

NC STATE College of Education

Well-Being and Equity in Rural Communities (WERC) Research Hub Proposal
Co-Principal Investigators (Co-PIs): Jared Stewart-Ginsburg, PhD; Brean'a Parker, Ph.D.,
NCC, LCMHCA; Maria Coady, PhD
Co-Investigators: AJ Jaeger, PhD; Samantha Graham, MCRP, Ellen Beasley

Educational Problem to be Addressed by the Hub

Nearly 3.5 million North Carolinians live in rural counties, making the state second only to Texas in the number of rural residents (US Census Bureau, 2022). Just under 40% of students in North Carolina PK-12 schools live in rural areas (approximately 568,000 students; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Rural locales are replete with assets, such as social capital and social infrastructure, innovation and adaptation, and natural resources that can facilitate well-being (Fagerholm et al., 2020; Lawson, 2019; McArdle, 2019). However, **rural communities experience disparities in well-being and educational equity** compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. For example, only 41% of rural residents in North Carolina have completed a post-secondary degree or credential compared to 51% of urban or suburban residents (NC Rural Center, 2023). Over 138,000 youth in rural communities do not have access to broadband internet, which is nearly twice the number of youth in large cities and nearly three times the number of youth in regional cities and suburban settings (US Census Bureau, 2023). Rural students in North Carolina are **less likely to graduate high school than urban and suburban students** (NC Department of Public Instruction [DPI], 2023). Significantly fewer healthcare professionals practice in rural counties (NC Rural Center, 2023).

These disparities affect all rural families, but **not all families are affected equally**. While the term *rural* may conjure images of white farmers, **rural areas are increasingly culturally, linguistically, and industrially diverse** (Bennett et al., 2019; Johnston & Lichter, 2020). The percentage of Latinx and multiracial youth in rural North Carolina more than doubled over the last decade (US Census Bureau, 2022). The 25 most economically distressed counties in North Carolina (all rural) comprise at least 40% Black and Latinx residents; the majority of residents in 16 of those counties are Black and/or Latinx (NC Department of Commerce, 2023). The trend of immigrant Latinos has been so significant for rural communities that scholars refer to this population as “a demographic lifeline” (Lichter & Johnson, 2020, p. 785). Despite being a “lifeline,” **Multilingual Learners (MLs) have been overlooked and underserved in rural schools**. More than 10% of North Carolina students were identified as MLs, but only 3.5% of teachers hold an English as a Second Language (ESL) credential (NC DPI, 2022). Most of these credentialed staff teach in urban or suburban settings (Coady, 2022). For example, Granville County Schools, located near the Virginia border, has an ESL staff-to-student ratio of 1:200, while the Wake County Schools ratio is 1:59. **Disability status also impacts educational equity in rural communities**. Rural students with disabilities in North Carolina perform statistically significantly lower on national achievement tests and are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than urban and suburban students with disabilities (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2022).

The National Rural Education Association has historically and recently named **North Carolina as one of the top ten priority states** for investment in and focus on rural educational equity (e.g., Showalter et al., 2023). **Neither this investment nor focus has materialized.** Inflation-adjusted expenditures per pupil have declined since 2010 (WestEd et al., 2019). Policymakers and institutes of higher education often prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to practices and policies for urban, suburban, and rural schools and ignore barriers unique to rural settings or leave rural schools and communities out of research opportunities altogether (Lavalley, 2018; McArdle, 2019). We propose the **Well-Being and Educational Equity in Rural Communities (WERC) Interdisciplinary Research Hub to address disparities in well-being and educational equity in rural communities** and understand the impact of gender, race, culture, language, and disability status within these disparities. We will begin by engaging in participatory advocacy research with interdisciplinary leaders in rural communities.

Partners and Assets

The WERC Research Hub will **unite the collective expertise of three CED units and one external partner.** The Co-PIs are affiliated with the Departments of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences (TELS) and Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development (ELPHD), respectively. Dr. Coady's work focuses on rural multilingual students and the preparation of educators who work with them (e.g., Coady, 2020). Dr. Parker's work centers embodied social justice learning and praxis for behavioral healthcare providers working with clinical populations occupying multiple marginalized positions and examining stories of relational violence within BIPOC communities (e.g., Chapman-Hilliard & Parker, 2022). Dr. Stewart-Ginsburg's work emphasizes the inclusion of youth and adults with disabilities in communities (e.g., Stewart-Ginsburg et al., 2023). All three Co-PIs hold research and praxis experience in rural communities and will contribute both their individual subject expertise regarding multilingualism, mental health, and disability, respectively, along with their shared expertise in community-engaged advocacy research.

