



Director's Message

This would normally be a note about the beginning of school and how our education community is adjusting to the new academic year. September 26-27 and Hurricane Helene changed everything, bringing death and destruction, and instantly imposing emergencies, hardships, and unspeakable sorrow on the region. Three things about this really stand out to me:

- 1) The very real destruction and loss experienced by so many in the region is just devastating.
- 2) The region has been blessed by incredible actions of kindness, support, and help to those in both the affected areas and from outside of the region. So many have contributed, and you will find examples of their actions in the articles in this newsletter. We include a brief update on when/how school districts are reopening. We also highlight the incredible actions of two CAP team members, Rachel and Yolanda, in our Employee Spotlight.
- 3) Finally, for anyone familiar with the extent of the destruction, it is clear that rebuilding will take months and years. I believe it will be a while before we fully understand the long-term impact of Helene on the people of the region, and I'm mindful that we will all need to continue to work together to meet the challenges set forth by September 26-27.

With that in mind, this newsletter also contains stories of the continuing work of our CAP programs and partners. It is both very necessary and heartwarming to know that even while we deal with the devastation, we continue to move forward. We so value our many partnerships across all of the programs at CAP and remain thankful for the privilege to work with you. Please don't hesitate to let us know as you see need.

- Jim Beeler,
Executive Director- College Access Partnerships

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Hurricane Relief Support

In light of the devastation and destruction that Hurricane Helene left in its path across Western North Carolina, there has been an overwhelming outpouring of support from the Appalachian community. Over the last few weeks, the CAP team has seen firsthand the generosity of neighbors, friends, and strangers as they work together to help rebuild and to support the resiliency of our community members.

CAP schools throughout the region suffered a wide range of damage to their infrastructure and to their communities. GEAR UP Burke County helped to distribute essential supplies to their community members. Appalachian State CAP staff helped clean up downed trees and debris for their neighbors and colleagues and helped deliver clothing to those in need. **MasteryPrep** worked with Doug Thompson from GEAR UP to shop for materials for families in Ashe County. **Texas Instruments** helped Yancey County families purchase items like propane, lamp oil, lamps, burners, detergents, plates and utensils, and heaters. The GEAR UP Team in Yancey delivered those items throughout the community to those most in need.

Q'Pasa Appalachia helped to gather information from around Watauga County and share it with our Latinx Community. GEAR UP Assistant Director for Student Leadership & Family Outreach, Yolanda Adams, has been providing Spanish translation services to multiple organizations in the High Country including Wine to Water. This has been pivotal in helping make sure everyone in our region is aware of the resources available to them during this crisis.

"In the wake of Hurricane Helene, our community has faced unimaginable challenges. Through Q'Pasa Appalachia and my work with organizations like Wine to Water, we're doing everything we can to build bridges and close gaps by providing critical, reliable information to our Latino(e/x) community. In times like these, it's more important than ever to ensure that every person has access to the resources they need to rebuild and heal. We're in this together, and our focus remains on the well-being and resilience of our community," said Yolanda Adams.

Reich College of Education and other partners are working together to connect schools from the eastern and western sides of the state in an Adopt-A-School initiative. To aid in the recovery process, we have launched a coordinated effort, enabling individuals to adopt schools in a way that minimizes additional burdens on those affected. Schools that would like to be adopted can complete this form and schools that would like to provide support and adopt a school should complete this form. One of our GEAR UP partners, **Thinking Maps**, made a generous monetary donation to the American Red Cross specifically to support Hurricane Helene relief efforts in western North Carolina.

The **Leading EDge Learning (LEL)** team of Nancy Mangum and Theresa Gibson has supported Empowering Teacher Learning, GEAR UP, and CAP as a long-term partner. In this time of need, they shifted their support to our districts by ordering supplies and sending funds for relief efforts. Nancy drove from Raleigh to Winston-Salem to deliver the supplies then helped a group of CAP staff members shop at Sam's Club. With LEL's help and the help of others, they filled 3 pull-behind trailers and a flatbed truck with essential supplies for local fire departments in Ashe County.

