

Evaluation Report: The Community Colleges of Appalachia Rural Educator Academy

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Abstract

This preliminary evaluation report has been developed to provide some initial impressions and thoughts that have been collected from the evaluation team. In this preliminary report, the methods, procedures, evaluation team, and some preliminary findings are shared. A final evaluation report with additional data and analyses is forthcoming.



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Background

THE ACTIVITY

The Community Colleges of Appalachia (CCA) seeks expertise to design and pilot a professional development program to enhance the skills that faculty, staff, and leaders at CCA member colleges need to improve rural student outcomes. The Rural Educator Academy is a unique, two-pronged approach to professional development that will yield sustained improvements in rural student success. Recognizing that changes must occur at the institutional level and at the course-level, the Rural Educator Academy will be designed as two complementary experiences: (1) a REA for institutional leaders, and (2) a REA for faculty and student services staff. Through this professional development Academy, CCA will create a community of practice across Appalachia focused on ways to improve student success for low-income students and students of color.

EVALUATION PURPOSE AND DESIGN

PURPOSE

The purpose of the evaluation of the Rural Educator Academy Program Review is to evaluate the CCA Rural Educator Academy experience to learn more about how participants brought their learnings back to their respective campuses, recommendations for possible changes, focus, recruitment, scope, processes, topics, etc. of continuous improvement consideration, and preparing a report for the CCA Board about recommended next steps for the Rural Educators Academy and potential future partnerships with community resource organizations in Appalachia.

SCOPE

The REA evaluation team will conduct an REA Program Review collecting data from cohorts 1 and 2 and will identify emergent themes and provide a list and description of unique characteristics of students in rural postsecondary institutions in Appalachia. At the end of the project, the team will also develop a set of potential research questions that will inform future research projects to examine the impact of the Rural Educator Academy on economic mobility for the rural communities in Appalachia.



DESIGN

During the evaluation data was collected in three primary ways:

- (1) A short the demographic and general information survey (~5 minutes to complete)
- (2) A Zoom focus group session with a question protocol of nine initial questions (Appendix A) with focus group facilitator follow-up questions asked as needed (~1 hour)
- (3) Email soliciting feedback from participants unable to attend the focus group sessions, the same nine initial questions were emailed to all participants of REA cohorts 1 and 2

COLLEGES INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN EVALUATION

- Allegany College of Maryland
- Isothermal Community College
- Mountain Empire Community College
- Somerset Community College
- TriCounty Technical College
- West Virginia University at Parkersburg

TIMELINE OF MAJOR PROJECT ACTIVITIES

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval submitted to Clemson University IRB; early January 2024
- IRB Approval; mid-February 2024
- Initial email contact to community college leads soliciting identification of focus group participants; mid-February 2024
- Conducted focus groups; late March 2024
- Emailed participants not participating for additional feedback; April-May 2024
- Preliminary Report; June 2024



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Preliminary Findings

Participants

Institution	Number of Participants in Focus Group	Number of Participants Responding Via Email
Allegheny Community College	3 (1 administrator, 1 faculty)	1 faculty member
Isothermal Community College	2 (1 administrator, 1 faculty)	
Mountain Empire	3 (2 administrators, 1 staff)	
TriCounty Technical College	5 (3 administrators, 2 faculty)	
West Virginia University at Parkersburg	0 attended the scheduled focus group	
Somerset Community College	No email response to inquiries	

Themes

- Overall, the participants had a positive experience with the CCA REA.
- People were invited to participate in REA because of the roles they held on campus; they chose to participate because they enjoyed learning and/or their desire to support students or expertise in broadening participation and research.
- **Learnings**
 - Enjoyed meeting, connecting with, and engaging with colleagues across campus toward a common goal. Led to further collaborations outside of CCA REA (e.g., working on transportation).
 - Storytelling was critical to developing and maintaining relationships and to a more nuanced awareness-raising and



understanding of student and community issues through a rural lens.

