they often have no idea about how GEAR UP is conceived, structured, authored, or promoted from the macro- or state-governing level. Clearly, this absence of knowledge is due to the lack of consistent communication with the site coordinator, as well as a lack of training.

The lack of information provided to counselors from the macro-implementation level suggests that counselors are operating in the dark. Spillane et al. (2002) explains that when actors are asked to work with an implementation protocol whose signals are not directly received, they often try to make sense of the situation by accommodating new knowledge into existing knowledge. Therefore, school counselors try to make sense of GEAR UP implementation using the school lens, rather than the overarching goals of GEAR UP TN. The result is that school counselors have an incomplete view of the ultimate programmatic goals of GEAR UP. Over time, contextual factors at the school level overshadow how program designers at the macro-implementation level structure implementation (Palumbo, 1984; as cited in Matland, 1995). As a result, we believe that, unless the school counselors become connected to the greater program context in a meaningful way, they will continue to think about GEAR UP tangentially, as a program that is not

We note that school counselors are quite enthusiastic to actualize themselves as counselors.

connected to their daily counseling practice.

Yet, the sense-making of the school counselor within GEAR UP is not simply defined by the macro- and micro-program contexts. Indeed, we assert that the sense- making of the school counselor is historical in nature and can be traced back to early philosophical debates on the role of school counselor. That is, while the school counselor has been present on the educational landscape for over a century, the profession has only recently authored a comprehensive counseling model that vigorously supports the suspension of all non-counseling duties for the school counselor and implementation of rigorous, ongoing counseling-centered professional development (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997; ASCA, 2000; Lambie, 2004;). Therefore, it appears that GEAR UP school counselors have entered a profession whose norms are not completely historically transparent or direct. It is clear that the role ambiguity the school counselor experiences comes not just from the macro- and micro-contexts but also from the historical context of the school counseling profession. Spillane et al. (2002) finds that the historical context creates a presumptive lens on a counselors' own cognitive pattern. Lambie (2004) continues, noting the "*the layered complexity of the school counselor role has created confusion in professional identity and effectiveness*" (p. 36). That is, since school counselors have so many historical and current conflicting messages about what they should be doing as counselors, they are often pulled in a number of different directions. The inability of the school counselor to find a consistent guiding voice on the professional role of counselor both in daily practice and within GEAR UP is arguably distracting to GEAR UP implementation.

To be sure, it is important to note that school counselors' narrow understandings of GEAR UP are not intentional. Rather, we note the sense-making of school counselors is a product of the state, district, school, community, and professional contexts. Again, we believe our findings and subsequent analysis support the notion that school counselors in GEAR UP counties are ready and excited to receive positive support and direction in both their work as counselors and within the GEAR UP program. Therefore, we assert that THEC must work to not only make the GEAR UP program known to counselors, but to also make counselors understand how the implementation of GEAR UP can actually improve their counseling services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The purpose and goals of GEAR UP TN are noble and important. Target communities, districts, schools, families, and children stand to benefit from the initiatives put forth. Our data reveal that the community contexts in GEAR UP TN counties have suffered from decades of economic depression and geographic isolation. Our examination of the roles site coordinators and school counselors play in implementation reveals that hard-working, conscientious, and well-intentioned people fill these roles. To a person, these professionals desire to positively influence the children in their stead. However, motivation alone will not achieve desired outcomes. The capacity of all personnel involved in GEAR UP implementation must be enhanced through training focused on achieving the goals. Additionally, their role structures must support efforts to ensure successful implementation. To bolster program implementation and effectiveness, we have developed a series of recommendations aimed toward building the capacity and will required for full program implementation, sustainability, and systemic change. While the recommendations have been organized to target specific roles within GEAR UP, we believe these recommendations must be considered and implemented as a collective whole in order to affect measurable and sustainable change.

Program Recommendations

Target: GEAR UP Site Coordinators
1. Create and implement ongoing site coordinator trainings which (1) bolster their knowledge of GEAR UP principles and the factors mediating college access for low-income youth, and (2) strengthen their knowledge and skill in program implementation. These research-based trainings should include the following:

    -   Understanding the social context of rural communities

    -   Examining the factors that mediate academic achievement and educational attainment

    -   Identifying the effects of poverty on students' academic preparation and college choice

    -   Examining factors that shape local program implementation with specific attention to (a) collaborating with district and school leadership to obtain program support; (b) conducting a needs assessment to develop appropriate local goals and activities; (c) allocating resources effectively to achieve program goals; (d) facilitating a local dialogue around college access; and (e) collaborating with teachers and counselors to disseminate knowledge of the program and its impact on school practices and student achievement.

Trainings should be enduring, occurring frequently throughout the year so that coordinators might have more structured opportunities to learn and collaborate.

2. Revise the *GEAR UP Tennessee Site Coordinator Manual* to include role descriptions for site coordinators, THEC officials, district leaders, school leaders, and school counselors. In addition to role descriptions, structural connections should be visually displayed between each of the GEAR UP participating agents.

