

Office of Rural Promise



Director's Message

Most of us in education just naturally take a deep breath and relax a little when the school year ends with the coming of summer. While we feel much the same, ironically this is one of the busiest times of the year for us. We're able to engage with students and educators in different ways such as camps, conferences, trips, and other activities that frequently are the culmination of the past year or the beginning of next year. This is very exciting and engaging work for everyone involved - often the special sauce that adds just the right touch to our programs. Looking back at all of the goings on of a summer is always cause for celebration.

I invite you to read the great stories from summer activities with Upward Bound, YES, GEAR UP, ETL and others. Three things of particular note about our organization:

- One - what was College Advising Corps is now Advise NC. We are very excited for the work this team will do in 23 counties across WNC.
- Two - we have added some information about the recent presentations, publications, and awarded funding of our team. A goal of almost every grant is to share what we learn with the field, and our team is fantastic at this with 13 of our folks listed as authors or presenters.
- Three - College Access Partnerships (CAP) is expanding to become the Office of Rural Promise (ORP). While we'll share more going forward, please know that we will continue our present work, and we look forward to this next chapter.

Fall is here, and we are busy with our school partners in this new year. The future is bright!

- Jim Beeler,

Executive Director- College Access Partnerships

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Office of Rural Promise

Introducing: Office of Rural Promise

We are thrilled to announce that College Access Partnerships is transitioning into a new organizational structure. As part of the Office of Research and Innovation (ORI) at Appalachian State University, the **Office of Rural Promise (ORP)** will be broken into three divisions: **College Access Partnerships**, **Learning in the Profession**, and **NC Rural Education Collaborative**. By leveraging existing CAP grants, the ORP will continue grant writing and identify areas of growth; focus on community partnerships, service, and research; and use design principles and challenge based learning to bring a wide group of App State and community stakeholders together to address community and regional challenges. With an initial focus on our region, ORP hopes to expand across regions outside of Appalachia and one day build partnerships that extend to state and national.

Additional communications will be forthcoming, but you may start to see new ORP branding and naming usage; however, CAP is not going away and will continue to house GEAR UP, YES, Advise NC at App State, On Ramp, and Upward Bound. ETL and GREAT STEM will be part of the Learning in the Profession branch of ORP, and the NC Rural Education Collaborative will be a new organizational arm where educators, administrators, and stakeholders from across rural North Carolina can share ideas, solve problems together, and build a stronger collective voice. We look forward to continued growth, and we value your support every step of the way!

Research & Innovation in 2025

The ORP team has been busy writing and submitting grants this year, many of which have already received funding. Some of the grant awards are included below.

Grant Applications

New grant funding commitments in 2025:

John M. Belk Endowment - \$633,000

Young Eisner Scholars - \$140,430

AmeriCorps - \$547,997

John M. Belk Endowment - \$600,000

Appalachian Regional Commission - \$300,000

Staff Presentations Q2-Q3 2025

College Access Partnerships is made up of multiple data-driven grant program initiatives that are evaluated annually to assess progress toward goals, objectives, and performance indicators. Research-based strategies are used to improve outcomes in all the districts we serve. Staff members routinely present results and best practices at various conferences and events across the state and across the country. Recent professional presentations are listed in the table below.

Presentations

Shepherd, R., Snyder J. & Winebarger, T. (April 2025). Evaluating Research in Teacher-Directed Professional Learning with CLASS. Presentation at CLASS InterAct 2025.

West, E., Childress, H. & Johnson, J. (April 2025). The Cost of Teaching: A Feminist Analysis of Teacher Experiences Earning Professional Learning Stipends. Presentation at AERA Annual Meeting.

Nave-Lewis, R. (April 2025). Funding Innovation. Presentation at NWRESA Media Coordinator Conference.

Adams, Y. & Norris, K. (April & July 2025). SEEDS: Planting SEEDS for DREAMS. Presentation at Academic Innovation Conference & NCCEP Annual Conference.

Smith, M. & Li, J. (July 2025). The GEAR UP Guarantee: Making the College Application Process More Transparent for GEAR UP Students. Presentation at NCCEP Annual Conference.

Thompson, D. & Nave-Lewis, R. (July 2025). Redesigning Algebra 1: Innovative Strategies for Inclusive & Engaging Math Instruction. Presentation at NCCEP Annual Conference.

Calbreath, W. & Warren, A. (July 2025). The C.O.R.E. System - A Comprehensive Web-based Resource for Improving Postsecondary Outcomes. Presented at NCCEP Annual Conference.

Calbreath, W. (July 2025). Counselors as Partners & Leaders. Presentation at Appalachian Principal Fellows Summer Summit.