- Identified specific needs for their campus; chose one to act on for REA but the others remain on the campus's list of things to address in the future.
- Invested and enthusiastic teams can take on big challenges (e.g., technology).
- Having external parties (CCA) offer assistance, shape goals, and hold you accountable to deadlines is helpful in making progress.
- Found that the Academy strengthened internal networks and collaboration as the college team worked to develop the project on campus, especially working with people across campus that don't often connect, also provided appreciation for people they don't often work with
- The overall experience from the modules to the networking to the implementation of projects provided affirmation they have been and will continue to do a lot of things correctly to serve rural students

- **Outcome(s)**

Participants reported many early outcomes and indicators of success that they and their campuses are experiencing because of participating in CCA REA. However, most acknowledge that impacts are still "trickling out ... [and] the waters are still dispersing" but there are "pebbles in the water"

- Many improvements on campus and to student outcomes were reported:
 - Made tweaks in technology processes from admissions to enrollment that streamlined the process for students, increased registration, and reduced calls to technology help desk.
 - Added a computer science tutor to aid students with technology issues, particularly at the start of the semester; that position turned into a full-time learning specialist role.
 - Work (e.g., streamlining the onboarding process; helping students use technology) has continued through a new technology task force; developed a checklist of items to address.
 - Additional projects to support rural students (e.g., transportation and faculty development) have begun.
 - Extra outreach was provided for the students that "wouldn't have been so much of a focus if it hadn't been for the Academy".
 - New faculty are seeking professional development related to campus projects and efforts. One campus



- reported that about 1/3 of the faculty who participated in the campus project (not the CCA REA cohort) wanted more training and development on the topic of the project to be able to better serve students.
- Nearly all reported improved campus cultures because of the CCA REA:
 - Highlighted positive campus culture where everyone wanted to participate - The project brought together people from across campus in all types of positions from "housekeeping staff ...up to the President's level" wanted to help the students and see the college move forward.
 - There was buy-in on the campus projects that created community, excitement, and was able to overcome the traditional "initiative fatigue" that many new projects experience.
 - Built stronger interinstitutional connections and connections within the CCA REA.
 - Participants expressed a desire for the project would be a sustainable ongoing initiative for change that wouldn't just be a "one and done" and would live beyond the tenure of the project team new recognition in seeing how rural student engagement part of their work is and connecting REA initiatives to other groups and projects on campus in a linear way. These connections will bring more awareness and involvement to support the culture shift.
 - The cohort work is starting to feel like it is "shifting culture from expecting students to come to college ready and shifting to a student ready college"
 - CCA REA brought greater awareness to student needs across many campuses:
 - The need to increase retention, sense of inclusion, and belonging on campus and the project "was just like a little bit of a push off the ledge for us and REA "catalyzed our response to that [retention, inclusion, belonging]"
 - Realized that there is a lot of opportunity in the project area that they didn't previously realize or think about, and they are "continuing moving ahead"
 - Created a greater awareness of how dynamics moving from a rural area into the world of academics play a role in a student's ability to be successful
 - The individuals who participated as part of the CCA REA cohort reported increase personal awareness and development growth areas:
 - The Academy reawakened awareness of social engagements as a teacher: (1) with students including recognizing potential biases that impact class policies



- and instructor-student relationships and interactions; and (2) with relatability to other faculty members
- Brought specific awareness to the differences between rural and urban poverty
 - Deepened approaches to systems thinking and looking at systematic injustice
 - Learned more about strategic thinking and program implementation through the role as a campus facilitator
 - In addition to bringing greater awareness, it identified a role as a campus influencer and opened the eyes of participants to new opportunities. "We can't continue to be successful for our students, if we don't continually learn and grow in our own roles and figure out what that looks like."

This direct quote from a CCA REA participant was particularly expressive of both the individual changes that she experienced personally and professionally but also of the importance and lasting impact of this work. "A rising tide lifts all boats ... and if my students can be engaged, they can then lift their entire community. It's not just about each individual student or me as a teacher with my individual students, but REA really reinforced for me the value of a community college and what it can do for a specific community. And how it's not really just content related about for me, like my students learning [my subject matter] one-on-one; but if we can reach rural students."