3. Assist site coordinators in developing relationships with district leaders, school principals, and school counselors to create a district community supportive of GEAR UP principles.

Target: District and School Leadership
1. Create and implement principal trainings relative to the mission and content of the GEAR UP program. Trainings should demonstrate how the GEAR UP program can be used to change school culture, structure, curriculum, and instruction. Design a training module that illustrates strong alignment between GEAR UP TN and NCLB in order to obtain stronger support from district and school leadership.

2. Engage district leaders in collaboratively and collectively planning GEAR UP interventions with site coordinators and THEC officials. Align the programmatic goals of GEAR UP with the district's improvement plan. Publicize the inclusion of the GEAR UP program to the district community.

3. Develop a *GEAR UP Leaders Guide* for all district and school leadership. Restate how the goals of GEAR UP can be used to increase academic achievement and graduation rates in GEAR UP counties.

Target: School Counselors
1. Develop and implement ongoing school counselor professional development institutes. Specifically, these professional development workshops should address identified counseling needs, including:

    -   Exploring the best practice roles for the school counselor in the college access and GEAR UP landscape.

    -   Developing an understanding and application of state-sponsored testing programs (e.g. EXPLORE, PLAN and ACT).

    -   Designing a school counselor curriculum that focuses on creating college- going behaviors for all students while simultaneously aligning to the programmatic goals of GEAR UP.

    -   Integrating the GEAR UP-sponsored, "collegefortn" program into newly created school counseling curricula.

- Developing an awareness of the positive role parents and community members can play in the creation of college-going behaviors among Tennessee youth.
- Creating college access interventions that develop communication networks with parents and the surrounding community.

2. Develop mechanisms that allow school counselors to positively document and ultimately assert their professional contributions in the school community.

3. Assist districts in determining how to create school counselor communication networks between grade levels and between schools, in order to foster camaraderie among counselors and allow for collaborative transition planning between grade levels and schools.

4. Develop a *GEAR UP TN School Counselor Training Guide* which outlines the goals, resources and personnel associated with the GEAR UP TN program. Additionally, the training guide should describe how school counselors can collaborate with the site coordinator to enhance their college access counseling practice.

Target: State Policy
1. Reduce the counseling load in GEAR UP counties to a 1:100 ratio.

2. Continue to create GEAR UP publicity models that educate all GEAR UP stakeholders to subscribe to the goals of GEAR UP Tennessee.

3. Create pathways to regularly disseminate data gleamed from federal evaluation instruments to all GEAR UP stakeholders.

4. Develop a sustainability model authored by a representative sample of all GEAR UP stakeholders. Specifically, this sustainability model should directly target the capacity of school leaders and school counselors.

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Appendix A: GEAR UP County Profiles

Appendix Table 1. *GEAR UP TN County Characteristics*

	2006 County Population[1]	2005 Median Family Income[2]	Percent of Population Below Poverty[2]	Percent of Population with at least a Bachelor's Degree[3]
Campbell	40,848	$33,500	33	8.2
Cocke	35,220	$41,900	20	5.7
Grundy	14,499	$36,000	23.9	7.5
Hardeman	28,176	$35,000	33.7	9.1
Johnson	18,043	$40,200	22.3	7.4
Lake	7,406	$40,200	18.3	6.0
Meigs	11,698	$36,000	23.9	7.4
Union	19,086	$48,430	15	7.0
Wayne	16,828	$37,500	21.6	9.2
Tennessee		$48,420	21	21.8

[1]Estimate according to U. S. Census
[2]Estimate according to Education Needs Index
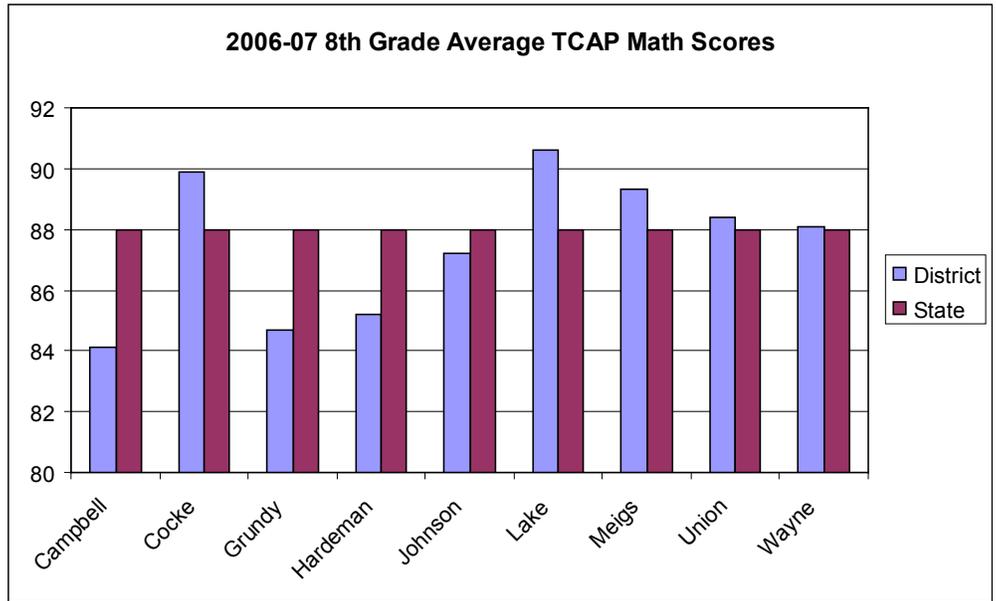[3]See Appendix B for method of calculation

