

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEAM GEAR UP and MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM Undergraduate Student Focus Group

In June 2019, eight Marquette University undergraduate students of color were convened for a focus group at the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) in Coughlin Hall on the Marquette University campus. The five male and three female students all participated in both TEAM GEAR UP (TGU) in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and the EOP at Marquette University. The students were asked to discuss their experiences in both programs and to make suggestions for how access to college and success in college could be supported more effectively for other MPS students like them. The students' majors included communications, art, education, psychology and media. Key findings are summarized below. A summary of the students' discussion is also presented with direct quotes that illustrate major themes or statements that elicited agreement among the other participants.

Key Findings

- The TGU participants highly valued the ACT preparation they received and felt that their preparation for the ACT would have been limited without TGU
- The TGU participants formed close relationships with the TGU advisors who were able to offer them personalized encouragement and guidance
- The students valued being connected to college readiness activities while participating in TGU, like college tours and summer programs that offered them a deeper understanding of college as a pathway after high school
- Most of the students were not considering Marquette University until they were accepted into the EOP and awarded financial aid
- The EOP provided academic and social support to the students on a predominantly white campus where they sometimes felt unwelcome
- Despite the microaggressions they experienced, the students would choose to attend Marquette University over again and were very confident that they would graduate
- The students were working to guide and motivate younger students to pursue college and agreed that college access supports should be available to all MPS students

Student Experiences in TEAM GEAR UP

“GEAR UP, that came like perfect timing for me. It was like when all the stuff started to happen to people in middle school and high school, where people started falling off, GEAR UP starting giving us opportunities where we could sway it away from stuff like that.”

The students discussed the relationships that they formed with the TGU advisors, the TGU activities they participated in and other MPS college readiness activities that the TGU advisors encouraged them to attend. The students recalled participating in college tours; preparing for the ACT; volunteering with students with disabilities; meeting with advisors to review their transcripts and set goals; and attending summer classes that prepared them for classes that they would take the following school year. The students recalled the college tours being their first experience traveling outside of Wisconsin, helping them understand the entrance requirements for different institutes of higher education and allowing them to see people of color on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) pursuing a similar path to what they wanted for themselves.

The students discussed the importance of the preparation for the ACT that they received since limited ACT prep was offered outside of TGU. Students felt that without TGU, their ACT preparation would have been confined to an ACT practice test in freshman year of high school.

“I didn’t have [ACT prep] at my school like, regularly. I always felt like GEAR UP was trying to prepare us for something higher than what MPS or the school system was trying to give to us.”

The students discussed the positive impact ACT prep could have on a student’s score. They discussed how other school districts offered preparation from elementary school through high school and how those students were likely to score higher due to their preparation. Through TGU, the students learned tips and tricks for the test and practiced writing an essay. Additionally, one student mentioned that ACT scores are used to determine acceptance into some of the majors at Marquette University, such as engineering and law and that this could create barriers for students who come from districts with less ACT preparation.

“Most of the time with the ACT, it’s not even a gauge of how smart you are. It’s just like, who’s better at taking the test.”

The students also discussed the close relationships that they formed with the TGU Advisors. They described how the advisors knew their names and about their lives, shared their own personal stories with the students and motivated them to pursue the opportunities available to them both within and outside TGU.

[TGU Advisors], “they follow-up with you, like you’re not just some random student. They know exactly what’s going on in your life. And then they’d tell you, there’s an internship that you can apply for, and then there’s a workshop that’s happening with

the major that you're interested in. So they really got to know you and that was profound."

The students mentioned some opportunities that were not being offered through TGU, but that the TGU advisors encouraged them to attend, such as a college fair at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. One student talked about the TGU Advisors connecting him to a program for talented and gifted high school students at the University of Wisconsin that helped prepare him for Marquette University and increased his confidence.

"That ended up preparing me for where I am today. I was really the minority out of all this student body. But also while I was there I learned that I can actually do the work because I finished at the top of my class and although it was a culture shock, it was like stepping out of my comfort zone. Throughout these little opportunities that GEAR UP provided, it's like you found yourself."

When asked about additional services that could have helped them prepare for college, the students suggested programming to explore career pathways. They remembered using a computer program to explore careers (Career Cruising), **but they wanted more experiential career exploration such as mentoring, job shadowing and internships.** Some students described participating in Lead to Change, a MPS afterschool career exploration and work readiness program, offered over the course of one school year that included a six-week paid internship in a career that the students were interested in.