- **REA Program Suggestions**

- Loved the in-person aspects and were able to apply those to various contexts (e.g., classrooms, professional development day).
- Much feedback was provided about the asynchronous/online activities and modules
 - Participants acknowledged that they were in the first cohort completing the modules and appreciated the flexibility of the facilitators.
 - Several campus sites reported that the timing of expected module completion was during a busy time at the beginning of an academic year (future work should consider the academic calendar and busy times).
 - They enjoyed some readings but were unsure about the questions and responses that corresponded with the readings. They shared that a smaller number of readings and more clarity around prompts would have been useful. Also, some participants felt that the modules and questions were geared toward faculty and staff and administrators had less applicability, materials and questions could have been worded differently to represent everyone involved



- Participants appreciated when the materials that went beyond reading to share research and practical applications
 - Participants felt that the modules were time consuming (particularly completing the background reading and reflections) and participants struggled to complete the modules and some shared that they did not complete the modules.
 - One group suggested the possibility of having a way to gauge knowledge of participants so that not everyone has to do every module would help. Participants felt that the modules and materials were a positive experience overall and helped to “expand their horizons” but that they were mostly “all in the choir to begin with” meaning that they felt they had already bought into and been previously exposed to much of the material. However, some mentioned that even though they were familiar with some of the topics it was affirming to see that the topics/materials were aligned with their previous experience and ongoing work.
 - One college felt that the modules were introducing the topic of rural but that they lived rural experiences and have “always been in the thick of it” and one rural campus can be very different from another rural campus – rural is not universal and instead of being broad (or overgeneralized) exploring what the differences are more would be beneficial i.e. resources, location, services, and roles are different in different rural contexts.
- Desired more in-person or synchronous aspects than the asynchronous/online activities; for example, could participants do the readings then do a video call to discuss them as a larger REA community (e.g., collective processing).
 - Wanted more meetings with the larger CCA REA community to continue learning from CCA and colleagues at other institutions.
 - Participants would have liked the time and space to increase connections with and network more with other institutions to discuss similarities between projects and get ideas



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Next Steps and Future Work

During summer of 2024 the evaluation team will continue to review and analyze data collected through focus groups and emails from participants. The team will share with CCA REA stakeholders and REA campuses. The data and analyses shared will help teams on each campus to:

- Map data to the competencies
- Map deliverables to the competencies
- Reflect on what they hoped to achieve compared to what they actually achieved

Additionally, the evaluation team will provide a full program review report focusing on how participants brought their learning back to their respective campuses, recommendations for changes and continuous improvement of the REA CCA, and using the data develop recommended next steps to present to the CCA Board. Finally, At the end of the project, the team will also develop a set of potential research questions that will inform future research projects to examine the impact of the Rural Educator Academy on economic mobility for the rural communities in Appalachia.



Appendices

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Interview Protocol

The Future of the CCA Rural Educator Academy Interview Protocol

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom within a 90-minute time frame and data will be used to assess participant and institutional experiences related to the Rural Educator Academy to date.

Interview Information

Date:

Time:

Format:

Interviewers:

Interviewee:

Question List

Thank you for taking time to meet with us today. We are faculty at Clemson University engaged in research related to the Rural Educator Academy

Researcher 1 – brief intro

Researcher 2 – brief intro

During our time together, we will discuss several topics related to your experience with the Rural Educator Academy. Our conversation will be shared with other researchers and with the leadership of the REA. We do not have to discuss anything that you do not want to, and you may end the interview at any time. Also, please feel free to ask for clarification at any point. Do you have any questions? Are you willing to participate? Am I able to record our conversation or would you prefer that I just take notes?

1. If we could go around and you can each introduce yourselves, your role on your campus, and how long you have been at your institution.
2. Why did you choose to be part of the academy?
3. How was the academy experience for you/your campus?
4. What have you learned personally through the academy?
 - How, if in any way, did you develop individually?
5. What have you learned professionally through the academy?
 - How, if in any way, did you develop individually?
 - What skills have you gained?
 - What networks have you developed (internally or externally)?
 - How might this experience be useful in your career trajectory?
6. How, if in any way, has your campus changed as a result of the academy?
7. How, if in any way, has rural student success been influenced as a result of the academy?



8. How might you continue the work you began as part of the academy?
9. What have we not asked about that you want to share?

Thank you for your time and participation. I appreciate you sharing your perspective and experiences with me.



Evaluation Team

Sonya Ardoin, Ph.D. is a learner, educator, facilitator, and author. Proud of her rural hometown of Vidrine, Louisiana, her working-class, Cajun roots, and her first-generation college student to PhD journey, Sonja holds a B.S. in secondary education from LSU, a M.S. in higher education and student affairs from Florida State, and a Ph.D. in educational research and policy analysis from NC State. She considers herself a scholar-practitioner of higher education; she served as an administrator for 10 years before shifting to the faculty in 2015. She held faculty appointments at Boston University for three years and Appalachian State University for four years before joining Clemson University as an associate professor in the higher education and student affairs programs in 2022. Sonja's career path also includes experience in student activities, leadership development, community engagement, fraternity and sorority life, student conduct, and academic advising.

