$33M USU grant seeks to prepare middle schoolers for college

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LOGAN — Professors at Utah State University hope to follow about 3,000 middle schoolers over the next seven years to give them the best chance possible at succeeding in college.

It's a lengthy project funded by a new $32 million grant from federal, state, local and commercial vendors. But by the end of the USU STARS! GEAR UP program, educators hope academic performance, high school graduation rates and desires to enroll in college will improve for many of Utah's low-income students.

"The facts are pretty clear. When we look at dropout rates, low-income students are more likely to drop out of high school. So they're not even ready for college," said USU professor James Dorward, one of the directors for the GEAR UP program.

"Students have these dreams. We want to match up these opportunities with those dreams and aspirations so we can help them realize their goals."

In more than 300 schools across the state, at least half of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, Dorward said. The GEAR UP program will involve 11 of them, including schools in several rural districts in northern Utah, as well as the Davis, Granite and Logan school districts. Two charter schools will also participate.

Students in those schools will be given resources to take more rigorous courses. Currently, only 15 percent of students in such schools take advanced coursework, such as advanced placement and concurrent enrollment courses. The program also seeks to educate students about what to expect in college — why a college education is important and what financial helps are available.

"Getting them on a college campus early does a lot of things to help break down some of those misnomers about the university campus. So we make sure that they get a behind-the-scenes tour of the campus," said USU professor Eric Packenham, one of the leaders of GEAR UP. "It really just opens up their opportunities (so they'll) say: 'I can do this.'"

The program will follow the students all the way through their first year of college to ensure they are able to transition as smoothly as possible, Dorward said.

While the initiative focuses on improving outcomes for students, it also seeks to implement cultural changes in families where kids don't plan to attend college or think it's out of their reach, Dorward said. He hopes parents will also benefit from the program.

"They just don't know about what the opportunities are for their children. So consequently, these children grow up without those kinds of experiences and college just isn't in their list of options for when they get out of high school," he said. "The GEAR UP program is looking at early awareness and readiness for college."
Leaders of the GEAR UP program said while other initiatives in Utah provide financial support for prospective college students, the GEAR UP program aims to ensure students are academically prepared for the rigors of higher education.

"We provide a different type of programing in the final years. We'll provide a lot of academic supports for students in their first year of college, rather than provide direct financial assistance. But we do provide a lot of supports in where to find those resources to support their first year in college," Dorward said.

Packenham said the effort is galvanized by Utah's goal of having 66 percent of working adults with a college education. Ultimately, if students are better prepared for college, they'll likely have better access to financial assistance and more success after graduation, he said.

"We envision that our students will be so attractive that they will receive those scholarships, they will be those top students that will tap into those opportunities," he said. "We're growing our own talent pool, and anytime we can do that, the state is going to be more successful; the nation is going to be more successful."

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