Montana GEAR UP is pleased to welcome Pacific Research Associates (PRA) as the new evaluator for the 2011 grant. Based in Portland, Oregon, PRA was one of 14 entities that responded to Montana GEAR UP’s request for proposals to be the external evaluator of the program. The three entities with the highest proposal scores were then interviewed via telephone by a proposal review committee. Based on a combined score from the proposal review and subsequent interview, the proposal review committee selected Pacific Research Associates.

PRA believes that the best evaluations are based on close collaboration between evaluation staff and project staff and that the purpose of educational evaluation is improved services to students. Two senior research associates, David Leitner, Ph.D., and James Kushman, Ph.D., will work on the evaluation, with David Leitner taking the lead role. Both staff members have over 25 years of program evaluation and school improvement experience, and both have worked extensively in the rural West, including Montana. PRA has worked on GEAR UP evaluation for 12 years and has developed GEAR UP databases for two Western states over the last six years.

PRA has hit the ground running since the beginning of their contract March 1. Preliminary tasks include reviewing and revising the Montana GEAR UP Evaluation Plan, which will culminate in an evaluation planning meeting with Montana GEAR UP staff at the end of May. Any revisions to the evaluation plan will then be shared with all GEAR UP schools. Additionally, PRA will design and develop a new online data collection system, fondly known as GEARS, for Montana GEAR UP that it is consistent with the evaluation plan and Annual Performance Report requirements. Please help us extend a warm welcome to our new partner.
Montana GEAR UP Seeks New Director

With the retirement of Sandy Merdinger in December, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) is seeking a dedicated leader for the Montana GEAR UP Program Director position. The GEAR UP Program Director is responsible for administration of a seven-year, $28 million grant, including supervision of all affiliated personnel and sub-contracts. The full vacancy announcement can be found at mus.edu/hr/GEARUP-ProgramDirectorVA2012.pdf.

GEAR UP Spotlight: Exciting Activities Taking Place at Troy Jr. High

By Sarah Davis, GEAR UP Liaison

The 7th grade students from Troy Junior High School visited the campus of North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, on Tuesday, March 20th. Students listened to a presentation by an admissions counselor and received a tour of the campus from a current student. Many questions were asked, and the admissions counselor said the students had the most questions of any group in the past three years!

Back at school the next day, 7th grade teachers reported that students were talking excitedly about the trip and about going to college. For over 50 percent of the students, this was their first time on a college campus, and the students are already asking when the next trip will be taking place. Before going to the college, students completed a research activity on the college website and came up with questions. After the visit, students completed a survey on their experience.

On Tuesday, March 27th, speaker Mac Bledsoe spoke to the students in Troy and did a community presentation for parents in the evening. The focus of his presentation was how the ideas in your head will rule your world. He also lauded the GEAR UP program, as he has worked with GEAR UP schools in Maine and Washington. The students enjoyed the talk and gave Mr. Bledsoe a thunderous round of applause at the conclusion of his speech.

Upcoming events for the 7th grade students include a field trip to Kalispell in May. The girls will be attending the Expanding Your Horizons conference at Flathead Valley Community College, and the boys will be visiting Hockaday Art Museum for a tour about artists in Montana as well as a STEM activity at Lone Pine State Park. Students have been benefiting from after-school tutoring, a daily advisory period, and presentations on the Montana Career Information System (MCIS), financial aid, and career awareness.

Finally, the current 6th and 7th grade students listened to a presentation on the local and state summer programs and they are very excited for these opportunities. Our local summer programs will include a creative writing program and an environmental studies day camp. A parent information meeting will be held after spring break and we are anticipating that many students will hand in applications for both state and local programs!

New Tool Designed to Increase FAFSA Completion

As the cost of college continues to increase, financial aid becomes ever more important to students seeking higher education. While many factors are involved in the decision to attend college, there is a strong correlation between completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and college enrollment.

High school counselors and administrators across the country have historically relied on self-reported surveys to estimate the FAFSA completion rate for students. Federal Student Aid is now providing high schools with current data about their FAFSA submissions and completions so they can track progress and help to ensure that students complete a FAFSA. A completed FAFSA allows for determination of a potential student's eligibility for federal student aid – a key factor in families’ college decisions.

The U.S. Department of Education has released a new tool that will help high school counselors and school leaders by giving them a resource to monitor FAFSA completions and better help students access higher education. School officials can now track FAFSA submission and completion statistics at individual high schools on the FAFSA Completion website at federalstudentaid.ed.gov/datacenter/fafsahs.html.

Through the FAFSA Completion Tool, which will be updated every two weeks, educators will have reliable data to track FAFSA submission and gauge their progress in increasing FAFSA completion. School officials can determine their school-wide FAFSA completion rate by comparing the number provided by the FAFSA Completion Tool with the number of seniors in their high school.

“Receiving the Achievement Grant encourages me to really ‘work’ for it more, to make my expectations higher, to push myself to get better. The Achievement Grant made me excited for college.”

Jestina Goodvoice, Rocky Boy High School 11th grader
GEAR UP Spotlight: Box Elder Students GEAR UP for College

By Shari Ruff, Gear Up Liaison

February 2nd Box Elder High School welcomed high school seniors, their parents, and financial aid representatives from Stone Child College. During a morning session and evening session, most high school seniors completed the online FAFSA as well as college applications and the first step towards receiving a higher education. As always, our appreciation goes out to Tiffany Galbavy and Shane Sangrey for their invaluable assistance and guidance.

Box Elder Seniors are applying for college and various local and national scholarships. If parents or students need any information or assistance, call Shari Ruff at Box Elder High School, 352-4195, or email ruffshari@yahoo.com.