Appendix Table 2. *GEAR UP TN District Information*

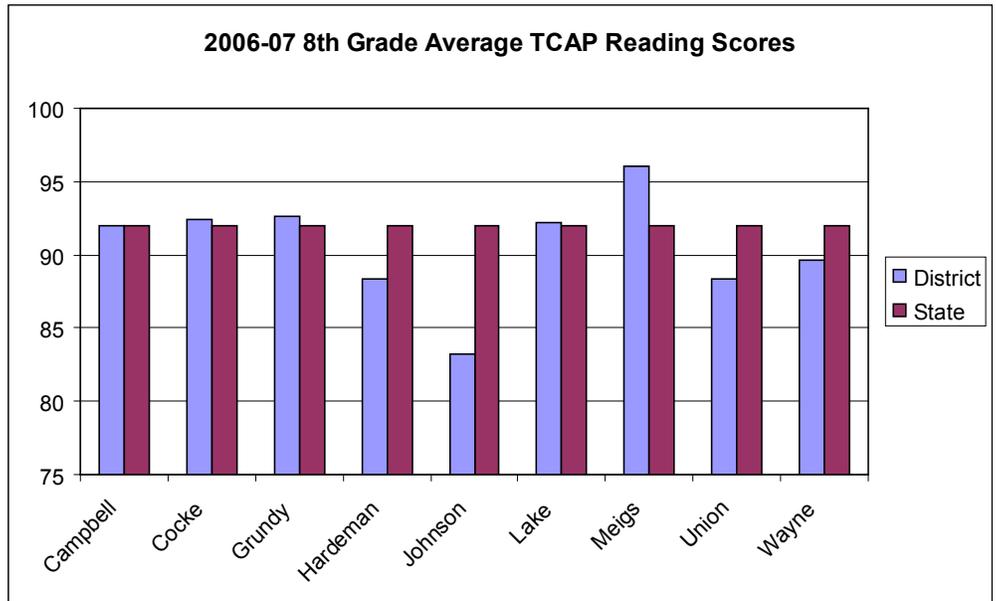|	2006-07 Enrollment	2007 Graduation Rate[4]	2007 ACT Composite[5]
Campbell	5,831	80.1	18.7
Cocke	4,672	84	19.7
Grundy	2,205	89.1	19.5
Hardeman	4,195	79.8	19
Johnson	2,228	87.9	19.5
Lake	883	81	18.3
Meigs	1,788	84.7	19.8
Union	3,014	81.3	18.9
Wayne	2,465	90.1	19.1
Tennessee		81.8	20.6