"Theresa and I have spent the last several years working with educators across Western NC and have come to think of this region as a second home to us. Seeing the destruction and devastation is heartbreaking. Donating supplies and helping the ETL team to support the communities impacted by Hurricane Helene was just a small way we could give back. We were inspired to see the response and strength of Appalachia and look forward to continuing to help in the months to come", said Nancy Mangum.

We are beyond grateful for the resilience and dedication of our team members. Your willingness to step up and support our communities during the recovery process is nothing short of inspiring. Whether it's offering a helping hand, sharing resources, donating everything you can, or just providing comfort to those affected, your efforts are making a real difference. Together we are stronger, and your commitment to making our communities thrive, even in the hardest times, shows the heart and spirit of CAP. Thank you to all who continue to support and uplift our region.



CAP staff and partners in action helping provide support to Hurricane Helene victims in our region

Hurricane Affected CAP Districts

Hurricane Helene impacted every county that CAP serves, with some districts facing severe challenges. The storm has left lasting impacts on the lives of students, families, and staff members, and several counties will face months, if not years, of rebuilding. Below is an update on the status of schools in the most affected counties as of November 4:

Yancey County: Starting October 21, faculty and staff at Mountain Heritage High School (MHHS) began returning to school for two hours each day, though the district has yet to announce a return date for students. Following the storm, MHHS served as a base camp for military personnel, FEMA, police, and cadaver dog teams. Many schools in Yancey County remain active as distribution centers and emergency shelters.

Mitchell County: After the hurricane, Mitchell High School functioned as a Red Cross shelter. The projected reopening date for the county's schools is November 6 and recovery efforts continue throughout the area.

Avery County: Students are tentatively scheduled to return on Wednesday, November 6, with a two-hour delay. The goal is to resume a regular schedule by November 12.

Ashe County: Ashe County Schools remained closed from September 27 until October 29 due to significant storm damage to roads, homes, and businesses. Numerous road closures have required the district to coordinate with the Department of Transportation (DOT) to adjust bus routes, resulting in community drop-off points and a two-hour delay during the first week back. The fall semester may need to be extended, potentially affecting early graduates' timelines.

Watauga County: The high number of road closures has also led Watauga County Schools to work with the DOT to reconfigure bus routes, establishing community drop-off points.

A Message to CAP

Over the past several weeks, we have all faced turmoil and hardship in the wake of Hurricane Helene. While some of our partners and communities are still reeling through the recovery effort, it's been amazing to see so many from our CAP team engaged and doing their part. All of you have been contributors, and we are proud to call you members of our family. This work goes above and beyond our KPI's and postsecondary goals, it's about us working toward the success of all in this region.

Employee Spotlights

In this newsletter, we'd like to feature and highlight two CAP team members who really stepped up to provide a helping hand to our neighbors and communities during the aftermath of the hurricane. Please read about **Rachel Shepherd** and **Yolanda Adams**, and find out for yourself why CAP is so lucky to have them on our team!

Let's get to know our ETL Program Director, **Rachel Shepherd**!

1. How long have you worked with CAP?

I started with CAP in January, but I've been working with CAP programs as a teacher and administrator for several years. I'm very excited to be part of this team and to celebrate my 1-year work-versary with ETL in a few months!

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

My favorite movie is The Goonies (also known as the greatest movie of all time)! I've watched it over and over again and can quote it from start to finish. It's funny, heartwarming, adventurous, and shows the power of friendship (and how to use pirate treasure to fight capitalistic greed and gentrification). What more could you want in a movie?

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

Sleeping in just a little, spending a luxurious day alone on a porch swing bed at the beach while reading my favorite books, then ending the day with a nice pasta dinner with my husband and kids.

4. What fictional place would you like to visit?

I would have to say Atlantis. If there's any truth to the legends, I'd love to see it! (I'm a former history teacher who had high school ambitions of becoming a marine biologist.)

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

Dive the Great Barrier Reef or dive in a shark cage! I'm a certified SCUBA diver, but I haven't been in years. These dives are both on my bucket list!



