

Washington University research for U.S. education department to contribute to federal college savings policy

Study through Brown School's CSD will assess impact of GEAR UP college access program

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By Katie Stalter

With college application deadlines looming, many prospective students are aware of the burden that comes with a college education. Some may even decide not to apply for fear of burying themselves in debt.

The U.S. Department of Education recently launched the first large-scale test of college savings accounts when it incorporated a college savings and financial counseling component into GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Programs), its initiative to prepare youth for college.

The agency allocated \$16.5 million for GEAR UP and has launched the first federal evaluation of the program. Washington University in St. Louis, through the Center for Social Development (<http://csd.wustl.edu/Pages/default.aspx>) (CSD) at the Brown School (<http://brownschool.wustl.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>), is taking part through a \$1 million grant.

Led by Michal Grinstein-Weiss, PhD, associate professor of social work and associate director of the CSD, the research conducted at WUSTL will inform policy at the federal level, particularly college savings and child development accounts.



Grinstein-Weiss

"This will generate rigorous evidence-based policy stemming from a randomized control trial," says Grinstein-Weiss, principal investigator on the GEAR UP research project. "It's great that the Department of Education is taking on this initiative, and CSD is very happy to help lead the research."

The large-scale study will include approximately 20,000 students in 200 high schools across 10 states, and it will be conducted in partnership with Abt Associates, a global research firm that specializes in the fields of health and social and environmental policy. The six-year study will research the impact of college savings accounts, financial counseling and other GEAR UP program features on outcomes such as college savings, enrollment and graduation. The study timeline has the potential to extend to 10 years.

"This research will take place over time, but it also has the potential to have an immediate impact," Grinstein-Weiss says. "The research will help the education department shape its College Access Challenge Grant program moving forward, and may also help raise awareness of the ASPIRE Act that Congress likely will be reconsidering."

ASPIRE, or the America Saving for Personal Investment, Retirement, and Education Act, aims to encourage savings, promote financial literacy and expand opportunities for young adults by establishing a savings account for every newborn.

GEAR UP, authorized in 1998 by amendments to the Higher Education Act, provides intervention services such as mentoring, tutoring, counseling and scholarships, primarily for low-income middle and high school students. With the new savings element, the education department aims to enhance its effort to make a college education accessible for all Americans.

About the Center for Social Development

The Center for Social Development at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis creates and studies innovations that enable individuals, families and communities to formulate and achieve life goals, and contribute to the economy and society. Through innovation and research, CSD makes intellectual and applied contributions in social development theory, evidence, community projects and public policy.

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