[4]Percent of on-time graduates with regular diploma
[5]Three-year average

Appendix Figure 1. *GEAR UP TN Math Achievement*

2006-07 8th Grade Average TCAP Math Scores

Legend: District, State

X-axis: Campbell, Cocke, Grundy, Hardeman, Johnson, Lake, Meigs, Union, Wayne

Y-axis: 80 to 92

Appendix Figure 2. *GEAR UP TN Reading Achievement*

2006-07 8th Grade Average TCAP Reading Scores

Legend: District, State

X-axis: Campbell, Cocke, Grundy, Hardeman, Johnson, Lake, Meigs, Union, Wayne

Y-axis: 75 to 100

Appendix Figure 3. *GEAR UP TN Social Studies Achievement*

2006-07 8th Grade Average TCAP Social Studies Scores
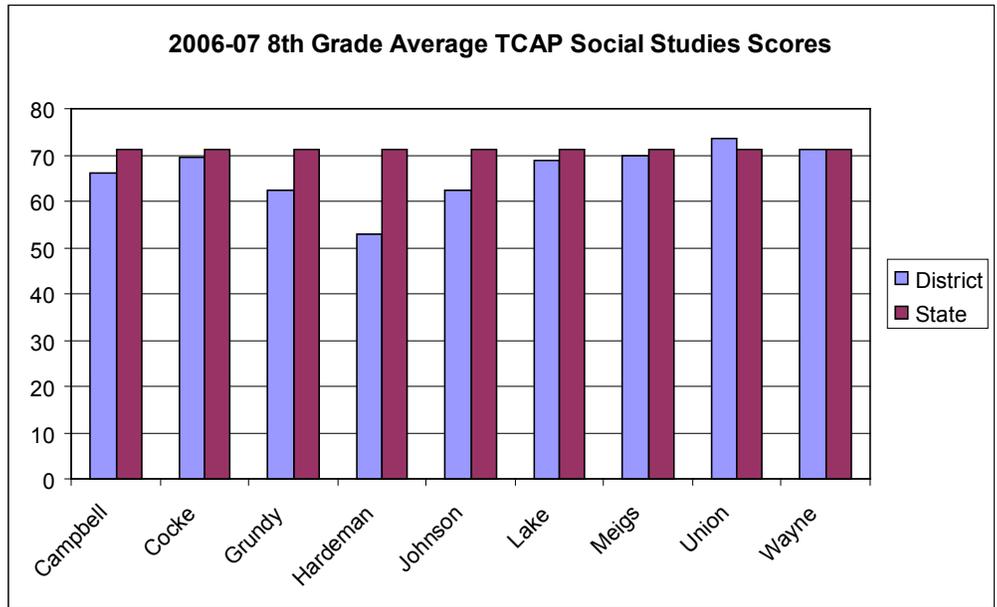
Appendix Figure 4. *GEAR UP TN Science Achievement*

2006-07 8th Grade Average TCAP Science Scores
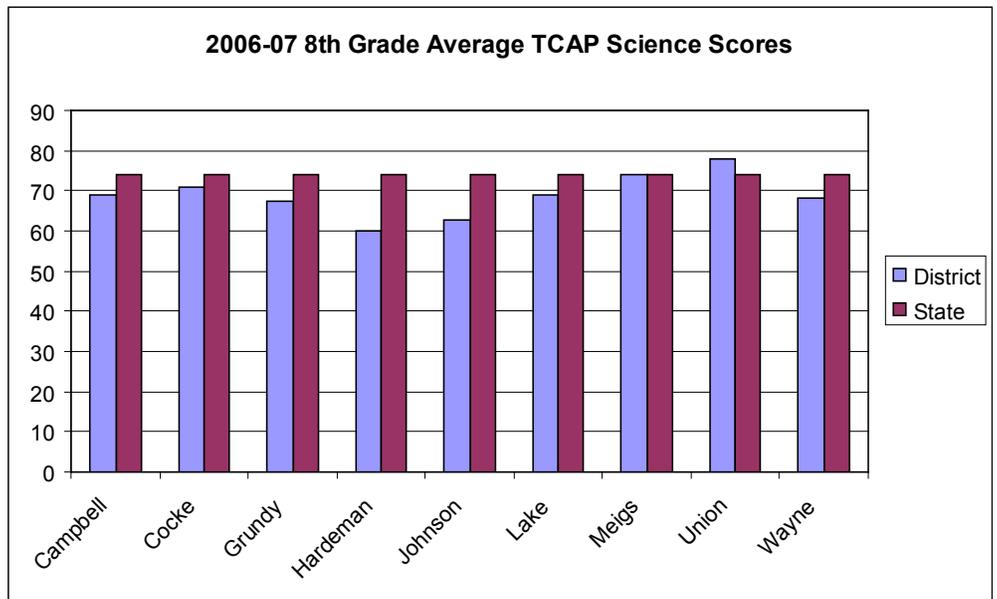
Appendix Figure 5. *GEAR UP TN ACT Average Scores*

2006-07 ACT Composite Averages
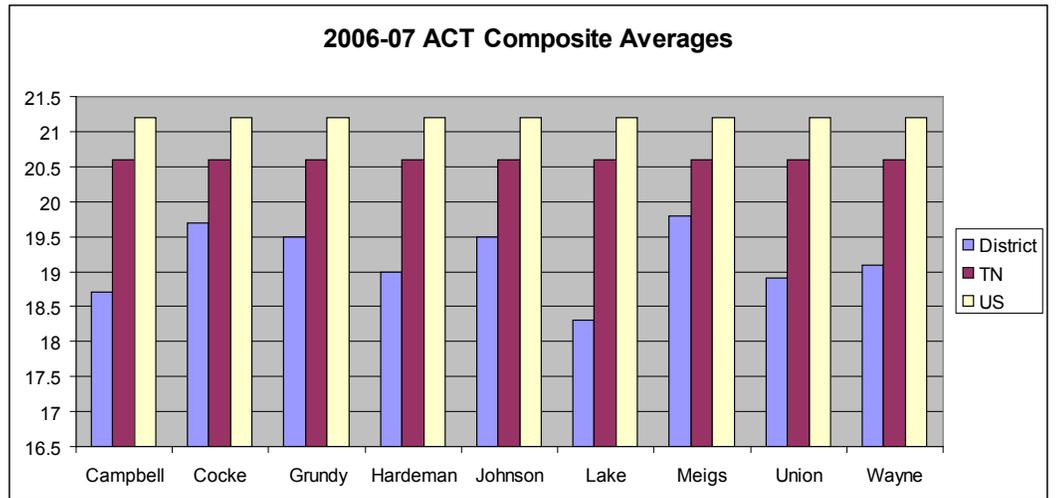
Note: District and State averages are three-year averages. The U.S. Average is a five-year average.