"My family and I weren't directly impacted by Helene, but so many folks I know suffered catastrophic damage to their homes and livelihoods. I'm an Ashe County native, and I've never seen this kind of destruction in this area. I've also never witnessed goodness, compassion, and care for our fellow man on such a large scale. When people had the option to act or to stand still, so many chose to step in and do whatever they could for people who were in need. CAP colleagues and people I've met as a result of our work have shown up for each other and the people of Appalachia - donating money, volunteering, providing meals, checking in, and so many other things. Neighbors have helped neighbors without fail, and in every situation, the inclination hasn't been "what can I get for myself?" but "someone else might need this worse than I do" - the kind of selflessness that Appalachian culture is known for. In these last weeks, I've worked with several people who own disaster relief nonprofits and travel the world to support in challenging times. Every one of them has said they've never seen a place or a disaster response like this, where everyone works together and thinks of others before themselves. I am so grateful to work for CAP and App State and have never been more proud to live here!"

Let's get to know our GEAR UP Assistant Director for Student Leadership & Family Outreach, Yolanda Adams!

1. How long have you worked with CAP?

Since December 2023

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

One Hundred Years of Solitude (*Cien Años de Soledad*) by Gabriel García. The novel touches on themes that resonate across cultures and time periods, such as love, power, loneliness, and the cyclical nature of history. The Buendía family's struggles, triumphs, and tragedies echo larger societal and existential questions that readers around the world can connect with. The novel becomes a reflection of the historical struggles of Colombia and the broader region, making it relevant to readers familiar with Latin American history and those experiencing political turmoil anywhere.



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

My perfect day would begin with a quiet, early morning—just before sunrise—when the world feels peaceful and still. This would also include a wonderful cup of Colombia coffee. I would start with a walk on the beach, breathing in the salty air and feeling completely present in the moment. Family time is incredibly important to me, so being able to enjoy the day with my loved ones would be at the heart of it. Some of my most cherished memories have been from our family vacations to Ocracoke Island, a small, family-oriented place where life slows down. The island gives us a chance to reconnect, away from the chaos of daily life, and focus on being together. On my ideal day, we'd spend the afternoon exploring the island, maybe riding bikes or relaxing by the water. The simple act of being fully present with each other, without distractions, makes everything feel more meaningful. In the evening, we'd gather for a family meal—laughing, sharing stories, and playing our favorite card game called "NERDS", just enjoying each other's company. To me, it's these moments of being truly present with my family that matter most. The perfect day wouldn't be about doing anything extravagant but rather about feeling connected and fully engaged with the people I love.

4. What fictional place would you like to visit?

El Dorado: *El Dorado* is the legendary city of gold, hidden somewhere in the vast jungles of South America. It's a symbol of riches, discovery, and the dream of finding a paradise on Earth. *El Dorado* embodies the spirit of adventure and the allure of the unknown, as well as the richness of Latin American folklore and the deep desire for exploration.

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

One thing I've always wanted to do but have never had the chance is to travel to Tuscany, Italy. The region's breathtaking landscapes, rolling hills, vineyards, and charming villages have always fascinated me. I'd love to immerse myself in the local culture, explore the history, and savor the authentic Italian cuisine right where it's made. Tuscany feels like the perfect place to slow down, appreciate life's simple pleasures, and really be present in the moment, all while surrounded by incredible beauty. It would be a dream to experience the art, wine, cuisine, and atmosphere of such a timeless place.

The past few weeks have been a whirlwind of emotions and action as our community confronts the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene. The scale of the impact has been overwhelming, yet **it has also revealed the incredible resilience and compassion within our community**. Volunteering to support those affected has been both heart-wrenching and uplifting, reaffirming the power of unity in the face of crisis—not just as neighbors, but as one strong, united community. While I've devoted myself to helping anyone in need, my focus has been on the Hispanic/Latino families who have faced particularly severe challenges. Many of these families will not qualify for federal or state aid due to documentation status, which makes it even more essential for us to step up as a community to ensure no one is left behind. **This is a humanitarian effort that transcends borders and status; it is about caring for one another at the most fundamental level**. This experience has profoundly deepened my sense of purpose and reminded me how interconnected we all are—not defined by the color of our skin, but by the kindness and care we show one another.



New GEAR UP Grant Awarded

The U.S. Department of Education has awarded a seven-year, \$35 million GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant to Appalachian State University's College Access Partnerships. The award represents the largest single grant ever awarded to the university.