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research (Belk Center) and the Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) will join the three Co-PIs to create the WERC hub. As the W. Dallas Herring Professor and Executive Director of the Belk Center, Dr. AJ Jaeger will provide technical assistance engaging community college partners to participate in research activities. Over 40 of the North Carolina community colleges serve rural areas of the state. The Belk Center, supported by Ascendum Education Philanthropy, has been working with 10 rural colleges to support improving student outcomes. Earlier this year, the Belk Center received a second grant from Ascendum Education to document promising practice for rural colleges. These connections and this specific work will support WERC hub work. The IEI contributes to the Land Grant mission of NC State University as a nonpartisan agency conducting work around community engagement, digital inclusion, and health disparities in rural communities. Samantha Graham and Ellen Beasley will provide technical assistance engaging leaders of community organizations (e.g., religious congregations) in research activities.

Together, the WERC hub team will connect the **expertise of researchers in four entities across several disciplines to interdisciplinary leaders in rural communities** and explore strengths and barriers to rural well-being and educational equity.

Goals and Deliverables

The initial goal of the WERC hub is to **explore and capture strengths and barriers to well-being and educational equity in North Carolina rural communities**. We will:

- identify rural school and community strengths (following Crumb et al., 2022) including qualities such as rural ingenuity, unity, resourcefulness, and familism;
- document how communities across different locales address issues of diversity (e.g., language, race/ethnicity, disability status) and what rural partners believe are significant equity issues within rural communities (Lichter, 2012; Lichter & Johnson, 2020); and
- examine and share how community institutions can work collaboratively to improve overall well-being and educational equity for diverse rural populations.

The WERC hub will use an advocacy-based research model (Janke et al., 2018), whereby researchers aim to uphold, empower, and engage in solidarity with the individuals and communities they serve through inquiry and discovery of knowledge. We will begin by identifying four focus rural communities in North Carolina (one Fringe Rural, one Distant Rural, two Remote Rural; NCES, 2023) to ensure various types of rural communities are represented. We will visit each community for an **extended site visit, bookended by community information exchange sessions**. First, we will host an information exchange session in each community (versus one-way focus groups) using the World Café model (Schiele et al., 2021; Steier et al., 2015). The sessions will involve leaders representing several organizations, including public schools, behavioral healthcare providers, community colleges, libraries, religious congregations, and infrastructure agencies (e.g., councils of governments, philanthropy). We will use dialogue to explore community strengths, concerns, and solutions.

Next, we will use Photovoice methodology (Seitz et al., 2022; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997), which involves community leaders taking pictures of their experiences and writing captions to narrate their photos. We will ask community leaders to document strengths and barriers to well-being and educational equity in their communities. In between information exchange sessions, we will conduct a Linguistic Landscape Analysis (Gorter, 2006) and engage in Community Resource Mapping (Crane & Mooney, 2005). Last, we will lead a second information exchange session. Community leaders (as co-researchers) will share their photos and narratives and engage in reflexive discussion to promote insight and action regarding identified strengths, issues, and challenges within their communities. **By the end of the preliminary research period (i.e., June, 2024), we will produce and share:**

- **Deliverable 1:** a set of community-designed research questions related to issues within community well-being and education;
- **Deliverable 2:** Photovoice data depicting strengths and barriers to well-being and educational equity in rural communities;

- **Deliverable 3:** a plan for using research questions and data to address identified barriers.

These three deliverables will **power WERC hub activities in the first two years**. In our first two years, we will: (a) create a **funded, sustainable pathway** between NC State CED and our partner rural communities to support addressing identified challenges and concerns; (b) create a **public policy brief** for the NC Legislature education standing committees; (c) **begin research activities** addressing the barriers identified by community participants.

Alignment with Priorities

The activities of the WERC Interdisciplinary Research Hub are crucial for North Carolina students, families, and communities. Additionally, our **proposed work aligns with both the College of Education (CED) Strategic Plan and national funding priorities**. The WERC hub enacts **three priorities of the CED Strategic Plan**. First, by involving researchers from two CED academic units, one CED center, and one external institute, we will increase the number of interdisciplinary research projects and apply multiple perspectives to address nuanced challenges (Interdisciplinary, Strategic Priority 2.1). The activities of the WERC hub will contribute to the development of research-based practices related to educational equity (Inclusion, Strategic Priority 3.3). Last, the WERC hub place-based participatory advocacy research methods will apply inquiry tools for community impact (Impact, Strategic Priority 4.2).

The activities of the WERC hub also align with several national funding priorities. In 2019, the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) recognized the dearth of investment in rural well-being and education and funded two centers for an initial five-year period: the National Center for Rural School Mental Health (<https://ruralsmh.com/>) and the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (<https://cepr.harvard.edu/rural>). The WERC hub aligns with the priorities of both centers and the IES competitive priority to involve historically minoritized communities in research, as evidenced through several recent RFPs (e.g., 2023 84.305A; 2023 84.305N). **WERC hub activities could be expanded** under an IES Development and Innovation grant or grants from foundations focused on rural well-being and education (e.g., NC SECU Foundation, The Duke Endowment, The Spencer Foundation).