Appendix B: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol: District Coordinators

District Context: Post-secondary Access
First, I'd like to ask you some general questions about how the district is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education.

1. Could you describe how your district is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education?
2. Could you describe how students in this district are doing in accessing post-secondary education?
3. What do most students in this district do after graduating high school?
4. What is the district's top priority?

GEAR UP Program and Coordinator Role
5. Could you describe the GEAR UP program in the district?
   a. How is it structured?
   b. What activities are involved?
   c. Who else is involved in the district with GEAR UP TN? (e.g., director of school counseling, asst sup for C&I, etc.)
   d. What are the strengths and challenges?
6. What do you see as the purpose of GEAR UP TN in your district?
7. What goals do you have for the GEAR UP TN program in your district?
8. What do you do in your role as a GEAR UP Coordinator?
9. How did you become a GEAR UP Coordinator?
   a. What did you do prior to this position?
   b. Why did you become the coordinator?
10. I understand that some GEAR UP district coordinators have roles and responsibilities in addition to GEAR UP coordinator roles and responsibilities. Could you describe any additional roles and responsibilities you have in the district?
    a. How are these other roles and responsibilities similar to or different from your GU coordinator role? (Alignment?)
    b. (refer to stated roles and responsibilities)….how do you manage your time among these different tasks and responsibilities? What does this look like in your work?
11. Could you describe what you have found most helpful in your preparing to be a GEAR UP Coordinator?
    a. Have you received any training on being a GEAR UP coordinator?
    b. Was a job description provided to you? Have you found that the job description provided to you matches your day-to-day work?
       i. If no, how is it different?

12. What types of resources have been provided to the district for GEAR UP ?
13. How does the district decide how GEAR UP resources are used?
14. Who is involved in this decision-making process?
15. Do you feel the district has the resources it needs to successfully implement GEAR UP in your district?
    a. How well has the state provided you with resources to develop and implement GEAR UP initiatives?
16. What are your greatest challenges as a GEAR UP coordinator?
    a. Do you have any support to help you address these challenges? (using dichotomous question, rather than "where have you gone for support.." because we don't want to convey we think they should be the initiator of finding support)
17. What are the greatest challenges the district faces in ensuring post-secondary access? Implementing GEAR UP?
18. How is the district addressing these challenges?

Interactions with Schools: Content and Enactment of Coordinators' Work
19. Could you describe how you work with schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN programs?
    Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
20. What do you see as the role of the school counselor in the district's GEAR UP program?
    Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for school counselors to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
21. How do you work with school counselors in the district?
22. Could you describe an interaction you've had with a school counselor related to GEAR UP?
23. What do you see as the role of the school administrators in the district's GEAR UP program?
24. Could you describe an interaction you've had with a school administrator related to GEAR UP?

Interactions with THEC
25. Could you describe how you work with THEC to develop and implement GEAR UP?
26. Could you describe an interaction you've had with THEC focused on a GEAR UP activity?

Coherence

27. Now I'd like to talk to you about the messages you are receiving about what you should be doing as a GEAR UP coordinator. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from the district and THEC about what you should be doing as the GEAR UP coordinator in this district?
    a. Prompt if say very different: Could you describe the messages and how they are different?
    b. Prompt if say they are consistent: What is the main message?

28. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from the schools about what you should be doing as the GEAR UP coordinator in this district?

29. In what ways is your performance as a GEAR UP coordinator monitored and assessed by your district? By THEC?
    What feedback have you received from THEC about your performance as a GEAR UP coordinator?

30. Is the district doing anything in addition to GEAR UP that relates to college access and post-secondary education?

Initial Perceived Effects/Impacts

31. I know the district is on an early phase of GEAR UP implementation, but what effects, if any, on the district, schools, or students have you observed at this point in time?

Is there anything else about your district, schools, or GU program that we haven't talked about that you would like to share or discuss?

Interview Protocol: District Coordinators

Biographical
1. How long have you been a school counselor?
2. How many years have you worked in education?
3. How many years have you worked at _____ school?
4. Do you have any teaching experience?

District Context: Post-secondary Access
Now, I'd like to ask you some general questions about how the school is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education.

5. Could you describe how your school is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education?
6. Could you describe how students in this school are doing in accessing post-secondary education?
7. What do most students in this school do after graduating high school?
8. What is the school's top priority?
9. What is the district's top priority?

School Counselor Role and Practices Within the School Context:
Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about your counseling role and practices in your school.

