

RERIC Partners With Rural Wisconsin

‘We are listening!’

In 2015, Jack Jorgensen and his colleagues were driving back to Madison from the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance (WiRSA) Conference in Stevens Point when they had an epiphany. “We realized we were the only individuals representing UW–Madison,” recalls Jorgensen, co-director of The Network at the time. “It was suddenly so apparent that the School of Education should play a more prominent role in rural Wisconsin schools and communities through research and outreach.”

Since that aha moment in the car, it’s been full speed ahead. Last fall, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research launched the Rural Education Research & Implementation Center, or RERIC (rare-ik)—a first-of-its-kind center in Wisconsin dedicated to improving educational outcomes for rural students, families and schools through rigorous, partnership-based research.

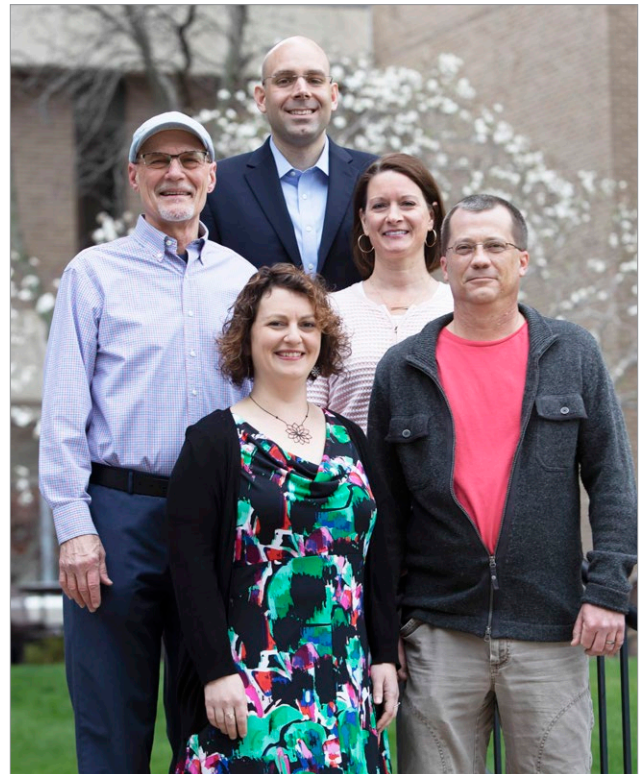
Leading the RERIC team are co-Directors Craig Albers and Andy Garbacz, professors of educational psychology at UW–Madison. It is a full-circle moment for Albers, whose parents still live on 80 acres in Medford, Wisconsin, where he grew up. “It’s given me an extra hop in my step because now I have this personal connection to my work.” Garbacz, too, has a rural background. As a postdoctoral fellow, he worked at the National Center for Research on Rural Education.

In building capacity for RERIC, the co-directors have operated on two guiding principles: to establish trust with rural residents and education leaders, and to listen. “We know from Katherine Cramer’s book, ‘The Politics of Resentment,’ how crucial it is to establish trust with rural communities.

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For an expanded version of this newsletter, visit wcer.wisc.edu/news/newsletter.



The RERIC team: (front row, left to right) Jennifer Seelig, Craig Albers; (center, left to right) Jack Jorgensen, Jackie Roessler; (back row) Andy Garbacz

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We've made it a priority to talk to people in rural Wisconsin, get to know them and hear about their challenges." Albers says the response has been very positive. "People tell us, 'Thanks for recognizing that we're here.'"

According to UW–Madison's Applied Population Laboratory, 77 percent of Wisconsin school districts are rural or town districts. However, their unique needs have mostly been overlooked in policy and research, says Jennifer Seelig, RERIC's assistant director whose award-winning, year-long ethnographic study of a rural school and community in Northern Wisconsin helped inform the approach that RERIC has taken to establishing rural research partnerships.