Smith, M. (July 2025). Breaking Through Barriers. Presentation at From Chaos to Community: A Retreat for Western NC Teachers from the National Paideia Center and the NC DNCR.

Calbreath, W. (August 2025). High Yield Strategies for Classroom Management in Challenging Settings. Presentation at Appalachian State Beginning Teacher Summit.



READ MORE

To learn more about CAP and ORP programs and to read additional publications and presentations by staff members, visit our [Impact](#) webpage.

Employee Spotlights

Let's get to know **Jason Snyder, Ph.D** our Research Support Specialist for ETL!



1. How long have you worked with CAP? Since January 2024

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

Book: The Milagro Beanfield War - Set in a fictional town in New Mexico, but referring to close to where I grew up. A combination of humor, sociological analysis, historical fiction, and political commentary, traces the activities of a small Hispanic community fighting to keep their water rights and way of life from the big money interests coming in.

3. What would your perfect/ideal day look like? Wake up and eat a nice breakfast, work on the hobby farm for a couple of hours, take a short nap, go with the family to an outdoor bluegrass music festival, and then end the day visiting close friends with drinks and a hot tub.

4. What fictional place would you like to visit? Middle Earth in the Shire and Elven Kingdoms

5. What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? Start a bioregional field school that focuses on activities like agroecology, natural building, ecosystem stewardship, decentralized energy systems, traditional crafts, and connects students to apprenticeships and access to land after they graduate



Jason hiking with his family

Let's get to know GEAR UP Accounting Technician, **Jennifer Denny**!

1. How long have you worked with CAP? Since 12/14/2020

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

Dirty Dancing! I have always loved it. I named my first dog Baby. I have seen it probably over 100 times. It's just so nostalgic; it's not just a romance movie (which I love all romance movies) - it's a mix of iconic music, memorable dances, cultural themes, and unforgettable performances. My Godmother was a dancer, so I think that made me love it even more. AND of course the famous "lift" scene!!!

3. What would your perfect/ideal day look like? Sleeping until I wake up naturally... and probably even staying in bed a little longer. I am definitely not a morning person. Making some delicious french press coffee. Drinking said coffee on a balcony with my husband overlooking a beautiful body of water! Meeting up with the kids for brunch at a lovely little café or bistro; then heading to some kind of adventure - be it exploring a town we've never been to, hiking in a tropical rainforest, horseback riding in the ocean, floating down a clear water creek or river, or any other off the beaten path thing. Stopping at a store on the way back to wherever we are staying to grab something fresh and local to cook for dinner. After putting up the groceries heading down to the water for the afternoon and to watch the sunset, then back to make a cocktail or pour a glass of wine to breathe, turn on island music, prep for dinner, dance in the kitchen with my husband, and cook all the yummy things we picked up while out. Set the table outside on the balcony and enjoy it with our kids. After dinner it's movie time with all kinds of snacks, treats, etc for the boys. They say I am "extra" so there would be tons to choose from. Then heading off to bed. That's a perfect day!

4. What fictional place would you like to visit? Neverland – full of hidden coves, lagoons, and sunny beaches and you never get old!!

5. What's something you'd like to do that you've never done? TRAVEL - I have only been out of the county once and that was to Jamaica. This is a life goal. I want to see all the wonders of the world and explore hidden gems and local cultures.



Jennifer's family photo collage



Corinne Smith Honored as GEAR UP Professional Leader of the Year

Early in 2025, the Appalachian GEAR UP team submitted an application package to nominate GEAR UP Director, Corinne Smith for Professional of the Year which included about 18 nomination letters from Corinne's peers from across the state and country as well as a video montage with testimonials highlighting Corinne's work with GEAR UP over the last 10 years. Corinne was selected as the winner and accepted her award during the conference and gave an amazing acceptance speech in front of nearly 2,000 conference attendees. Read more [here](#).



Corinne Smith, GEAR UP Director and CAP Deputy Director receives national award at NCCEP Conference in July

GEAR UP Launches Money Mondays

Appalachian GEAR UP is proud to announce the launch of Money Mondays! Money Mondays is a free, online financial aid program hosted by GEAR UP in collaboration with financial aid experts from our partner IHEs. Students and their families will drop in to as many of these sessions as they'd like – no registration required. Money Mondays will take place on Zoom every other Monday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. beginning on October 6th. For more information about Money Mondays visit our [website](#).



Academic Innovation Conference

On June 10th and 11th, Appalachian GEAR UP hosted their annual Academic Innovation Conference, organized by Rachel Nave-Lewis and the AIC conference committee. This year's conference focused on the theme of global citizenship and sought to answer the question, "How do we equip students with the tools to navigate and thrive in an ever-changing world?"