10. What is your counseling load?
    a. (If applicable) How are the students divided among counselors (alphabetical, grade level, etc)?
11. How long have you known the students you are counseling?
12. How do you divide your time between personal counseling and college advising?
13. What resources do you use to inform or guide your counseling practice?
    a. How have you come to rely on these resources?
    b. Who provides these resources? Are they from a particular agency or organization?
14. How do you use state provided assessments (e.g. Kuder/EXPLORE/ PLAN) in your counseling practice?
15. Can you share how students plan for their academic classes in high school?
    a. Are parents involved in the academic planning process?
    b. How do you monitor students for academic success?
16. What resources, either print or online, do you use to help students learn about college entrance requirements, applications and/or financial aid requirements?
17. Can you describe how you publicize/promote post secondary opportunities for students?

School Counselor Role within the GEAR UP Program

18. Could you describe the GEAR UP program in the district?
    a. How is it structured?
    b. What activities are involved?
    c. Who else is involved in the district with GEAR UP TN? (e.g., director of school counseling, asst sup for C&I, etc.)
    d. How are you involved in the GEAR UP program?
    e. When did you become familiar with the GU program?
19. What do you see as the purpose of GEAR UP TN in your district?
20. What goals do you have for the GEAR UP TN program in your school?
21. Who is your main point of contact within the GEAR UP program? (GEAR UP coordinator, director of counseling, principal, state director of school counseling, THEC)

School Counselor Successes and Challenges Relative to GEAR UP

22. What successes have you experienced in terms of working with students on post-secondary education plans?
23. What successes have you experienced in the development and implementation of GEAR UP activities?
24. What challenges have you experienced in terms of working with students on post-secondary education plans?
    a. Can you describe the challenge?
    b. Do you have any support to help you address these challenges? (using dichotomous question, rather than "where have you gone for support.." because we don't want to convey we think they should be the initiator of finding support)
    c. Is this still a challenge you're experiencing, or has it been resolved? How has it been resolved?

Probes in Response to Challenges

Time and School Structure
If time is identified as a challenge then,

25. What is the structure of the school day?
    a. How does the school structure affect your counseling practice?
26. How often do you meet with students regarding post-secondary plans?
    a. Individually or in small groups?
27. How does time affect your counseling practice?
28. How has the implementation of GEAR UP changed the structure of the school, if at all?
    a. Can you share some examples?

Communication
If communication is identified as a challenge then,

29. How do teachers work with school counselors to ensure that all students are receiving information relative to post-secondary access?
    a. Can you provide some examples?
30. How do middle and high school counselors communicate?
    a. In what forum?
    b. About what?
    c. How frequently?
31. How frequently do you communicate with parents?
    a. In what forum?
    b. About what?

,**School Counselor Supports within GEAR UP**

32. How has the GEAR UP program affected your counseling practice?
    a. Resources?
    b. Staffing?
    c. Other?
33. Can you share any interaction you have had with the GEAR UP coordinator?
34. What do you see as the role of the school administrators in the district's GEAR UP program?
35. Could you describe an interaction you've had with a school administrator relative to GEAR UP?

Professional Development

36. How much time per year is devoted to school counselor professional development?
    a. Of that time, how much professional development is devoted to learning about college advising and financial aid processes?
37. Is your "counseling professional development" fully subsidized by the school and/or school department?
38. Are there any types of professional development that are consistently offered each year (e.g. TN Lottery Scholarship updates…UT system admission update conferences)?
39. Can you describe your most recent professional development experience?
    a. How, if at all, have you implemented what you learned into your counseling practice?

40. Have you participated in any specific school counseling GEAR UP training(s)?
    a. Where?
    b. When?
    c. Duration?
    d. Topics covered?
    e. Types of activities involved (large group lecture, counselor study groups, etc.)?
41. How, if at all, have you implemented what you learned into your counseling practice?

Coherence

42. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from your school and district about what you should be doing as a school counselor in this school and district?
    a. Prompt if say very different: Could you describe the messages and how they are different?
    b. Prompt if say they are consistent: What is the main message?

43. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from THEC about what you should be doing as a school counselor in this school and district?
    a. Prompt if say very different: Could you describe the messages and how they are different?
    b. Prompt if say they are consistent: What is the main message?

School Principal Interview Protocol

Biographical:
1. How long have you been principal at this school?
2. What did you do prior to this position?
3. How many years have you worked in this district?
4. Do you have any teaching experience?

District Context: Post-secondary access
5. *Now, I'd like to ask you some general questions about how the school is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education.*
    a. Could you describe how your school is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education? (be sure to get the "what" in terms of specific activities of the school).
    b. Could you describe how students in this school are doing in getting to college/post-secondary?
    c. What do most students in this school do after graduating high school?
    d. What is the school's top priority?
6. What is the district's top priority?