"Historically, WCER and the School of Education have focused on non-rural schools and communities, which are equally important to study," says Seelig, who earned her Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies from UW–Madison. "But through RERIC, we are bringing a renewed vigor and attention to places we have not paid much attention to in the past." Before joining RERIC, Seelig was a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern University. "RERIC is the reason I came back to UW–Madison. When I knew this center was opening, I couldn't imagine missing the boat."

Tackling rural education issues head-on

Rural Wisconsin faces many educational challenges. But which ones demand the new center's most immediate attention? Through conversations with stakeholders across the state, the RERIC team has identified five urgent research strands on which they have grounded the center: mental and behavioral health; teacher preparation, recruitment and retention; STEM education; diversity; and research preparation and training.

School psychologists Albers and Garbacz report that mental and behavioral health is a "public health crisis" and they are leading the charge in this area. Last year, RERIC's co-directors were awarded two grants to further their work in mental health promotion: a Grand Challenges Transform Competition Grant from the School of Education (FOCUS Partnerships) geared toward prevention and early intervention; and with WCER researcher Bradley Carl, they received a grant from the Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Seed Project to promote mental health in rural communities, in partnership with WiRSA and rural schools.

Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the School District of Florence County, president of WiRSA's executive board and a member of RERIC's Grand Challenges project advisory



RERIC co-Directors Andy Garbacz (left) and Craig Albers say collaboration with education stakeholders in rural Wisconsin is key to the success of the new center.

board, is raising a red flag about mental health issues in rural Wisconsin, as well. "We have a dire need for mental health support for students and families, and few resources available." Niehaus has seen a preponderance of mental health-related incidents with families in his community. "Without help, it's going to snowball in the wrong way." He is grateful that Garbacz is working with him to apply for a much-needed mental health grant from the Department of Public Instruction. "We are so appreciative of RERIC advocating for us at a higher level. We cover large areas up here, but our voice is small."

Collaboration is the cornerstone

When building a distinguished research center like RERIC, collaborations and partnerships become the brick and mortar that hold it together.

As Albers says, "The concept of the center is to bring people together from different areas." To do that successfully requires a skilled matchmaker like Jack Jorgensen, RERIC's associate director for outreach and networking. "My role is to make new connections and leverage relationships I have already established," says Jorgensen, who in his previous role at The Network facilitated key relationships on campus and with external partners.

One longstanding relationship he developed is with Kim Kaukl, WiRSA's executive director. "Jack and I have been talking for five years about how to get better research in rural Wisconsin," shares Kaukl. "People are moving out of rural areas because there aren't a lot of jobs. If we can work with legislators on rural economic development, it will help people

stay in rural Wisconsin and help stem the tide of declining enrollment, one of the biggest problems facing rural schools.” According to WisCONTEXT, 67 percent of rural school districts reported a decrease in student population from 2012-2017.

RERIC is also reaching out to other UW System campuses to help support rural research being conducted externally. To date, they have started conversations with System universities in Platteville, Oshkosh, Whitewater and La Crosse. “Driving around and talking to faculty at other schools to engage them in the work that RERIC is doing is what I have enjoyed the most,” says Albers, who has also developed a newfound love for roadside supper clubs.

Garbacz is enthused about working with undergraduate and graduate students who show great interest in RERIC’s work. “It’s so fun to see excitement among students for rural education and to see the progress we’ve made in expanding the reach of rural education to students on campus. They are the future—the directors and individuals who will one day make decisions about what gets funded,” he explains.

Building momentum daily

RERIC is a young center, less than a year old. In that short time, considerable progress has been made by the coordinated efforts of RERIC’s core team—Albers, Garbacz, Jorgensen, Seelig and Jackie Roessler, project manager—with the help of a strong contingent of hard-working graduate and undergraduate students.

In the fall, RERIC will sponsor the third annual Teacher Speakout! under the leadership of Seelig. This one-day



RERIC will host the third annual Teacher Speakout! this fall.

symposium on campus offers a collaborative environment for the state’s rural K-12 teachers, UW–Madison’s education researchers and state policymakers to discuss the most pressing education issues in Wisconsin’s rural classrooms.

