



Director's Message

Okay, I'll admit it... I've been really cold a few times this winter, especially when crawling under the house to place a heat source near a frozen pipe when it was seven degrees and snowing outside! January was certainly full of winter weather and the recent cold/snow snap in February reminds us that winter takes its time in the mountains. Our schools have certainly been impacted by the weather with lots of snow days, remote learning days, and 2-3 hour delays. These missed days and delays compound the challenges caused by time missed because of Hurricane Helene, and I'm grateful to our team for its flexibility in meeting the needs of our students, parents, and educators. Additionally, I also want to thank Rachel, Yolanda, our CAC team, and so many others for their work volunteering locally to help with hurricane recovery.

Through all of this, our CAP programs have continued their great work, and this newsletter shares some highlights. The newest GEAR UP grant, APEX, is underway, and our team stuffed over 6,000 welcome bags to distribute to 6th and 7th graders as well as providing training for new district coordinators. Read about the GEAR UP launch of the L.E.A.D (Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Discovery) Coalition Program for student leaders across the region and On Ramp's Junior Workforce Career Connection Breakfast in Swain County, high school STEM students in Wilkes County creating disaster preparation kits and the after school peer mentoring efforts of the YES scholars. The ETL team continues its study about self-directed learning and micro-credentials, and the CAC team continued their training at the state level with Becka leading one of the sessions. Our team continues to grow professionally, presenting at conferences, learning about education policy, and providing professional development (read about Holly in Greece!). The Upward Bound team is beginning their intense planning for the summer, and YES scholars are already receiving college acceptance to schools like WCU and Columbia!

Thanks to our CAP team for its wonderful work. I'm so pleased and fortunate to work with such talented and passionate folks!

- Jim Beeler,

Executive Director- College Access Partnerships

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Employee Spotlight

Let's get to know our leader, **Jim Beeler**, Executive Director of College Access Partnerships!

1. How long have you worked with CAP?

I have worked at CAP for almost seven years. I started as director of GEAR UP, then of CAP, then executive director. CAP has grown from about 15 to 70 employees during that time, and I consider it quite a privilege to work with this very talented team every day.



2. What's your favorite book/movie/album/song? Pick one and explain why.

Since I'm somewhat known for my taste in music I awake every morning to Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring: Doppio movimento (you will probably know it if you hear it). I have a CD of Copland rehearsing the piece with the NY Philharmonic that is very cool - you can hear him advising a great orchestra on how to play his music as he has it in his head. If I had to choose the music of five musicians to take to a deserted island it would be Mozart, Ella Fitzgerald, the Allman Brothers, the Beatles, and the Eagles, and, okay, ... maybe Taylor Swift in reserve because she has been so prolific.



Jim pictured at Hebron Falls in Price Park with his dog, Izzy, a rescue from Austin, Texas who likes running around in the mountains

3. What would your perfect/ideal day look like?

Hiking in the mountains alone or with members of my family on a cool, crisp day in late April-early May when the trillium, mayapples, jack-in-the-pulpit, bluets and other flowers are in bloom, followed by a family gathering at our house for pot-luck, followed by some quiet time with my wife, Annette.

4. What fictional place would you like to visit?

It's not exactly fictional, but since I like classic westerns, I would like to ride the terrain in Colorado-Wyoming-Montana. I'm not sure I like horses enough to do it that way ... maybe there's a four-wheeler in my future!

5. What's something you'd like to do that you've never done?

A few years ago this list included climbing Mt. Everest, hang gliding, scuba diving through a shipwreck, parasailing, parachuting, and bungee jumping off the New River Gorge bridge. I realize now that I've done lots of thrilling, death-defying stuff and I have been to places and experienced things that moved me deeply. Now, I'm more interested in continuing to learn and expressing myself or having an impact in new ways.

Employee Spotlight

Let's get to know our Assistant Director of CAP Communications, **Elyssee Gibson!**

1. How long have you worked with CAP?

Last month marked 8 years that I've been with CAP. I started out in an administrative role serving GEAR UP and Upward Bound and soon transitioned into the role of Resource & Communications Coordinator for GEAR UP. In 2020, I became the Assistant Director for CAP Communications and have been in that role ever since. I love that I am one of the few staff members who gets to work closely with team members across all of our grant programs, so I get an up-close look at all the amazing work coming from each branch of CAP!

2. What's your favorite book/movie/album/show/song? Pick one and explain why.

My favorite TV show is The Office (American version). My husband and I have literally seen every single episode about 100 times, and even though I have the lines basically memorized, I laugh at every joke! It's the one show that I can watch and never get sick of watching. Peacock streams "SuperFan Episodes" that include deleted scenes and directors' cuts, so it's almost like getting to watch some of the episodes for the first time, and I love it!