Role within GU:
7. Could you describe the GEAR UP program in this school?
    a. How is it structured?
    b. What activities are involved?
    c. Who else is involved in the district with GEAR UP TN? (e.g., director of school counseling, asst sup for C&I, etc.)
    d. What are the strengths and challenges?
8. How are you involved in the GEAR UP program?
9. What do you see as the purpose of GEAR UP TN in your school and district?
10. What goals do you have for the GEAR UP TN program in your school and district?
11. Have principals in the district received any training involving how to implement GEAR UP in the schools?
12. What types of resources have been provided to your school and district for GEAR UP?
13. How does the district decide how GEAR UP resources are used? How do you decide how resources are used at this school?
14. Who is involved in this decision-making process?
15. Do you feel your school has the resources it needs to successfully implement GEAR UP?
16. What are the greatest challenges your school faces in ensuring post-secondary access? Implementing GEAR UP?
17. How is the school or district addressing these challenges?

Interactions with Counselors and District Coordinator

18. Could you describe how the district works with schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN programs?
19. Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
    a. What do you see as the role of the GU coordinator in the district's GU program?
    b. What do you see as the role of the school counselor in the district's GEAR UP program?
20. Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for school counselors to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
    a. Could you describe an interaction you've had with the school counselors related to GEAR UP? (how often they meet? What do they discuss? What questions are posed?)
    b. How do you work with GU district coordinator in the district?
21. Could you describe an interaction you've had with the district coordinator related to GEAR UP?
22. What do you see as the role of the school administrators in the district's GEAR UP program?

Interactions with THEC

23. Do you interact with THEC around the GEAR UP program?
24. Could you describe how you work with THEC to develop and implement GEAR UP?
25. Could you describe an interaction you've had with THEC focused on a GEAR UP activity?

Coherence:

26. Now I'd like to talk to you about the messages you are receiving about what the school should be doing to implement GEAR UP. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from the district and the messages you are receiving within the state about how GEAR UP should be implemented?
    a. Prompt if say very different: Could you describe the messages and how they are different?
    b. Prompt if say they are consistent: What is the main message?
27. Is the district doing anything in addition to GEAR UP that relates to college access and post-secondary education?
28. Is the school doing anything in addition to GEAR UP that relates to college access and post-secondary education?

Initial Perceived Effects/Impacts

29. I know the district and your school is in an early phase of GEAR UP implementation, but what effects, if any, on the district, schools, or students have you observed at this point in time?

Is there anything else about your district, schools, or GU program that we haven't talked about that you would like to share or discuss?

Interview Protocol: District Leaders

Background:
1. What is your current position?
2. How did you come to be the X?
3. What do you do in your role as X?
4. What did you do prior to this position?

District Context: Post-secondary access
Now, I'd like to ask you some general questions about how the district is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education.

5. Could you describe how your district is doing in preparing students for post-secondary education?
6. Could you describe how students in this district are doing in accessing post-secondary education?
7. What do most students in this district do after graduating high school?
8. What is the district's top priority?

Role within GU:
9. Could you describe the GEAR UP program in the district?
   a. How is it structured?
   b. What activities are involved?
   c. Who else is involved in the district with GEAR UP TN? (e.g., director of school counseling, asst sup for C&I, etc.)
   d. What are the strengths and challenges?
10. How are you involved in the GEAR UP program?
   a. How are these other roles and responsibilities similar to or different from your GU coordinator role? (Alignment?)
   b. (refer to stated roles and responsibilities)....how do you manage your time among these different tasks and responsibilities? What does this look like in your work?
11. What do you see as the purpose of GEAR UP TN in your district?
12. What goals do you have for the GEAR UP TN program in your district?
13. Could you describe what you have found most helpful in your preparing to work GEAR UP program?
   a. Have you received any training involving GEAR UP?
14. What types of resources have been provided to the district for GEAR UP ?
15. How does the district decide how GEAR UP resources are used?
16. Who is involved in this decision-making process?
17. Do you feel the district has the resources you need to successfully implement GEAR UP in your district?
18. What are the greatest challenges the district faces in ensuring post-secondary access? Implementing GEAR UP?
19. How is the district addressing these challenges?

Interactions with Schools and District Coordinator

20. Could you describe how the district works with schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN programs?
    Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for schools to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
21. What do you see as the role of the GU coordinator in the district's GU program?
22. What do you see as the role of the school counselor in the district's GEAR UP program?
    Prompt 1: Are there any incentives for school counselors to develop and implement GEAR UP TN activities?
23. How do you work with GU district coordinator in the district?
24. Could you describe an interaction you've had with the district coordinator related to GEAR UP?
25. What do you see as the role of the school administrators in the district's GEAR UP program?
26. Could you describe an interaction you've had with a school administrator related to GEAR UP?

Interactions with THEC

27. Do you interact with THEC around the GEAR UP program?
28. Could you describe how you work with THEC to develop and implement GEAR UP?
29. Could you describe an interaction you've had with THEC focused on a GEAR UP activity?

