

Students, parents learn signposts on road to college

By Terry Organ
Miner Staff Writer

Parents of juniors at Kingman High School got an idea of what to expect in terms of college costs and scholarships during a presentation Tuesday night.

GEAR UP is a six-year college access program administered by Northern Arizona University that began tracking seventh graders five years ago in Kingman and nine other schools in Arizona. The students will graduate high school in 2006.

GEAR UP stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. The program provides federal money, matched by non-federal dollars, that allows students to visit college campuses, attend summer programs at NAU in Flagstaff and participate in mentoring, tutoring and job shadowing to prepare them for college.

More than 500 juniors attended a presentation during school hours. Some returned along with their parents in the evening for another presentation by GEAR UP state representatives Steve Hart and Barbara Soby in the school's cafeteria. Hart is GEAR UP scholarship coordinator. Soby is assistant director of the program and is based in the Phoenix office of NAU.

A total of 110 people signed in Tuesday night. They saw and heard a two-part presentation wrapped around a meal prepared by chef Michael Gaul's culinary arts students.

"GEAR UP is like a college-access lottery," Soby said. "Out of all the high schools in the state, Kingman is one of the few sites chosen to participate."

Soby and Hart addressed four questions during the first half of the presentation: Why go to college, how to prepare, how much does it cost and how to pay for it. A college education over the course of a lifetime can mean \$1 million more in earnings for an individual, Soby told the audience. The college graduate is less likely to be unemployed, and a degree opens more doors for the individual.

Also discussed was the FAFSA form – Free Application for Federal Student Aid. It opens up many financial options and is a requirement for the college-bound student. Hart said the federal government requires up-to-date information for the year when the student applies for aid, so completion of the form is suggested by Feb. 15 of the student's senior year in high school.

During the meal break, some parents were contacted for reaction to the first half of the presentation.

"I didn't know what FAFSA was before," said Cindy Buckley, who attended with her daughter Carlaina. "It seems to be what you need to apply for to get college funds. GEAR UP is one sort of scholarship that I wasn't sure of, but they explained the options well. I know college will be expensive and I'm not sure how we'll pay for it, but I was interested in hearing about the Perkins loan as Carlaina wants to be a teacher."

Betsy Parker, assistant superintendent of the Kingman Unified School District, said a Perkins loan could be arranged for students going into teaching careers. Upon college graduation, the loan-holder can apply for a one-year deferral of repayment and renew the deferral request annually for another four years. After five years, the loan is entirely relieved or only a small portion must be repaid if the graduate meets one of three criteria: teaches at a school with a certain number of free and reduced lunches for students or teachers in the science, math or special education fields.

Carlaina Buckley said the first half of the presentation was wonderful and helped answer many of her questions. Kris Haynes, another parent, took notes. She attended with her daughter Amberly. "I had never heard of FAFSA," Kris Haynes said. "I didn't understand everything the GEAR UP program has to offer like job shadowing. Amberly has been on several college visits and it's good to know the finances are out there if she needs it." Amberly said she was unsure of when to begin applying for aid and thought it was something to do only during her senior year.

The second half of the presentation explained just what a GEAR UP scholarship is, how much it may be worth, who is eligible, and how to apply.

Hart said attendance was the highest of any presentation he has made to date. He has made presentations this school year at Coconino, Yuma and Phoenix Alhambra high schools.