Attendees participated in a number of events, including the partner showcase, the Innovator of the Year Luncheon, the Participate Learning Downtown Boone Scavenger Hunt, over 70 breakout sessions, and the highly anticipated Ex=PO Pitch Competition.

In the Ex=PO Pitch Competition, educators competed in a "Shark Tank" style pitch competition for the chance to win mini-grants for their classrooms and schools. Over \$50,000 in mini-grants were awarded.

This year's AIC also saw presentations by Joaquin Zihuatanajo of CoolSpeak and GEAR UP's own L.E.A.D. students.

Next year's Academic Innovation Conference will be held **June 9th-10th, 2026** at A-B Tech Community College in Asheville. GEAR UP will begin accepting proposals for next year's sessions in October. If you have innovative ideas, research, or experiences to share, GEAR UP invites you to consider submitting a proposal at that time.



Photos from this year's Academic Innovation Conference

GEAR UP Summer Roundup

The summer months mark what may be considered the busiest time for the GEAR UP community. Summer camps are underway in many districts and on IHE campuses, college bus tours are traversing the state, and the annual GEAR UP Conference takes place. Read below to learn more about our summer highlights:

- **Appalachian GEAR UP hosted 122 students in three separate five-day bus tours across the state.** Rising 10th grade students visited UNC Greensboro, Elon University, NC State University, Duke University, UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Wilmington, Eastern Carolina University, and Cape Fear Community College. Students were housed in NC State and UNC Wilmington residence halls. They also attended the Morehead Planetarium show, Queen Anne's Revenge Laboratory, historic riverboat tour of Wilmington and made a stop at Wrightsville Beach.
- **Students across our districts participated in numerous summer camps:**
 - Cosmetology Summer Day Camp & Construction Camp at Western Piedmont Community College
 - Earn Your Wings Aviation Camp with Wilkes CC
 - Camp NASCAR (Navigating Automobile Safety Collisions & Robotics) at App State
 - Leadership Camp with Isothermal CC
- **5 L.E.A.D. Students attended the NCCEP Youth Leadership Summit in San Francisco.** Marlene Alcaraz-Galen, Adrianna Chavez-Jasso, and Melvin Cervantes (all rising seniors from Watauga HS), Sara Gomez from Yancey County, and Sariah Hyatt from Swain County attended the national conference in July. These incredible students showed exceptional leadership, dedication, and passion throughout the L.E.A.D Program. The 2025 Youth Leadership Summit included 150 GEAR UP students from across the country. Students participated in a 3.5-day leadership training during which they learned skills and strategies to strengthen their ability to navigate their future. The final day of the program culminated in a student-led presentation about current education issues that impact students, given to the over 2,000 conference attendees.



L.E.A.D. students and chaperones pose for a selfie en route to San Francisco for the Youth Leadership Summit



Summer Academy

From June 16 - July 25, Upward Bound held their annual Summer Academy, a 6-week residential program that gives 10th and 11th grade students a snapshot of what real college life is really like. Students took classes, lived on campus, and ate all of their meals in the dining hall alongside their college student mentors. Students also went off campus for college tours of other schools and participated in recreational activities such as movie nights and evenings at the Student Recreation Center. Upward Bound students who graduated from high school and had participated in the program since freshman year were also invited to attend a week-long visit to Washington, D.C. to celebrate their achievements.

"It's really just meant to be a celebration of their end of time with Upward Bound and to celebrate the success of graduating and achieving their goal," said Jessica Dale, UB Academic Coordinator and co-chaperone of the trip. "We do a lot of sightseeing and touristy things in DC. It's just like a fun week to kind of be together." To read more about Upward Bound's summer programming [here](#).



Snapshots from Upward Bound Summer Academy

Summer Highlight Video



Please check out this short video using the button to the left. You'll see college visits, dorm life, friendship building, outdoor activities, enrichment classes, food, fun, and more! Enjoy!

3D Printing STEM Opportunities

This summer, Upward Bound introduced an exciting new hands-on learning opportunity with the addition of 3D printing to their program. Rising 10th grade students were the first to explore this technology during their afternoon sessions at Summer Academy, using programs like Tinkercad and Bambu Studio. Students designed custom name tags, keychains, fidgets, and figurines. The Upward Bound staff also made creative use of the printers by designing and producing our end-of-summer awards. Teachers were able to personalize each award with students' names and titles, making the recognition even more meaningful. The addition of these printers reflects Upward Bound's ongoing commitment to providing meaningful STEM experiences that foster creativity, problem-solving, and future-ready skills. Special thanks to Jack Faullin for leading the 3D printing sessions and to Upward Bound Director, Aaron Gersonde, for supporting the purchase of the printers and allowing this new experience for students.