Additionally, the students discussed the MPS College and Career Centers that offer on-site assistance with college applications, scholarships and financial aid. They talked about the importance of offering college and career services to all students in MPS each year to make sure that all students have access to the same opportunities and support. The students discussed how MPS did not seem to promote college in the same way as other school districts because access to college readiness programs and support was limited to only certain groups of students and so other students may not have explored college as a possibility for themselves.

"That's exactly why we need GEAR UP too, because when I was in middle school, college wasn't even a thought, I just wanted to graduate. I didn't think college was even—like, what's the point? I started going on them trips and seeing what the possibilities could be and what I could do. That's the thing, some kids don't even know what they want. Once they get exposed to the opportunity and shown things they like and what they might want to do, then they can change their mind and put themselves on a better path."

Student Experiences in the Educational Opportunity Program

Although the students attended public schools in Milwaukee where Marquette University is located, most did not know much about the university prior to attending. The students described how they felt encouraged to attend two-year colleges more so than four-year schools while attending MPS. Students recalled the TGU Advisors being very persistent in ensuring that they applied to the EOP before the deadline. Students ultimately chose Marquette University because of the financial assistance they received despite originally thinking that the school would be too expensive, would not be diverse or that they would prefer to leave Wisconsin for college.

The students described some of the ways in which they felt that they did not belong on the predominantly white campus where there are only 28%, 16%, and 21% students, faculty, and staff of color respectively¹. They discussed being spoken to as though they are not intelligent, their peers in class being reluctant to work with them, professors saying “racist, ignorant stuff” in class and not feeling welcome at the library.

“Honestly, Marquette don’t make you feel welcome. Ever since I been here, I never felt welcome. At this point, I just accepted it. I don’t feel welcome, like in class, no. I’m usually the last person somebody will want to pair up with. Or I’m the last person to get to speak in the group. Even the events that they have, like the big campus-wide events, I never go to them because it don’t feel like I’m a part of it.”

The students described how the **EOP provided a space for them to interact with peers like themselves and helped them to adjust to a predominantly white campus after attending high schools that had more diverse student bodies. They also described the importance of the EOP in supporting them academically with mandatory tutoring in freshman year, a summer freshman seminar and teaching them study and time management skills.**

“Career-wise, like in the future, most career fields are pretty much almost like Marquette, sadly. It’s not as diverse. You only have a few minorities and that’s why there’s all these laws about the amount of minorities you should have and things like that. So, I think as hard as it is to navigate through Marquette like that, because there’s a lot of ignorant folks, a lot of ignorant people who’ve probably never seen somebody of color before. And then you have to kind of like feel the need to constantly prove yourself sometimes. That, you know, you are a person too, like you are a student and you too have goals and ambition. And a lot of them already have all of these stereotypes about you. And then when you go back to EOP, like Coughlin, and you see your people who can relate to you when you talk to them and it’s kind of like a comfort area and we push each other. So, if I didn’t have EOP, I would have went to like, an

¹ Data retrieved from <https://www.marquette.edu/oira/composition-dash.shtml>.

HBCU or something like that. Just a college that's a little bit more diverse because that's what I'm used to."

When asked if they would choose to attend Marquette University again, the students agreed that they would due to the support of the EOP and the opportunities that they have had while attending. This, despite the small number of students of color and the microaggressions that they experienced. **The students discussed the need for Marquette University to hire more diverse staff members and staff members who were more racially sensitive.**

"If you can be at Marquette, you can be anywhere. If you can be a Black female on Marquette's campus, you can go anywhere and be anything because you face adversity every day, but you learn how to navigate your way through it and never give up. So, yeah, I would choose Marquette still."

Current and Future Plans

The students were Tutor Counselors for high school students in Upward Bound. Although none of them participated in Upward Bound themselves, they could make connections between their own experiences and those of the Upward Bound students. They planned to offer insight to high school students who had similar backgrounds to their own and to offer guidance and motivation. They stated that TGU staff had acted as mentors to them in similar ways. Some of the students also participated in summer programs at Marquette University as incoming freshman and at the University of Wisconsin while in high school.

In addition to acting as role models, the students shared the types of advice that they could offer to the high school students they mentor. They discussed encouraging younger students to explore the options and possibilities open to them; doing things outside of their comfort zone; goal setting; finding and using resources, like tutoring; and discovering their strengths and weaknesses.

The students were overwhelmingly confident that they would graduate from Marquette University.

About This Project

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