Coherence:

30. Now I'd like to talk to you about the messages you are receiving about what you should be doing as a GEAR UP coordinator. How consistent are the messages you are receiving from the THEC and the messages you are receiving within the district about how GEAR UP should be implemented?
    a. Prompt if say very different: Could you describe the messages and how they are different?
    b. Prompt if say they are consistent: What is the main message?
31. Is the district doing anything in addition to GEAR UP that relates to college access and post-secondary education?
32. How does district monitor and assess the performance of the GEAR UP coordinator?

Initial Perceived Effects/Impacts

33. I know the district is on an early phase of GEAR UP implementation, but what effects, if any, on the district, schools, or students have you observed at this point in time?

Is there anything else about your district, schools, or GU program that we haven't talked about that you would like to share or discuss?

THEC Interview Protocol

I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today to discuss the GEAR UP TN program and your role. We've spoken before and you've shared with us very valuable and helpful information regarding the purpose and aims of GEAR UP TN, so today I'd like to really focus on the evolution of GEAR UP over the past couple of years since it has been implemented in districts. I'm particularly hoping to better understand the challenges and successes associated with the program and the state's and districts' capacity to achieve the GEAR UP objectives.

Role within GEAR UP
I'd like to begin with a few questions about your position here at THEC.

1. How did you become [name position]?
   a. What did you do prior to this position?
      i. Experience with federal programs?
      ii. Experience at the federal, state, or district level?
   b. Why did you want to apply to this position?
      i. Were you asked to apply or did you do so voluntarily?
2. What do you do in your role as [name position]?

Evolution of GEAR UP
3. Could you walk me through the major milestones in the life of GEAR UP TN, particularly how the program has evolved since last year – the 06-07 year?
   a. Budgetary issues?
   b. Personnel issues?
   c. Capacity issues at the state level?
   d. Capacity issues at the district level?
4. What are the assets at the state level on which GU can draw to reach its goals and objectives?
   a. Responses may refer to personnel and expertise in P-16 policy
   b. Responses may refer to structural configurations as assets (e.g., how budget lines are aligned, how state and districts are aligned structurally)
   c. Responses may refer to legislative will to increase college access
   d. Etc.
5. How do you access/utilize/draw on these assets?
   a. Can you please give me an example?

6. What are the barriers or constraints on the GEAR UP program and its implementation?
   a. Resources
   b. State or district capacity
   c. Legislative or policy interference
   d. Competing goals or policies – incoherence
   e. Authority
   f. Specificity of the program objectives, procedures
   g. Consistency of implementation, etc
   h. Communication among key players
7. How have you dealt with these barriers/constraints? How have you tried to reduce or overcome them?
   a. Can you please give me an example?
8. What are your goals for GU TN? What is your vision moving forward?

9. **Resources**

10. [We'll need to be flexible here if they mentioned resources above and if you probe at that point]

11. What resources does THEC provide to districts and schools through GEAR UP?
    a. Personnel?
    b. Monies?
    c. Expertise?
    d. Training?
    e. Other?
12. How do districts decide how to use GU resources?
13. How much latitude do districts have in utilizing resources?
    a. Can you please give me an example?
14. How do you work with districts to ensure resources are being used to their best possible end?
    a. Can you please give me an example?
    b. Are there challenges associated with this? Example?
15. Do you feel the districts have what they need in order to successfully implement GEAR UP?

Interactions with Schools and Districts
16. Could you describe how you work with districts to develop and implement GEAR UP TN programs?
17. What do you see as the role of the GEAR UP district coordinator?
18. How do you work with the district coordinators?
19. In what ways are the performances of coordinators and school counselors monitored and assessed?
20. Do you provide a job description to GEAR UP coordinators?
21. Are there any GEAR UP district coordinators who have roles and responsibilities in addition GEAR UP coordinator roles and responsibilities?

22. There appears to have been some GEAR UP coordinators whose positions in the past included other roles and responsibilities in the district but now are funded completely by GEAR UP.
    a. What prompted this change? In other words, why?
    b. What was THEC's involvement (if any) in bringing about this change?
23. What do you see as the role of the regional coordinator in the GEAR UP program?
24. How do you work with the regional coordinators?
    a. Can you give me an example?
25. What do you see as the role of the school counselor in the district's GEAR UP program?
26. What do you see as the role of the school administrators in the district's GEAR UP program?

Professional Development

27. What professional development opportunities or trainings related to GEAR UP are available for GEAR UP coordinators? School counselors? School administrators?
    a. Where?
    b. When?
    c. Duration?
    d. Topics covered?
    e. Types of activities (large group lecture, counselor study groups, etc.)?
28. What do you perceive as the greatest professional development needs of GEAR UP coordinators? School counselors? School administrators?

Conclusion

29. I know that THEC is in an early phase of GEAR UP implementation, but what effects, if any, on the district, schools, or students have you observed at this point in time?
30. How is THEC thinking about sustainability of the interventions GU has implemented?
31. What's next for GU TN (i.e., plans for the future)?

Is there anything else about your district, schools, or GU program that we haven't talked about that you would like to share or discuss?