I Graduated High School! Now What?

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Time Frame 250 minutes

Essential Question(s)

- What's standing between me and my next step and what do I need to do to move forward?

Summary

This welcoming session connects high school graduates who have not yet enrolled in higher education with the GEAR UP team and its services. Through reflective questioning and interactive activities, students identify current obstacles and challenges that have prevented them from enrolling in higher education. The session aims to help students understand that pursuing higher education remains an option and that GEAR UP can support them in navigating the transition from high school to a viable career through college or university enrollment.

Learning Goals

Attachments

- Needs Assessment.docx
- Needs Assessment.pdf
- Postcard—Now What.pdf
- SMART Goals—Now What.docx
- SMART Goals—Now What.pdf
- Slide Presentation—Now What.pptx

Materials

- Lesson Slides—Now What? (attached)
- Postcard—Now What? (attached; one per prospective student)
- Postage to mail postcards
- Beach balls for Beach Ball Talk and Toss
- SMART Goals—Now What? handout (attached; one per student)
- Needs Assessment—Now What?
- QR codes for Bridge Needs Assessment, TREK Rapid Feedback, and Modern Campus link
- Rapid Feedback forms, if necessary (printed; one per student)

15 minutes

Engage

Display **slides 2** through **4** of the attached **Presentation Slides** as desired and make introductions of the GEAR UP staff. If necessary, briefly explain GEAR UP Bridge the Gap services.

Ask participants to introduce themselves informally or use a simple icebreaker of your choice. Then show **slide 5** and explain the Walking Vote strategy. Select 3-4 prompts to use from the list below and designate which side of the room represents their vote as you read each prompt. (If you prefer, unhide **Slides 6-11** to use on the slide presentation.) Allow students a little bit of think time, then move on to the following prompt.

- A $100,000 a year job that you absolutely hate or a $65,000 a year job that you love?
- Have a flexible, predictable workday or a flexible, changing schedule?
- Be your own boss and manage everything or work for someone else and focus only on your job?
- Take out student loans to attend your dream school or attend a less expensive school and avoid debt?
- Earn a degree in a “safe” field like business or major in a passion subject like art/music?
- Earn enough money to live comfortably now or invest heavily for early retirement?
- Have a large savings account and live frugally, or have no savings and live luxuriously?

Show **slide 12** and ask students to stand in small groups (the exact number should correspond to the total number of students present). Explain the Beach Ball Talk and Toss strategy and direct participants to think about their responses to the prompts in the Walking Vote activity. This will help them process their decisions about enrolling in college and deciding on a degree program by asking why participants selected particular options. Consider questions such as:

- What are the things most important to you:
  - doing what you enjoy?
  - doing something you're good at?
  - having stability or flexibility in your work, etc.?

After some group discussions, encourage students to reflect on their vote and how it relates to their decision-making and choosing a post-secondary institution (PSI) and career.

- For example, considering the first question of a $100,000 a year job that they hate or a $65,000 a year job that they love: If they chose less money, but are doing something that is meaningful and that they enjoy, they may want to explore careers that allow for what they consider meaningful work instead of selecting a career solely based on potential income.

10 minutes

Explore

Display **slide 13** and have participants work with an Elbow Partner or a small group to discuss three questions about life after high school:

- Since graduating high school, what are some things you have enjoyed?
- What is something you didn't expect or weren't prepared for?
- Now that you're here, is there something you'd like to change or do differently?

Facilitator's Note

The goal of the conversation around life after high school is to help them evaluate the transition from being a high school student to whatever their next step is. After high school, education and work are an essential part of adulthood and many times shape the quality of life we build for ourselves and/or future family. Oftentimes, recently graduated high school students have a different view on the importance of receiving some type of postsecondary education that helps them achieve and maintain a viable career. Research has shown that a viable, meaningful career can improve a person's quality of life overall.

Explain to students that they will participate in an informal true-or-false assessment based on a Strada Educational Foundation survey and the Fiction in the Facts strategy. Move to **slide 14** to begin, pausing after each statement to allow think time. Click the slide again to reveal the answer and repeat the process through **slide 17**. Allow students time to discuss their personal opinions and judgement as you see fit.

Facilitator's Note

Highlight that even though participants did not immediately enroll in any post-secondary institution, it is not too late. If you like, use information from the ChildTrends research findings or other sources as you see fit. Remember to balance positivity about college with respect for students' diverse paths.

15 minutes

Explain

Transition to **slide 18**. Invite students to take a little time to create two SMART goals related to enrolling in a college or university. Ask participants to just think about the two most important goals that they need to accomplish to apply and enroll in a college or university successfully. After these goals are identified, work with students to make the goals SMART. Pass out the SMART Goals Template and help participants write out their two SMART goals. Remind students that a **SMART goal** is **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound**.

Facilitator's Note

Encourage students to connect their goal directly to something they discovered during the myths vs. facts discussion (for example, learning that "it's never too late" might inspire a goal to submit an application within the next month).

Provide examples, such as:

- *"I will schedule a meeting with an academic advisor by next Friday to discuss re-enrollment options."*
- *"I will complete my FAFSA application by November 15 to prepare for spring enrollment."*

Emphasize that small, realistic goals help make college enrollment feel achievable and less overwhelming.

15 minutes

Extend

After students write their SMART goals, invite volunteers to share one goal with an Elbow Partner, and then a second goal with another partner. Discuss how setting clear, time-bound goals can turn new information and motivation into real progress toward college enrollment.

Facilitator's Note

If participants are hesitant to begin, the facilitator can help break the ice by sharing one of their own goals first. This can encourage others to feel more comfortable and willing to participate. Don't rush to fill quiet gaps with talking: it's OK to have some silence.

10 minutes

Evaluate

Facilitator's Note

Prior to this part of the lesson, test the links and QR codes for Bridge Needs, TREK Rapid Feedback, and Modern Campus.

Present **slide 19** to have participants complete the Bridge Needs Assessment (a Google Form). Then, move to **slide 20** and have students complete the rapid feedback (TREK) to have students assess the lesson and give their feedback on one thing they intend to do as a result of this activity. Finally, have them submit their contact information in Modern Campus.

Remind students that GEAR UP staff will continue to communicate with them and host future workshops to assist them with next steps of exploring degree programs at local colleges, preparation to enroll in the college of their choice, and understanding financial aid options and resources including technical assistance in applying for FAFSA.

Research Rationale

Research indicates that students who delay postsecondary enrollment face diminished prospects for degree completion compared to those enrolling immediately after high school graduation (Andrews, 2017). While summer melt—the phenomenon of college-intending students failing to matriculate—affects more than one in ten graduates nationally (Miller et al., 2024), evidence demonstrates that targeted interventions can substantially mitigate enrollment barriers. High-touch counseling provided during the post-graduation transition period has been shown to increase immediate college enrollment by 14 percentage points and improve plan persistence by 19 percentage points (Castleman et al., 2012). Studies of GEAR UP programming reveal that college preparatory interventions emphasizing goal-setting, social resource development, and completion of key enrollment actions significantly improve both attendance and persistence outcomes, particularly for low-socioeconomic and underrepresented populations (Knaggs et al., 2013; Stephan et al., 2013).

Resources

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- Educause. (2025). New national survey: 60% of students who left college would return if given clear completion path; Cost is top barrier for those who never enrolled. *Ellucian*. https://www.educause.edu/about/corporate-participation/member-press-releases/new-national-survey-60-of-students-who-left-college-would-return-if-given-clear-completion-path
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