Elyssee and her family

3. What would your perfect/ideal day look like?

*Breakfast would involve donuts, for sure - chocolate glazed, maybe cream stuffed, or strawberry sprinkles (heck, let's say one of each!). Since I'm indulging in the donuts, maybe I'll drink a simple chai latte or London fog. I'm having breakfast with a view of the ocean, and my toddler, Waverly, is sleeping late so I can have a few minutes of "me time". Next, my husband and I do a fun workout on the beach and my daughter joins us afterwards to look for shells. My nephews are there too, and we all play a game of Spike Ball and build some sandcastles while my Mama and my sister are making sure Waverly has snacks and bubbles to pop. It's also early Spring, so it isn't a million degrees outside, and there's no pollen- this is very important! Later in the day, we have a picnic at the park under a shady tree. I'm thinking some nice Italian subs with lemonade. My dogs Appa and Stafford are there with us, and there's a perfect breeze blowing in their fur. Waverly gets to play on the slide and on the swing and pick up rocks and sticks. Finally, for dinner, I'm eating Mama's rice and gravy, fordhook lima beans, and I'm having biscuits and syrup for dessert. After I rock Waverly to a **very** sound sleep, the whole family plays board games or card games together. We each have our favorite drink in-hand, but we call it a night by 10PM. At that point, I curl up into my perfectly made bed complete with freshly laundered sheets. We all sleep soundly through the whole night, and I have the sweetest and most comforting dreams of my late grandmother.*

4. What fictional place would you like to visit?

I would love for my family to not just visit, but actually live in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood! There's only love, acceptance, kindness, and peace there, and I am desperate to experience that right now and to raise my daughter in a place like that.

5. What's something you'd like to do that you've never done?

My husband and I dream of going on a wildlife expedition with Quark or Nat Geo or to have a similar responsible ecotourism experience. I cannot imagine how it would feel to see a polar bear or orangutan in the wild. I am desperate to go whale watching one day. How incredible would it be to take part in an ethical whale swim in Tahiti?



L.E.A.D. Cohort

GEAR UP has launched the L.E.A.D (Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Discovery) Coalition Program, and 25 student leaders from across western North Carolina have been identified after a rigorous application process. The students represent eight GEAR UP districts and are in their sophomore or junior year of high school.

The L.E.A.D Program is designed to cultivate the next generation of student leaders. Through a unique blend of experiences and opportunities, students will feel empowered to positively impact their communities, families, and beyond. In addition to gaining leadership skills, students will collaborate with one another, foster personal growth, refine their communication skills, and learn how to advocate for themselves in their schools and communities. Learn more about the students and the program [here](#).



APEX Grant Underway

CAP's newest GEAR UP grant was awarded last fall, and work is well underway across the 12 districts served. Coordinators for the new school systems have been hired and onboarded, and district support personnel have been trained. Services to students and families are starting to take place including tutoring, campus visits, and summer camp registration. Professional development for teachers and coordinators has also begun. District coordinators even had the opportunity to attend the recent [NCCEP Academy](#).

Last month, CAP team members helped to assemble over 6,000 welcome bags for every new GEAR UP student. These kits will be distributed in local kick-off events across the new districts where students can learn more about what GEAR UP is and how it will help them to achieve their goals after high school!



The App State GEAR UP team helps assemble over 6,000 welcome bags for new students



GEAR UP APEX Coordinators attend onboarding in Boone last month

College Advising Corps Appalachian State University

NC Adviser Mid-Year Training

In December, AppCAC advisers joined their fellow North Carolina college and career advisers in Winston Salem for the NC CAC Mid Year Training! This meeting featured adviser led sessions, an overview of updates for our data management system GRACE, and presentations about life after the corps. Franklin High School adviser Becka Dulaney led a session on foundational advising skills entitled "Empowering Advisors: Creating Connections, Setting Boundaries, Driving Success."

Adviser Recruitment 2025-2026

AppCAC is looking for recent college graduates who want to make a difference by supporting WNC high school seniors with the postsecondary planning process!

Our projected adviser position openings for the 2025-26 school year are:

- Robbinsville High School, Graham County
- Smoky Mountain High School & Jackson County Early College, Jackson County
- Swain County High School, Swain County
- Alexander Central High School, Alexander County
- Hayesville High School, Clay County
- Alleghany High School, Alleghany County
- Mountain Heritage High School, Yancey County
- Madison High School, Madison County
- McDowell High School, McDowell County



Please share with any recent college graduate (grad years between 2021 and 2025) who may be interested!

[Click here for the application link.](#)

Podcast Guest: Kenley Longbottom

Kenley Longbottom, CAC adviser at Alleghany High School, was recently featured on a podcast from the [Alleghany Education Foundation](#). She discussed her school's approach to FAFSA completion and the complexities of postsecondary planning.

Listen using this [link](#)!



AppCAC December Training

Advisers came together before the CAP Holiday Gathering in December to reconnect and reflect on the resiliency of their communities in the wake of Hurricane Helene. They built gingerbread houses and villages that incorporated the spirit of resilience they experienced in their regions following the storm.



CAC Advisers build gingerbread houses during their holiday gathering



CAP Executive Director Serving on Rebuilding Western NC Board

North Carolina Governor Josh Stein launched the Rebuilding Western North Carolina Advisory Committee late last year and named several local and state leaders who will help advise the governor's work in continuing to aid these areas post Hurricane Helene. CAP Executive Director, Dr. Jim Beeler is one of the individuals selected. Read more [here](#).

