Background

It is the end of the first semester and 13 GEAR UP tutors and college advisors are huddled together around the board, silently grouping Post-it notes with scribbled ideas on them. Part of a federal grant program to build college awareness and access, they are tasked with helping more than 350 high school seniors graduate high school and enroll in college next fall. They appear focused and determined; they are moving with purpose as they place the notes in groups with similar themes. Close to an hour passes before they all seem satisfied and ready to discuss their next steps. By the conclusion of the activity, staff have collaboratively selected and committed to priority tasks for the second semester.

The tutors and advisors are working on an NSRF activity, “Affinity Mapping.” In previous years, staff members had lacked a shared vision of what they were engaged in, and while all staff were committed to young people’s success, they were not all focused on project goals. However, for the students’ senior year, a CFG model was adopted for professional development, used for several full-day workshops with participants. While CFGs have been used extensively in K-12 schools, this project took the model to a group that works with students both in and outside the classroom, during the day and afterschool. These types of programs offer CFGs the potential to reach students in new settings, and to ensure that a message of high expectations reaches students from all personnel at school.

The Affinity Mapping Process

The GEAR UP CFG tutors and advisors desired an activity to help them collectively decide how best to support high school seniors during the second semester. Prior to the activity, they were not sure which specific tasks would be most beneficial. Because Affinity Mapping activity works best with an open-ended question that has many answers, it was selected for this particular task. After reading and discussing several peer-reviewed articles about high school students transitioning to college, GEAR UP CFG tutors and advisors were invited to answer the following open-ended question, “What does it take to set up and facilitate a successful transition from Wayne Memorial High School to post-secondary education for our GEAR UP students?”

They began the activity by silently writing individual ideas on Post-it notes. Once ready, staff members randomly placed the notes on large butcher paper. Then, silently, the staff moved the notes around and put them together based on their “affinities” or common themes. Finally, the silence was lifted and team members gave each group of Post-its a title to capture the intended action of each theme. For example, one theme was named “Resources.” The items listed in the resources group were specific actions GEAR UP staff members could assist students with during their final semester in high school.
school such as looking up and promoting free tutoring resources on college campuses.

Ultimately, the themes developed during the Affinity Mapping process helped GEAR UP staff create an action plan. [A complete list of topics generated during this protocol are found in Figure 1]. For example:

1.) GEAR UP staff can inform students of (and help prepare for) the various placement tests required for their post-secondary school.

2.) GEAR UP staff can engage in open discussions with students about their hopes, fears, challenges, and strategies for not only surviving but thriving after high school. GEAR UP staff can also create and facilitate group workshops on this theme to promote a healthy and successful post-secondary transition.

3.) The GEAR UP program can sustain a support system for students after graduation by creating resource artifacts and staying in communication with students through our WMHS GEAR UP social networking sites.

4.) GEAR UP staff can help students find ways to feel prepared, safe, and welcomed at their new post-secondary school.

Staff expressed high satisfaction with the affinity mapping activity, and its impact on the group’s shared vision. One GEAR UP staff member expressed her appreciation for having her voice heard at the conclusion of the affinity mapping activity:

“The Affinity Mapping exercise really excited me. We all rose to the challenge and were able to organize all of our thoughts and ideas in a very diplomatic, effective way. I find it fascinating that when our actual voices were taken out of the equation, we were able to accomplish so much more than if we had tried to hash it all out verbally.”

Results of Affinity Mapping

During the second semester, staff demonstrated that they had a higher level of commitment to the tasks than if they were instructed to complete the exact same tasks by a supervisor. Adult learning theory suggests that adults have a deep need to be self-directing and enter into a learning experience with a problem-centered orientation to learning. The Affinity Map Protocol empowered staff to use their creativity to find solutions...
to assisting seniors with their post-secondary transition. Affinity Mapping strengthened the commitment and comradery of our GEAR UP tutors and advisors, thus leading to a better transition out of high school to higher education for our GEAR UP seniors.

**Resources**


Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs [GEAR UP]. [http://www2.ed.gov/](http://www2.ed.gov/)
The NSRF Affinity Map Activity helps GEAR UP participants to organize their thoughts on helping students transition into post-secondary educational settings.

**Figure 2: Discussion Topics**

**In person**
- Share appropriate stories with students about one’s own college experiences. They may learn something.
- Offer students resources for self-care strategies.
- Prepare students to be independent. That is, let them know that the choices they make can be helpful or hurtful to them. (Use our GEAR UP definition of advising.)
- Encourage a stable work ethic for studying and time management by discussing work loads and scheduling.
- Discuss hopes and fears for college and brainstorm effective strategies for managing both.
- Discuss healthy ways to relieve stress. (Concerts, counseling, sports, gym, art.)
- Discuss problem solving strategies.
- If you relate to a student, let it be known.
- As GEAR UP staff, we need to be the positive alumni examples for our students.

**Workshops**
- Workshops/education about developing strong study skills.
- Teach students “soft skills” at WMHS.
- Give seminars and panel discussions where seniors can ask current and former college students what to expect their first year so it all doesn’t seem so daunting.
- Have a workshop or set of workshops about a) how to be successful in college, b) what to expect in college, and c) summer transition or after school.
- Q & A panel about life in college. Challenges faced, groups/clubs to join, places to find support, etc.

**Figure 2: Discussion Topics**

GEAR UP staff developed these ideas for engaging in open discussions with students about their hopes, fears, challenges, and strategies for not only surviving but thriving after high school. The staff can also create and facilitate group workshops on these themes to promote a healthy and successful post-secondary transition.
Want to clarify your understanding of NSRF’s Critical Friends Groups? Want some support explaining CFGs to friends, colleagues, and administrators? Click the photos above or the links below to review our latest promotional materials, or email us to request copies and links:

A Self-Guided Tour to NSRF Critical Friends Groups (pdf)

and

Video Glimpse of NSRF New CFG Coaches Training

How’d we do?

How did you like this issue? Do you have ideas for future articles, book reviews, or topics you’d like to explore (or you’d like us to explore)? We’d love to hear your experiences with NSRF Protocols and CFGs. Email us, or call 812-330-2702.

The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) is a professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through professional learning communities. We train individuals to coach Critical Friends Groups, or CFGs, a specific type of Professional Learning Community (PLC). Critical Friends Groups use protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning.

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