Project SOAR²: Success and Opportunity through Affordability, Rigor and Relevance

Central Washington University (CWU) and the Northwest Learning and Achievement Group (NLA) are lead agencies in Project SOAR², a seven year GEAR UP project to help more than 3242 students (Classes of 2020 and 2021) in eleven districts – Oroville, Tonasket, Omak, Brewster, Chelan, Manson, Wenatchee, Quincy, Highland Richland and Easton, prepare for, enroll in, and complete postsecondary programs. This two-grade cohort comprises a student body the size of one large suburban high school, but represents the future for eleven rural communities across a vast, rural region in north central Washington. Poverty rates (free and reduced lunch rates) range from 50 to 97%. If these students move into college, an estimated 87% will be first generation college students. Most students are Hispanic, low income White, and Native American. Most families rely on seasonal farm labor wages and depend on social services.

Partners: Included in the project are eleven forward-thinking and courageous school districts, faculty from multiple departments on the main Ellensburg campus of Central Washington University, the University of Washington School of Medicine, LIGO on the Hanford Reservation, LearnCore – an affiliate of ASEE - the American Society for Engineering Education, Naviance Career and College Planning, the College Board, and many affiliates.

Goal: To prepare students to enroll and persist in postsecondary education.

- **Objective 1**: Increase students’ academic performance, preparation for, enrollment, and completion of postsecondary program by classroom rigor and academic supports = **RIGOR**.
- **Objective 2**: Increase students’ and families’ knowledge of postsecondary education options; show them how student efforts can make college affordable = **AFFORDABILITY**.
- **Objective 3**: Focus on ways to make education relevant to students: advance STEM learning, highlight high level careers in rural areas, elevate Spanish language skills = **RELEVANCE**.

Activities and Services: In this region there are two kinds of work: low-paying and seasonal agricultural jobs, and high-paying newly expanding high tech STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers as new companies are drawn to the area by cheap electricity provided by Columbia River dams. We will steer students to high wage jobs. For STEM careers, students must complete college or a technical program. This project will partner with schools to augment science and math curricula, improve teacher preparation, and connect districts to the STEM community to build engaging, standards-based, rigorous curricula and enrichment activities that will significantly strengthen math and science performance.

Students will be helped to form long-term plans that include postsecondary enrollment, work on skill building, participate in visits to college campuses and STEM business sites, engage in college planning activities in print, online and in day and afterschool programs, including summer STEM camps and get additional academic support in-class and afterschool for rigorous content coursework. More ‘college in the high school’ classes engage students in rigorous coursework, preparatory to their success in postsecondary work, while reducing college costs. Parents partner with students in building students’ postsecondary plans, and receive training.

Informing our efforts is an ongoing longitudinal study of 450 Class of 2011 students from 6 of our partner districts from an earlier CWU/NLA GEAR UP project; we are tracking their experiences in postsecondary institutions to find those strategies that work best to ensure students will apply, enroll in and complete postsecondary programs, to help us know type and dosage of services our students need to successfully enter and succeed in postsecondary training.