YES Summer Highlights

YES hosted their academic summer camp at the Ashe County campus of Wilkes Community College. This camp brought together rising 7th and 8th graders from Ashe and Watauga County for 2 weeks of programming featuring lessons on coding, engineering, creative writing, graphic design, Glowforge printing, video editing and production, and more. Students enjoyed lunch and dinner together with YES leaders Susan Saule and Carly Stephens, as well as game time and socialization every day. To read more about the YES summer day camps, click [here](#).

Scholar Summer Opportunities

Scholars and families were provided a list of summer opportunities to pursue on their own. Some of the YES Scholars applied, were accepted to, and participated in summer camps with NCSSM, Vanderbilt's Program for Talented Youth, a vet camp for rising 12th graders at Auburn University, and idTech. Additionally, a handful of college Scholars completed paid internships away from home and school, and one of the college Scholars received a \$10,000 summer fellowship to complete research for their culminating senior research project!



Macie's research project

End-of-Summer Celebration

YES wrapped up their summer programming with the end-of-summer celebration on July 31st. Students and their families were encouraged to attend and enjoy dinner with one another while enjoying presentations from YES scholars about their summer adventures.



YES Scholar Family Event: End of Summer Celebration



Advise NC

New Model, New Year, New Team!

Along with the launch of Advise NC, the new statewide advising collective, Advise NC at App State is thrilled to introduce the 2025-26 Next Step Advisers! They are an amazing team of new folks and returners.

New advisers include:

- Aubrey Clapsaddle, Hayesville High (Clay County)
- CJ Williams, Madison High (Madison County)
- Fitz Fitzgerald, Avery County High & Marjorie Williams Academy (Avery County)
- Laura Tellez-Elias, Alleghany High (Alleghany County)
- Reagan Ditmore, Robbinsville High (Graham County)
- Xavier Johnson, Mountain Heritage High (Yancey County)
- Anson Gagnier, Freedom High (Burke County)
- Dorian Davis, Shelby High (Cleveland County)

Returning advisers include:

- Becka Dulaney, Franklin High (Macon County)
- Courtney Gragg, Watauga High (Watauga County)
- Jaden Shorett, Andrews & Hiwassee Dam High (Cherokee County)
- Katie Hubbard, Wilkes Central High (Wilkes County)
- Lala Reid-Jackson, St. Stephens High (Catawba County)
- Lorena Calvillo, Ashe County High & Ashe Early College (Ashe County)
- Paige Georgeou, Mitchell High (Mitchell County)

Advisers completed a multi-week summer training experience in preparation to best advise students on the three Es - Enrollment, Enlistment, and Employment. Topics included Advising 101, Effectively Engaging Families, FAFSA, RDS, Professionalism & K12 Etiquette, Data Security & Confidentiality, FERPA, Working with Workforce Bound Students, and many adviser-led sessions. Advisers even got outside for some team-building at Camp Broadstone and broke wooden boards with their bare hands as part of a Breaking Barriers session with CAP Deputy Director, Corinne Smith!



Advise NC at App State team poses during recent summer training



Summer Bridge Experiences

Summer for On Ramp offers opportunities for high school students to explore career opportunities more directly in their region while supporting the transition of high school graduates into the local community college.



Students attend Summer Bridge Program

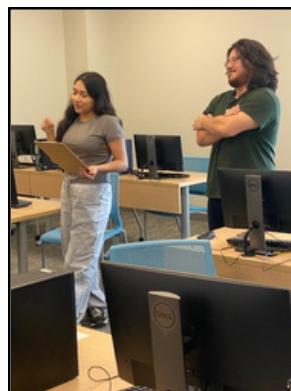
Across the grant, summer experiences provided deeper connections with workforce partners and assisted students in making a smooth start to their college career.

Summer Bridge experiences were hosted at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Western Piedmont Community College, and Wilkes Community College. These programs gave students a chance to blend the high school routines with the college experience and welcome students to the institution. An intentional approach targeted a group of 18 students from partner high schools as they made the transition to their local community colleges. These students participated in shared course work, met campus faculty and support personnel, established the foundation of time management and study skills, and set themselves up for success as they entered their first year of college.

Read more about the experience at Wilkes Community College on the next page.