Known as GEAR UP APEX (Advancing Prosperity through Education and eXcellence), the grant launched on September 1 and includes 12 school districts and eight partnering North Carolina higher education institutions all working together to provide college and career services to nearly 14,500 middle and high school students and their families.

The 12 school districts, representing 52 middle and high schools, are Burke, Catawba, Cherokee Central, Clay, Graham, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Polk, Swain, and Transylvania. Higher education partners include Western Piedmont Community College, Isothermal Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, McDowell Technical Community College, Blue Ridge Community College, University of North Carolina Asheville, and Southwestern Community College.

Read more about the new GEAR UP grant [here](#).



CORE Website Launches

Earlier this semester, the GEAR UP team launched the C.O.R.E. (College Options, Resources, & Education) website for district coordinators and school personnel to use to help their students complete the many steps required to pursue postsecondary education.

The goal of the site and of the program is to answer these fundamental questions: *What do students/parents need to know before they perform a task or make decisions? How do we support students with the tasks through the process of application and enrollment? How do we build buy-in?*

The website will continue to evolve to fit the needs of the districts, but school districts have started using the content, and we look forward to making this information accessible to those who need it.

QCM at Warren Wilson College

Earlier this semester, the GEAR UP team attended a quarterly coordinator meeting (QCM) at Warren Wilson College. At the two-day meeting, staff members were able to connect and plan for services to implement over the next year.

The team also honored several staff members who were celebrating 10 years with the GEAR UP Program: April Marr, Eric Klein, Jody Freeman, Keree Mackey, Lisa Gahagan, Seth Prevette, Bekah Gardner, Kim Faw, Michelle Myers, Michael Wallin, Kim Bennett, Steve Birkhofer, and Shelley Hollingsworth.



GEAR UP staff honored for 10-years of service and participate in a campus visit at Warren Wilson College

Career Exploration Camps at Wilkes Community College

Rising 8th and 9th graders from Wilkes, Ashe, and Alleghany Counties attended a series of camps at Wilkes Community College earlier this summer. Each camp incorporated off campus tours of local industries and on campus activities with instructors and campus staff. Camps included presentations and interactive activities with community partners that informed them of career opportunities within their communities including representation from Jamie Anderson and Summer Jolly (Biology Instructors who participated in Kayak Adventure), Earl Byrd-Chief of Campus Police (who participated in Crime Stoppers), Jere Miles and Randall McNeil (IT instructors who participated in Can You Hack It?), and Donna Riddle (Horticulture instructor who participated in Thyme to Farm).



GEAR UP students attend camps held at Wilkes Community College

Trees of UNC Asheville

Earlier this semester, ten sophomores from three rural high schools in Madison, Graham, and Swain Counties bonded with each other and with UNC Asheville's campus. They learned about trees and fabrication and how working together on a project can be really fun. They learned what faculty from different college departments do and they learned that they like working with college faculty. At lunch on Tuesday, the kids talked about what the theme for next year's camp could be and what responsibilities they wanted to take to make it happen.

IHE Coordinator at UNC-A, Eric Klein, recalled a special moment after the event had ended, "I found the campers sitting on the floor in a hallway of Founders Hall with their luggage piled around them. I said: 'What are y'all doing? It's time to check out' and they said: 'We don't want to leave!'".

Western Piedmont Student Experiences

Western Piedmont Community College recently hosted an exciting week-long camp for rising 11th and 12th graders, offering them hands-on experience in various trades. Participants had the opportunity to dive into diverse programs, including Cosmetology, where they explored beauty techniques and tools. The Health Camp provided an in-depth look into fields such as Dental Assisting, Nurse Aid, Medical Technology, Medical Laboratory Assistance, Medical Assisting, and Recreational Therapy Assisting. Meanwhile, the Construction camp allowed students to channel their creativity and skills into building custom cornhole boards. Each program was designed to give students a practical taste of their chosen field, helping them make informed decisions about their future careers. WPCC hopes to host engaging and educational camps again in the summer of 2025, continuing our commitment to supporting students in their career exploration and development.

Cameron Fisher, a staff member from GEAR UP Burke County said, "The most interesting factor from our Summer Camps were how interested the students were in programs that they had NEVER heard of before, such as Recreational Therapy Assisting."