Co-Director Garbacz is proud of the small successes RERIC is making every day. “We really have something special here. We have tried to do our best, to work really hard and make a lot of strong connections.” He especially appreciates the support he and Albers have received from day one. “We’ve been able to develop this center because of the investment and encouragement from WCER Director Bob Mathieu. And we plan to fully honor the commitment WCER and the School of Education have made to our rural education partners.”

Publications/Findings From WCER Researchers

LABOR MARKET

“Teachers on the Market: A Typology of Teachers’ Philosophy, Mission, Vision and Values”

The inequitable distribution of teachers across districts and schools poses a serious problem for states. In this paper, Peter Goff introduces a new strategy to classify teachers. Using data on teaching positions and vacancies, Goff finds a significant portion of teacher distribution problems begins with teachers and how they seek out vacancies. Findings suggest solutions such as differential salaries and staffing bonuses.



HIGHER EDUCATION

“A Model of Two-Year College Students’ Postsecondary Pathway Selection”

Kelly Wickersham’s study draws on interview, survey and transcript data from NSF’s Expanding STEM Talent and Contextualize to Learn project. It examines decision-making of two-year college students when choosing postsecondary pathways. The study finds six factors shaping students’ decision-making: payoff, fit, transferability, place, flexibility and mobility. Published in *Community College Review*.



STEM

“New Survey Instrument Measures Factors in Upward Transfer in STEM Fields”

Xueli Wang and Seo Young Lee

examine psychometric properties of a new survey measuring factors of STEM student transfers from two- to four-year colleges, such as:

initial attitudes toward math and science, self-efficacy in math and science, active learning and transfer-oriented interaction. They demonstrated that the instrument is a viable research tool to understand the STEM transfer mechanism.

Published in *The Review of Higher Education*.



INTERNSHIPS

“Exploring Issues with Access, Program Design and Developmental Outcomes in Three U.S. Colleges”

In this paper, Matt Hora and his team analyze survey and

focus group data from students in three diverse U.S. colleges. Results indicate internship participation varied significantly by race, institution, enrollment status and academic program; supervisor quality predicted intern satisfaction; and 64 percent of students who wanted to work internships couldn't due to work and school conflicts. Researchers suggest colleges ensure equitable access and make high-quality mentorship available at placement sites before advocating for internships.



“How Do Two-Year College Students in Beginning STEM View Themselves as Learners?”



Doctoral students in Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis, Ning Sun, Brit Wagner and Brett Nachman, explore how self-perceptions of STEM learners are formed and transformed. Findings reveal that self-perceptions are linked with how students view themselves as mathematics learners in relation to others, driven by the rewards and challenges of studying STEM, and shaped by external validation. Published in *Teachers College Record*.

MENTORING

“Final Report of the 2018 AAS Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in Astronomy Graduate Education”

Christine Pfund, director of WCER's Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER), served on the American Astronomical Society Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion in Graduate Education. The final report provides recommendations for addressing barriers to diversity and inclusion in astronomy and other STEM fields. It highlights ways to provide effective mentoring through evidence-based practices and includes concrete examples.



News

WIDA releases first extensive study of long-term English learners



WIDA has conducted the broadest study ever undertaken of long-term English learners (LTELs) in U.S. public schools. Findings underscore the need to better understand how students receive this classification, and why the size of the LTEL population varies widely across and within states. The study calls for a much closer examination of how students become classified as LTELs across the country. For the full report, go to wida.wisc.edu and search “LTEL.”

School districts get free evaluation tools developed by UW–Madison education researchers



Wisconsin school districts can get expert help with student academic and career planning using a free toolkit developed by WCER's Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative. The guide can help district and building leaders assess the effectiveness of their ACP plans—required for every student in grades 6-12 under state law. The toolkit is available online at the state Department of Public Instruction website: <https://dpi.wi.gov/acp/quality>.

For more findings, news and events, visit: wcer.wisc.edu/news/newsletter.



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