

College Access Starts in Middle School—and One Professor Is Making It Happen

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Aryn Dotterer, Ph.D., with USU STARS GEAR UP staff.

Aryn Dotterer, Ph.D., professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) and executive director of USU STARS GEAR UP at Utah State University, is working to help 6,000+ under-resourced middle school students across Utah attend college and land their dream jobs. Dotterer does this by leading the USU STARS GEAR UP partnership grants funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

“Professor Dotterer has been critical to the success of our partnership grants that help middle schoolers envision and pursue academic and career pathways,” said Al Smith, endowed dean of the Emma Eccles College of Education and Human Services. “Her deep expertise in this area and her personal experiences have enabled her to be an incredibly impactful advocate for young people’s educational access, life success, and wellbeing.”

Dotterer’s life trajectory was impacted when she participated in the Wayne State University (WSU) Summer Bridge Program, a program—similar to GEAR UP—that is designed to support first-generation college students who come from under-resourced backgrounds. Dotterer credits her mentors in this program who helped her navigate the challenges of university life.

Motivated to pay it forward, Dotterer later worked at the Student Access and Success Center at WSU, providing tutoring and supplemental instruction for students who shared similar backgrounds with her. There,

she became interested in the research and evaluation components of a college access program.



USU STARS GEAR-UP Director Aryn Dotterer

“I was fascinated by documenting that it was working,” Dotterer explained about her work there. “Seeing the value of it helped me keep going to foster the work.”

After she earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology from WSU, Dotterer continued her education at Pennsylvania State University, where she received master’s and doctoral degrees in human development and family studies. She joined the USU faculty in HDFS in 2016 and has been executive director of USU STARS GEAR UP since 2024.

The GEAR UP program supports students from seventh grade through their first year in postsecondary education. Middle school GEAR UP programming teaches students about post-secondary options, financial aid, and career pathways. College tours and site visits to GEAR UP partners also provide students with meaningful exposure to a potential career path.

“Middle school is a great time to expose youth to different careers, opportunities, and experiences outside the classroom,” Dotterer said. “They are exploring likes and dislikes.”

She also emphasizes resilience when creating programming for the GEAR-UP students. “It’s important to create a culture in our program where we teach students to persevere through challenges,” Dotterer said.

Resiliency is a priority for Dotterer that originated from her own childhood. She recalled hearing stories of adversity and perseverance told by her parents, who

personally endured financial and cultural hardships. “These experiences helped me understand what it means to overcome challenges,” Dotterer said.

Dotterer recalled seeing resilience in action for the first time when she worked at the Mercy Education Project in Detroit. She was struck by the hope and optimism the girls she worked with displayed despite the enormous challenges they faced. “I didn’t know it at the time, but I was seeing resilience in action,” Dotterer said.

Today, Dotterer oversees program implementation, administrative operations, fiscal management, and a team of 13 staff members at USU who coordinate middle school events statewide. In addition, she leads 12 other staff members who oversee events and provide onsite support to students in the schools across Utah.

Outside of GEAR UP, Dotterer’s research focuses on the role of parental involvement and parent-child relationships in shaping racial/ethnic minority adolescents’ school engagement and academic achievement, with a particular focus on identifying protective factors that promote positive development despite adversity.

“To say that Aryn is fantastically strong as a researcher is an understatement,” said Rob Stawski, department head of HDFS at USU. “As an applied researcher she translates what she does to solve real-world problems. Being able to successfully operate in the theoretical and applied worlds can be a challenge, but Aryn does it extremely well.”

Dotterer is a widely cited researcher in the field of human development. In 2024, she was ranked by Elsevier Research among the top 100,000 researchers globally or in the top two percent of her field.

According to Google Scholar, she has received over 6,000 citations, with her top paper cited nearly 1,000 times. Dotterer explained that the paper was impactful because it highlighted that school engagement is malleable and shifted the focus away from mere achievement. Dotterer’s longitudinal research shows that motivation and engagement decline across adolescence, especially during times of school transitions. She is applying this work to USU STARS GEAR UP to study how GEAR UP services promote engagement and prevent decline.

Looking ahead, Dotterer is working to expand GEAR UP’s reach to more students. USU STARS GEAR-UP recently added Ogden Preparatory Academy as a new school partner and aims to strengthen mentoring at Mount

Logan Middle School, a longstanding partner. Over the next five years, she hopes to see many more GEAR UP students complete high school and successfully transition into post-secondary education or a career.

“We hope to continue to have the support and investment from our state, community, and federal government in realizing the magnitude of a program like GEAR UP,” Dotterer said.

Dotterer remains passionate about resiliency, college access, and evaluation, and is grateful for the Summer Bridge Program where her own journey began. Her goals with GEAR UP remain strong: to help thousands of students across Utah enter a fulfilling college and career path.