At Box Elder School, GEAR UP supports the Science Research Program directed by science teacher Mrs. Melanie Schwarzbach. Student scientists work on their projects during semester one and begin competitions at science fairs during semester two. The Science Research Program incorporates not only science, but also public speaking, graphic design, technology, math, and cultural factors. Our students have earned many top honors and scholarships over the past school years.

Through GEAR UP, 10 Box Elder seniors are eligible to apply for the competitive and highly lucrative Pathways Scholarship. This scholarship is valued at approximately $22,000 over 5 years of college. Shari Ruff has discussed the process with the students and two of the ten seniors have completed the application, which was due March 5, 2012. The scholarship requires the students to complete a project. Projects can be science, art, community service, technology, music… the possibilities are unlimited.

GEAR UP at Box Elder Schools continues to encourage all students to be planning for postsecondary opportunities. We begin educating students in the 7th grade and continue to plan and prepare until they graduate from high school.

College Students and Credit Cards

By Cory Chenoweth, Financial Aid Manager

A recent USA Today article states the average student graduates college with over $4,000 in credit card debt. In fact, many students graduate college with more credit card debt than student loan debt, which is unfortunate considering the interest rate on a credit card for a college student can be upwards of 20 percent.

As we all know, one of the main reasons students cite for not completing a college degree is finances. This is especially true for many students from GEAR UP schools. When traveling across the state talking to our GEAR UP students, it’s always evident to me that GEAR UP Liaisons, school counselors, and other staff and mentors do a great job of teaching students about grants, scholarships, fee waivers, work study, and loans. From an early age many students know that gift aid is better than taking out a loan, and that subsidized loans are better than unsubsidized.

Once a student sets foot on a college campus, there are many resources available to help them navigate the financial aid process. It could be a financial aid officer, a member of the Student Assistance Foundation outreach team, or even an advisor or professor. All of these people are great resources that have the students’ best interests in mind. There are, however, some predatory entities who are taking advantage of naïve, new adults who are for the first time away from home.

I remember when I was in college, different credit card companies had booths all over campus offering free t-shirts, hats, a chance for a trip to Vegas, and all sorts of cool “free” things to entice college students to sign up. Thanks to the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act (CARD Act) of 2009, credit card companies are no longer allowed to set up shop on college campuses. This, however, does not mean they still aren’t targeting college students; they are just being more creative about it. They are setting up in malls, sending emails, and finding students on social media websites like Facebook.

Credit cards can be useful in the case of an emergency. However, I remember when I was in college my definition of an emergency was paying for a spring break trip or having the latest cell phone. Unfortunately, this type of thinking is why credit card companies are targeting and preying on these students.

There are many great financial literacy resources available online or through a nearby credit union to help students understand the dangers of credit cards, and how credit card companies are tricking them in to signing up. I know many schools do a great job of addressing financial literacy issues with their students before graduating. If your school would like more information on financial literacy, please contact me at cchenoweth@montana.edu.
Montana GEAR UP Reminders & Upcoming Events

April 12-15: Montana Indian Education Association (MIEA) Conference, Bozeman. For more information or to register for the conference visit mtiea.org.

April 13: Statewide Summer Camp Applications due to GEAR UP Liaisons.

April 15: Annual Performance Report (APR) due to the U.S. Department of Education.

April 16: Statewide Summer Camp Applications due to Montana GEAR UP office.

April 19-20: Montana School Counselor Association (MSCA) Spring Conference, Bozeman. For more information or to register for the conference visit mtschoolcounselor.org.

April 24: Statewide ACT test date for pilot schools.

April 30-May 1: Montana GEAR UP Implementation Plan Workshop, Carroll College in Helena. GEAR UP teams are required to attend.

May 7: Notification of Statewide Summer Camp placements.

May 8: ACT test makeup date for students who missed the April 24th date.

May 25: Deadline for students to return health forms to campus host for Statewide Summer Camps.

June 8: 2011-12 final program reports due.

June 15: GEAR UP data entry deadline.

June 10-13: MSU - Northern “Quantum Learning and a Lot of Fun!” Summer Camp for GEAR UP students entering 7th and 8th grade in the fall.

June 17-22: UM “Digging for the Past and Thinking for the Future” Summer Camp for GEAR UP students entering 7th and 8th grade in the fall.

June 24-30: DCC “GEARing UP for College” Summer Camp for GEAR UP students entering 7th and 8th grade in the fall.

July 15-21: Montana Western “CSI: Birch Creek” Summer Camp for GEAR UP students entering 7th and 8th grade in the fall.

July 15-21: Carroll College “Preserving the Planet” Summer Camp for GEAR UP students entering 7th and 8th grade in the fall.

GEAR UP Spotlight: Hardin Middle School Students Travel to YNP

BY YVONNE DEMARS, GEAR UP LIAISON

Hardin Middle School students enrolled in Mike Flamm's Yellowstone Exploration class traveled to Yellowstone Park in February. Students and chaperones spent three nights at the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) facilities roughing it. Lecturers for this great opportunity were National Park Service Rangers stationed in Yellowstone Park. The students learned about the winter eco-system, volcanic activity in Yellowstone, and cultural aspects as related to early Native Americans who used the area. Students also studied critical issues related to survival in the fragile ecosystem and the volcanic area.

Students were impressed with the wonderland of Yellowstone Park in the winter: steaming hot pots, colorful paint pots, and animals covered in winter fur.

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Our mission: Montana GEAR UP believes that postsecondary education is possible for all Montana students, regardless of economic background. Montana GEAR UP supports schools, students, and their families to increase students' college and career readiness through academic preparedness, postsecondary planning, and financial aid knowledge so that they may succeed in their education beyond high school.