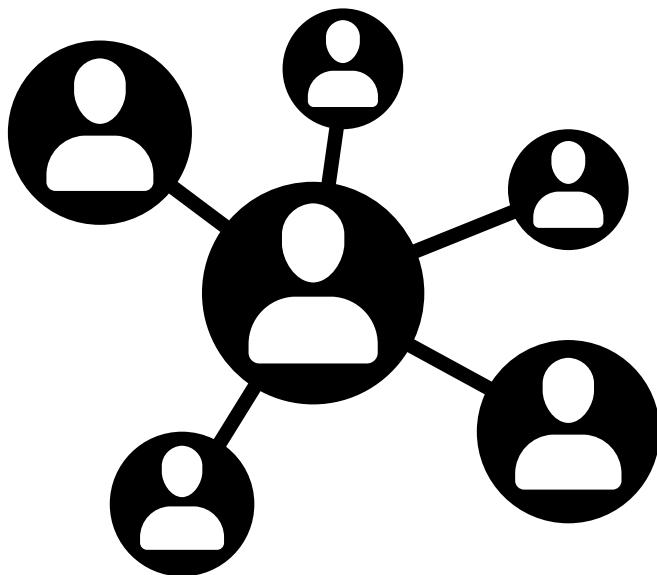
GEAR UP students attend summer camps at Western Piedmont Community College



Welcome, New Hires!

On Ramp Appalachia, in its first year, is excited to welcome new staff at our partnering institutions to continue to connect students with opportunities available to them. At Appalachian State, On Ramp Appalachia shares Finance Technician, Catherine Graham, with GEAR UP to support the work of both programs at partnering institutions. As a partnership grant with community colleges, On Ramp Appalachia works through Directors and Coordinators at the college level to implement services for students. On Ramp's goal is to identify students without a career or college plan and connect these students to opportunities through their local community college with connections to local and regional employers.

On Ramp Appalachia welcomed two new staff at partnering institutions in July and August to help contribute to these efforts. Susie Bryson joins the On Ramp and GEAR UP teams at Southwestern Community College as the On Ramp and GEAR UP Coordinator. Blaise Boone joins the On Ramp and GEAR UP teams at Western Piedmont Community College as the On Ramp and GEAR UP Coordinator. Susie and Blaise join colleagues Debra Joseph (AB Tech) and Lacey Kilby (Wilkes CC).



Workforce Connection Breakfasts

The first service offered through On Ramp is a Junior Workforce Connection Breakfast. This event is an opportunity for ALL high school juniors to come together with local employers to talk about opportunities in their area. This Fall, many of the breakfasts had to be put on hold in the wake of Hurricane Helene. Wilkes CC held breakfasts with Ashe County HS juniors in September, bringing together 20+ workforce partners to meet with juniors at the school in a conversational environment very different than a career fair. Additional breakfasts are rescheduled to November or a future date in the wake of Helene.

On Ramp supports students entering their senior year through direct advising services, providing targeted conversations about opportunities and pathways available to them at their local community colleges. Coordinators are working with Student Services teams across the service region to start offering these services and build plans for students as they near graduation and their next steps.



Students engage at a Workforce Connection Breakfast in Ashe County



ETL Publishes a Micro-credential

We are thrilled to announce that the ETL team has successfully authored and published their own micro-credential (MC) titled "Reflective Practice Using Video," in collaboration with Digital Promise.

This innovative MC encourages teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices using video. Participants are also guided to reflect with a trusted thought partner regarding their instruction and identify potential areas of growth. The team's MC emphasizes the importance of maintaining a non-evaluative approach to reflection, encouraging teachers to focus on impacting student engagement and learning outcomes.

The process of publishing a micro-credential requires extensive research, meticulous planning, and thoughtful writing to ensure a high-quality resource for teachers. The ETL team's work was outstanding, achieving immediate approval and publication without requiring any revisions. Furthermore, the team is currently developing two additional micro-credentials, which they anticipate will be available for educators shortly.