SAVE THE DATE

The GEAR UP Academic Innovation Conference
will take place on June 11, 2025 at Appalachian State University.
Learn more by visiting this [link](#).



Workforce Connection Breakfast

Southwestern Community College and Swain County High School recently hosted a Junior Workforce Career Connection Breakfast bringing together the entire junior class of Swain County HS and 25+ professionals from the region. The breakfast provided a sit-down meal and conversation to help students know what is available in their local area as they look ahead to their next steps. As students continue to identify options, On Ramp works to support those students without a clear plan of action and to develop a plan that takes a student to or through the community college.



Swain County HS and Southwestern CC host an On Ramp Workforce Connection Breakfast

ETL Goes International

Read from ETL Navigator, Holly Weaver, about her once-in-a-lifetime experience sharing ETL with educators in Athens, Greece!

Latest News



[From Rural Appalachia to Athens, Greece: How Empowering Teacher Learning Project Resonates with Teachers Across the World](#)

Nov 25, 2024

When Appalachian State's College Access Partnerships was presented with the opportunity to replicate Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL), a profession...

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GREAT STEM Educator Feature

Students and educators throughout western North Carolina know all too well the impact Hurricane Helene has had on their communities. Not only were many personally impacted by the physical destruction the storm left in its wake, but so many of our students and teachers continue to see the emotional toll that the storm has taken on everyone in the region. As soon as many residents were able, they were jumping into action to help with recovery efforts. It was with this mindset that **Thelma Kastl**, engineering teacher at West Wilkes High School, initiated a project with her students aimed at creating and building preparation kits that could be distributed to Hurricane Helene victims in need or to assist in any future crisis. The message from the book they read, All We Need is Love and a Really Soft Pillow was the guiding principle. The book allowed the students to solve a real-life problem using human-centered design, and as a teacher in the GREAT STEM Program (part of the Empowering Teacher Learning (ETL) program that supports high school teachers), Mrs. Kastl was able to incorporate this microbadge to help tie it all together. Read more about the project [here](#).

ETL Conference Presentations

The ETL team recently presented at several state and national conferences sharing processes, successes and challenges, and the project's impact on teachers. Each presentation was well-attended and generated significant interest. In North Carolina, the team shared about ETL at the NC School Boards Association (NCSBA) Conference in November, the NC Principals and Assistant Principals Association (NCPAPA) Conference in December, and the NC Association for Research in Education (NCARE) Conference in February. Nationally, at the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Project Directors Meeting in DC, the team presented on the impact of SB49, known as the NC "Parents' Bill of Rights," on their data collection and research. They also discussed implications for teacher licensure and relicensure at the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) Annual Meeting. These presentations are a critical component of the dissemination plan for the ETL grant and are also a significant part of the team's aims to support a state and national move to competency-based professional learning for teachers.



Summer Planning

Upward Bound Summer Academy planning is in full swing and accepting applications for Summer Instructors and Mentors. Interested people should contact Matthew Medlin (medlinml@appstate.edu) for more information regarding this excellent opportunity to engage with high school students during the summer.

Student Academic Success

Current Upward Bound students have been working diligently on ACT preparation, FAFSA, college applications, and scholarship applications. To date, 92% of the senior class has completed a FAFSA!

Class of 2031 Recruitment Begins

YES Scholar recruitment for class of 2031 is underway! The applications we've received are from strong candidates. For the past few weeks, we've been interviewing students and families. We look forward to spending time with the accepted applicants this summer!

Ice Skating in December

With the support of our MSW intern, Lex, YES launched a four-week after-school peer mentoring program. Despite a compressed schedule due to Hurricane Helene, scholars from 7th to 12th grade participated enthusiastically, built deeper friendships, and enjoyed their time together. To celebrate the semester, we went ice skating at App Ski and had a fantastic time!



Scholars ice skate at App Ski to celebrate the success of their peer mentoring program

Class of 2025 College Acceptances

Of the eleven YES Scholars graduating from high school this year, nine have already received college acceptances. Four have been accepted to Appalachian State, with one already committed to attending.

We're especially excited that YES will be represented at Western Carolina for the first time this fall! Additionally, we will have a second scholar attending Columbia University in New York City.



YES scholars attend campus tours of Berea College, Centre College, and Vanderbilt University.

Kentucky College Tour

Susan and Carly drove eight students from Ashe and Watauga Counties to Berea College, Centre College in Danville, KY, and Vanderbilt University. This was the second time staying overnight at Berea's Sturt Cottage, which provides visitors a place to stay at no cost.

Centre College was a new experience for all of us, and we were impressed by their strong scholarship program, which meets 100% of demonstrated financial need for academically strong students.

The highlight of the trip was receiving a personal tour of Vanderbilt from Ashe County's own YES Scholar, Connor Waterman. We also visited the 3D printing lab where Connor works and had the opportunity to meet Dr. Florian, his supervisor. Known as "Dr. Flo," he has impressively 3D-printed a life-size, fully functional boat!