Now more than ever, a college education is the passport to opportunity and success. Yet, for too many students, a college degree remains out of reach. Experts know that students are more likely to earn a degree or career-oriented credential if they set educational and career goals early, are motivated and supported by their families and schools, and are academically prepared for the tough courses they’ll face in college. To help schools and families meet this challenge, two national initiatives exist that are worth learning about: GEAR UP and its accompanying College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium. Students in Minnesota are already benefitting from GEAR UP through its Get Ready Program, and our state will soon be assisting the consortium with research that will make GEAR UP even better.

Read on to learn more about these two important initiatives.

What is GEAR UP?
The Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs initiative—better known as GEAR UP—is funded by the federal government to prepare more students for college. Each year, states and communities apply to the U.S. Department of Education for a share of these funds so that they can address local needs and design innovative programs that ultimately increase the number of students enrolling in college and earning a degree.

What makes GEAR UP unique is that it starts early. Our Get Ready/GEAR UP program targets low income and under-represented students in grade five through high school and supports them through high school graduation by providing a blend of academic, motivational, and social programs tailored to the specific needs of local communities. Since these resources are above and beyond what states and schools are already doing, it means extra resources for mentoring and tutoring programs, additional training for educators, taking students on college visits, helping families plan for financial aid, and other essential activities. Taken together, we expect that GEAR UP programs, such as Get Ready, will strengthen our schools, help families plan for college, and ensure that our students are motivated and prepared for life beyond high school.

What is the GEAR UP College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium?
The GEAR UP College and Career Readiness Evaluation Consortium is an effort led by 15 states that receive GEAR UP funds (including Minnesota) to learn about the impact that GEAR UP is having on schools, families, and students. These states recognize that, despite all of the great work that GEAR
UP is supporting across the country, there is still a lot more we can learn about how best to prepare students for college. So the states volunteered to work together over a period of seven years to conduct high-level research and also recruited two national education organizations to support the effort: the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships and ACT, Inc.

What is the consortium trying to learn and how will those lessons be used?
Helping students become ready for college is hard work. The consortium is focused on using scientific methods to investigate the extent to which GEAR UP is better preparing students for college compared to similar students who are not receiving GEAR UP services. In addition, the consortium will be seeking a better understanding of which activities or combinations of activities appear to have a greater positive impact on students. For example, the consortium may ask: are GEAR UP students enrolling in college at higher rates than similar non–GEAR UP students? Or, which GEAR UP activities appear to help improve students’ test scores better than others?

When isolated to a small number of students, these are tough questions to answer. However, since 15 states are working together, we will be able to look at a group of over 120,000 students as they progress from the middle grades through the first year of college.

To be able to answer these questions, each state in the consortium has agreed to a common method for documenting student participation in GEAR UP. In addition, over a seven-year period, each state will be administering three exams to students: one each in grades 8 (EXPLOR) and 10 (PLAN), and then the ACT (the national college entrance exam) in grade 11 or 12. These assessments of students’ academic skills will give the consortium a measuring stick for how much GEAR UP activities are contributing to student academic growth in English, reading, mathematics, and science. In addition, the exams will enable students and their families to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and get extra help from their school.

The lessons we learn from this process will be used for several purposes. We can help educators make smarter investments with their dollars, time, and effort by shining a light on practices that the research says will make the most difference. We can also help district, state, and federal leaders make better decisions and policies to help communities everywhere strengthen students’ pathway to college.

Won’t this add additional expenses for families or our schools? No. All of the costs associated with the research work—including the three exams—will be provided by GEAR UP or the state at no cost to the school or families. And while the cooperation of the schools is necessary, the consortium has taken great lengths to make sure that this effort doesn’t require a great deal of time for school leaders.

How will the consortium protect the privacy of our students?
Of course, student privacy is a top priority for the consortium. The consortium has developed processes to protect personal information, so that while we can look for patterns at the state and national levels, no specific data can be attributed to any individual student. We will also never share personal, confidential, or identifiable information about any student. If we find schools that are doing an amazing job, we may ask permission to highlight that school in public reports, but we
will always adhere to the highest school and student privacy standards. In addition, any and all databases will adhere to industry data security standards and protocols.

**Who can I contact if I have additional questions?**
If you’d like to learn more about our GEAR UP work in Minnesota, or about the consortium, please don't hesitate to contact: Mary Lou Dresbach, Get Ready/GEAR UP State Director--Minnesota Office of Higher Education, (651)259-3940 or Marylou.dresbacbh@state.mn.us.