CAC Serving Seniors Amidst Ongoing Hurricane Relief Efforts

Amidst all of the destruction throughout Yancey County caused by Hurricane Helene, Mountain Heritage High School is still working to provide some opportunities for students such as some sporting events and club trips. Recently, on October 15-16, CAC provided seniors with assistance on college applications. On October 22-24 the senior counselor and CAC adviser hosted a modified version of the Free College Application Week event. They decorated the media center, provided snacks and drinks, and allowed students to drop in to receive application assistance. Admissions representatives from UNC Chapel Hill and Mars Hill University were also there to speak with students.

CAC Drives FAFSA Completion Rates

Madison County has recently been named as one of the two counties in Western North Carolina whose seniors have exceeded the state of North Carolina's FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion rate for the 2023-2024 school year.

As part of the myFutureNC FAFSA pilot program, Madison County joined 36 school districts across the state participating in activities to increase FAFSA completion rates across North Carolina. High school seniors complete the FAFSA, and states and colleges use information from the FAFSA form to determine eligibility for grants, scholarships, and loans. The immediate goal of the program was to increase FAFSA completions and share federal, state, and local financial aid resources. Districts also received additional funding to use for hosting events and incentivizing completing the FAFSA.

Taylor Kromer, Appalachian College Advising Corps adviser at Madison High School works directly with high school seniors assisting them with the college application process, including applying for financial aid.

"Completing the FAFSA was one of the biggest hurdles I faced as I transitioned from high school to postsecondary life. As a first-generation student, my family was not familiar with the process and was not informed about the financial aid that was available to help us. My school site has many first-generation students who have families that are going through the college application process for the first time, and being able to help them navigate that and identify opportunities for funding makes all the early mornings worth the effort. I am so proud of our collective accomplishment that is reflected in our FAFSA completion rate and we hope to increase it this year so that I can ensure that every student that wants to has access to all of their options," says Kromer.

Read more about this recognition [here](#).



Watauga HS Pioneer Spotlight

An Upward Bound student at Watauga High School was recently recognized and honored for her character.

The Pioneer Spotlight Program, which was started in 2006, honors students who have positive character traits based on a positive behavioral support system.

"I received this award from my art teacher Ms. Elle Lowry. The three words that she used to describe me were *determined, creative, and helpful*. When Ms. Lowry told me that she would be giving me this award, I was really surprised and extremely grateful because every teacher gets to choose two students, and the fact that I was the student that she thought of made me feel extremely proud! This award is given to a student when they have made their teacher proud of the work done in class. And for that, I'll always remember Ms. Lowry."



Robotics Workshop

YES (Young Eisner Scholars) hosted a robotics workshop for two different groups of scholars this summer at the Ashe campus of Wilkes Community College. Jose Lopez, the YES STEM Director and National Operations Director, traveled from the national office in Los Angeles to the New York branch and then drove to Ashe to facilitate the workshops. Jose is also a YES alumnus who graduated from Stanford University with a degree in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering. He's literally a rocket scientist!

The purpose of this workshop was to introduce students at an early age to robotics and engineering. While learning the fundamentals of electronics and coding, students built fun, engaging projects to challenge their critical thinking skills. They had time to tinker and use their creativity to explore some of the coding. Scholars worked with the [SparkFun Electronics](#) Inventor's Kit to build various projects including a light-sensitive LED light, a game with an LCD display similar to the game Head's Up, and a self-driving robot.

Each of these projects were mentioned as a favorite when given a feedback survey. One scholar said he wished that he had "more time to really absorb the knowledge that would've been helpful to develop our knowledge of [robotics]." Approximately 60% of our polled students said that they were interested in participating in a robotics class or club in the future. This feedback is important to see what types of activities are of interest to scholars and to direct future programming. Hands-on experiences like this expose our scholars to different types of thinking and narrow down their interests as they look ahead toward their futures.



CAP Strategic Planning Meeting

Our incredible group of dedicated CAP staff members gathered in Raleigh in September for a two-day Strategic Planning Meeting full of collaboration, growth, and connection. So many ideas evolved and grew from the discussions that were had at this meeting. We are excited about the future of college readiness and College Access Partnerships!



CAP staff members pose for a group photo during a meeting on the campus of NC State University



YES scholars attend a Robotics workshop this summer at the Ashe campus of Wilkes Community College