WCC Summer Bridge Program

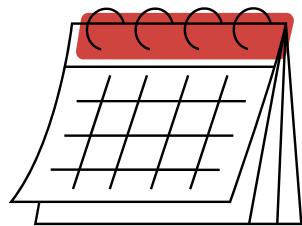
Wilkes Community College hosted a small but mighty group of students on both the main Wilkes County campus and the Ashe campus of Wilkes Community College. Students spent four instances over the summer exploring local career opportunities related to their college programs, developing mentorship relationships, and deepening connections. Throughout summer, students had the opportunity to meet some of their fall instructors, ask questions about coursework and expectations, and engage with a host of faculty and staff members through various activities. All Summer Bridge participants reported feeling more confident about starting their first day of class, becoming more familiar with the layout of campus, and experiencing less nervousness.



Students attend WCC Summer Bridge Program

Upcoming On Ramp Events

Coming up this Fall, Junior Workforce Connection Breakfasts will be offered at each of the partner high schools (Ashe County HS, Patton HS - Burke County, Madison HS, and Swain County HS). A foundational experience for On Ramp, the breakfasts provide an opportunity for students to sit down and meet with local and regional career professionals.



The breakfasts will kick off on September 17th with Patton High School hosted by Western Piedmont Community College. Ashe County High School, hosted by Wilkes Community College, has multiple small group breakfast experiences, and they kick off on October 10th. Madison High School, hosted by AB Tech Community College, was unable to host a breakfast in Fall 2024 due to the impact of Hurricane Helene and will host breakfasts for juniors and seniors on October 22nd. Swain County High School, hosted by Southwestern Community College, will host their breakfast on October 27th.

Supporting First-Year College Students

On Ramp wants to support students to and through their college experience. As students start their first semester as full-time college students, On Ramp provides several opportunities to ensure their continued success. First-year students are treated to direct engagement with the On Ramp Coordinator who can become a trusted adult and support figure on campus. Coordinators work closely with academic advisors, tutors, Success Coaches, faculty members, and others to provide campus resources and to support student advocacy. Students will meet with coordinators monthly to discuss challenges, successes, and opportunities to grow their connections with their fellow On Ramp Scholars at campus partners.

For the college partner, this also means offering shared meals to students, providing workforce engagement events and job shadowing opportunities, funding resources such as textbooks for students, and providing budgeting and financial aid support throughout the transitional year.



ETL In Greece

Earlier this month, members of the Empowering Teacher Learning team traveled to Greece for a week of learning and professional development. This marks the second time ETL has made this trip to Athens College. The team traveled with a plan to teach 30 teachers and participants about micro-credentials and self-directed learning.

Stay tuned to read the full story about ETL's time in Greece and the impact this trip had on their educators later this month. You can read about their past opportunity to travel to Greece [here](#).

ETL Summer Convening

From July 29th–August 1st, the ETL team hosted a four-day series of professional learning events at Appalachian State University, bringing together teachers from across the Empowering Teacher Learning community. The week kicked off with the Innovation Cohort, where 38 veteran ETL teachers explored ways to introduce more autonomous and self-directed learning opportunities into their classrooms this year. This group will meet twice throughout the year and work in community groups and alongside their Navigator on developing unit plans that embrace student self-directed learning with the hope of developing the leaders who might implement ETL on their own campuses.



ETL Summer Convening

On days two and three, the final ETL cohort made up of teachers who have been participating in the control group of the ETL research project for the last three years engaged in their first Summer Convening, where they reflected on their professional learning strengths, areas for growth and established learning goals for the year. They also had the opportunity to hear from ETL alumni during a discussion panel, where teachers shared inspiring success stories and offered practical advice for achieving success in the program. After three years of waiting, this cohort will finally experience the treatment phase of the project.

The final day featured the GREAT STEM cohort, where high school science teachers set meaningful STEM-related learning goals for the year ahead and selected microcredentials that align with their professional growth journeys! In addition to the innovation cohort, ETL launched another pilot program, also made up of veteran ETL participants. This new program is called PRIME (Professionals Refining Instructional Inventories through Microcredential Expertise). In this program, educators are using their experience in the ETL program to transform their content-area knowledge and classroom experience into high-impact, subject-specific microcredentials.

The ETL team is thrilled to see the energy, creativity, and commitment these educators are bringing to their classrooms and to our programs. We can't wait to celebrate the exciting work they'll accomplish this year!

Latest Feature Stories



Isothermal GEAR UP Hosts Middle School Leadership Camp

Sep 5, 2025

On July 23rd, Isothermal Community College hosted a one-day leadership



Upward Bound Summer Academy Offers Students a Taste of College

Jul 23, 2025

The 2025 Upward Bound Summer Academy has officially kicked off and



App State's Corinne Smith honored as 2025 national GEAR UP Professional Leader of the Year

Jul 21, 2025

BOONE, N.C.

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