Budget

An itemized budget is included on pp. 8-9. Funds in the proposed 2023-2024 budget of \$24, 975.20 will be used to **facilitate and analyze community information exchange sessions**.

Travel (\$14,475.20). Funds are requested to provide mileage, meals, and lodging, and allow WERC hub staff to travel to the four selected rural communities in North Carolina.

Wages (\$1,500.00). Funds are requested to provide hourly wages for three Federal Work Study Undergraduate Research Assistant (RA) positions. RAs will support WERC hub staff in gathering, organizing, analyzing, and disseminating data from information exchange sessions.

Supplies (\$9,000.00). Funds are requested to provide honorariums for information exchange session participants (15 per community) in gratitude for their time and contribution.

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Budget

Fringe 1 Site

Expense	Quantity	Amount	Persons	Total	Site Total
Lunch	3	\$13.30	8	\$319.20	
Mileage	100	\$0.655	4	\$262.000	\$581.20

Distant 1 Site

Expense	Quantity	Amount	Persons	Total	Site Total
Lunch	3	\$13.30	8	\$319.20	
Mileage	300	\$0.655	4	\$786.00	\$1,105.20

Remote 1 Site

Expense	Quantity	Amount	Persons	Total	Site Total
Breakfast	3	\$10.10	8	\$242.40	
Lunch	4	\$13.30	8	\$425.60	
Dinner	3	\$23.10	8	\$554.40	
Lodging	3	\$150.00	8	\$3,600.00	
Mileage	600	\$0.655	4	\$1,572.00	\$6,394.40

Remote 2 Site

Expense	Quantity	Amount	Persons	Total	Site Total
Breakfast	3	\$10.10	8	\$242.40	
Lunch	4	\$13.30	8	\$425.60	
Dinner	3	\$23.10	8	\$554.40	
Lodging	3	\$150.00	8	\$3,600.00	
Mileage	600	\$0.655	4	\$1,572.00	\$6,394.40

Wages	Amount	Persons	Total
FWS Research Assistant	\$500.00	3	\$1,500.00

Supplies	Quantity	Amount	Total
Participant Honoraria	60	\$150.00	\$9,000.00

Category Totals	
Travel	\$14,475.20
Wages	\$1,500.00
Supplies	\$9,000.00
2023-24 Budget Total	\$24,975.20



Belk Center
for Community College
Leadership and Research

November 14, 2023

Dear Dr. Hollebrands,

As stated in the mission of the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, “we believe collaboration drives systemic changes.” We are excited to support the Well-being and Educational Equity in Rural Communities (WERC) Interdisciplinary Research Hub proposal and use our expertise in community colleges to address disparities in rural communities across North Carolina.

With 40 of the North Carolina community colleges serving rural areas, rural communities are a significant focus of the Belk Center. We just received a second grant from Ascendum Education Philanthropy to extend our work with 10 rural colleges and document promising practices. Our strong relationships with community colleges throughout the state will allow us to engage community college leaders as part of information exchange sessions and consider how findings will extend to the capacity of community colleges to drive statewide prosperity and equity.

The Belk Center staff look forward to collaborating with the WERC hub Co-PIs and partners in advocacy-based research to address crucial disparities in well-being and educational equity in rural communities. I welcome any questions you may have and appreciate your consideration of this hub proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Audrey J. Jaeger".

Audrey J. Jaeger, Ph.D.

W. Dallas Herring Professor of Community College Education
Executive Director, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research
North Carolina State University



November 14, 2023

Karen Hollebrands, PhD
Associate Dean for Research and Innovation
College of Education
NC State University
208 Poe Hall, 2310 Stinson Drive
Raleigh, NC 27695

Dear Dr. Hollebrands,

I am pleased to write this letter in support of the Well-being and Educational Equity in Rural Communities (WERC) Interdisciplinary Research Hub proposal. As Director of NC State University's Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI), and in previous roles with both the NC Department of Public Instruction and NC Division of Public Health, I am acutely aware of the disparities in rural communities related to educational equity and well-being. I believe the WERC hub research activities can play an important role in addressing these disparities in a community-engaged manner.

The IEI connects North Carolinians across sectors, regions, and perspectives for collaborative work on key emerging issues affecting the state's future economic competitiveness. Our work includes increasing digital inclusion, increasing household financial resilience, rural faith supported community development, and an annual Forum focused on key emerging issues affecting the state. All draw rural partners from across the state and rural education often comes up as a key priority in our work. We are well-connected to residents in rural communities and able to engage community organization partners in research activities.

Thank you for considering this proposal. The IEI staff look forward to partnering with the WERC hub Co-PIs in their efforts to conduct research activities and contribute to this important and needed work. Please don't hesitate to reach out should you have any questions. You can reach me at smlanger@ncsu.edu or 919.332.5954.

Sincerely,

Sarah Langer Hall
Director