

'Stepping Up' to College Success in Hawai'i

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Step Up Scholars was a statewide campaign and program that encouraged Hawai'i public school students in the Classes of 2013, 2014, and 2015 to earn the Board of Education Recognition Diploma (BOERD), which was designed to better prepare high school students for college and careers. Spearheaded by GEAR UP Hawai'i, a federal program with the goal of increasing low-income middle and high school students' awareness of, preparedness for, and enrollment in postsecondary education, **Step Up sought to boost the number of students who took rigorous coursework, graduated with the BOERD, and as a result, successfully enrolled in and completed a postsecondary education program.**

Researchers at Education Northwest evaluated Step Up's effects on the rates of high school graduation and earning the BOERD for program participants (known as Step Up Scholars), as well as their college enrollment and persistence (defined as when a student is enrolled in the fall term of the first year and then enrolled in fall term of the second year). Researchers then compared those rates with those of a matched comparison group. They also examined Step Up's impact on students earning credit in rigorous high school coursework, and they interviewed principals and counselors at four high schools to hear their perspectives on the program.





Spreading the Word

From fall 2008 through spring 2011, GEAR UP program staff members communicated the value of the more-rigorous high school diploma and a college degree through mailings, newspaper and magazine articles, announcements and commercials on radio and television, and outreach at community events. School administrators and counselors said an enormous amount of time and energy went into getting students to pledge to be Step Up Scholars and learn about the BOERD.

“ *There was a push in ninth grade. The district got behind it. The counselors did presentations and passed out a pledge form. Initially, with the push to pledge, kids were made aware of what they needed to do to go for the BOERD. Our students also developed a commercial. It was aired on TV all over the state.*

– HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Making Pledges and Hearing Positive Messages

The public awareness campaign was very successful—about a third of students in the Classes of 2013, 2014, and 2015 pledged to be Step Up Scholars. After the campaign, they received a significant amount of information and resources about how to meet the requirements of the BOERD, apply for college and financial aid, and develop the skills needed to be college and career ready. The idea was that more-informed and better-prepared students were more likely to take the required coursework for the BOERD and apply for financial aid and college.

Almost all counselors and administrators mentioned two reasons Step Up was a promising program: It was an additional source of information for students about college preparation, and it emphasized positive messages about postsecondary readiness and success, which are important for students to hear as much as possible, from as many sources as possible.

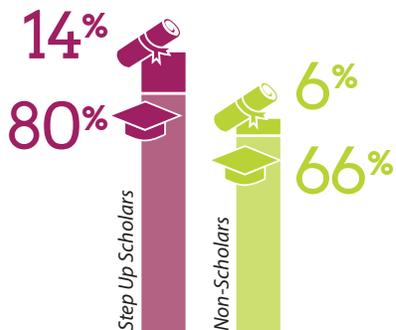
“ *How Step Up has impacted me is that when Step Up mails things to students, they come to me to talk about it, and I can get students to do things I have been telling them over and over to do, but they never do. It is helpful for them to hear it from an outside source. It is better that they get the information right at home.*

– HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR

Seeing Results

Using K–12 and postsecondary data from the Hawai'i State Department of Education and the University of Hawai'i (UH), researchers analyzed the program's impact on Step Up Scholars compared with a matched comparison group. The outcomes reported below are based on a comparison of Step Up Scholars and non-Scholars who were similar in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, assessment scores, and English language learner and special education status.

Step Up Scholars had better educational outcomes than their non-Scholar peers:



 80 percent of Step Up Scholars earned a **regular diploma** compared with 66 percent of non-Scholar peers

 14 percent of Step Up Scholars earned a **BOERD** compared with 6 percent of non-Scholar peers



33% of Step Up Scholars **enrolled at a four-year college**

34% of Step Up Scholars **enrolled at a two-year college**



16% of non-Scholars **enrolled at a four-year college**

21% of non-Scholars **enrolled at a two-year college**



64 percent of Step Up Scholars at two-year colleges **persisted to the second year** compared with 59 percent of non-Scholar peers



85 percent of Step Up Scholars at four-year colleges **persisted to the second year** compared with 80 percent of non-Scholar peers

These results are similar for low-income Scholars.

The analysis also indicated Step Up Scholars took more advanced math and Advanced Placement classes than non-Scholars, which may have contributed to their higher rates of high school graduation and college enrollment and persistence. The Step Up program may have inspired Scholars to take more rigorous coursework so that they earned the BOERD, which better prepared them to enter and succeed in college.

Finally, Step Up Scholars who attended UH also had better outcomes than their non-Scholar peers. Specifically, they earned more college credits in their first year and higher grade point averages than their counterparts who did not pledge to be a Step Up Scholar.

Reflecting and Looking Ahead

Today, the Step Up program and BOERD no longer exist. Based on the positive impact of Step Up, however, continuing the program in some form might benefit Hawai'i students' college readiness and success.

Prior research suggests two aspects of Step Up were particularly impactful: when and where information was sent to students.

First, the timing of materials sent to Scholars may have provided the information and motivation they needed to stay on track to earn the BOERD and graduate from high school. Step Up's approach is similar to "low touch information and nudges," which include materials sent home, emails and automated text message reminders, that have been found to improve college enrollment.*

Second, Step Up sent materials directly to students' homes, which appears to have been an effective way to provide guidance on how to earn the BOERD and apply for college and financial aid. Presumably, parents and other caregivers also received this information, sparking conversations and further guidance about course taking, college, and careers.

Step Up had positive effects on a broad range of outcomes for all program participants, including low-income students, which justifies consideration of how to preserve aspects of the program. Well-timed materials about college preparation, financial aid, and college admissions sent to students' homes or provided to students and their families could contribute to GEAR UP's goal of increasing the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

* Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4–22

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