Sonja's research interests include social class identity in higher education; college access and success, particularly for first-generation college students and students from rural areas; student and women's leadership development and practice; and career preparation and pathways in higher education and student affairs. Sonja has co/authored six books, one monograph issue, and numerous book chapters and journal articles, and she has served as a speaker and consultant across the United States.

Sonja stays engaged in the field through presenting, facilitating, and volunteering with national organizations such as ACPA, AFLV, ASHE, the Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA, and several journal editorial boards. She is a contributor to the NASPA Center for First-generation Student Success advocacy group and the AFLV Board of Directors. She also serves on the editorial boards for the *Journal of College Student Development-Research in Brief*, the *Journal of First-generation Student Success*, and the *Review of Higher Education*.

Sonja contributes to literature through books, book chapters, journal articles, and blogs and enjoys reading the work of others. She credits her love of reading to her grandmother, who always brought her to the local library as a child and challenged her to read the maximum number of books each week.

Sonja also enjoys traveling, dancing and listening to music, reading, writing, sports, laughing, and spending time with people (and dogs) she loves.



Michelle Boettcher, Ph.D. has a background working in housing and conduct for nearly 20 years which serves as her foundation as an educator and scholar. She have worked or learned at Iowa State University, the University of Arkansas - Fayetteville, the University of Cincinnati, Ohio University, Dartmouth College, and now at Clemson University.

Dr. Boettcher is committed to collaborative learning spaces and innovation in learning and practice. The classroom is a space where we each get to share our insights, areas of expertise, and how our identities and backgrounds inform our work and learning in and beyond higher education. She actively engages in efforts to continuously improve student engagement and learning as well as my pedagogy.

Dr. Boettcher look for ways to support students as scholars particularly in my practice of partnering with graduate students on writing projects. She has served as editor and/or reviewer for 15 different journals. She is currently the editor for ACPA's Developments publication which focuses on a broad range of writing opportunities particularly for students, new(er) practitioners, and emerging writers.

Being a faculty member affords her the opportunity to draw upon my interests as a writer, educator, and innovator in the context of higher education with a focus on student affairs across functional areas.

Tony Cawthon, Ph.D. serves as an Alumni Distinguished Professor of Student Affairs and Higher Education at Clemson University in Department of Educational Organizational and Leadership. Development. He previously served as department head and program coordinator of the Student Affairs Graduate Preparation program and prior to becoming faculty, he has worked as a university housing professional at Clemson University, Mississippi State University, and the University of Tennessee Knoxville.

Dr. Cawthon has written and presented nationally and internationally on career/ professional development, inclusion and equity, and student affairs administrative issues. He has written numerous edited books, book chapters and articles in scholarly journals such as the NASPA Journal, the College Student Affairs Journal, the Journal of College and University Student Housing, and the Journal of College Orientation and Transition. He is the co-editor of three New Directions for Student Services publications and is co-editor of ACUHO-I Core Competencies: The Body of knowledge for Campus



Housing Professional.

Dr. Cawthon has a strong history of professional association service: ACUHO-I (Knowledge Enhancement, Director, Program Chair, and editor of the Journal of College and University Student Housing); ACPA (Director of Research and Scholarship, Senior Scholar, and on the editorial board for The Journal of College Student Development); NASPA (Chair of Dissertation of the Year committee, and editorial board member for Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice); and SACSA (President and editor of The College Student Affairs Journal). He is an ACUHO-I Parthenon recipient, ACPA Diamond Honoree, and NASPA Pillar of the Profession.

Kris Frady, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor and Founding Program Director of the Human Capital Education and Development Bachelor of Science with a joint appointment between the Educational and Organizational Leadership Development and Engineering and Science Education Departments. Her research focuses on *innovations in workforce development at educational and career transitions* emphasizing two-year college and secondary STEM and career education, educational innovations, and the middle skill workforce which has resulted in over 110 publications and presentations. Kris has written and been awarded 24 federal and foundation grants totaling over \$17.7 million including the National Science Foundation's prestigious early CAREER award. Kris has also led development of nationally adopted digital learning and training tools for technician education including virtual reality tools, e-learning modules, and iBooks.

